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

LEBANON

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

CONTENTS

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

The Shared Realities Project aims to address the eroding relationship between truth and trust that is playing out across the globe. The project supports stakeholders 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 doing so, 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 in Lebanon. The aim of this report is to begin to bring the feedback loop between social cohesion and mis and disinformation into view. It helps to reveal how the feedback loop manifests itself in people's everyday lives; how local vulnerabilities influence outcomes; and what kind of action is needed in response. To that end, this report consolidates and shares the learning gathered through this initial phase of work in Lebanon.

Part 1 of the report shares a first version of scenarios for possible futures for social cohesion in an age of mis and disinformation in Lebanon. Their purpose is to support an open and constructive reflection on the challenges and opportunities for shifting the loop, based on a robust picture of the system and how it could play out.

One of the scenarios tells a story of a healthier future, while the other tells a story of a more harmful one. The essence of the healthier future scenario is one of hope, citizen engagement, increasing shared identity, incremental improvement. The essence of the more harmful future scenario is one of Stagnation, disengagement, division, increased violence, emigration, polarization.

An analysis of the two scenarios reveals the systemic conditions that would animate each scenario. This analysis brings into focus what can be seen with regards to what structures, beliefs, and values might underlie a healthier or more harmful future. This provides some initial indications of areas in which to focus interventions to shift from a more harmful to a healthier loop.
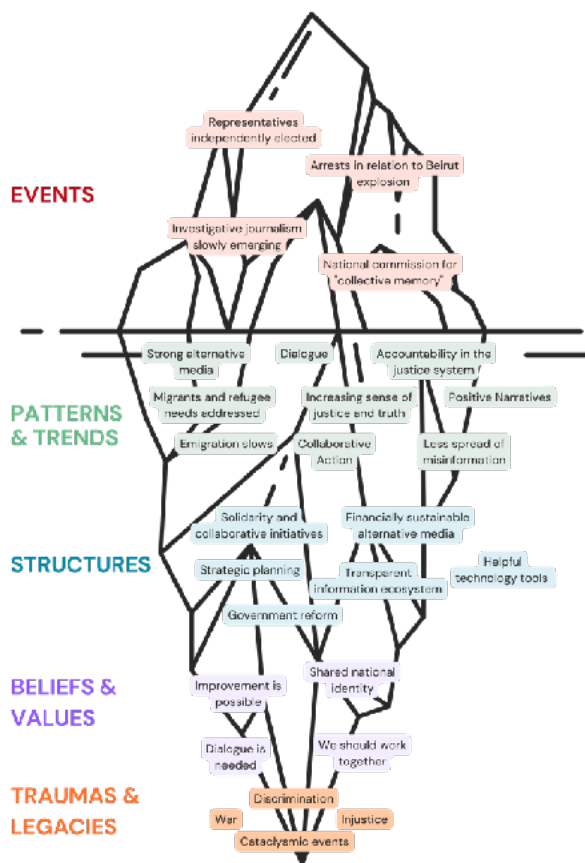
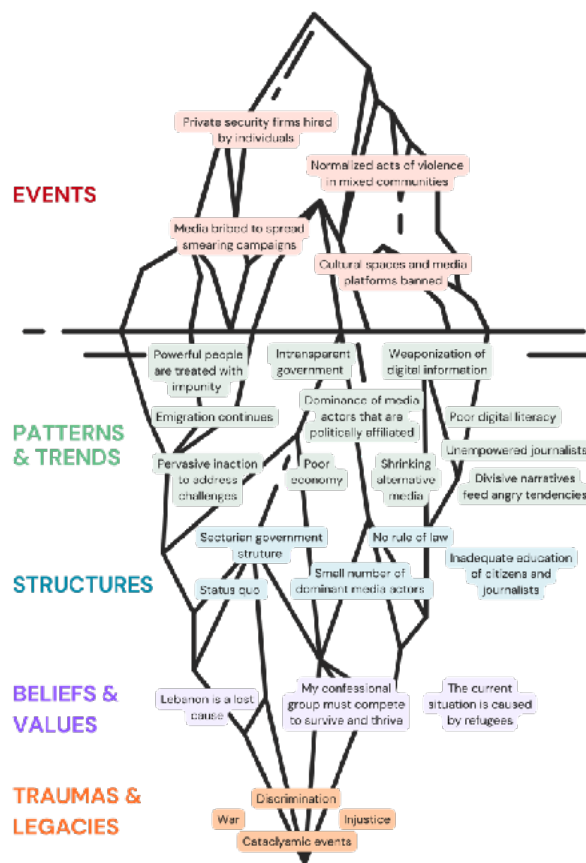*Figure 1: An iceberg diagram showing a Healthier Future in Lebanon*

Figure 2: An iceberg diagram showing a more Harmful Future in Lebanon

Part 2 of the report, shares what a group of stakeholders identified as the leverage points that they believe that, if addressed, could lead to healthier and less harmful loops. They identified five leverage areas in which they believe that action could help to shift the loop. The leverage areas that they identified are:

- independent and transparent media
- media literacy
- shared identity and citizenship ideology
- connections through public spaces
- reforming government through sectoral reform

Part 3 of this report details building blocks that the scenarios were built on. The building blocks of these scenarios are what people are most concerned about with regards to the future, and the key drivers that will determine the direction of the future. This section reveals, in greater depth, the perspectives shared by the interviewees, and provides a foundation for thinking about other stories that might be told about possible futures.

The first building block is stakeholders' key concerns. These are the things that they care most about when thinking about the future of their country. Stakeholders identified issues related to what life will be like for different groups living in Lebanon. The concerns that they expressed were with regards to:

- Living conditions
- Violence and war
- Migrants and refugees
- Youth
- Emigration

The second building block is systemic drivers. These are the social, technical, political, environmental, and economic forces that will influence the future of the things that stakeholders care most about. The key systemic drivers that they identified include:

- The extent to which sectarianism is reinforced or reduced
- The structure and function of the country's government and political leadership
- The extent to which people build cohesion and solidarity among themselves
- Economic conditions
- The structure and function of the media
- How key populations engage with the information and ideas that they are presented with
- What is happening in the broader region
- If and how actors outside the country engage in and with the country

Part 4 notes the gaps in this report and suggests next steps. Useful next steps would be to engage the stakeholders who participated as well as a broader group of stakeholders in deep participatory processes in which, together, they can co-create an even more robust and illuminating view of the system dynamics, and key leverage areas. From that, a solid foundation for collaborative scaling and innovation could lead to impactful and lasting solutions. Some key areas for further investigation include deeper understanding of:

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

The appendix provides a broad selection of quotes that illustrate participant perspectives on the building blocks. Readers who want a deeper understanding of how stakeholders see the loop, its current dynamics, and its possible futures will find a greater level of depth, and detail in this appendix.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND TO THE PROCESS

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 to mis- and disinformation and catalyze tangible action to shift from harmful to more healthy dynamics.
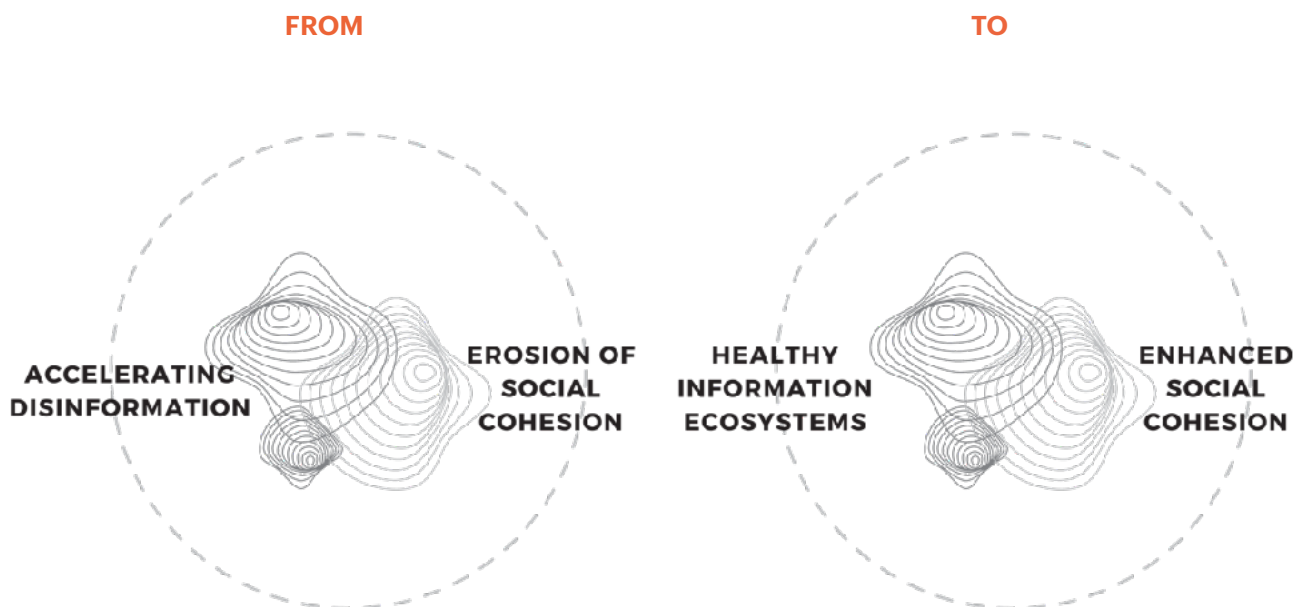
FROM   **TO**

Figure 3: A harmful feedback loop   *Figure 4: A healthy feedback loop*

Shared Realities works with diverse multi stakeholder groups in different geographies to help inoculate individuals and communities against mis- and disinformation; support their agency in creating strategies for coping with harmful dynamics between social cohesion and mis and disinformation; and to 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 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 addition to this country-specific learning, we also conducted some initial cross-context learning for interviewees from the three countries by sharing the outcomes of this process. In this way the Shared Realities Learning Project endeavors to contribute to global knowledge about the loop.

