

Special

# Thematic Report

## Monitoring Informal Social Protection for Improved Humanitarian Diagnostics in Lebanon - Round 1

January 2024



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The Lebanon Crisis Analytics Team (LCAT) provides reactive and in-depth context analysis to inform the aid community in Lebanon. This Special Thematic Report on Informal Social Protection and its underpinning study is conducted in partnership with the Research and Learning Team (RLT) at Mercy Corps. The information and analysis contained in this report is therefore strictly to inform humanitarian and development actors and associated policymaking on Lebanon.

*This study/report is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and European Union Humanitarian Aid. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of the LCAT and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or the European Union.*

Humphrey, A., Elsamahi, M., Chohaney, M., Srour, I. El Hussein, M. (2024) *Special Thematic Report. Monitoring Informal Social Protection for Improved Humanitarian Diagnostics in Lebanon – Round 1. Beirut, Lebanon: Mercy Corps.*





Credit: World Bank

## Executive summary

During and in the aftermath of crises, communities are often their own first responders. Informal support from family, friends, neighbors, and other groups is frequently more essential to households’ survival than formal support from aid actors and governments. However, quantifying this type of support – also known as informal social protection (ISP) – can be difficult. Previous efforts to quantify ISP have tended to focus on exclusively measuring economic resources mobilized during times of hardship through households’ social networks. However, this narrow definition does not capture other types of tangible and intangible assistance, from market knowledge to equipment lending, debt forgiveness, and psychosocial services.

The report aims to help aid actors look beyond conventional vulnerability assessment criteria by offering practicable approaches to measuring and evaluating ISP. This includes a downloadable ISP research tool, found separately on the LCAT website.<sup>1</sup> When monitored regularly, ISP may be able to efficiently identify shifts in patterns of need, uncover “hidden” vulnerabilities, and identify changes in humanitarian crisis trajectories. This information would potentially enable humanitarian actors to more effectively anticipate needs, respond more quickly, and more effectively target assistance.

This brief is the first in a series presenting findings from LCAT’s ongoing initiative to monitor ISP for improved humanitarian diagnostics in Lebanon. It presents findings from an initial round of data collection completed in two municipalities between September and October 2023, including cross-sectional survey results detailing key characteristics of households’ ISP networks in Lebanon. Subsequent reports in the series will introduce ISP as a predictive indicator, unpacking the linkages between ISP and other vulnerability indicators over time.

<sup>1</sup> Navigate to this report on the thematic reports section of the LCAT website using this link: [Thematic Reports](#)



## Key Findings

- Credit and loans from within Lebanon are the most commonly shared tangible resource. Cash gifts including remittances sent from abroad accounted for a much smaller percentage of tangible ISP.
- Roughly half of respondents in both Barouk and Bourj Hammoud report that the number of people they can turn to for support has decreased in the last six months.
- Emotional support is equally important as tangible support according to respondents. Socially isolated communities such as Syrian nationals rely more on emotional support because they struggle to maintain solidarity networks that they established back home.
- The quality of ISP is equally, if not more, important to households than size. This means that while networks appear to be shrinking as purchasing power decreases, those with “the right kind” of social support remain better off than their worse connected peers.
- ISP diversity is another important variable for households’ wellbeing. Network diversity may grant households more reliable access to support throughout a crisis. However, those types of network are rare, with networks tending to be homogenous overall.
- Round 1 survey results confirm that LCAT’s ISP indicator measures a distinct aspect of household vulnerability compared to “traditional” vulnerability indicators. Almost half of households identified as vulnerable by the ISP indicator were not identified as vulnerable according to the two food security and two essential needs scores.





Credit: João Sousa/L'Orient Le Jour

# What is **informal social protection** and why does it **matter**?

Previous Mercy Corps research in Yemen and South Sudan (see Box 1) has shown that communities are often their own first responders during and following crises.<sup>2</sup> Neighbors, friends, relatives, religious institutions, political parties, and community associations serve as sources of a diverse array of support, ranging from food and cash to information, advice, and emotional support. Access to informal social protection (ISP) networks has been proven to directly impact household food security, access to economic opportunities, safety, and their psychosocial wellbeing. Compared to formal aid actors, ISP networks are often mobilize faster in response to shocks, including economic crises, pandemics, and conflict.<sup>3</sup>

## **Defining informal social protection**

*Informal social protection refers broadly to the “care and support ... provided to family, community, and group members through social structures and social networks.”<sup>4</sup> These networks may include international diasporas that maintain close links with home communities, but they may also be highly localized and cut-off from outside sources of support. ISP can exist alongside formal social protection – external interventions by the state or official aid actors that are designed to help individuals and households cope with poverty, destitution, and vulnerability – but also in its absence. In protracted crises where formal governance structures are weak to non-existent, people rely heavily on informal social protection to get by. Other terms may be used to refer to the same concept, including “mutual aid”, “social solidarity”, and “social safety nets”. We use the term Informal Social Protection in order to emphasize the informal nature of support systems, and the co-occurrence of ISP next to “official” social protection schemes implemented by states or formal aid actors.*

<sup>2</sup> Aldrich (2012); Corbett et al. (2021); South et al. (2010); Berry & Reddy (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Aldrich & Meyer (2015); Wall & Hedlund (2016); Saferworld & Save the Children (2020)

