JORDAN, TUNISIA, LEBANON

POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR SOCIAL COHESION IN AN AGE OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

CROSS COUNTRY REPORT

SHARED REALITIES PROJECT
[social cohesion and resilience in an age of information disorder]

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

> "Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with the existential problems of our times."
>
> – Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize laureate 2021

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Shared Realities Project aims to address the eroding relationship between truth and trust that is playing out across the globe. The project supports participants in developing new and enhanced understanding and awareness of the harmful feedback loop between social cohesion and mis- and disinformation (both on-line and off). In so doing, it works to build resilience and catalyze tangible action to shift from harmful to healthier dynamics.

This report gathers the perspectives of the participants who took part in the first iteration of the Shared Realities Project in 2023 from Tunisia, Lebanon, and Jordan. It is complemented by, and builds upon, individual reports for each of these countries.

The participants in each country are leaders in the areas of social cohesion and/or information. They include social activists, journalists, bureaucrats, academics, and business leaders who are both well-grounded in their country and knowledgeable about social cohesion and mis- and disinformation dynamics.

In each country, participants shared their views about the feedback loop between social cohesion and mis- and disinformation in their own contexts, and potential areas for shifting from harmful to healthier dynamics. Taken together, these observations begin to paint a picture of shared experiences and challenges, including:

- Factors that may be exacerbating the erosion of social cohesion
- Conditions that may be contributing to the creation and spread of mis- and dis-information
- The ways in which mis- and disinformation may be influencing social cohesion in these contexts
- Potential entry points for positive change.

Looking across the observations shared from all three contexts provides some insights into the commonalities and differences in these areas across three very different countries.

OBSERVATIONS

COMMON FACTORS THAT MAY BE EXACERBATING THE EROSION OF SOCIAL COHESION

Looking at what participants said about Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia brings into view several factors which contribute to the erosion of social cohesion, and combine to create a set of highly vulnerable conditions. These include:

Lack of strong, inclusive shared identity
In all three countries, participants described that divided identities, such as of religious, sectarian, racial, regional, or country-of-origin identities are more strongly held identities than a shared national identity. These different identities create a context in which feelings of being treated unjustly as compared to other groups emerge, and in which narratives about others are easier to believe.

Structures that reinforce division
Division and separation between groups can be reinforced by a variety of structural elements in a system. Participants identified physical separation, for example through lack of transportation connection or public space, separation caused by "echo-chamber" algorithms, and the structure of the political system as reinforcing the existing divisions between people.

Structures that reinforce exclusion and disempowerment
Like division and separation, social

exclusion also contributes to the erosion of social cohesion by marginalizing often vulnerable groups. While divisions in society are beliefs and behaviors that keep people apart, social exclusion keeps some groups in society from experiencing rights and privileges that others in the society typically experience. Participants identified structural elements that reinforce exclusion in each of the three countries. Examples include differential treatment of different groups under the constitution, and legal justice systems that treat people differently.

Feelings of alienation and disaffection

A common feeling that participants described in all three countries is one of disconnection and disaffection, especially among unemployed people and youth. This is commonly accompanied by a growth of resentment and anger, which are sometimes targeted at the state or at other groups in society. As participants describe it, when feelings of alienation and disaffection are present, people become more open to persuasion by mis- and disinformation, to acting upon it, and to sharing it, particularly if that information helps to find a target for their frustration.

Feelings of fear and deprivation

Across Jordan, Tunisia, and Lebanon participants described a shared social fear of scarcity and deprivation. All three countries are facing economic difficulties. In Lebanon and Tunisia participants also described a fear of war and violence. Participants described that these fears create greater openness to believing and sharing mis- and disinformation and to perceiving others as a threat.

Withdrawal

In all three countries participants shared that many people feel that they are unable to create change, that they feel hopelessness about the future of the country, and/or their own futures. They described that as a result of these feelings, people are increasingly reducing their civic engagement, withdrawing from engagement with information about politics, economy, and the state of the country, or emigrating from the country. As participants described it, this withdrawal is narrowing the range of voices and opinions that are engaged in public dialogue about the country in all information domains, from the face-to-face, to social media, to traditional media.

COMMON CONDITIONS CONTRIBUTING TO THE SPREAD OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

Participants also described factors in the information systems in the three countries that contribute to the spread of mis- and disinformation. The four factors below stand out as significant in all three countries.

- **Information vacuums** - in which needed information is scarce or absent
- **Sanctioned mis and disinformation** - in which government and other official sources of information are creators and purveyors of mis- and disinformation
- **Constrained information environments** - in which access to a range of media types and outlets and information sources, is limited
- **Lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills** - in which a population is unfamiliar with key skills for safely navigating the information environment

COMMON INFLUENCES OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL COHESION

By targeting fears and amplifying grievances in particular, mis and disinformation can reinforce and deepen social divisions and exclusion. Such dynamics were described by stakeholders as areas of concern in each of the three countries.

Increasing divisions

In each of the three countries, there are perceived divisions between people. In Jordan, participants described divisions between religious groups and between groups with different national origins. In Lebanon, participants described sectarian divisions, while in Tunisia, participants described regional divisions, as well as political and racial divisions. While the divisions in each country are

different, what is common is that across all three countries, some participants described mis- and disinformation as playing an important role in exacerbating these divisions.

Increasing social exclusion
Each country also has groups that are socially excluded, experiencing discrimination, and poorer access to rights. In all three countries migrants and refugees were identified as groups who experience social exclusion, and in Jordan and Tunisia, women were also described as experiencing exclusion. In all three countries, participants described the dynamics by which mis- and disinformation lead to the further exclusion of these groups.

LEVERAGE AREAS TO SHIFT THE LOOP

Leverage areas are those parts of a system which, if influenced or changed, can help shift a system in a positive direction. In the context of Shared Realities, participants were invited to explore which areas, if changed, could help shift from a harmful loop between the erosion of social cohesion and mis- and disinformation, to a more positive one of improved social cohesion and healthier information and practices.

On the basis of the initial systems analysis carried out with stakeholders, they identified several leverage areas for creating such a shift. It is important to note because these leverage areas respond only to those systemic elements that are currently in view, some very important global drivers are thus far not addressed.