This report represents a key achievement of this process. It is complemented by similar reports for Tunisia and Jordan, a Cross-Country Report, which identifies similarities and contextual differences across the three countries, and a mapping, which identifies actors in each country that are already working to shift the loop.

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 can begin 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

The aim of this report is to begin to bring the feedback loop between social cohesion and mis and disinformation into view. It helps to reveal how the feedback loop manifests itself in people's everyday lives; how local vulnerabilities influence outcomes; and what kind of action is needed in response. To that end, this report

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Part 2 of the report, shares what a group of stakeholders identified as the leverage points that they believe that, if addressed, could lead to healthier and less harmful loops.

Part 3 of this report details building blocks that the scenarios were built on. The building blocks of these scenarios are what people are most concerned about with regards to the future, and the key drivers that will determine the direction of the future. This section reveals, in greater depth, the perspectives shared by the interviewees, and provides a foundation for thinking about other stories that might be told about possible futures.

Part 4 notes the gaps in this report and suggests next steps.

The appendix provides a broader selection of quotes that illustrate participant perspectives on the building blocks. Readers who want a deeper understanding of how stakeholders see the loop, its current dynamics, and its

possible futures will find a greater level of depth, and detail in this appendix.

APPROACH

To compile this report, we conducted interviews with 16 knowledgeable experts from and living in Lebanon. Two of them are early in their career, and two-thirds of these experts have 10 to 20 years of experience in their respective fields, while three have over 20 years of experience. There was a relative balance in terms of their areas of focus pertaining to the loop, with 6 experts working issues related to social cohesion (including work with refugees, focusing on gender, and addressing different forms of social inclusion), 5 experts focused on various aspects of information (all of whom are independent media practitioners not affiliated with the government or major political parties), and 4 experts working at the intersection of these domains (such as on freedom of expression and human rights). Among the interviews, only one was conducted with individuals affiliated with government entities, specifically two women working for a municipality-backed cultural center. Although all the interviewees are Lebanese and have lived extensively in Lebanon, a few currently reside abroad but remain affiliated with organizations operating in the country.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each expert, inviting them to use futures thinking to explore key themes with regards to the loop in their country. These semi-structured interviews were analyzed for common themes, which we next grouped into building blocks for scenarios for possible futures of social cohesion in an age of mis- and disinformation in Lebanon (Part 3 of the report). These building blocks were then developed by a scenario writer into two different narratives (scenarios) of how social cohesion and mis-/disinformation could unfold into the future in the country. These scenarios were further analyzed using an iceberg metaphor for systems understanding to illuminate the systemic factors that would underlie these two scenarios (Part 1 of the report). These preliminary scenarios provide a starting point for shared systems understanding, which will be further elaborated through subsequent steps in the process in each country.

1.SCENARIOS

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Scenarios are stories about what could happen over the coming years based on the current reality and the dynamics around key certainties and uncertainties. They are not forecasts or predictions of what will happen. Neither are they visions, preferences, or recommendations of what should happen.

In a complex situation scenario development can be helpful as a way to lift the gaze beyond the current reality and to broaden perspectives beyond the most probable or feared trajectory.

Scenarios can help to expand the imagination, to discover different possibilities, and to restore a sense of hope and agency.

Further, considering multiple narratives about the future allows for exploring the full space of future potential, without requiring agreement and without committing to specific positions. Scenarios enable us to deal with the reality that – although we cannot predict or control the future – we can work with and influence it.

The scenarios presented in this report are anchored in participants' understandings of and perspectives on the current situation of social cohesion and information ecosystems in Lebanon. They offer different stories of how the future could play out between the present moment and the year 2030. These scenarios are neither the most healthy nor the most harmful that stakeholders in the country could imagine, but plausible scenarios of what the future could look like.

The scenarios aim to be relevant, challenging, credible, and clear. Their purpose is to support an open and constructive reflection on the challenges and opportunities faced by Lebanese society and to stimulate dialogue and action among actors involved in different ways with Lebanon. In particular, the scenarios are intended to help people explore the question "What areas, if changed, could shift the loop between social-cohesion and information from a harmful one to a healthier one?"

SCENARIO 1:
A HEALTHIER LOOP

SCENARIO ESSENCE: HOPE, CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT, INCREASING SHARED IDENTITY, INCREMENTAL IMPROVEMENT

In the world of a healthier future in 2030 there is an expanding feeling of hope for the future of the country. Concerned that the country might devolve into violence, and convinced that a better future would be possible, many people in Lebanon and in the Lebanese diaspora have remained steadfastly dedicated to working towards improvements in the country. They believe that improvement require hope, working together, and a shared identity, and have worked towards building these tendencies among the Lebanese people. They have used a wide variety of tactics to inspire these tendencies including in person activities, social media, as well as alternative media, and as a result, in 2030 a small, but growing number of Lebanese people are engaging in efforts to improve the country.

One area that these actors focus on is youth. There are significant efforts made to provide youth with capacity building, education, and opportunities, leading to increasing inclusion and hope among young people.

The variety of actions taken by the Lebanese people are bolstered by cooperation and inspiration from actors around the world, who are engaged in addressing similar challenges, and with whom Lebanese actors are networked.

These efforts have generated only minor changes in living conditions in Lebanon. However, they are producing significant changes in morale. Peoples' activism and action have not met with repression from the government, but rather with some low level responsiveness. There is a feeling of increasing agency and emigration from the country has slowed.

Believing that alternative media is an important tool for advancing unbiased information, a small group of actors have worked through the mid and late 20s to build and implement financially sustainable models for independent media, and to build the capacity of alternative media to effectively engage audiences through a variety of digital platforms and media. Their efforts have been successful in expanding the reach and influence of independent media.. Now in 2030, alternative media is meeting peoples' information needs and ever-increasing numbers of people look to alternative media as a reliable source of truthful information. They are engaging with alternative media in interactive ways that are advancing a culture and practice of dialogue. Although alternative media remains small in comparison to major media outlets, and attracts far less advertising revenue, it appears stable and increasingly influential.

In this more open information ecosystem, messages of hope have been increasingly able to compete with sectarian messaging and feeling in election campaigns over the past 7 years. New candidates are now able to break through and receive coverage, first through alternative media, and eventually in major media outlets. As a result, there are some new faces in politics, including some young people.

At the same time, technology tools that flag misinformation, rumors, and potentially inflammatory remarks are becoming increasingly effective and prevalent. These tools are being used by information and social media platforms themselves, as well as by users. This, combined with campaigns to educate people about the risks of digital engagement and the importance of fact checking has resulted in people and journalists sharing less mis- and disinformation from unofficial sources. However, major political parties, major media, and the government continue to purvey mis- and disinformation, which circulates with relative speed and ease. In this context, the increased awareness of false information is contributing to increasing mistrust in all forms of information. As a result, there are segments of the population who increasingly disengage from consuming most types of information that are not immediately personally relevant, posing a threat to the sense of social cohesion that has been emerging over recent years.

While there are ongoing tensions in the region, there are no significant events or changes that ripple into Lebanon. As a result the inflow of migrants and refugees has slowed substantially. This, combined with slightly better living conditions and improving confidence in the government, has led to less tension with regards to migrants and refugees. Official sources refrain more from scapegoating refugees and migrants for the problems in the country, and messages that do receive less traction across the information ecosystem.

In order to exit the country's financial crisis faced in 2023, the government worked with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to institute a recovery plan.

As part of meeting the conditions imposed by the IMF there are significant changes made to fiscal transparency approaches, and to addressing corruption, leading to greater government transparency. There are also some reforms made to the justice system, which reduce impunity. Further, the IMF support leads to some improvements in the economy, leading to less tension in the country overall, and improving feelings of hope. As a result of these changes, there is a slight increase in trust in the government, leading to fewer rumors about the government.