<sup>4</sup> Calder & Tanhchareun. (2014), p.4



However, protracted crises can exhaust ISP networks, as resources become increasingly scarce and households' capacities to share material support with one another erode. When these networks become strained it may signal worsening humanitarian conditions, as households are left without a crucial source of resilience and become increasingly reliant upon external assistance.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, not all groups have equal access to informal social protection networks. Exclusion from these networks, whether based on socioeconomic, geographic, or political factors, can imply particular vulnerability for some groups. Studies have also shown that informal social protection networks can evolve and be disrupted by crisis and conflict-related dynamics.<sup>6</sup>

### Previous Mercy Corps research on Informal Social Protection

#### ***The Currency of Connections: Why Do Social Connections Matter for Households in South Sudan? (2018 – 2020)***

*Mercy Corps and the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University conducted a mixed methods study exploring how households rely on informal social protection to manage shocks and stresses during protracted crises. The study team conducted panel surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions in South Sudan and West Nile, Uganda where many South Sudanese had been displaced. This research discussed the ways in which access to ISP supports resilience during protracted crises, and highlighted the ways in which humanitarian aid can both complement and disrupt these systems.*

#### ***Sharing to survive: Investigating the Role of Social Networks During Yemen's Humanitarian Crisis (2021 – 2022)***

*In partnership with the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, Mercy Corps conducted a qualitative study to better understand how Yemenis relied on informal social protection to cope with new and recurring challenges, including conflict, climate shocks, and the Covid-19 pandemic. The study team conducted 149 interviews with context experts, members of the diaspora, aid actors, and individuals affected by the humanitarian crisis in the Taiz governorate. Findings demonstrated how households leveraged their social connections to mobilize tangible and intangible resources, as well as the ways in which aid actors missed opportunities to account for these networks in the humanitarian response.*

These characteristics make measuring ISP a promising entrypoint for monitoring and anticipating patterns of household vulnerability during crises. However, ISP remains largely absent from humanitarian information systems. Instead, aid actors tend to rely on standardized measures of vulnerability that are easier to quantify. These indicators typically focus on individual- or household-level consumption, coping strategies, or essential needs in order to determine humanitarian need and vulnerability dynamics. In turn, there is a missed opportunity to account for and measure relational and locally-led approaches to coping and survival.

Typical approaches to measuring household vulnerability rely on assessments of "outcome" indicators – for example cross-sectional measures of food security or economic welfare. However, no single indicator can comprehensively measure all aspects of household vulnerability. The usual solution to this problem has been to measure increasingly specific sector-based indicators to account for specific dimensions of vulnerability, often for specific sub-populations. Crisis analysis and program targeting tend to also rely on the cross-sectional "outcome" level, based on the implicit assumption that measures of current vulnerability can reliably predict future need. However, vulnerability is dynamic. Status measured at a single point in time may not be a reliable predictor of need in the future.

<sup>5</sup> Kim et al. (2020); Kim et al. (2022)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid



Measuring ISP instead seeks to identify patterns that have current and future implications for multiple dimensions of household vulnerability. For example, characteristics of a household's current informal support system may be associated with multiple aspects of vulnerability during crises, including its food security status, ability to access essential needs, and psychosocial wellbeing, among others. A household's ISP may also be associated with their ability to build and protect their future welfare.

By measuring informal social protection and its dynamics as part of assessments and monitoring activities, aid actors may be able to efficiently identify shifts in patterns of need, uncover "hidden" vulnerabilities, and identify changes in humanitarian crisis trajectories. This information would potentially enable humanitarian actors to more effectively anticipate need, to respond more quickly, and to more effectively target assistance to those in greatest need.

To evaluate the utility of measuring and monitoring ISP in humanitarian information systems, LCAT is employing a mixed-methods approach to understand the nature and function of ISP in Lebanon. This report is the first in a series of studies on ISP, addressing the following research questions in two locations in Lebanon:

- 1. How can monitoring ISP help aid actors more accurately and efficiently identify household vulnerability, including for currently overlooked populations?**
- 2. How can measuring ISP help aid actors more effectively monitor the crisis trajectories and predict future changes in humanitarian need?**





Credit: LRC

## Why should aid actors monitor ISP in Lebanon?

Skyrocketing prices for essential needs coupled with extreme inflation and currency devaluation are driving an economic crisis in Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> By September 2023, inflation, as measured by the rate of change in the LBP consumer price index, had reached almost 5,000%,<sup>8</sup> decimating the purchasing power of LBP-earning households, whose salaries have not kept pace with inflation. Formal social protection schemes reach a small number of Lebanese. Although it has expanded considerably since 2019, the coverage of state social safety nets is limited and their targeting is outdated; registration for the National Poverty Targeting Programme has been closed since 2019 while that of the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) was only open for two months between December 2021 and January 2022. This means that people who became poor since January 2022 have had no chance to benefit from any social safety net, even if they would now qualify for assistance. Meanwhile, the vast majority of households in Lebanon do not receive humanitarian assistance from aid actors such as the UN or the dozens of NGOs working in the country. So how are Lebanese households coping amidst a protracted humanitarian crisis and in the absence of formal support systems? Evidence points toward the critical role of ISP in enabling households to cope with, and eventually recover from crises.