There are seven leverage areas that have been identified through this process to help shift the loop:

1. Advancing shared identity and history
2. Changing structures that reinforce exclusion
3. Advancing feelings of connection, engagement, and agency
4. Addressing the source of fears
5. Improving the state's information behaviors
6. Supporting a healthy information supply
7. Improving education

GAPS AND NEXT STEPS

The inherent and central role that mis- and disinformation play in social cohesion (and conflict dynamics) has taken on new dimensions in the context of rapidly evolving digital communication technologies. This presents new challenges related to the scale, scope and speed of information flows characterizing our information ecosystems. Many of the key global drivers involved in this complex system are still

either unfamiliar, or even invisible to many of us. In the lead up to the participatory multistakeholder process, the Shared Realities Project identified a set of five key global drivers of the loop. While all of these were touched on lightly in this process, those in bold remain relatively unexplored.

These drivers are: Social cohesion, Information ecosystems, Information economy, Data and Technology, and Geopolitics[1].

Such additional learning - about these and other drivers- is important for ensuring that we are not only seeing the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the drivers of the feedback loop. This is important for ensuring communities have the opportunity to get a fuller perspective of the systems driving this key dynamic in their contexts, and discovering new ways of addressing it as it evolves over time. Working only with those drivers in view, or with those identified at one point in time, can leave key challenges unrecognized and unaddressed, exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, and leave potential opportunities untapped.

For the Shared Realities Project, the next steps envisioned in Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia are to build on the initial work undertaken through this process. This involves carrying out the next phase of Shared Realties to:

- Engage in a deeper participatory systems analysis with a broader group of stakeholders, who can bring more of the loop into view;
- Work together to both expand and refine the leverage areas identified;
- Work collaboratively to shift those leverage areas.

This initial process has been a small step in working towards addressing the eroding relationship between truth and trust that is playing out across the globe. By developing enhanced awareness and understanding of the dynamics between social cohesion and mis- and disinformation (both on-line and off), and creating new scenarios for possible futures for societies impacted by such dynamics, the project, and this report, have aimed to build resilience and catalyze tangible action to shift from harmful to more healthy dynamics.

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[1]   In the context of this project, we are concerned with how geopolitics can play a central role in shaping the supply of disinformation in local contexts.
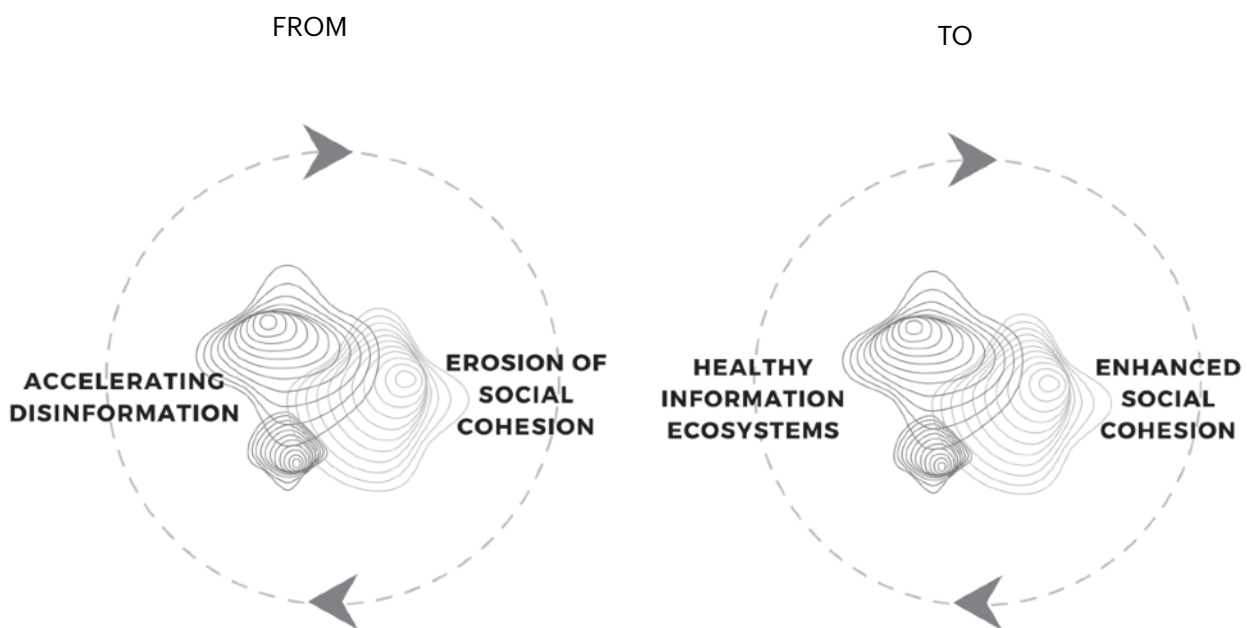
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[social cohesion and resilience in an age of information disorder]

INTRODUCTION

"Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy, and it becomes impossible to deal with the existential problems of our times."

– Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize laureate 2021

The Shared Realities Project is an initiative of the Reos Institute aiming to address the eroding relationship between truth and trust that is playing out across the globe. By developing enhanced awareness and understanding of the dynamics between social cohesion and mis- and disinformation (both on-line and off), and creating new scenarios for possible futures for societies impacted by such dynamics, the project aims to build resilience and catalyze tangible action to shift from harmful to more healthy dynamics.

With Shared Realities, our impact goal is to help communities shift from harmful feedback loops to healthy ones.

FROM

ACCELERATING DISINFORMATION

EROSION OF SOCIAL COHESION

TO

HEALTHY INFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS

ENHANCED SOCIAL COHESION

Shared Realities works with diverse multi stakeholder groups in different geographies to:

- Help inoculate individuals and communities against mis- and disinformation and build resilience;
- Support their agency in creating strategies for coping with harmful dynamics between social cohesion and mis and disinformation; and

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- Generate relationships of trust needed to shift such dynamics in their own contexts in support of healthier societies and information ecosystems.

The larger vision of Shared Realities as a program of work is to engage in three different ways :

1. Undertaking collaborative, systemic processes in different geographies and regions
2. Fostering cross-context learning
3. Influencing discussions at a global level

THE SHARED REALITIES LEARNING PROJECT

In 2023, the first iteration of Shared Realities was carried out in Tunisia, Lebanon, and Jordan, through a Learning Project. With the support of Porticus, and with the engagement of many collaborators, in each country we undertook the first steps of a systemic process to lay the groundwork for collaborative action towards healthy information ecosystems and enhanced social cohesion.