Having been without an official history textbook that covers the years after 1950, efforts are underway to create a

shared history. Several attempts at creating a shared history text were abandoned after coverage of the process appeared to stoke sectarian divisions and the possibility of success appeared hopeless. However, new approaches to creating a shared history that focus on dialogue and reconciliation appear to be progressing, and there is hope that eventually an official history might be created.

SCENARIO 2: A MORE HARMFUL LOOP

SCENARIO ESSENCE: STAGNATION, DISENGAGEMENT, DIVISION, INCREASED VIOLENCE, EMIGRATION, POLARIZATION

In the world of a more harmful future in 2030 society is under tension, and many who are able to are leaving the country. The economic crisis continued to weigh heavily on the country, and living conditions for many remain poor. As a result there is discontent among many.

The prevailing narrative perpetuated by political actors and major media sources is that problems that the country is facing is because of the burden put on systems by migrants and refugees. As a result, anti-migrant and refugee narratives gain traction and spread easily through digital and legacy media platforms. There are decreasing services for migrants and refugees, increasing hostility, and violent acts towards them becomes more common.

The government has become progressively more intolerant of criticism. There is no transparency with regards to government actions. Public and vocal critics of the government face smear campaigns, discrediting them, and sometimes more official sanctions, such as imprisonment, or threats. At the same time, the judicial system treats most powerful actors with impunity. Corruption, disinformation, and neglect are all unaddressed in the judicial system. During elections, there is little change, with people voting largely along sectarian lines and for incumbent candidates.

While migrants are largely scapegoated for the economic problems of the country, other challenges are blamed on sectarian groups. Political narratives focus on blame, and narratives that emphasize the differences between sectarian groups, spread easily. Within different sectarian groups there is an increased sense of group identity and cohesion, but between them, there is a high level of division.

Unable to compete with major media sources the majority of independent media actors are voluntary. They have little reach, and their reporting is limited to a few issues, which are supported by donors. There is no source of information that people perceive to be neutral, unbiased, and trustworthy, unless it is the source that is associated with their sectarian group. As a result, there is little shared narrative about the country and its conditions, and rumors about others spread easily. In each

group perspectives on a wide range of issues become more fixed. Violent acts between sectarian groups also become more common. Youth, who feel that most media is irrelevant, and stakeholders who do not feel strongly aligned with a sectarian group have progressively withdrawn from the information space. They experience engaging with conventional media and with social media to be disheartening and a waste of time. They engage less both as consumers and contributors .

There had been little disruption to the education system over the last years, but youth largely express discontent. Some youth dedicate themselves to obtaining the best education that they can, with the intention of leaving the country as soon as possible. Others drop out or complete only basic education, feeling that there is no point in making the effort.

Many people in Lebanon feel hopeless about the future, and those who have the means to leave the country, contributing to an increasingly dispirited population whose hopes lie more and more outside the country, and who are more vulnerable to mis- and disinformation.

COMPARING THE SCENARIOS

The scenarios above describe two different contexts in which the loop between social cohesion and mis- and disinformation could play out in a future Lebanon. The table below explores some of the implications of each scenario for how the loop could play out around the issues of key concern discussed by stakeholders.

LIVING CONDITIONS AND EMIGRATION

HEALTHIER LOOP: Faced with poverty and lack of access to basic needs, Lebanese people speak out to demand their rights, and to criticize unjust and corrupt acts. These messages are picked up by alternative media sources, which have large reach, and are spread on social media. They lead to widespread calls for change, which are eventually addressed by leadership, who engage in progressively more dialogue with those making demands.

EXAMPLE: In the face of record high food prices, investigative journalists expose corruption, which has led to the prices. This story is picked up by alternative media, which has a large reach, and spread through social media. This leads to organized demands made by large groups of citizens, especially youth. These demands are engaged with and acted on, if in minor ways, by political leaders. The belief that change is possible grows.

A MORE HARMFUL LOOP: Faced with poverty and lack of access to basic needs, Lebanese people speak out to demand their rights, and to criticize unjust and corrupt acts. These demands are not covered by major media outlets, but are covered by alternative media sources which have small reach. Speaking out does not lead to change and is met with repression and personal costs. As a result, voices for change are silenced, and needs remain unmet.

EXAMPLE: In the face of record high food prices, investigative journalists expose corruption, which has led to the prices. This story is not picked up by major media nor on social media, except by a small group. The journalist is interrogated and receives threats. The corruption and prices are unaddressed, and the journalist decides to leave the country.

VIOLENCE

HEALTHIER LOOP: People are increasingly engaged with one another, and working together. There is also increasing transparency from the government, which is increasing trust.

EXAMPLE: After a crisis event which takes many lives a rumor circulates that the crisis event was intentionally perpetuated by one sect in order to clear out residents of another sect. Over recent years, due to increasing transparency and effectiveness, trust in the government has been improving. The official government statements about the cause of the crisis, which is spread consistently through major and alternative media is widely accepted as the truth.

A MORE HARMFUL LOOP: The sectarian system of government, and politically aligned media reinforce perceived differences between groups. Narratives that highlight differences between sects and paint them as in unresolvable tension are prevalent, spread easily, and are believed. These perceived tensions play out between groups and individuals, further entrenching division.

EXAMPLE: After a crisis event which takes many lives, a rumor circulates that the crisis event was intentionally perpetuated by one sect in order to clear out residents of another sect. This rumor is believed by some and intentionally reinforced by others in order to strengthen group belonging and identity. Belief in the rumor stokes hate and feeds greater tensions which lead to violent clashes.

MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

HEALTHIER LOOP: Narratives about migrants and refugees which scapegoat these groups are present. However, they are balanced by narratives of solidarity, largely

spread by alternative media, which has increasing reach. Spaces are created for dialogue and problem solving. Feelings of stress and frustration are balanced by feelings of hope and solidarity. As a result migrants and refugees are more included in society, and their needs are better met.

EXAMPLE: During an influx of new migrants, as frustrated citizens circulate scapegoating narratives, solidarity and problem solving narratives are also spread in ways that reach the same audiences. Messages and platforms for increased dialogue spread through alternative media and civil society actors. There is increased dialogue about how to address the challenge and increased inclusion of migrants.

A MORE HARMFUL LOOP: People are frustrated by their living conditions. At the same time they see large numbers of people entering the country, who have some different habits, customs, or appearance. People's fears about worsening conditions cast these newcomers as a threat, and narratives scapegoating migrants and refugees become increasingly popular topics of conversation both on-line and off. Many groups within the population, looking for a way to explain and end their frustration, embrace these narratives. As a result migrants and refugees become the targets of discrimination, objects of mistrust, and are more excluded from society, receive fewer services, and are more likely to be deported.

EXAMPLE: During an influx of new migrants, politicians and various influencers seize on people's fears and amplify the scapegoating narratives about migrants and refugees circulating both on-line and off. Vindicated by these "official" messages, frustrated citizens broadly exploit these narratives and fears through memes, cheap fakes, and other forms of media manipulation which become increasingly prevalent, including across some conventional media outlets. This gives focus to more generalized fears and anger towards refugess, migrants, and certain cultural or ethnic groups are stoked in social media bubbles. This leads to a number of violent incidents targeting migrants and some are deported.

IDENTIFYING SYSTEMIC DRIVERS

	Healthier Loop	More Harmful Loop
What patterns would repeat? What trends would we see over time?	• Harmful mis-and disinformation does not spread far or fast • People approach information with a sense of responsibility, and navigate the information environment with care • Increasing influence and reach of transparent and independent media • The justice system consistently holds people accountable • Diverse people engage in dialogue with each other • Positive narratives build curiosity, hope, engagement, and trust • Collaborative action • Effective media build an increasing sense of justice and truth • Migrants and refugees needs are better addressed • Emigration slows	• Dominance of the media space by media actors that are politically affiliated, sharing institutional information and narratives, including false ones • False narratives are picked up and diffused across the media landscape including on social media, with increasing reach and influence • Powerful people are treated with impunity in the justice system • Government decisions are highly intransparent • Divisive narratives feed angry tendencies towards migrants, refugees, and other sectarian groups • Pervasive inaction to address challenges • Emigration continues • Digital information is weaponized • Poor digital literacy • Poor economy • Alternative media is shrinking and journalists are unempowered
What are the structures that cause the patterns in this scenario?	• Financially sustainable business models for alternative media • Government reform • Technology tools that enable easy fact checking • Solidarity and collaborative initiatives • Strategic planning for the digital economy • Transparent information ecosystems	• The sectarian government structure is maintained • There is no rule of law • There is inadequate education of citizens and journalists • There is a small number of dominant media actors