The current socio-economic crisis in Lebanon has affected vulnerable Lebanese citizens and refugees. The situation was exacerbated by a number of occurrences, namely the Covid-19 pandemic, the August 2020 Beirut Port Blast, the protracted presidential vacuum, and the consequences of the Ukraine war. The government's inability to provide needed assistance to vulnerable communities and the steady increase in households' Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB), mean that poor and vulnerable households have borne the brunt of the compounding crises, putting them at a disproportionate disadvantage.

<sup>7</sup> World Bank, [Lebanon Economic Monitor, Spring 2023: The Normalization of Crisis is No Road for Stabilization](#), May 16, 2023; Central Administration of Statistics, [Annual Inflation Rates, CPI](#);

Mercy Corps Lebanon, [End of the Lira – The Impact of Dollarization on Lebanese Households](#), November 17, 2023

<sup>8</sup> Mercy Corps Lebanon, [End of the Lira – The Impact of Dollarization on Lebanese Households](#), November 17, 2023





Inequity among the population causes vertical and horizontal tensions, as evidenced by protests against high prices and poor living standards, strikes for better working conditions and wages, and inter and intra-community tensions as a result of scarcity and strains on available resources. In May 2023, the Integrated Food Security Phase categorized approximately 21% of the Lebanese population and 36% of Syrian refugees in Phase 3 (Critical), and 2% of the Lebanese population and 3% of the Syrian refugees in Phase 4 (Emergency).<sup>9</sup>

The shift in humanitarian response to cover both the Lebanese community and the refugee community has strained the response's capacity to cover all vulnerable communities. Compounded with an absence in government assistance, households opt for informal coping mechanisms, relying on their own social networks. Lebanon has a history of communities rallying to support one another during periods of crises and it has experienced a number of overlapping crises in recent years. Following the Port Blast, the community-led response was quicker to respond than aid actors, especially in terms of mobilization and cleanup, and collection of expatriate and foreign donations. Remittances and other diaspora inflows are playing a crucial role during the crisis, being informally redistributed among many households, including highly vulnerable ones. More recently, as a result of the ongoing fighting along Lebanon's South border, as of January 11, 2024, 80% of internally displaced persons sought temporary shelter with host families.

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<sup>9</sup> IPC categorised 30% of PRL and 35% of PRS in Phase 3(Critical), and 2% of PRL and 5% of PRS in Phase 4 (Emergency). (IPC 2023).



Credit: Adrian Hartrick/Al Jazeera

## Research methodology

This research project employs a mixed methods design. Quantitative analysis is based on iterative household monitoring surveys, which are being implemented in two Lebanese municipalities. Complementary qualitative analysis is based on panel in-depth interviews and Photovoice at the same research sites. Data collection has and will take place between September 2023 and April 2024, with the first round of data collection completed between September and October 2023.

### Quantitative design and analysis

The monitoring survey consists of eight simple modules, including five vulnerability modules and three modules that will be used for descriptive/control purposes. These modules included demographics; informal social protection; Livelihood Coping Score - Essential Needs (LCS-EN)<sup>10</sup>; Food Consumption Score (FCS); Reduced Coping Strategy Index (rCSI) and the Multidimensional Deprivation Index (MDDI)<sup>11</sup>; debt; and remittances. We reviewed the most commonly collected vulnerability indicators in Lebanon (e.g., by the VASyR, MSNA, and WFP monitoring surveys) and prioritized these in order to ensure that our analysis is of immediate relevance to these stakeholders. Drawing on previous research on this topic, LCAT also took conceptual and theoretical factors into consideration to prioritize vulnerability modules which have had compelling associations with ISP.

A statistically representative random sample of households were drawn for Barouk and Bourj Hammoud from a database of residential single and multi-family housing units provided by LCAT's data collection partner. The sample was statistically representative within a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, resulting in a sample size of 240 households for Barouk and 346 households for Bourj Hammoud. Additionally, a 30% buffer was added to the sample size to account for non-response households<sup>12</sup> and attrition during data collection for future rounds of the study.

<sup>10</sup> Includes receipt of formal assistance and household events measurements.

<sup>11</sup> Includes measures of health, education, shelter, WASH, displacement, and safety.

<sup>12</sup> Non-response households were replaced by households randomly drawn from the list of additional households.



## Monitoring site selection

This project is being implemented in two Lebanese municipalities. The municipalities were selected based on a two-step ranking process, designed to ensure that sites are strategically diverse in ways relevant to the key research questions. Step one entailed ranking Lebanon's 26 districts by vulnerability according to an indicator developed by LCAT, which comprises changes over time in night-time light reflectance (NLR) and fuel prices. Districts were selected from this list, including one highly vulnerable one (Metn) and one middle-vulnerability one (Chouf), in order to account for potential backsliding among middle-income populations. Step two entailed a further narrowing, to select municipalities within the shortlisted districts. This was based on a qualitative desk review process and consultation with experts, to identify and rank municipalities based on characteristics of relevance to the research questions.