In each country, the Shared Realities Learning Project brought together people from different sectors, professions, and life experiences. By bringing together a diversity of actors who have different kinds of country-based knowledge, experience, and influence, participants were able to generate new understandings, and contextualized insights concerning how global drivers are playing out in each country. Further, this diversity of actors began to envision fresh opportunities and influential entry points for shifting the harmful feedback loops between social cohesion and mis- and disinformation in these different contexts.

PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

This cross-country report represents a key achievement of the Shared Realities Learning Project. It is complemented by, and builds upon, individual country reports for Lebanon, Jordan, and Tunisia, and a mapping report which identifies actors in each country already working on areas that can shift the loop.

The country reports summarize and build upon the perspectives of the group of stakeholders who were interviewed and engaged in the country-discovery phase of the Shared Realities process. A key task of this phase was to bring the feedback loop into focus for participants, in their own contexts. The country reports therefore provide meaningful scope and context for learning about how people see the feedback loop manifesting in their everyday lives; for understanding how local vulnerabilities may influence outcomes of the loop; and for envisioning what kind of action is needed in response.

The present report shares some of the initial observations and reflections that have emerged from looking across all three country reports to consider commonalities and differences in what stakeholders said about the loop. It is therefore not a technical assessment of dynamics in the region, or an empirically grounded comparative analysis of the information ecosystems in the three countries, and does not replace the need for or value of such research.

Rather, as a central goal of Shared Realities is to gain insight into how global drivers shape local dynamics, the purpose of this report is to compare the initial observations shared by stakeholders in each country report, in order to prompt reflection, and inspire directions for further learning.

Part 1 of the report shares participants' impressions of how the feedback loop manifests itself in people's everyday lives, and how local vulnerabilities influence outcomes, when looking across the three countries. It contemplates what we can learn from considering commonalities across the countries and differences between them.

Part 2 of the report identifies key systemic drivers of the feedback loop between social cohesion and mis- and disinformation that did not emerge in participants' discussions during this phase of work, but which are both essential and consequential for shifting the loop in any context.

Part 3 looks at what leverage areas, if addressed, could shift the loop.

Finally, **Part 4** explores what next steps and directions could generate additional useful understanding and action.

1. SEEING THE LOOP

1. SEEING THE LOOP

This section of the report looks across what stakeholders from Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia shared with regards to how the feedback loop manifests itself in people's everyday lives, and how local vulnerabilities influence outcomes. Across the three countries, stakeholders shared perspectives with regards to:

- Factors that may be exacerbating the erosion of social cohesion
- Conditions that may be contributing the creation and spread of mis- and dis-information
- The ways in which mis- and disinformation may be influencing social cohesion in these contexts

FACTORS EXACERBATING THE EROSION OF SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion is fundamental to the functioning of healthy societies. It refers to the relationships of trust and connectedness that enable a sense of common good across different communities, underpin the social contract between citizens and government, and allow societies to deal with difference and conflict in non-violent and non-coercive ways. It is also central to a society's capacity to cope with threats and risks.

Looking at what participants said about Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia brings into view several factors which contribute to

the erosion of social cohesion, and combine to create a set of highly vulnerable conditions.

These include:

- Lack of strong, and/or inclusive shared identity
- Structures that reinforce division
- Structures that reinforce exclusion and disempowerment
- Feelings of alienation and disaffection
- Feelings of fear
- Withdrawal

LACK OF STRONG, INCLUSIVE SHARED IDENTITY AND HISTORY

Across all three countries, participants identified the lack of an inclusive, shared identity as making people more vulnerable to be more influenced by mis- and disinformation.

In all three countries, participants described that divided identities, such as of religious, sectarian, racial, regional, or country-of-origin identities are more strongly held identities than a shared national identity. These different identities create a context in which feelings of being treated unjustly as compared to other groups emerge, and in which narratives about others are easier to believe.

"Playing on identity is easy because corrupt politicians tend to guide citizens to their religious or sectarian belonging, rather than national belonging." — Lebanese participant

One example of this was described in Lebanon, in which participants shared that sectarian identities are more prevalent than a single national identity, there is no common history curriculum that covers the last 70 years, which leads to competing versions of history, as well as different information environments, and thus members of different sectarian groups experiencing different truths about the past and the present.

"A huge number of people that I met, they kept saying the same phrase: 'we do not feel like we are citizens, we do not feel like we are part of this country.'" —Tunisian participant

In Tunisia, participants described a context in which people do not have a feeling of belonging to the country as a whole. Some find a sense of belonging in a regional group, rather than a national identity, and minorities and migrants are largely excluded from a shared identity.

In Jordan participants described a context in which there is a strong national identity, but that minorities and migrants are largely excluded from that shared identity. They added that religious minorities also are largely excluded from a shared national identity.