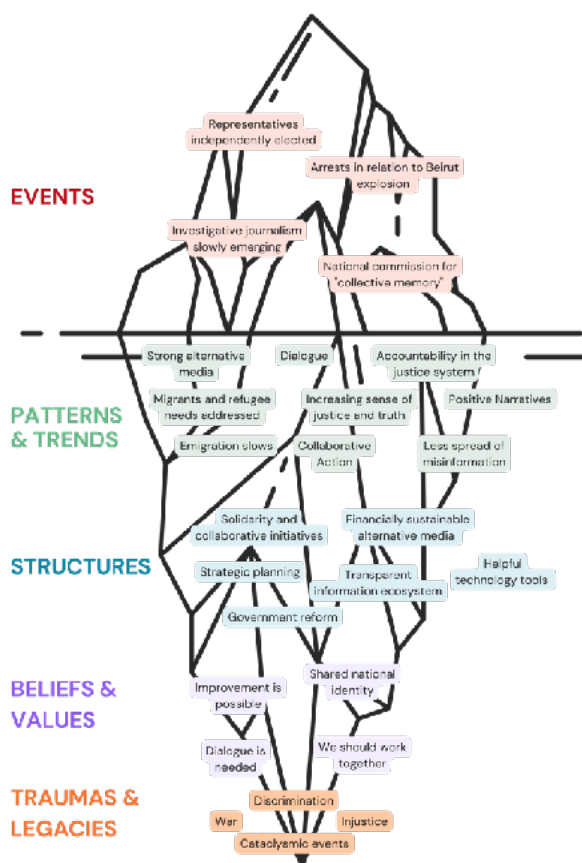| What are the beliefs, values, and assumptions that underlie the structures and patterns in this scenario?	• Lebanon and Lebanese society can improve • Dialogue can create a better future • Our shared national identity is valuable • A better future will be created if we work together	• Lebanon is a lost cause • Our current situation has been caused by refugees • My confessional group must compete in order for us to survive and thrive
What are the traumas that persist and show up in this scenario?	• War • Discrimination • Injustice • Cataclysmic events	• War • Discrimination • Injustice • Cataclysmic events

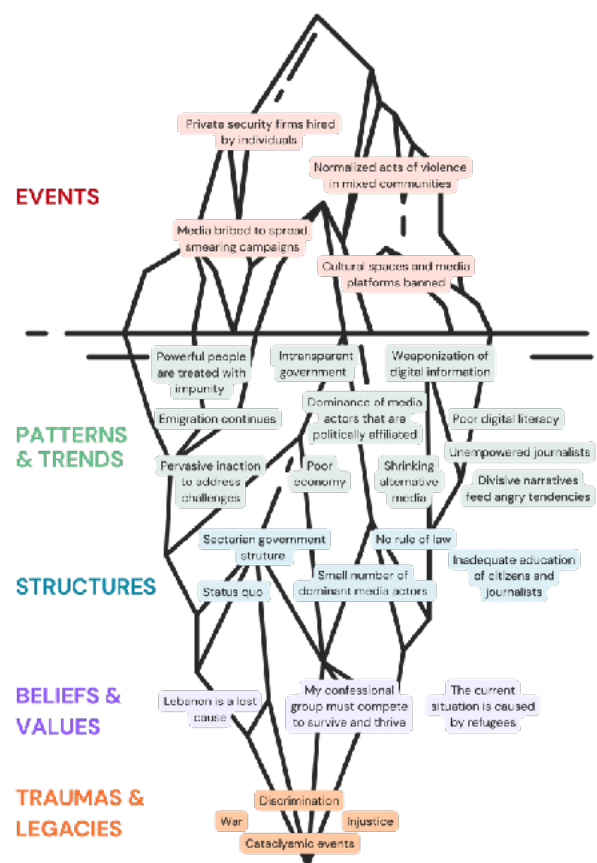Figure 1: An iceberg diagram showing a Healthier Future in Lebanon

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2.LEVERAGE POINTS

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"These are places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, an ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything."

— Donella Meadows

Following the presentation of these scenarios to a group of Lebanese stakeholders, the stakeholders were asked to identify leverage areas which, if shifted, could lead to a healthier, rather than more harmful loop. They did this by looking at the structure and beliefs and values levels of the Iceberg system maps above. The stakeholders identified five key leverage areas that, on the basis of their understandings, they believe could help to shift the loop: independent and transparent media, media literacy, shared identity and citizenship ideology, connections through public spaces, and reforming government through sectoral reform.

The first area that stakeholders identified is in **supporting independent and transparent media, including investigative journalism**. The scenarios highlighted that a media sector that is perceived as biased and sectarian can create a context in which the perspectives of the people become more polarized, and in which people perceive information to be largely unreliable. They noted that a growth in reliable independent and transparent media could have a significant positive impact on the loop.

The second area that stakeholders identified is in the domain of **media literacy**. They suggested that if larger numbers of Lebanese people understood how mis- and disinformation spread, how the loop works, and the impacts on society of harmful communication and information behaviors, it would significantly shift the loop in a healthier direction. The primary strategy that they mentioned for advancing media literacy is through campaigning.

The third area that stakeholders identified is **advancing shared identity and citizenship ideology**. They noted that the dominant identity in Lebanon is sectarian, rather than a unified national identity. Further, they noted that a citizenship ideology that highlights duties and rights could lead to greater civic engagement. They noted that the construction of a more shared and active national identify would diminish the more divisive sectarian identities which tend to be more dominant, and which degrade national social cohesion. They suggested strategies including advancing collective memory work, improving history education at school, and through civic education.

The fourth area that stakeholders identified is in creating more opportunities for people to connect in **public spaces**. They noted that a great deal of urban planning in Lebanon creates segregation and that public spaces for people to meet and exchange could lead to improved social cohesion.

The fifth area that stakeholders identified is advancing **government reform** through reform of each sector that the government is engaged in. They noted that sectoral reform might be an effective way to reduce the extent to which sectarianism is entrenched within the government and governance, helping to reduce divisions and frictions between people.

3. BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE SCENARIOS

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The two scenarios written above, of the healthier and more harmful loop, were chosen among the many that could be. These scenarios are neither the most healthy nor the most harmful that stakeholders in the country could imagine, but rather aim to reveal both helpful and harmful dynamics. In so doing they illuminate some features and dynamics while leaving others unexplored. For example, in both stories, the political system is largely the same though in one there is reform, the economy is slow, and the country is not at war. Neither story describes significant events or instability in other countries in the region specifically, nor the dynamics of elections.

The following building blocks are shared as an inspiration to guide the discovery of other possible stories.

The building blocks of these scenarios are the key concerns of people, what they are most troubled about with regards to the future, and the key drivers that will determine the direction of the future. They create a foundation from which we might tell other stories about possible futures. They also provide

inspiration for thinking about and identifying other concerns and drivers.

The first building block is stakeholders' key concerns. These are the things that they care most about when thinking about the future of their country. Stakeholders identified issues related to what life will be like for different groups living in Lebanon. The concerns that they expressed were with regards to:

- Living conditions
- Violence and war
- Migrants and refugees
- Youth
- Emigration

The second building block is systemic drivers. These are the social, technical, political, environmental, and economic forces that will influence the future of the things that stakeholders care most about. The key systemic drivers that they identified include:

- The extent to which sectarianism is reinforced or reduced
- The structure and function of the country's government and political leadership
- The extent to which people build cohesion and solidarity among themselves
- Economic conditions
- The structure and function of the media
- How key populations engage with the information and ideas that they are presented with

- What is happening in the broader region
- If and how actors outside the country engage in and with the country

Throughout the following section, brief summaries of the perspectives that stakeholders shared are provided. Some illustrative quotes from their interviews are also provided. A wider range of illustrative quotes is provided in the appendix.

BUILDING BLOCK 1: KEY CONCERNS

Stakeholders were asked about the key issues that they are concerned about when they think about the future of Lebanon. The key themes that emerged from the interviews are presented in this section. These concerns overlap with one another, and many influence each other.

The concerns that they expressed were with regards to:

- Living conditions
- Violence and war
- Migrants and refugees
- Youth
- Emigration

1. LIVING CONDITIONS

Stakeholders expressed concerns about the material conditions that people in Lebanon will live in, and how those conditions are impacting on social cohesion, people's mindsets, and

whether they will stay in the country. In particular they expressed concern about: the economy, financial system, poverty, safety, access to basic services, and feelings of anxiety due to crises.

Poverty

They shared that they are currently seeing an increase in poverty in the country and are concerned about the future of employment. They also shared a sense that safety is decreasing and expressed concern about access to basic services.

> *"The level of poverty is around 80% on record of Lebanese people below the poverty line. In our history books, Lebanon was always described as 50% to 60% middle class."*

"Since the financial collapse, being out is not the same. If you go out at night, it's like during the war. The streets become dark. You need to look behind your shoulder on dark side streets."