### Barouk

Barouk is a small town in the Chouf district with approximately 5,000 inhabitants. It was chosen as a research site for this report due to its high number of middle income households which would not typically be included in official aid targeting or the government's social protection programmes. It is also more representative of the many rural towns outside of Lebanon's more urban areas, such as along the coastal highway. Tourism represents a key part of the local economy, thanks to its proximity to the Cedar Reserve. Barouk also has a wide informal economy, with many residents employed in agriculture, small businesses, and construction.

### Bourj Hammoud

This urban municipality in the Metn district contrasts significantly with Barouk on many levels. Very close to Beirut, Bourj Hammoud has a high number of migrant workers, with a much more diverse and vulnerable population compared to Barouk.<sup>13 14</sup> It is also a municipality where many NGOs and other aid projects are active. Bourj Hammoud's economy reflects a mix of formal and informal sectors, encompassing established businesses, informal markets, and recent migrant businesses. This allows for an assessment of how households adapt to changing economic realities and provide essential assistance to other vulnerable individuals and families.

Following each round of the three-wave monitoring survey, LCAT employs distinct analytical methods to answer the study's various research questions.

**1. Cross-sectional analysis:** Based on the first round of data collection, this brief presents summary descriptives related to key attributes of ISP at a single point in time. This includes descriptive findings related to select dimensions of ISP (see Box 3), as well as an analysis of how our measure of ISP compares to other vulnerability indicators. This resulted in a discussion of the extent to which measuring informal social protection can surface "hidden vulnerabilities."



Research Site Distribution Map

<sup>13</sup> [LCAT Dashboard](#), Economic Vulnerability Index.

<sup>14</sup> Relief Web, [Lebanon: Inter-Agency Coordination - The 332 localities in Lebanon that host the highest number of displaced Syrians, Palestinian refugees, and deprived Lebanese - 2022](#) October 28, 2022





2. **Temporal analysis:** Following the second monitoring survey round, LCAT will conduct longitudinal analysis to determine the extent to which changes in ISP – including its individual dimensions as well as the composite ISP index – are associated with changes in other vulnerability indicators. Disaggregated analyses will also consider the extent to which select household characteristics, including gender, nationality, and location may affect households’ access to informal social protection.
3. **Predictive analysis:** Following the third monitoring survey round, LCAT will conduct predictive analysis, in an effort to determine the extent to which changes in ISP may be a precursor for changes in other measures of vulnerability, and vice versa.

### Constructing Mercy Corps’ Informal Social Protection Index

*There is little consensus about how quantitative indicators can be used to effectively measure households’ access to informal social protection. Previous efforts to quantify ISP have largely focused on measuring economic resources mobilized during times of hardship through households’ social networks, which are usually narrowly defined by geographic proximity or other pre-selected socioeconomic characteristics. However, previous Mercy Corps research on ISP shows that these approaches do not adequately account for the nuances and dynamics of people’s social connectedness, especially in terms of how they relate to coping and recovery during crises.*

*Instead, this project measures ISP using eleven variables to account for the following six distinct dimensions:*



**Number**

The number of people a household can call in times of need



**Diversity**

The different types of social connections a household can call or be called upon in times of need



**Reliability**

Confidence in a household’s ability to call upon its social connections to mobilize resources in times of need



**Reciprocity**

A household’s ability to provide help to its social connections in times of need



**Resources**

The different types of economic and non-economic resources a household receives and/or provides to its social connections in times of need



**Dynamics**

Changes to a household’s ability to receive and provide economic and/or non-economic resources to its social connections in times of need

*The identification of the six ISP dimensions and their corresponding survey questions was informed by qualitative insights, a literature review, and consultations with key experts conducted through the long-term exploratory research initiatives. Assuming light-touch adjustments to ensure contextual relevance, the streamlined survey module can be plugged into existing monitoring and assessment activities.*



## Qualitative data collection

The qualitative approach aims to understand how Lebanese households rely on ISP to cope with the impacts of the crisis, contextualize the quantitative data to better understand emerging findings, and explore the temporal dimensions of vulnerability through longitudinal in-depth interviews (IDIs). Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling method, with the study team selecting an equal number of male and female participants of various ages, who were representative of different nationalities present at the study site, and knowledgeable about the social dynamics in their community. These in-depth interviews provide a temporal lens, capturing a snapshot of ISP networks during a particular period of data collection. Through these in-depth interviews, the study team will be able to draw out narratives that chart changes in ISP networks and differences across study sites as well as the types of support households provide to one another. Approximately 15-20 IDIs will be conducted per round in both localities, disaggregated by gender and nationality.<sup>15</sup>