STRUCTURES THAT REINFORCE DIVISION AND SEPARATION

Division and separation between groups can be reinforced by a variety of structural elements in a system. In Tunisia, for example, participants talked about the physical division, due to lack of infrastructure, that exists between the capital region of the country, and other regions. They described this physical division as reinforcing the sense that
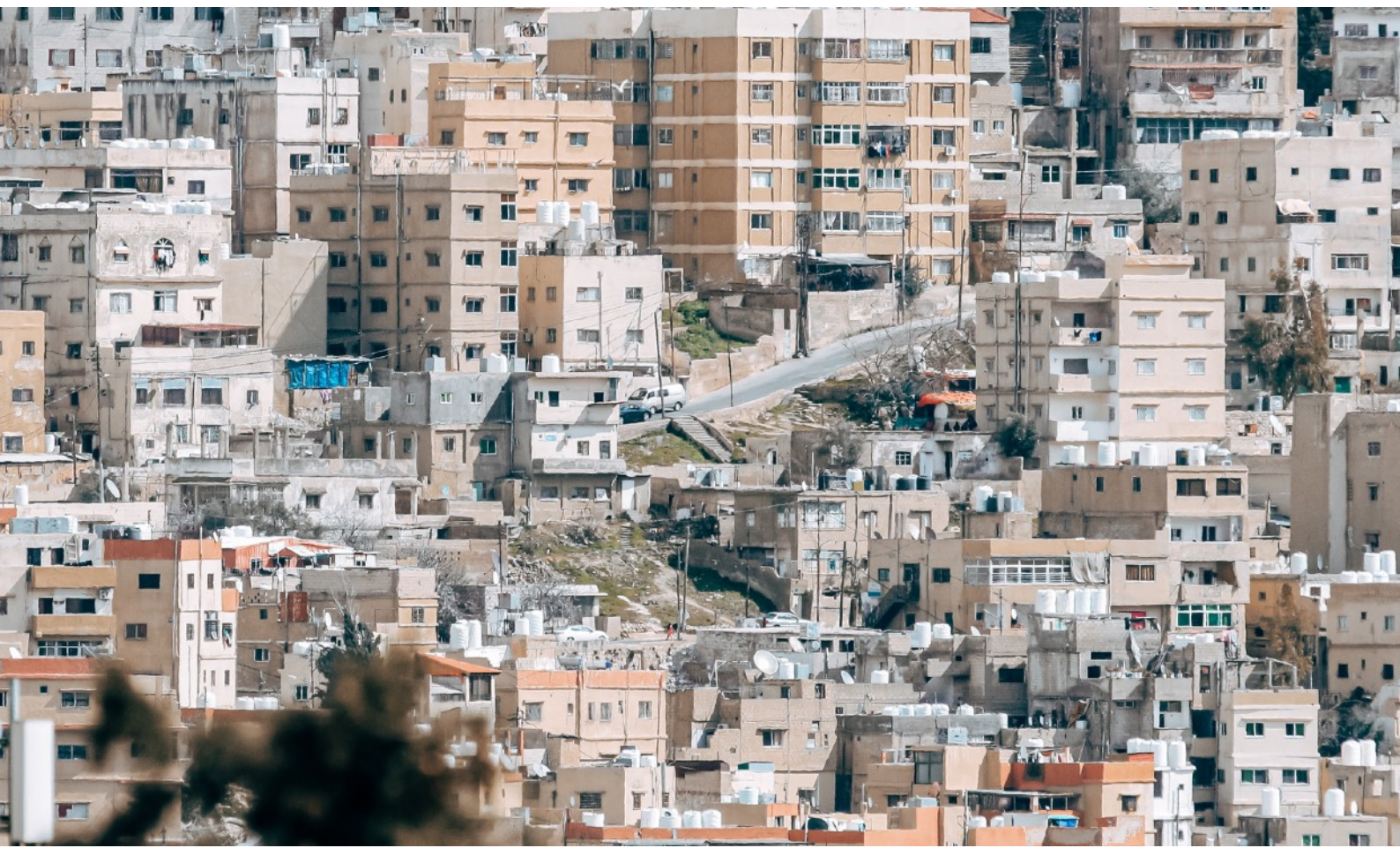
people living in different regions are different and "other" and thus make people more susceptible to being influenced by mis- and disinformation.

In all three countries, participants also observed that algorithms that create "echo chambers" in which people are exposed only to views that are similar to their own. They observed that this reinforces separation and also serves to deepen divisions, and amplify grievances and fears.

In Lebanon, the sectarian structure of politics and the government was also described as reinforcing perceived identity differences among people, and amplifying the potential impacts of mis- and disinformation. As in Tunisia, participants in Lebanon also observed that physical divisions, and a lack of public spaces where diverse people interact reinforces division and separation.

STRUCTURES THAT REINFORCE EXCLUSION

Like division and separation, social exclusion also contributes to the erosion of social cohesion by marginalizing often vulnerable groups. While divisions in society are beliefs and behaviors that keep people apart, social exclusion keeps some groups in society from experiencing rights and privileges that others in the society typically experience. Participants identified many structural elements that reinforce exclusion in each of the three countries. For example, Jordanian participants

described that in their country women are second class-citizens within the law. Additionally, they described the legal justice system as one in which people do not receive equal treatment. In this context, women are not able to effectively fight against the discrimination and exclusion that they are faced with, including those perpetrated through instances of mis- and disinformation. This further reinforces their social exclusion and exposes them to harm.

"Women are not treated as equals. Women are treated as second class citizens. Will women be treated as equal with men? Including in the constitution?"
— *Jordanian participant*

FEELINGS OF ALIENATION AND DISAFFECTION

A common feeling that participants described in all three countries is one of disconnection and disaffection, especially among unemployed people and youth. This is commonly accompanied by a growth of resentment and anger, which are sometimes targeted at the state or at other groups in society. As participants describe it, when feelings of alienation and disaffection are present, people become more open to persuasion by mis- and disinformation, to acting upon it, and to sharing it, particularly if that information helps to find a target for their frustration.

"There is misinformation and disinformation because our social media is filled with a lot of anger. When you

have so many people unemployed and sitting at home, and engaging on social media, fueled by their agitation." — Jordanian participant

FEELINGS OF FEAR AND DEPRIVATION

Social tensions often give rise to fears and concerns that are held by many in a society, based on the real or imagined conditions around them. They are not individual anxieties or phobias held by only a few members of society, such as a fear of heights or of spiders. Rather, they are more widely shared, and relate to a past shared experience or future threat. They might include things like fear of war, wide-spread xenophobia, or fear of famine or scarcity.

Social tensions and fears can generate solidarity towards addressing a perceived shared threat, or they can create division, if there are different perspectives with regards to how to address a threat or if other people are perceived as a threat. As such social tensions and fears can contribute to or undermine social cohesion. Two fears stood out from the interviews:

Fear of scarcity

Across Jordan, Tunisia, and Lebanon participants described a shared social fear of scarcity and deprivation. All three countries are facing economic difficulties.

"People are suffering and living with the minimum level of food, security, housing..."— Jordanian participant

In Lebanon, as participants described, the devaluation of the currency and political instability have created a context of high joblessness and greater poverty than most Lebanese can ever remember. In Tunisia, participants described a context of high levels of joblessness, and economic tensions, due to recent economic contraction and a subsequently slow growth rate. In Jordan, participants described a context in which there are high levels of unemployment, especially among youth, as well as high levels of poverty.

Participants described the poor economic conditions in all three countries as driving fears of scarcity, which are subsequently undermining

social cohesion, with many people wondering who is to blame for the poor conditions. In all three countries one strong narrative is that migrants and refugees are to blame for the poor conditions, driving anti-migrant sentiment and action. Another strong narrative is that the government is to blame, feeding political division.

"If people have their basic needs met, society will be more united. The issues right now are rooted in instability and insecurity." — Lebanese participant

Fear of war and violence

In Lebanon and Tunisia participants also described a fear of war and violence. In Lebanon, participants further elaborated that this fear differs between generations. As participants described, prevalent among the older generations, is a fear of war, which creates a motivation to find non-violent solutions, and to maintain a stable society. This fear is not shared to the same extent by the younger generation.