"If someone from my family gets cancer, how am I supposed to get them medicine? Insurance has become too expensive. Hospitals have become super expensive. And there were gas issues and we didn't know how to commute."

Mental health and motivation

Following the events of the last years, especially the port blast in Beirut and political and financial instability,

stakeholders expressed a feeling that they are in continuous crisis, and feel anxious that it will only worsen.

"The whole of Lebanon is mentally impacted, especially after the explosion."

"There is fear all the time about something either collapsing more or blowing up for the wrong reasons. It's always this anxiety about there being no stability tomorrow because everything changes so fast. We see how things can get bad rapidly. What more can we hold? It affects your personal aspirations. It also affects your feeling of safety."

Access to rights

Stakeholders expressed concerns about peoples' access to rights including free speech, and people's access to justice, feeling that there is inadequate freedom of speech and human rights.

"No one is digitally secure in Lebanon. It affects freedom of speech."

"Where are the human rights? People talk about it but no one's doing anything about the basic rights of citizens."

Access to justice and accountability

They also shared that they feel that there is a lack of rule of law and accountability.

"When there's a scandal or wrong doing, there's no accountability, no fair justice, no investigation."

2. VIOLENCE

Stakeholders expressed concern that the current conditions in Lebanon might lead to violence, or even war.

"I'm worried about the security situation. Even though they say it's not the same as 1975, it can be... in a snap. Will we see war between Lebanese people."

3. MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Stakeholders expressed a great deal of concern about migrants and refugees in the country. They expressed concern about the ability of migrants and refugees to meet their needs and be included in society, as well as about the ability of the society to carry the burden of refugees. Stakeholders noted that among the divisive narratives circulating in Lebanon are many which scapegoat refugees for the problems of the country. They asserted that many of these scapegoating narratives come from people in power within the government.

"The ministries and people in power are the same people that are responsible for the overarching narrative of nationalism that seeks to instill this fear and otherization against people who are not

"More and more youth are emigrating. Skilled people are leaving the country when the country needs those skills. It is changing the demographics a lot, which will impact social cohesion."

Lebanese, scapegoating them."

"The perceived impact of Syrians is blown out of proportion. Some people say that they are the root of all of our problems today. These racist narratives circulate on Facebook"

"Syrian refugees are a huge burden of the country. There are no enabling conditions to enable them to contribute to the economy and prosperity of the country. And they are a huge number. If today a solution is not found, and I don't think we will find one, it will be a huge issue on an already collapsing country."

4. THE FUTURE FOR THE YOUTH

Stakeholders expressed concern that in the context of Lebanon today, youth are not being adequately prepared for the future. They shared concerns that youth are losing hope and motivation, possibly leading to extremism, as well as to poverty and poor mental health.

"The lost generation are leaving schools. This impacts social cohesion, and leads us to poverty, extremism, and poor mental health."

5. EMIGRATION

Stakeholders noted these factors have created feelings of anxiety and despair for many and that many Lebanese people who wish for a better future are leaving the country. They also noted that these people are largely educated, leading to further worsening conditions in the country.

"Are we going to continue to see the emigration of a certain mentality; the open, democratic, liberal Lebanese mentality?"

BUILDING BLOCK 2: WHAT WILL DETERMINE THE DIRECTION OF THE FUTURE?

Stakeholders were asked about what will influence the future of their core concerns. Said differently, they were asked what would drive the future in one direction or another (more positive or more negative). The most influential and most uncertain drivers are those that most differentiate how possible futures may turn out, and are thus key building blocks for scenarios.

1. SECTARIANISM

Stakeholders described the sectarian structure of Lebanese society as being both a driver of political challenges, and reinforced by the political system. They described this sectarianism as feeding and being further fed by intentional narratives of division, as well as mis- and disinformation. Thinking about the future they wondered if people would continue sectarian voting, if political groups intentionally spread mis- and disinformation, and if there would be more significant non-sectarian media.

2. NATIONAL GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE

Stakeholders expressed the belief that the political leadership and governance is a key driver of possible futures for all

"Dis and misinformation are used as a weapon to gain political support and followers. The need to do so can only be reduced with an improved economic situation, communication between religious circles, and better understanding of the context. The behavior is engrained in systemic trauma."

elements of the future of Lebanon. They explained that the information ecosystem of Lebanon is very closely linked with the political system, with close connection between political leadership, economically powerful actors, and media leadership. They further explained that political actors influence the media and information

"We're talking about something very systemic and class related. We're talking about people who want to maintain the status quo at any means with any means by any means necessary. And to have a lot of opportunities and resources to spread misinformation that leads to action."

landscape by amplifying clashes and differences, and intentionally direct blame for the country's challenges away from the government.

Stakeholders described the ways in which this system would need to be different if it were to drive a healthy loop. They described the following as being

"Would we ever have a clear process shared every time a decision is taken? Because Increasing transparency and access to information will increase accountability."

key areas that could improve the future of the country and the loop:

- A new social contract
- Changing the confessional system
- Improved government transparency and accountability
- Improved rule of law and access to justice
- Accountability for mis and disinformation
- Peaceful political change

Stakeholders expressed concern that the confessional political system which Lebanon has, in which political power and governmental bureaucracy are organized according to religious sects, is not serving the country well. They wondered if it would be possible to shift from this system in an orderly manner.

Stakeholders generally shared the desire that these changes be generated without violent disruption and instability, however, many expressed a feeling of stuckness with regards to the possibility that the needed changes would take

"Lebanese live next to one another, but not together."

place in an orderly manner, though some

could imagine an intentional change in power by key leaders.

"The country is at a very interesting transition point. The system cannot continue as it is. All are in agreement that the modality is not sustainable, but not yet at a phase looking at what the alternatives are."

3. SOCIAL COHESION

Stakeholders described Lebanon as a context of poor social cohesion. They also articulated how important social cohesion is to the future of the country and the future of the loop. They identified solidarity, common causes, and shared history as areas that could improve social cohesion. They noted that in this moment there is a strongly divided identity, divided along sectarian lines, no shared version of recent history, and little shared memory and that this is both a symptom of, and driver of poor social cohesion.

"Will there be one history book in Lebanon? In the official history books, history stops in the early 1950s. There is no official version of 1957. There is no mention of the civil war of 15 years?"

"In Lebanon social cohesion practically doesn't exist. As a result, the impact of the information revolution is becoming really dangerous."

"There is not collective history or memory. Where is social cohesion going to come from?"

"If we don't defend social cohesion, we are lost."

4. ECONOMY

Stakeholders described the economic crisis and overall poor economy as driving a need among politicians to distract the people, and a feeling of unhappiness among people, that is looking for a cause, or blame. They also shared ideas about how the economy might recover, and for how ongoing economic crisis might drive significant shifts.

"If we have a better economic situation there will be less need for intentional misinformation."

"As long as the government is receiving support from international donors they will maintain their positions and nothing will change."

5. MEDIA

Stakeholders described major, large-scale media as being strongly politically affiliated. They wondered if independent or alternative media would be able to effectively and adequately provide reliable information, and if there would be free, open, and capable media. They noted that there is independent media, but that it is not well funded, nor very influential. They also observed that dominant media is highly linked to high-powered political and economic actors, increasing the bias in these dominant voices. They also observed that critical voices in media are often quieted or silenced. Finally, they observed that

there is inadequate training for journalists in the country.

> *"We can make change by strengthening the independent and alternative media that exists that are disseminating today much more unbiased news, that are targeting issues that are important for minorities and marginalized people."*

"All of the major news is politically affiliated. It's all biased. We are one of the countries where, for freedom of expression, we have been a reference. Our political practices have eroded. We have freedom of expression, but you cannot get reliable analysis."

6. HOW INFORMATION IMPACTS PEOPLE

Stakeholders identified the narratives that circulate as being highly influential on subsequent behavior, especially given the context of poor social cohesion.

They wondered if:

- Divisive narratives would remain prevalent
- Fact checking and media monitoring would be effective
- People would have hope for change
- Perspectives and norms would change
- There would be healthy dialogue
- Technology would help or hinder healthy engagement

"To what extent, will the myths about the burdens on economic and social life of refugees and migrants in this country

> *"We would benefit from networking with other groups that are alike, that are functioning elsewhere. It's good to see, for example, what the syndicate of press and media is doing in France. It is of benefit not to corner people into the closed corner that Lebanon is today with, but to get them into more networks that exist around the world, give them space to express themselves."*

persist?"

"We have no healthy debate because we lack the tools and the critical thinking skills."

7. CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION

Stakeholders noted that action by civil society could be highly influential on the future of the country. They wondered if civil society would be effective in creating change.

"A civil society that is alert and aware enough to keep reminding the government that this is something that needs to be working on would make a change."