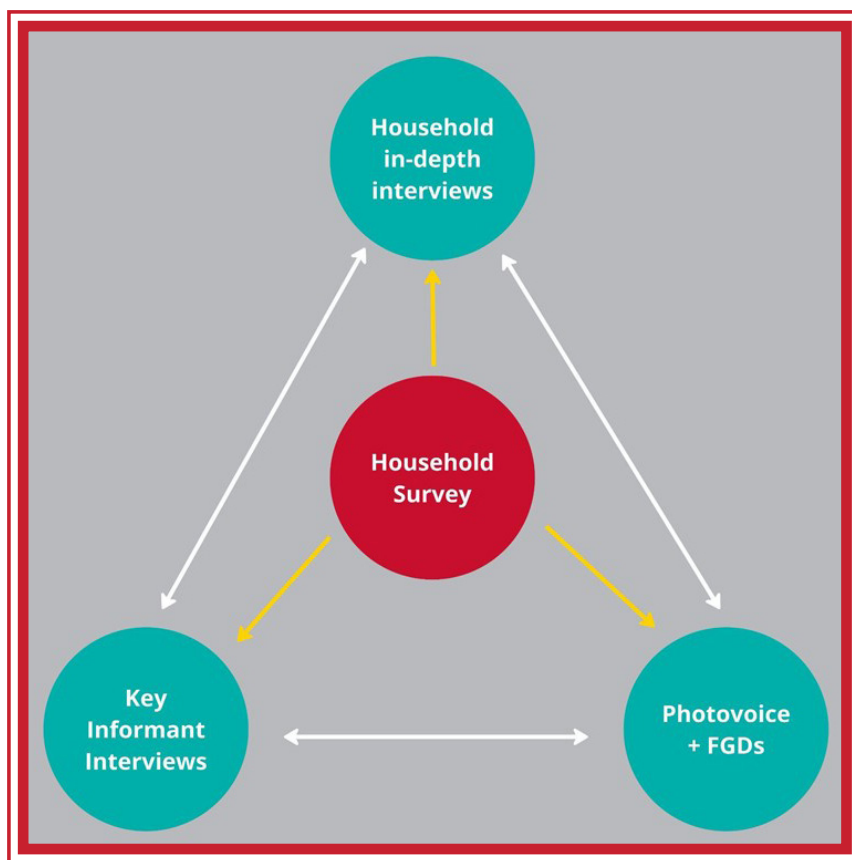


Figure 1: LCAT's mixed methods approach.

<sup>15</sup> In round 1, a total of 11 IDIs (3 Lebanese Females, 2 Lebanese Males, 1 Armenian Female, 1 Armenian Male, 2 Syrian Females, and 2 Syrian Males) were conducted in Bourj Hammoud and eight (3 Lebanese Females, 3 Lebanese Males, 1 Syrian Male, and 1 Syrian Female) in Barouk. The example sample size and composition may change in future rounds.



Credit: Getty

# What do Informal Social Protection networks look like in Lebanon?

This section presents descriptive findings from an initial round of Mercy Corps’ ISP monitoring survey, conducted from Oct-Nov 2023. This section provides readers with a brief overview of the current nature of ISP in Lebanon. However, ISP networks are dynamic, and change over the course of crises. It is therefore important to emphasize that this data describes select characteristics of ISP networks at a single point in time, only. Later briefs in this series will address the primary motivation for this project: to monitor ISP dynamics over time as a tool for improved humanitarian diagnostics.

## During the economic crisis, households have been relying on their support networks for multiple forms of support

The strength of a household’s ISP network is in large part determined by the diversity of resources that it can access from its informal support system. With this in mind, our monitoring survey asks respondents to report the types of assistance that they were able to mobilize from their support networks, with a focus on both tangible and intangible support.

Among the most commonly shared tangible resources are credit and loans (54%), food in kind (39%), and gifts of cash (18%) – which may include remittances sent from abroad, as well as cash shared between households residing in Lebanon. Qualitative respondents explained that tangible resources are often directly shared between households, but may also be collected and redistributed through informal community initiatives. In Barouk for example, interviewees discussed the creation of an informal “crisis cell” spearheaded by the heads of family committees, mayors, and leaders of health centers, and which were primarily concerned with collecting and redistributing food to households most in need. Respondents explained that their ISP networks were especially important sources of in-kind goods during the crisis, because high rates of inflation and reduced purchasing power prevented them from being able to purchase these goods.