"Will there be a civil war caused by disinformation?" — Tunisian participant

WITHDRAWAL

Across all three countries, participants described how feelings of fear, hopelessness, and inefficacy are leading to people withdrawing from different domains of life, and ceasing to participate in them. When they do, this leads to a narrowing of voice and perspective in those domains.

In all three countries participants shared that many people feel that they are unable to create change, that they feel hopelessness about the future of the country, and/or their own futures. They described that as a result of these feelings, people are increasingly reducing their civic engagement, withdrawing from engagement with information about politics, economy, and the state of the country, or emigrating from the country. As participants described it, this withdrawal is narrowing the range of voices and opinions that are engaged in public dialogue about the country in all information domains, from the face-to-face, to social media, to traditional media.

"One thing that could really affect action is if people believe that their action would make a change. You have dramatic things that happen in Lebanon, like political assassinations, like journalist assassinations, like revolutionaries being killed by the police. These things happen without accountability. People are willing to be brave, but you wonder, are my courage and my bravery really worth it? It's a waste if change is not going to happen. What is needed is believing in the reality of change and seeing that actually yes, bravery would pay off and bravery will not just get us killed and life will move on." — Lebanese participant

CONDITIONS CONTRIBUTING TO THE SPREAD OF MIS-AND DISINFORMATION

Several conditions are known to contribute to the creation, amplification and acceleration of mis- and disinformation, including:

- Information vacuums - in which needed information is scarce or absent
- Sanctioned mis and disinformation - in which government and other official sources of information are creators and purveyors of mis- and disinformation.
- Constrained information environments - in which access to a range of media types and outlets and information sources, is limited.
- Lack of media literacy and critical thinking - in which a population is unfamiliar with key skills for safely navigating the information environment.

When looking across the Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia interviews these four conditions stand out as features in each context

INFORMATION VACUUMS

Information vacuums are created when information that is necessary for people to understand and navigate their daily lives in an informed and effective way is limited or absent. When the information needs of people are unmet, especially in contexts of upheaval, crisis, or disaster, this creates fertile ground for mis-and disinformation to develop and take hold.

In all three countries, participants described a context in which the

government is intransparent, and leaves many gaps in the information that it provides. In Tunisia, participants described how these gaps in information create an environment in which mis- and disinformation spread easily.

"The government doesn't like to communicate. They leave others to make assumptions. There is no good information. They are creating a void. That void is filled with everything and anything. " — Tunisian participant

MISINFORMATION FROM OFFICIAL SOURCES

Incidents of intentional mis- and disinformation from official sources can create doubt in other official information. They can also undermine a sense of trust and cohesiveness with the state.

Across all three countries, participants described contexts in which the state shares mis- and disinformation intentionally, undermining trust in official information for many. They also shared that this mis- and disinformation is sometimes intentionally aimed at reinforcing divides between groups, undermining social cohesion.

"The moment fake news and misinfo is institutionalized and systematic it is very hard to be able to counter it." — Lebanese participant

CONSTRAINED INFORMATION ENVIRONMENTS

Across all three countries, participants described contexts in which there are significant constraints on who is able to share what information. These constraints can be in the form of formal or informal restrictions on freedom of expression, in the financial models behind news media, in community or professional norms, and many other forms.

In these constrained environments, it can be difficult to challenge or correct mis- or disinformation, especially if it comes from a powerful source, leaving mis- and disinformation as the only information that circulates about different topics, or the only information which has a significant reach.

In Jordan, participants described a context in which information is highly constrained. They described a context in which there is official censorship, coupled with norms of self-censorship adopted by many journalists.

They shared that journalists in the country are well trained professionals, but that the environment makes it difficult for them to cover certain topics, particularly those critical of the government.

"Jordan is super-censored. You have people in the government whose job is to delete and moderate comments." — Jordanian participant

In Lebanon participants described a context in which the traditional media landscape as one with many influential

actors, each of which has a sectarian affiliation. They also described that these significant media actors are closely linked with dominant actors from the private sector, and with political actors. As participants describe it, the highly linked and sectarian nature of the traditional media landscape means that the information shared by traditional media actors is perceived by many to be politically driven and participants described it as reinforcing bias.

"Advertising funds the media. In Lebanon, the traditional media scene and the traditional advertising scene all are within the same space of powerful people, whether it's politicians or big economic institutions or, banks, et cetera. In general, the way it would work is they would all feed each other. So the media would talk well about the politicians, the banks, et cetera. And the politicians and the banks would fund the media" — *Lebanese participant*

Participants described Lebanon as a context in which there is a high degree of formal freedom of speech in the law, but that there is a real threat of retribution for certain kinds of speech, for example assassination of journalists.

In Tunisia, participants described this moment as one in which freedom of speech is being eroded, with arrests of vocal critics and opponents to the government, including artists. They described these arrests as generally not being accompanied by charges, and a few days at most. In this environment, though free speech is legally permitted, in practice there are growing limits on what topics people feel free to discuss publicly.