8. REGIONAL POLITICS AND STABILITY

"Things and issues that happen in Iran and Saudi Arabia end up affecting us in Lebanon and making clashes between citizens here."

"We will be dependent on regional context. If it is at ease, we will be, and if tense, we will be."

9. SUPPORT FROM INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

Stakeholders also observed that the actions of international actors also impact on what happens in Lebanon. They wondered if there would be benefits from networking, if the IMF would support a better future, or if there would be external technical assistance.

"We would benefit from support in terms of resources from other countries and experts for reform."

"Our crisis will end if we sign a deal with the IMF, and agree to do step 1, which is reforms."

4. GAPS AND NEXT STEPS

4. GAPS AND NEXT STEPS

GAPS

This report summarizes and builds upon the perspectives of the group of stakeholders who were interviewed and engaged in this country-discovery phase of the Shared Realities process. The learning shared is intended only as representation of the views of this group of stakeholders. It is neither a reflection of the extent of expertise and awareness on these issues in Lebanon today, nor a technical assessment of the information ecosystem in Lebanon. Rather, it paints an initial picture of the challenges and concerns on their minds in relation to the future of social cohesion in Lebanon, the systemic drivers in view for them, and therefore what leverage areas seem relevant to address in an effort to work towards a more positive future for social cohesion from their perspective.

Mis- and disinformation play an inherent and central role in social cohesion and conflict dynamics.

This has taken on new dimensions in the context of rapidly evolving digital communication technologies which

present new challenges related to the scale, scope and speed characterizing our information ecosystems. Many of the key global drivers involved in this are still either unfamiliar or even invisible to many of us. Therefore, Shared Realities endeavors to support stakeholders in recognizing a fuller range of global drivers that may be shaping dynamics in their own context, so that they may form a more complete picture of the challenges and opportunities for addressing them.

To that end, this step in the Shared Realities Process is accompanied by a curriculum, which provides 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 are:

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

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

 Some of these drivers emerged in discussion during this learning phase with stakeholders in Lebanon, while others did not. This could be for many

reasons (including: the expertise, particular interests, or degree of awareness of the individuals involved; the small number of interviews conducted; the need to use an on-line and interview-driven approach; or the design of discussion guides, among other possible explanations).

These gaps point to useful areas for further learning and exploration with stakeholders in this context, in support of building pathways to a more positive future.

Of the drivers covered by the curriculum, social cohesion and related dynamics featured very clearly in the interviews. In addition, some elements of information ecosystems was touched upon, as was the information economy though to a lesser extent (focusing mainly on the sustainability of media outlets).

Geopolitics was also raised, though to less depth, and not in relation to mis and disinformation dynamics. For example, stakeholders did not identify disinformation tactics to intentionally seed distrust and disorder as a possible

problem (whether by internal or external actors), nor did they mention disinformation dynamics active in their own information ecosystems. This is an important area to explore further with stakeholders.

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 and different digital platforms. (It is unclear whether this is a reflection of their assessment of this driver as less influential than others in their context as this question was not asked).

OUTCOMES

This initial phase of Shared Realities in Lebanon has:

1. Provided stakeholders with a way of visualizing and discussing a key and consequential set of harmful dynamics in their context shaping the future of social cohesion in Lebanon and explored these in relation to issues of key concern;

2. Engaged them in an initial systems analysis to begin identifying the events, patterns, structures, mindsets animating those dynamics;

3. Worked with them to begin identifying the drivers involved, and potential leverage points for shifting the feedback loop to a more healthy one.

This has resulted in an initial systems mapping that can provide a good basis for a deeper transformative scenarios process.

In addition, the process created a much needed opportunity for stakeholders from different backgrounds and with shared concerns to connect. Some of them cited the value and encouragement this provided, and how these new connections were already leading to new ideas and potential collaborations.

NEXT STEPS

As noted earlier in the report, the scenarios described in this document are two of many possible futures for social cohesion in an age of mis-and disinformation in Lebanon. Useful next steps would be to engage the interviewees and other stakeholders in a deeper process in which, together, they can co-create an even more robust and illuminating view of the systems dynamics, and key leverage areas. From that, a solid foundation for collaborative scaling and innovation could lead to impactful and lasting solutions.

5. APPENDIX

5. APPENDIX: COMPLETE BUILDING BLOCKS SYNTHESIS

The foundation of this report is the perspectives that stakeholders shared in interviews. These interviews were rich conversations in which stakeholders shared their understanding, experience, and perspectives. This appendix provides a broader set of quotes than those included in the report above. Readers who want a deeper understanding of how stakeholders see the loop, its current dynamics, and its possible futures will find a greater level of depth, and detail in this appendix.

Please note that because interviews were conducted in several languages, some have been translated. Additionally, in some cases, these quotes have been slightly edited to clarify their meaning. However, special care has been taken to ensure that in translating and editing, the meaning intended by the interviewee is not changed.

BUILDING BLOCK 1: KEY CONCERNS

Stakeholders were asked about the key issues that they are concerned about when they think about the future of Lebanon. The key themes that emerged from the interviews are presented in this section. These concerns overlap with one another, and many influence each other.

The concerns that they expressed were with regards tot:

- Living conditions
- Violence and war
- Migrants and refugees
- Youth
- Emigration
- Living conditions

Stakeholders expressed concerns about the material conditions that people in Lebanon will live in, and how those conditions are impacting on social cohesion, people's mindsets, and whether they will stay in the country. In particular they expressed concern about: the economy, financial system, poverty, safety, access to basic services, and feelings of anxiety due to crises.

POVERTY

They shared that they are currently seeing an increase in poverty in the country and are concerned about the future of employment.

"UNICEF is reporting very high numbers of people in poverty."

"We were not used to the number of Lebanese beggars in the streets. If you're having a coffee or a drink on a sidewalk, you have 3, 4 Lebanese beggars that come and ask for money. "

"The level of poverty is around 80% on record of Lebanese people below the poverty line. In our history books, Lebanon was always described as 50% to 60% middle class."

They also shared a sense that safety is decreasing.

"Since the financial collapse, being out is not the same. If you go out at night, it's like during the war. The streets become dark. You need to look behind your shoulder on dark side streets."

Finally, the expressed concern about access to basic services.

"I'm worried about pollution, the water supply, and the power supply."

"If someone from my family gets cancer, how am I supposed to get them medicine? Insurance has become too expensive. Hospitals have become super expensive. And there were gas issues and we didn't know how to commute."

MENTAL HEALTH AND MOTIVATION

Following the events of the last years, stakeholders expressed a feeling that they are in continuous crisis, and feel anxious that it will only worsen.

"The whole of Lebanon is mentally impacted, especially after the explosion."

"People gave up after the blast."

"People are getting used to things that should shock us. We think 'things are going to turn out badly', and yet we can sleep at night. There is so much bad news, that we barely even note serious incidents, since it's the 8th piece of

seriously bad news you hear in a day. We become blasé."

"There is fear all the time about something either collapsing more or blowing up for the wrong reasons. It's always this anxiety about there being no stability tomorrow because everything changes so fast. We see how things can get bad rapidly. What more can we hold? It affects your personal aspirations. It also affects your feeling of safety."

"After the earthquake I have a hard time sleeping. It's the accumulation of many issues."

ACCESS TO RIGHTS

Stakeholders expressed concerns about peoples' access to rights including free speech, and people's access to justice.

"No one is digitally secure in Lebanon. It affects freedom of speech."

"Where are the human rights? People talk about it but no one's doing anything about the basic rights of citizens."

"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, 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."

ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

"Will the judicial system or accountability and impunity be the same as they are?"

"When there's a scandal or wrong doing, there's no accountability, no fair justice, no investigation."

VIOLENCE

Stakeholders expressed concern that the current conditions in Lebanon might lead to violence, or even war.

"I'm worried about the security situation. Even though they say it's not the same as 1975, it can be... in a snap. Will we see war between Lebanese people."

"The will is there for war. People are fed up. People have weapons, and they control areas, and want to control other areas. Some people want to have a fight."

"Social cohesion is very fragile - the elements of social stability are not there; the state, rule of law, trust between various people, the role of media, levels of information, culture, history, anything can be a trigger for a civil war. And the ease of how people talk about the threat of civil war, and how susceptible they are to accept and receive any information is incredible."

MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Stakeholders expressed a great deal of concern about migrants and refugees in the country. They expressed concern about the ability of migrants and refugees to meet their needs and be included in society, as well as about the ability of the society to carry the burden of refugees.

Meeting migrant and refugee needs

"There are so many refugees who are not educated and not registered. They are not recognized or legalized by anyone. They have no documentation, no education, no income."