## What kinds of help did you receive from your network in the last six months?

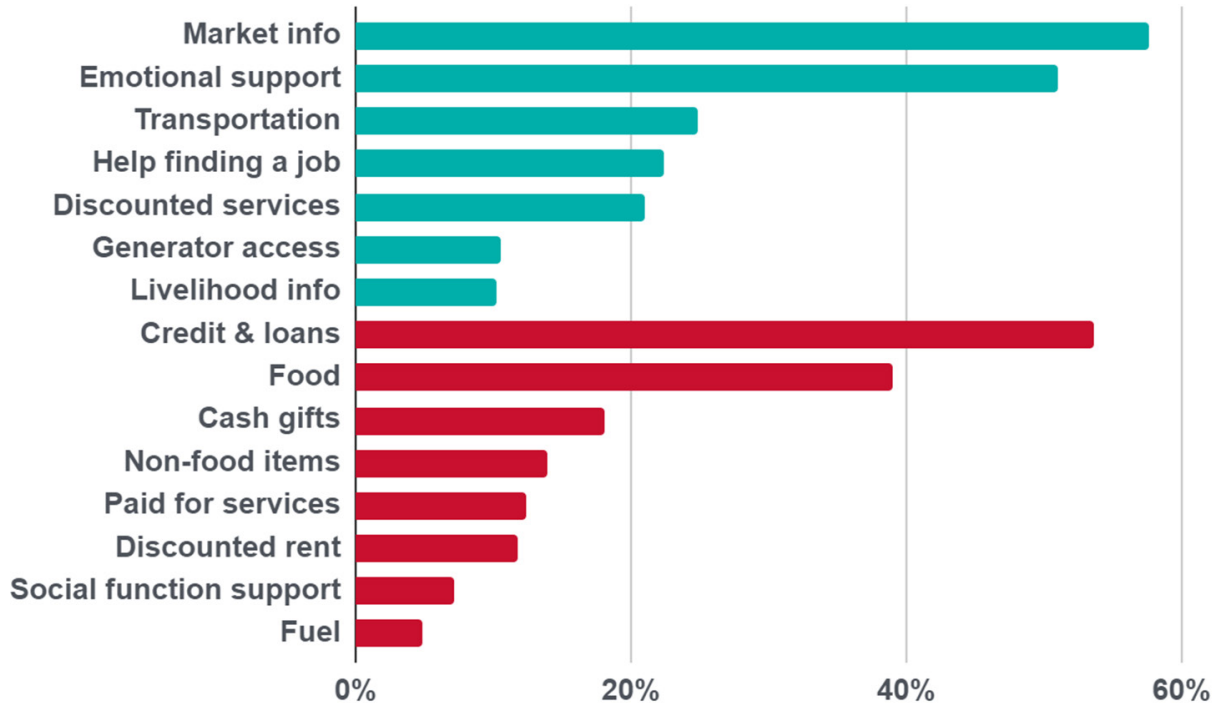


Figure 2: Tangible and intangible support received by households.

Market information, including knowledge of prices and where to find essential items, was the most commonly shared intangible resource, with 58% of survey respondents reporting that they received such information from their ISP networks in the last six months. Qualitative respondents explained that market information has become especially important during the crisis, when essential items like formula and medications are in short supply. Households rely on their ISP networks to find out where these items are available for sale.

Emotional support and guidance is also widely shared within ISP networks. In some cases, this includes semi-formal support such as psychological first aid (PFA) in the aftermath of the port blast.<sup>16</sup> One participant in Bourj Hammoud recounted that he and others in his network who were trained in PFA rallied together to form support teams that operated for four months. Both men and women stressed that emotional support was equally important as tangible support, particularly among displaced Syrians who were more socially isolated in Lebanon and struggled to maintain the solidarity networks they had established back home. They explained that emotional support was an especially important example of informally shared support because of the absence of robust formal mental health and psychosocial services, and given the significant stigma associated with receiving psychotherapy or psychiatric treatment.

<sup>16</sup> Psychological first aid is an evidence-based approach and “an initial disaster response intervention with the goal to promote safety, stabilize survivors of disasters, and connect individuals to help and resources.” (American Psychological Association 2023).



## Aida's story: New challenges, new connections



*Aida\* and her family have encountered challenge upon challenge since arriving in Beirut from Aleppo nearly 13 years ago. With three children in school and her husband suffering from an untreated injury sustained while working, her household finances have had to be managed scrupulously – an endeavor that has become more complicated since the onset of the economic crisis in 2019. Since her husband's salary is paid in Lebanese pounds, many necessities (which are often priced in US dollars) remain outside of their means. As she describes it, they used to be able to afford winter clothes for their children, but now they cannot even buy them socks.*

*Yet Aida remains steadfast, especially regarding building connections. She stresses the importance of quality over quantity when it comes to her relationships within the community. With limited resources, her small network of Syrian families have provided for one another in other ways, including stepping in to provide emotional support in the aftermath of family tragedies in Syria and Turkey. Building relationships with her Lebanese neighbors has proven more difficult. Since moving to Bourj Hammoud nearly 10 years ago, she and her family have been subject to harassment on account of their Syrian nationality, leaving them largely isolated from their immediate community. According to Aida, this is the case for many Syrians, who often feel trapped because of the economic constraints they are navigating and see little opportunity for recourse.*

*Still, Aida acknowledges the important role that her Lebanese connections have played in helping them cope during the crisis. Their landlord has looked the other way when rent has gone unpaid in exchange for them looking after their building, and her local pharmacists have allowed them to pay for prescriptions at a later date. Although her neighbors are a source of disappointment and frustration, Aida still remains active in her community. She teaches local Lebanese women how to make jams and cooks for others free of charge so long as they provide her with the necessary ingredients. In return, she asks that they pray for her and her family's health and wellbeing.*



\*Name changed to ensure anonymity

### Households currently have small support networks, and for many, the number of people they can turn to for support is shrinking during the crisis.

The size of a household's ISP network refers to the number of individuals outside the immediate family that they can turn to for support during times of need.

Respondents generally reported having relatively few people they could turn to for support, reporting an **average support network size of just 2.6 people**. Similarly, when asked to self-assess the current size of their household's support network, the majority of respondents answered "small" (42%) or "nonexistent" (30%) (see figure 2). Notably, demographic factors, such as gender of household head, geography, and nationality did not have significant implications for average support network size, though demographic disaggregation will be considered further after subsequent rounds of the monitoring survey are completed.



Support network size appears to be dynamic, and tied to the trajectory of the crisis. Indeed, nearly half of respondents report that the number of people they can turn to for support has decreased in the last six months (see figure 3). Qualitative interviews also support this finding, during which interviewees say that resource constraints stemming from the crisis have negatively impacted people’s ability to help one another.