"People are arrested for what they say on the radio, or even in music videos on
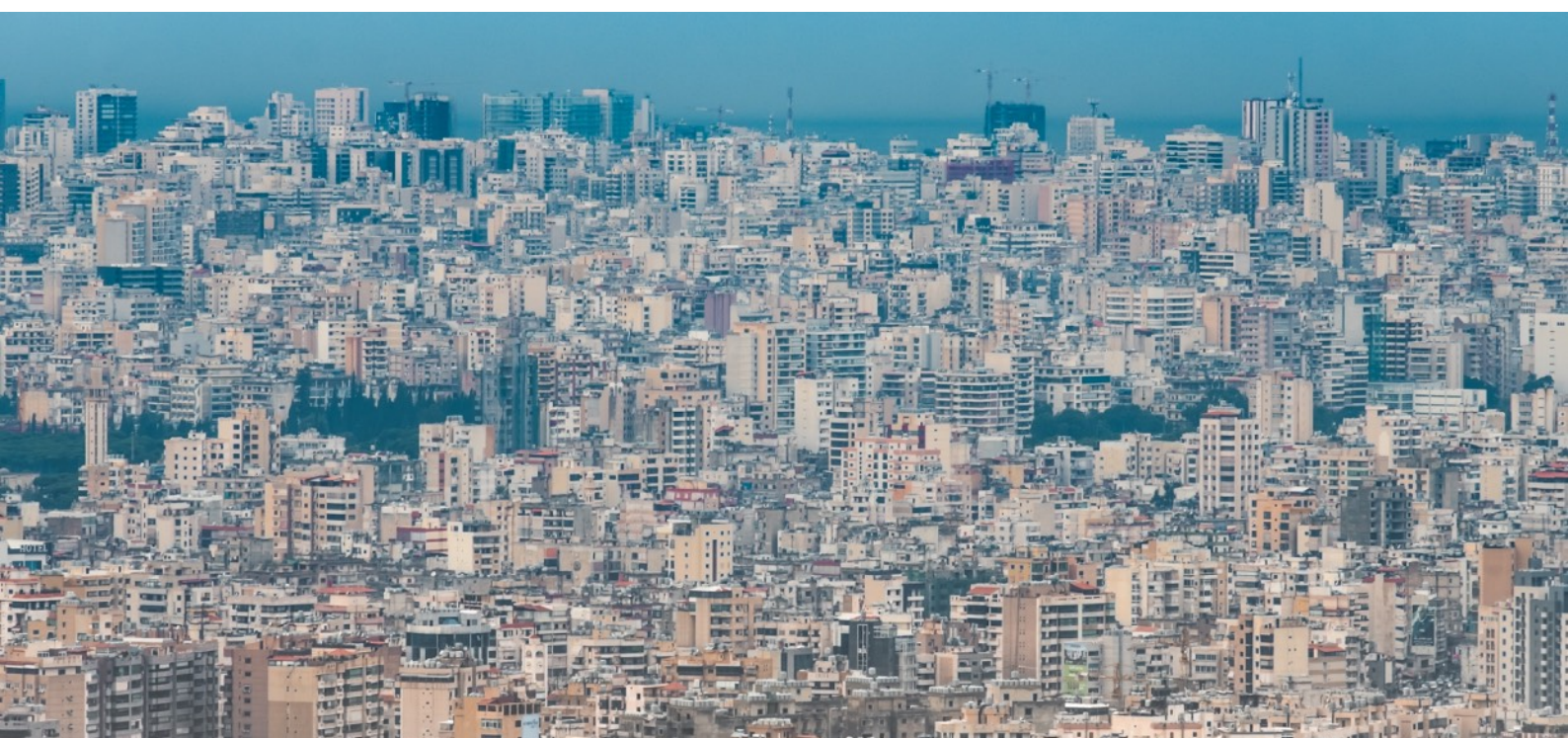
YouTube. They get arrested and released after a day or two, and don't get charged. But when you talk about fake news, or racism or hate speech or something, they give you a warning." — Tunisian participant

Participants described the state's information behavior in Tunisia as largely closed, and unpredictable. They shared that the state rarely engages other actors in consultation or decision making, and shares information and decisions inconsistently and largely through Facebook.

In Tunisia, participants described a context in which there are large national news actors, which are largely politically affiliated.

"Every news channel has an agenda - that is financed by someone. It's like Fox news/CNN. We know what that channel is promoting. It's never going to be real information." — Tunisian participant

In both Lebanon and Tunisia, participants described the presence of a diverse alternative media sector which includes small, local, and voluntary media, as well as mid-sized and independent media. They noted that this alternative media sector is largely dependent on grant funding, and is thus fragile, and sometimes does not experience full independence, for example, needing to focus on topics or audiences specified by donors. They also noted that the reach and influence of these actors is less significant than the large national actors.

"For alternative media platforms, is their narrative going anywhere?" — Lebanese participant

As participants describe, these constraining factors are creating spaces for mis and disinformation to circulate.

LACK OF MEDIA LITERACY AND CRITICAL THINKING

Across all three countries, participants pointed to the importance of media literacy and critical thinking to slowing the spread of mis- and disinformation. They also pointed to fact checking as an important factor enabling media literacy to be effectively practiced.

Mis- and disinformation have existed long before digital technologies, and are an element of human communication. Having a significant proportion of the population have the ability to identify questionable information, inquire about its veracity, and to investigate the motives behind sharing different information can help to slow the spread of mis- and disinformation.

Across all three countries, participants described their contexts as having some media literacy education happening, largely delivered by NGOs, but that across the population there are largely low levels of media literacy, especially in rural areas and among some vulnerable communities such as women, migrants and refugees, and people experiencing poverty.

Participants also described the importance of having tools to verify information.

"Artificial intelligence is now huge and the things that can be created with artificial intelligence can actually destroy societies. Unless we give people the skills to identify and to be able to not be fooled by deep fakes and be more open to messaging and to videos and, and photos being able to fact check, it can be really horrible." — Jordanian participant

In each country there are some verification initiatives and tools available. Participants noted that, while these tools are important, they can only protect against the harms of mis-and disinformation if people use them.

THE INFLUENCE OF MIS- AND DISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL COHESION

Today, the dynamics of mis- and disinformation present a set of pernicious challenges and threats to social cohesion around the world. This often takes shape in the exacerbation of social divisions and exclusion. But it's important to recognize that this is not always the case.

Above we have discussed some of the conditions that can contribute to the spread of (or resistance to) mis and disinformation in a given context. A central assumption of Shared Realities is that social cohesion is chief among them. That is, when social cohesion is weak, people are more vulnerable and

susceptible to mis- and disinformation, and when it is strong, people are more resilient and resistant to it. By targeting fears and amplifying grievances in particular, mis and disinformation can reinforce and deepen social divisions and exclusion. Such dynamics were described by stakeholders as areas of concern in each of the three countries.

INCREASING DIVISIONS

In each of the three countries, there are perceived divisions between people. In Jordan, participants described divisions between religious groups and between groups with different national origins. In Lebanon, participants described sectarian divisions, while in Tunisia, participants described regional divisions, as well as political and racial divisions. While the divisions in each country are different, what is common is that across all three countries, some participants described mis- and disinformation as playing an important role in exacerbating these divisions.

"There is a great deal of discrimination against Christians, treating them differently, poorly. We need to keep them in Jordan. Some of them are leaving and they're becoming a really tiny number, and that's unfortunate. And this is happening also across the region. They're being driven out in Iraq, they're being driven out of Israel." — Jordanian participant

For example, in Lebanon, participants described a context in which politically motivated actors intentionally spread

mis- or disinformation with the intention of dividing people in order to create stronger allegiance to their party or their view, deepening divisions.

"Politicians use sectarian news to ignite clashes on purpose that will serve their interests." — Lebanese participant

In all three countries, participants could imagine these divisions being amplified enough that they would lead to war.