Including migrants and refugees in society

"There is a stigma around Palestinians. They were never really integrated even after 70 years. Which is strange, because we integrated the Armenians and Kurds even if they could be perceived as different. Palestinians are adding to our successes, in agriculture, for example. No one is highlighting this in the media. The focus is on the ones who fight. Palestinians are instrumental in setting up the banking system here, and in culture, and art. But these things are not in line with the negative narrative about Palestiinians. Even our image of Palestinians in Palestine is always miserable. It's important to show all facets of their life, not the sad one or victims only. We don't talk about the culture of Syrians' and Palestinians' in everyday life."

Refugee scapegoating

Stakeholders noted that among the divisive narratives circulating in Lebanon are many which scapegoat refugees for the problems of the country. They asserted that many of these scapegoating narratives come from people in power within the government.

"Whenever there's an influx of refugees, it's focused on and communicated as the worst thing to happen to this country."

"The ministries and people in power are the same people that are responsible for the overarching narrative of nationalism that seeks to instill this fear and otherization against people who are not Lebanese, scapegoating them."

"When the dollarized economy went completely south and refugees were getting their UN payments in dollars from the ATMs, which were are the same ones the Lebanese are struggling to get their money from, it was easy to blame the refugees and migrants."

"Things on the ground can change so much based on what's communicated to the masses. For example the narratives on refugees have recently switched, and now there's a crackdown narrative and people are ready to deport migrants"

"The perceived impact of Syrians is blown out of proportion. Some people say that they are the root of all of our problems today. These racist narratives circulate on Facebook"

Migrant and refugee burden

"Syrian refugees are a huge burden of the country. There are no enabling conditions to enable them to contribute to the economy and prosperity of the country. And they are a huge number. If today a solution is not found, and I don't think we will find one, it will be a huge issue on an already collapsing country."

THE FUTURE FOR YOUTH

Stakeholders expressed concern that in the context of Lebanon today, youth are not being adequately prepared for the future.

"I don't see any political future- the situation today is massively affecting our future and our youth. They are losing hope and motivation. They don't have the right support or education."

"The lost generation are leaving schools. This impacts social cohesion, and leads us to poverty, extremism, and poor mental health."

"The education system is in bad shape, every year the school year is impacted. This year they closed for 4 months. Reasons: economic crisis, covid, failure. This impacts the whole country."

EMIGRATION

They noted these factors have created feelings of anxiety and despair for many and that many Lebanese people who wish for a better future are leaving the country. They also noted that these people are largely educated, leading to

further worsening conditions in the country.

"More and more youth are emigrating. Skilled people are leaving the country when the country needs those skills. It is changing the demographics a lot, which will impact social cohesion."

"Are we going to continue to see the emigration of a certain mentality; the open, democratic, liberal Lebanese mentality?"

BUILDING BLOCK 2: WHAT WILL DETERMINE THE DIRECTION OF THE FUTURE?

Stakeholders were asked about what will influence the future of their core concerns. Said differently, they were asked what would drive the future in one direction or another (more positive or more negative). The most influential and most uncertain drivers are those that most differentiate how possible futures may turn out, and are thus key building blocks for scenarios.

SECTARIANISM

Stakeholders described the sectarian structure of Lebanese society as being both a driver of political challenges, and reinforced by the political system. They described this sectarianism as feeding and being further fed by intentional narratives of division, as well as mis- and disinformation.

Will people continue sectarian voting?

"The population is very resilient in voting for the same people. Regardless of the problems in the country, they are very attached to their normal pattern. Come the election, we know how they will vote."

"You feel that there is no public good in the vote. You cannot find the public sense in the vote. You find the sectarian community sense."

Will political groups intentionally spread mis- and disinformation?

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

"For the two main political regimes to maintain their legitimacy, they need to show their best and say that the others are attacking them and they are stopping us from achieving our goals. Some misinformation are shared consciously."

"Dis and misinformation are used as a weapon to gain political support and followers. The need to do so can only be reduced with an improved economic situation, communication between religious circles, and better understanding of the context. The behavior is engrained in systemic trauma."

"What got us here is very much the actions of those who are trying to cover up their tracks. What's easier to throw at people than a god shield and a nationalist narrative that will demonize everyone else?"

LEBANON COUNTRY REPORT

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

Will there be major media that is non-sectarian?

"Journalism is driven into a sectarian perspective rather than speaking truth to power."

"Would we have public opinion discussing matters depending on the performance of public figures and not their religious or political background?"

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE

Stakeholders expressed the belief that the political leadership and governance is a key driver of possible futures for all elements of the future of Lebanon. They explained that the information ecosystem of Lebanon is very closely linked with the political system, with close connection between political leadership, economically powerful actors, and media leadership. They further explained how political actors influence the media and information landscape.

"Those in power are warlords, the political parties, the lawmakers, the judiciary, the banks, the media. They are one and the same."

"All political parties are mostly interested in how strong their party is, rather than how strong our country is. No party is ready to lose power for the better of the nation."

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

"Politicians use social media as a way to divert people's anger and use it as a way for people to vent their frustrations. But this can lead to real and physical harm."

"We're talking about something very systemic and class related. We're talking about people who want to maintain the status quo at any means with any means by any means necessary. And to have a lot of opportunities and resources to spread misinformation that leads to action."

Stakeholders described the ways in which this system would need to be different if it were to drive a healthy loop.

Will there be a new social contract?

"Will there be a change in the political system, a new social contract, not a radical one, that will formalize a new awareness of power between communities."

Will there be transparency and accountability?

"Would we ever have a clear process shared every time a decision is taken? Because Increasing transparency and access to information will increase accountability."

Will it be possible for there to be peaceful political change?

Stakeholders generally shared the desire that these changes be generated without violent disruption and instability, however, many expressed a feeling of stuckness with regards to the possibility

that the needed changes would take place in an orderly manner, though some could imagine an intentional change in power by key leaders.

"Will there be enough political will on the state level? People need to be convinced that this is what needs to be done."

"Will Lebanon / Lebanese be able to invent or create a way / system / mechanism / culture / solution so that conflicts are resolved peacefully? Change is created peacefully? So that we do not have to go through violence every time change is about to happen? Can we institutionalize this? While embedding this / working it out institutionally? And not have to deal with it on the event-level."

"I feel that there is no solution in the near future. Some other times, I am hopeful that the country can survive with access to basic needs. There is positive cultural change happening, but we don't see hope in political change."

"The country is at a very interesting transition point. The system cannot continue as it is. All are in agreement that the modality is not sustainable, but not yet at a phase looking at what the alternatives are."

"If the real opposition in the country manages to get themselves together to seize the right political moment and slowly replace the leaders in place we would have a much better outlook. There

would be trust in the state and their institutions."

Will the confessional system be changed?

Stakeholders expressed concern that the confessional political system which Lebanon has, in which political power and governmental bureaucracy are organized according to religious sects, is not serving the country well. They wondered if it would be possible to shift from this system in an orderly manner.

"Will we be able to build institutions that are independent of all communities and political parties? Closer to western democracies?"

"The country is bad when it goes communitarian and better when it goes more national."

"Would the political system change? - The nature of the communitarian system, that communitarian divide within the system, is based on a political system on communities, rather than on the idea of a nation. If this will not change, everything will not change. We need a new social contract."

Will there be justice?

"If people are better organized, better empowered, and able to face the governmental machines, there could be justice. I think a certain revolution within the judicial system by certain law lawmakers will say, okay, that's it. We are going to take things into our own hands. We are going to continue, you know,

building this judicial system in an unbiased way and non politicized way."

Will there be legal accountability for disinformation?

"Legal punishment for fake news is, very important to put in place."

"It's not one single party that is governing in Lebanon. Even though they are allies in, in many instances one party releases fake news about the other party. You've seen them legally battling fake news to each other, which is not exactly the perfect solution, but is not bad if they cancel each other. I think they should encouraged to do so. We've seen this several times, this party battling this other party media because they release fake news. The problem is that this is not done by the actual legal institution that has to take action when there is fake news."

Will there be transparency behind government decisions?

"Will the government show the reasons behind decisions or not? Because Increasing transparency and access to information will increase accountability."

SOCIAL COHESION

Stakeholders described Lebanon as a context of poor social cohesion. They also articulated how important social cohesion is to the future of the country and the future of the loop.

Will social cohesion improve?

"If we don't defend social cohesion, we are lost."

"In Lebanon social cohesion practically doesn't exist. As a result, the impact of the information revolution is becoming really dangerous."

"Lebanese live next to one another, but not together."

Will Lebanese people find solidarity? Common causes?

"Lebanese people don't find common causes, as a result of our sectarian and political divisions."

"We can all go to the positive scenario together, working on a common goal, or interest. If we don't all work together, we for sure will go to the negative scenario. Social cohesion is a strategy."

"We're in a continuous crisis, it's a loop, and every sector is being impacted. The point of focus is the citizen who is now living in this unsafe environment. Instead of having a social cohesion to support citizens, we're more individualistic. It is survival of the toughest. As a result, there is an increase in emigration and brain drain. Corruption becomes part of the process."