While many households’ support networks may be shrinking during the crisis, it is important to note that the quality of support networks may be as or more important than their size. Indeed, qualitative respondents stressed that knowing just a few reliable people can be of greater help than knowing many unreliable people. In particular, those connections who were deemed “influential” – i.e. those who occupied leadership positions in the community or had a large network themselves – were often more effective at facilitating access to much-needed tangible and intangible resources compared to the average individual in a person’s network.

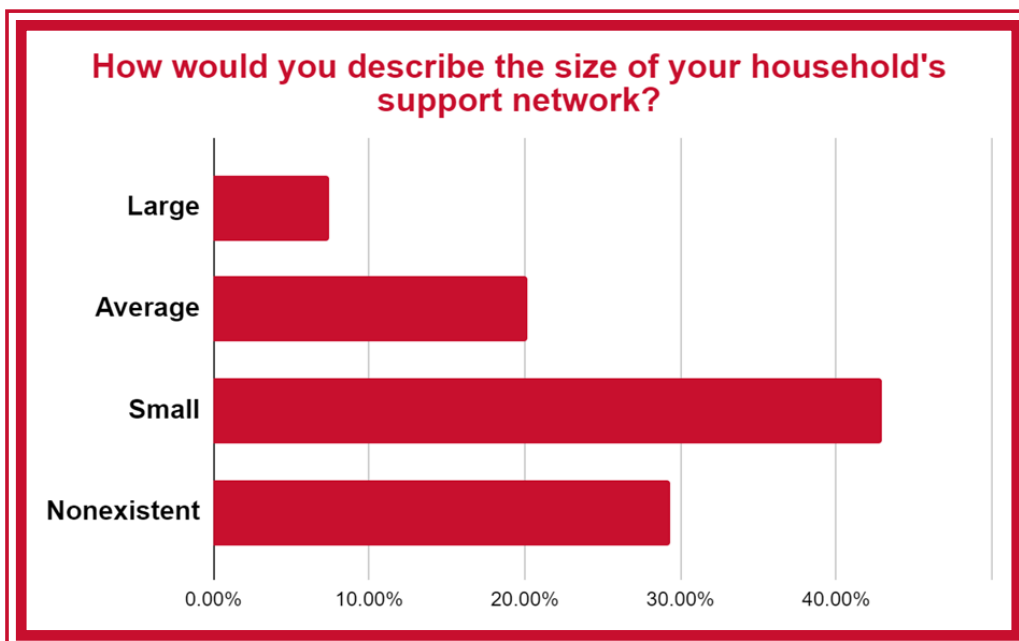


Figure 3: Size of household support network.

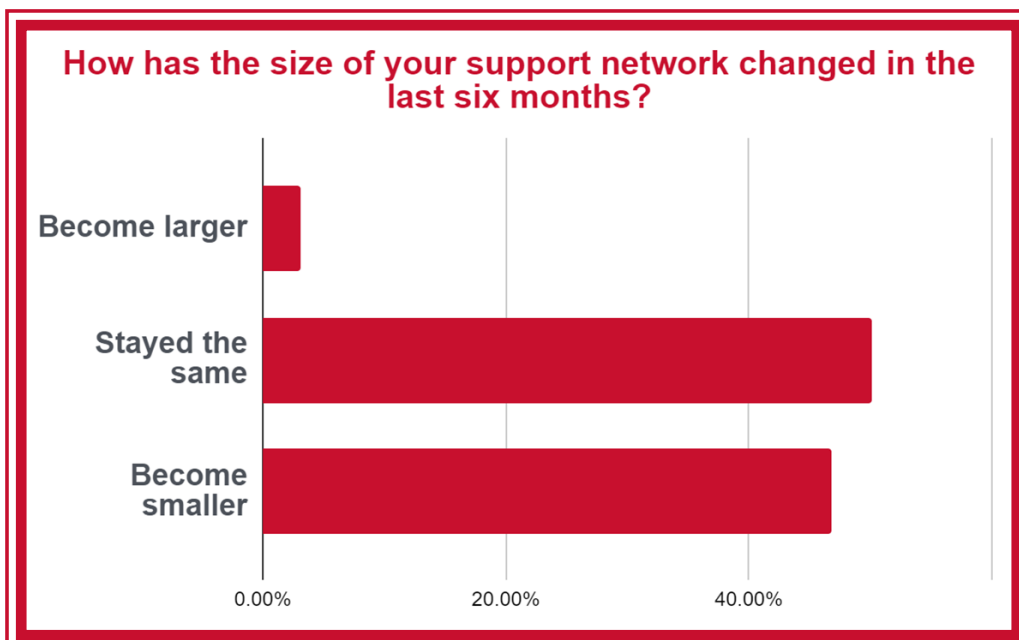


Figure 4: Change in household support network.





## ISP network diversity is limited, with households currently able to rely on relatively few distinct sources of informal support.

ISP network diversity refers to the number of distinct categories of connections one can turn to for support. Network diversity is an important dimension of ISP for two reasons:

First, certain connection categories may be especially important for accessing specific forms of support. For example, interviewees explained that connections with shopkeepers are especially important for accessing loans and or goods on credit, while connections with employers may open up access to income generating activities or information about livelihood activities.