INCREASING SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Each country also has groups that are socially excluded, experiencing discrimination, and poorer access to rights. In all three countries migrants and refugees were identified as groups who experience social exclusion, and in Jordan and Tunisia, women were also described as experiencing exclusion. In all three countries, participants described the dynamics by which mis- and disinformation lead to the further exclusion of these groups.

Across all three countries participants described a dynamic by which migrants and refugees are scapegoated for the problems of the country. Scapegoating messages as well as exaggerated claims about their numbers and the impact that they are having on the country are perpetuated in all information domains, from face-to-face to national media. Additionally, in Tunisia, they shared that the President has advanced the idea of the "great replacement", which claims that the population is being demographically and culturally replaced

with people of a different race. In all three countries participants described that this scapegoating and exaggeration is leading to real-world exclusion of migrants and refugees, including, at times, physical violence. As some participants describe it, when mis- and disinformation targeting refugees and migrants is spread by the state, it is intended to channel people's frustration and discontent away from the government.

*"When the president came out on 21st of February, 2023 and started talking about the great replacement theory, that was an example of the racism that is there... Everyone was hating black people, even Tunisian black people, and everyone who supported them. Everyone who gave them shelter or tried to help was also a target of hate campaigns online. Black students, sub-Saharan students started to be kicked out from their own houses."
— Tunisian participant*

The dynamic that participants describe by which women in Jordan and Tunisia are being further excluded through mis- and disinformation is quite different from the dynamic which is playing out with refugees and migrants. For women, participants described a dynamic in which women who are active in politics or who are vocal activists are targeted with mis- and disinformation which discredits them and with harassment and threats. This happens in both traditional media, as well as online. As some participants describe it, the aim of this mis- and disinformation is to silence or disempower these womens' voices,

and to cause them to withdraw from their activities.

The result of such deepening divisions is that vulnerabilities are exacerbated.

2. DRIVERS

2. DRIVERS

The inherent and central role that mis- and disinformation play in social cohesion (and conflict dynamics) has taken on new dimensions in the context of rapidly evolving digital communication technologies. This presents new challenges related to the scale, scope and speed of information flows characterizing our information ecosystems. Many of the key global drivers involved in this complex system are still either unfamiliar, or even invisible to many of us. But gaining a fuller understanding of the systems involved requires recognizing a fuller range of global drivers that may be shaping dynamics in their own contexts, so that we may form a more complete picture of the challenges and opportunities for addressing them.

To that end, this step in the Shared Realities Process was accompanied by a curriculum to provide stakeholders with a basic introduction to some of the key global drivers animating the loop between social cohesion and mis and dis-information. (Not all stakeholders participated in the curriculum.)

These drivers are:

- Social cohesion
- Information ecosystems
- Information economy
- Data and Technology
- Geopolitics

These drivers were selected because they are both central and highly consequential to the dynamics of concern, *and* often either unfamiliar or invisible to many of us due to their highly technical and often concealed nature.

Considering what has been shared thus far by participants through the lens of the drivers points to some additional areas for learning that would be valuable for bringing the systems animating the loop more fully into view.

Parts 1 and 3 of this report consider the perspectives of stakeholders, and the drivers and influences within their awareness. Of the drivers covered by the curriculum, social cohesion and related dynamics featured very clearly in participants perspectives.

In addition, some elements of information ecosystems were also commonly touched upon, though with a primary focus on the supply of information (such as the narratives and messages being created and shared by others, especially institutional actors such as "media" or "the government"). Less attention was given to the demand for information. This dimension of information ecosystems brings into view the ways in which unmet needs (informational and otherwise), as well as fears, play a crucial role in shaping the information practices of individuals in context, and therefore in driving mis- and disinformation dynamics. Developing a more complete view of information ecosystems can create helpful insights into local challenges and

needs, and therefore additional leverage points.

Elements of the information economy were also touched upon by participants in the three countries, though to a lesser extent. In the Global North, the information economy is a powerful driver of mis- and disinformation, and no plausible scenario of the future of social cohesion can be developed without considering it. Further learning is needed to understand how this driver is working in other regions and understand the role it plays.

Geopolitics were raised generally in discussions in each country, though to less depth, and not in relation to mis and disinformation dynamics. For example, no stakeholders identified disinformation tactics to intentionally seed distrust and disorder as a possible problem (whether by internal or external actors), nor did they mention intentional disinformation dynamics by geopolitical actors active in their own information ecosystems. This is an important area to explore further with stakeholders, as the information ecosystems of each of these countries are known to have been targeted with coordinated disinformation campaigns (with some of these being perpetrated by their own governments and militaries).

Finally it is notable that data and technology, which are indeed central drivers of the loop, were only minimally mentioned by the stakeholders engaged, with only minor mentions of digital security, different digital platforms, and

Artificial Intelligence. This could be for several reasons, including the small number stakeholders involved, stakeholder selection and expertise, and/ or interview design. A better understanding of how this driver (through its many dimensions) manifests in each of the participating countries would provide crucial information about similarities and differences in both challenges and leverage areas.

Such additional learning - about these and other drivers- is important for ensuring that we are not only seeing the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the drivers of the feedback loop. This is important for ensuring communities have the opportunity to get a fuller perspective of the systems driving this key dynamic in their contexts, and discovering new ways of addressing it as it evolves over time. Working only with those drivers in view, or with those identified at one point in time, can leave key challenges unrecognized and unaddressed, exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, and leave potential opportunities untapped.

3. LEVERAGE AREAS

3. LEVERAGE AREAS

Leverage areas are those parts of a system which, if influenced or changed, can help shift a system in a positive direction. In the context of Shared Realities, participants were invited to explore which areas, if changed, could help shift from a harmful loop between the erosion of social cohesion and mis- and disinformation, to a more positive one of improved social cohesion and healthier information and practices.

On the basis of the initial systems analysis carried out with stakeholders, this section maps a range of leverage areas for creating such a shift. It is important to note because these leverage areas respond only to those drivers in view, some of the very important global drivers are thus far not addressed.

These leverage areas directly correspond to the observations of the loop that are covered in section 1. In each of these domains, participants from at least one of the three countries identified an area which, if shifted, would lead to a healthier loop. Where appropriate to the context the leverage areas have been suggested for application in all three countries. Some of these recommendations could apply to any or almost any country around the world, while others are highly context specific. How each leverage area could be shifted, and what a healthy end-state might look like, will be different for each country.

For some of these leverage areas there are actions that the participants from each country could take right away, for others there are actions that the government would need to take, and for others, systemic action is needed.