"If we have civil society, the free media, and well organized people to be able to fight back, and win elections that could actually create a balance with the corrupt judicial system."

Will there be shared history?

Stakeholders noted that there is no shared version of recent history, and little shared memory and that this is both a symptom of, and driver of poor social cohesion.

"There is not collective history or memory. Where is social cohesion going to come from?"

"Will there be one history book in Lebanon? In the official history books, history stops in the early 1950s. There is no official version of 1957. There is no mention of the civil war of 15 years?"

"Without a shared history book, everyone learns their parents' version of history, which is based on their group's identity?

"One thing that could lead to a shift is if the myths that are circulating were debunked and unpacked and complexified and the lens was shifted from away from the Syrian refugees as the integral cause of the current economic crisis. And the right light were shed on what was really dire about the harm done by the economic policies and the humiliating neglect that brought us here."

ECONOMY

Stakeholders described the economic crisis and overall poor economy as driving a need among politicians to distract the people, and a feeling of unhappiness among people, that is looking for a cause, or blame. They also

shared ideas about how the economy might recover, and for how ongoing economic crisis might drive significant shifts.

What will the economic situation in Lebanon be?

"When will the banking crisis end?"

"What will happen economically to Lebanon? We are experiencing the biggest inflation the country has had over the past 5 years. Will Lebanon be able to get through the crisis? Will we work with the IMF or will we get deeper into the crisis? Will we be able to get through? Create jobs? Have a stable lira? Attract investors? Get back on the world map through our banking system? Will we be able to produce and develop sectors like industry and agriculture?"

"What will the work ecosystem look like?"

"If we have a better economic situation there will be less need for intentional misinformation."

"Will the crisis that is creating the social divide end? In Lebanon we don't even have a team who can write up a recovery plan. The IMF should be giving us money. Our care taker government hasn't signed anything with the IMF. There's nothing that's starting."

"How will the economic situation of Lebanon be? We have political clientelism. When the economic situation got worse, the political parties could no longer offer citizens job

opportunities in the political sector. They need to find other ways to get citizens with them, so, they are building hate among groups. If there is again positions to share among parties, they will need less fake news."

"We could be a touristic country."

Will the economic crisis force change?

"As long as the government is receiving support from international donors they will maintain their positions and nothing will change."

MEDIA

Stakeholders described major, large-scale media as being strongly politically affiliated. They wondered if independent or alternative media would be able to effectively and adequately provide reliable information.

Will there be effective alternative media?

"All of the major news is politically affiliated. It's all biased. We are one of the countries where, for freedom of expression, we have been a reference. Our political practices have eroded. We have freedom of expression, but you cannot get reliable analysis."

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

"In mass media, the discourse of disinformation on the refugee crisis shows the level of control over the public opinion and the level of

manipulation. Alternative media is doing a little bit better."

"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. After 2019, after the revolution, there was a big rise of independent media that are funded by, external donors. These media that would present a different kind of news that would be unbiased, that would serve more the younger audience, the diaspora of Lebanon, et cetera. The problem is their financial sustainability. The moment that they don't have these donors, or the big advertisers, their economic sustainability and their financial sustainability is quite shakey."

"Will we see real independent media that is funded by subscriptions and not dependent on political funds and foreign or local grants?"

"We can make change by strengthening the independent and alternative media that exists that are disseminating today much more unbiased news, that are targeting issues that are important for minorities and marginalized people."

Will media be free, open, and capable ?

"We see a crackdown in terms of the outlets that try to debunk myths, and that try to start different conversations that try to expose the lies and the oppression. They are the ones who are victims of security threats themselves, incidents, sometimes abduction, sometimes unfair legal like accusations and ramifications because of what they're putting out there. They're much more at risk for being called subversive, being accused of spreading untrue information, defamation campaigns, whatever the, the people in power decide to call them at the time."

"You have the alternative syndicate of the press media that was formed two years ago, and that's quite active whenever there is not only misinformation, but also censorship. Whenever there is a journalist that's being asked for questioning in alternative media, they are quite active in supporting this.

"Alternative media, alternative syndicates, alternative civil society groups that are working in parallel to a totally collapsing state should be encouraged at this point until they become one day in power somehow."

"The fact that there is not a journalism school is a disaster. There is no training to learn this vital profession."

HOW INFORMATION IMPACTS PEOPLE

Stakeholders identified the narratives that circulate as being highly influential on subsequent behaviour, especially given the context of poor social cohesion.

Will divisive narratives remain prevalent?

"To what extent, will the myths about the burdens on economic and social life of refugees and migrants in this country persist?"

'There is a lot of misinformation that infiltrates the local community to cause problems, including creating frictions between the municipality and donors'

Will fact checking and media monitoring be effective?

"All the institutions that are debunking the fake news, sometimes their voice is not as loud as the actual fake news because, well, simply because fake news is a lot of times more tempting to believe. It's very emotionally driven and, and gets people excited or angry or whatever, whereby debunking it is, is really very factual, sometimes boring for a lot of people. To be able to actually sexify it is important."

"There's a news monitor that people wanted to create. You can enter a link and then it shows you digitally the truthfulness of the site; from green (true) to red (false) and in between."

"We have trained people on waiting and checking before you share news. You can impact people."

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

Will people believe that action for change will be effective?

"Thanks to the work of civil societies and NGOs, there are improvements in social norms. For example, there is a song from ten years, by Elie Ayoub "bint el sirilankiyeh" that was considered ok. Today we cannot anymore talk in a pejorative way about home workers. Before things were accepted even if wrong. Today it is expressed and dealt with."

"There are always promises from our politicians that everything will be better in 2 months. People live on a promise that things will change and wait for something to happen. It kills people's motivations and hopes. All of this, paradoxically, maintains a certain social cohesion."

"Can we show people how social cohesion is good for everyone? And how the current situation is weakening everyone including groups who think the current situation is beneficial?"

Will there be healthy dialogue?

"You go on youtube, and you hear all of the conspiracies. People who speak sense don't want to engage in the debate any more."

"We have no healthy debate because we lack the tools and the critical thinking skills."

"Dialogues have become too simplistic and reductionist."

"We are working on the culture of dialogue. I might be too optimistic, but if we, as social activists, increasingly got into this topic. if we have an impact that starts with 20% in the first year then 30%in the second year, then 50%... then that would be an achievement. If we don't try there's no hope"

Will technology enable or hinder healthy society?

"To spread information there are electronic armies and bots. They are affecting social behavior."

"Technology needs to be accessible to different social groups. People can't remain in the dark. They need to be enlightened to be engaged."

"'Maybe technology will promote social cohesion. Maybe technology will enable filtering out fake accounts through tech. Maybe apps will change harsh comments that we write to reformulate them to be kinder. Maybe tech will help reach people who are usually not reached maybe because of language through instant translation."

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION

Will there be effective civil society action?

"The country has a small and fragmented potential for change in the small buds of groups of political organizers and mutual aid groups. Some of them are very small,

nascent NGOs. The last milestone when we had a group of people that are aligned politically acting together was the 2019 uprising. I don't even think its cohesive enough to be a pole. They have a strong aversion to elections and the current machineries of power. But there is this group that is at the intersection of political and social activism, civil society, and the arts."

"I would have a specific curiosity about specific alternative groups, not just media outlets and if they have started to thrive somehow. Have they gotten backing? Have they been able to produce art? To produce the messaging that they usually are able to? Has there been change in terms of money, but also social freedom?"

"We have been 3 years with no benefits. My only optimism is that no money will come to the government but to ngos so that citizens don't starve."

"A civil society that is alert and aware enough to keep reminding the government that this is something that needs to be working on would make a change."

Regional politics and stability

How will events and conditions in other countries affect the future?

"Things and issues that happen in Iran and Saudi Arabia end up affecting us in Lebanon and making clashes between citizens here."

"We will be dependent on regional context. If it is at ease, we will be, and if tense, we will be."

"War would break out if Lebanon was treated as a proxy country. With the tensions that we have had over the last 10 years, if someone had opened the warehouses of arms and weapons and funding it, we could have had war. It is easy to stigmatize people who are identifying as different communities. It is easy to cross the line. We have crossed the line before. People who were born during peace time don't have an issue going to war. People who have lived war, there's no way that they would enter again."

Support from international actors

Will outside actors provide useful support?

"We would benefit from networking with other groups that are alike, that are functioning elsewhere. It's good to see, for example, what the syndicate of press and media is doing in France. It is of benefit not to corner people into the closed corner that Lebanon is today with, but to get them into more networks that exist around the world, give them space to express themselves."

"We would benefit from support in terms of resources from other countries and experts for reform."

"Our crisis will end if we sign a deal with the IMF, and agree to do step 1, which is reforms."