There are seven leverage areas that have been identified through this process to help shift the loop:

1. Advance shared identity and history
2. Change structures that reinforce exclusion
3. Advance feelings of connection, engagement, and agency
4. Address the source of fears about scarcity
5. Improve the state's information behaviors
6. Support a healthy information supply
7. Improve education

SHARED REALITIES PROJECT
[social cohesion and resilience in an age of information disorder]

Leverage area	Jordan	Lebanon	Tunisia
Advance shared identity and history	Advance an inclusive and shared national identity**	Advance an inclusive and shared national identity** Advance collective memory and shared history*	Advance an inclusive and shared national identity**
Change structures that reinforce exclusion	Improve the justice system to be more fairly applied** Improve the rights of women in the constitution*	Undertake sectoral reform of the government to begin to shift the sectarian nature of the system** Establish a new social contract* Improve the justice system to be more fairly applied	Reestablish rule of law, freedom of speech, and social justice
Advance feelings of connection, engagement, and agency	Build greater civic engagement** Create opportunities to connect to other people and to nature* Improve public space so that people can have improved exchanges across differences	Build greater civic engagement** Create opportunities to connect to other people and to nature Improve public space so that people can have improved exchanges across differences**	Build greater civic engagement** Create opportunities to connect to other people and to nature Improve public space so that people can have improved exchanges across differences Improve transportation connectivity across the country **
Move forward in the face of fears	Advance economic empowerment**	Advance economic empowerment	Advance economic empowerment Create an easier environment for investment and for establishing organizations**

SHARED REALITIES PROJECT
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Improve the state's information behaviors	Allow freedom of the press** Implement government transparency**	Implement government transparency**	Engage civil society in consultations and government processes Implement government transparency**
Support a healthy information supply	Ensure that there is strong independent and transparent media Maintain and enhance information verification and fact checking tools	Ensure that there is strong independent and transparent media ** Maintain and enhance information verification and fact checking tools	Ensure that there is strong independent and transparent media Maintain and enhance information verification and fact checking tools
Improve education	Provide education on dialogue, peacebuilding, and media literacy ** Ensure equal access to high-quality education for young people	Provide education on dialogue, peacebuilding, and media literacy Ensure equal access to high-quality education for young people	Provide education on dialogue, peacebuilding, and media literacy Ensure equal access to high-quality education for young people**

** Named by a group of actors in the country during a participatory session
* Named by one participant in an interview
Named by the authors of the report

4. CONCLUSIONS

"If you want a better truth architecture, you need a better trust architecture."
-Eli Pariser

The focal concern of the Shard Realities Project is the future of social cohesion in an age of mis-and disinformation. We join with many others in the recognition that the pervasive feedback loop between mis- and disinformation on the one hand and erosion of social cohesion on the other is exacerbating vulnerabilities to the key challenges of our time including climate change, inequality, discrimination, human rights violations, conflict, and threats to democracy.

To shift this loop, we must attend not only to the infrastructure, tools, and content of the information we exchange, but the health and nature of relationships we share.

This report has begun to make visible how dynamics between social cohesion and mis- and disinformation are playing out in three different country contexts: Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia. It is complemented by country reports for each country.

This report has shared what can be observed when looking across what stakeholders shared with regards to the loop in the three countries. It presented what can be observed with regards to how the feedback loop manifests itself in people's everyday lives, and how local vulnerabilities influence outcomes.

It summarized stakeholder's perspectives with regards to

- Factors that may be exacerbating the erosion of social cohesion

- Conditions that may be contributing to the creation and spread of mis- and dis-information

- The ways in which mis- and disinformation may be influencing social cohesion in these contexts

It has also indicated parts of the loop which have not yet emerged through this initial phase of the Shared Realities process, and noted that working just with those drivers currently in view can leave key challenges unrecognized and unaddressed, exacerbate vulnerabilities, and leave potential opportunities untapped for communities.

Finally, it has shared the leverage areas identified by participants to shift the loop in each of the different countries, and that apply across all three.

Through different moments and modes of engagement with participants, and through the different outputs produced, this project has created greater visibility of

- The dynamic of the loop unfolding in each context

- Some elements that animate it in the three different countries

- Some leverage areas for beginning to shift it

- Some crucial gaps in the recognition of drivers and leverage areas

It has also laid the foundation for continued engagement for these issues for participants, and begun to develop a new approach for mobilizing the benefits of participatory systems analysis to create new and eventually comparative insights into the global drivers and local manifestations of the feedback loop between social cohesion and mis- and disinformation.

NEXT STEPS

With regards to the Shared Realities Project, the next steps envisioned in Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia are to build on the initial work undertaken through this process. This involves carrying out the next phase of Shared Realties to:

- Engage in a deeper participatory systems analysis with a broader group of stakeholders, who can bring more of the loop into view;
- Work together to both expand and refine the leverage areas identified;

- Work collaboratively to shift those leverage areas.

Outside this next phase of the Shared Realities Project, there are many other steps that the participants and other stakeholders can take on the basis of this project's outcomes. For participants, this process has already begun to reveal how these important dynamics are working, and where the leverage is to shift them. Additionally, participants across the three countries saw many ways in which they could collaborate and learn from each other, both within each country, and across the countries.

Some of the areas of collaboration and learning that they could imagine as beneficial include learning from challenges that each country is experiencing to avoid similar challenges in other country contexts; learning from the successes that each country is experiencing to adapt effective ideas to other country contexts; and to innovate together. A few of the many areas where they recognised they have useful experiences that could be leveraged for

mutual support included: policy, media literacy, rules and regulations, supporting women, fighting corruption, and governance transparency.

This initial process has been a small step in working towards addressing the eroding relationship between truth and trust that is playing out across the globe. By developing enhanced awareness and understanding of the dynamics between social cohesion and mis- and disinformation (both on-line and off), and creating new scenarios for possible futures for societies impacted by such dynamics, the project aims to build resilience and catalyze tangible action to shift from harmful to more healthy dynamics.

We all play a role in influencing the direction of this loop - whether at individual, organizational, community, national, regional or global levels. Therefore the Shared Realities Project itself is designed to operate at different levels. By situating the project in specific contexts we help stakeholders connect with and recognize the drivers and impacts of the feedback loop unfolding in their own lives and environments. Meanwhile, enabling cross-context learning and drawing out shared patterns allows us to build global systems understanding for informing and enhancing influence on global actors and drivers.