Second, network diversity may grant households more reliable access to support throughout a crisis. Crises often have specific or disproportionate effects on certain categories of people, limiting the extent to which these people can continue to serve as reliable sources of support during a crisis. Should one connection category become unreliable, households with diverse networks are more likely to be able to pivot to seek support from elsewhere in their network. Conversely, households with more homogeneous networks may have nowhere else to turn.

Households' ISP networks are currently predominantly composed of friends and extended family members residing in Lebanon. Other categories of social connections, including shopkeepers and friends and family in the diaspora were also significant, though they are less frequently accessed than other sources. In qualitative interviews, respondents often explained that ISP networks have become less diverse during the crisis, fueled in part by rising social tensions linked to competition over scarce resources. In Bourj Hammoud, this was perceived to be tied to increasing intergroup tensions between Lebanese and Syrian households. The far-reaching economic impacts of the crisis, especially on Lebanon's once prevalent middle class, has likely whittled away previously strong domestic support networks that comprised individuals from different livelihood and socio-economic groups.

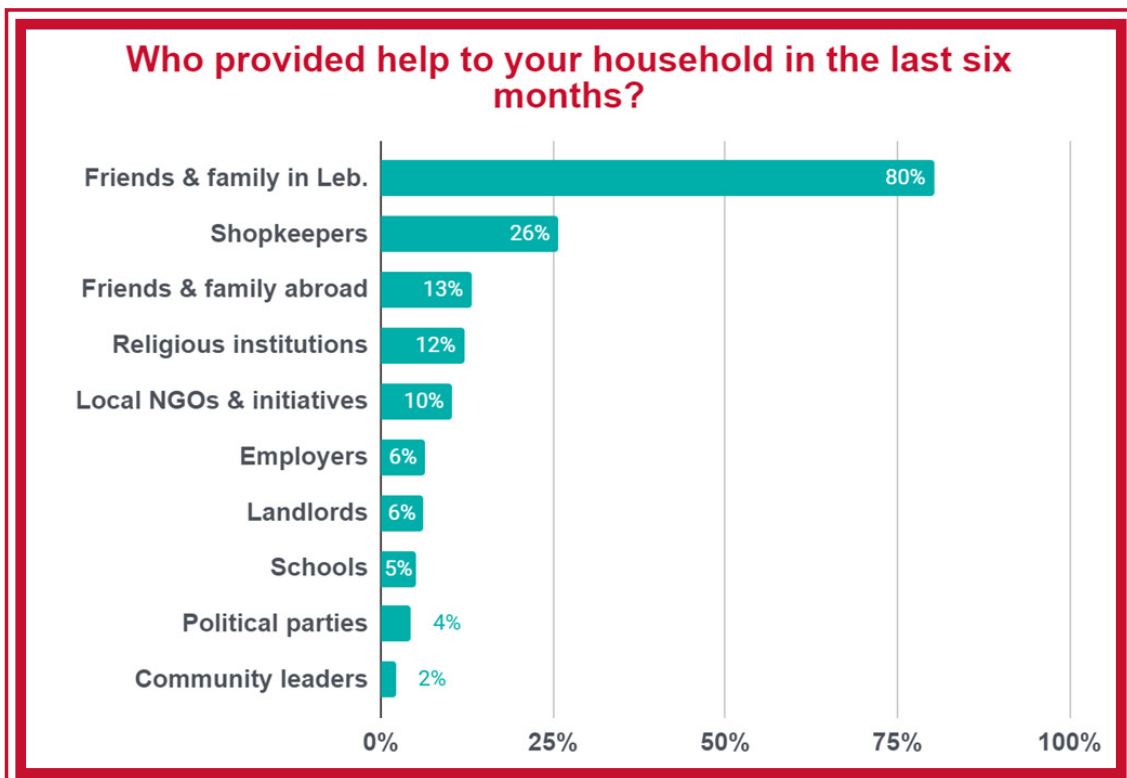


Figure 5: Sources of informal support network



Participants also pointed to another factor that may be impacting support network diversity: people’s psychosocial well-being. Several interviewees discussed the impact of the economic crisis and the Beirut Port blast on their own mental health and that of others, noting that years of crisis have caused some to intentionally withdraw from their community. Connections that require daily or regular interactions – such as those with grocers, pharmacists, other market actors, etc. – have dwindled as a result of decreased engagement and social interaction. In sum, people’s connections with their immediate household and family have remained the same while their capacity to maintain or forge new connections in their wider community has diminished.

**Even with ISP networks under increasing strain, many households remain at least somewhat confident in their reliability.**

Respondents were asked about the perceived reliability of their support networks, specifically their confidence in their network’s ability to continue to provide support in the future. Even though ISP networks are becoming smaller and less diverse as noted above, the majority of respondents remain “somewhat” or “very confident” in their ability to continue to obtain help from their support networks should they need it.

Qualitative interviews suggest that this sustained confidence in ISP networks may be related to the fact that even amid growing resource scarcity and hardship, some households are increasing the amount of support that they share with others. In Barouk for example, participants described how individuals who were more well-off and had fared better during the crisis were expanding the number of households they were supporting, in some cases supporting upwards of 20 families. Similarly, in

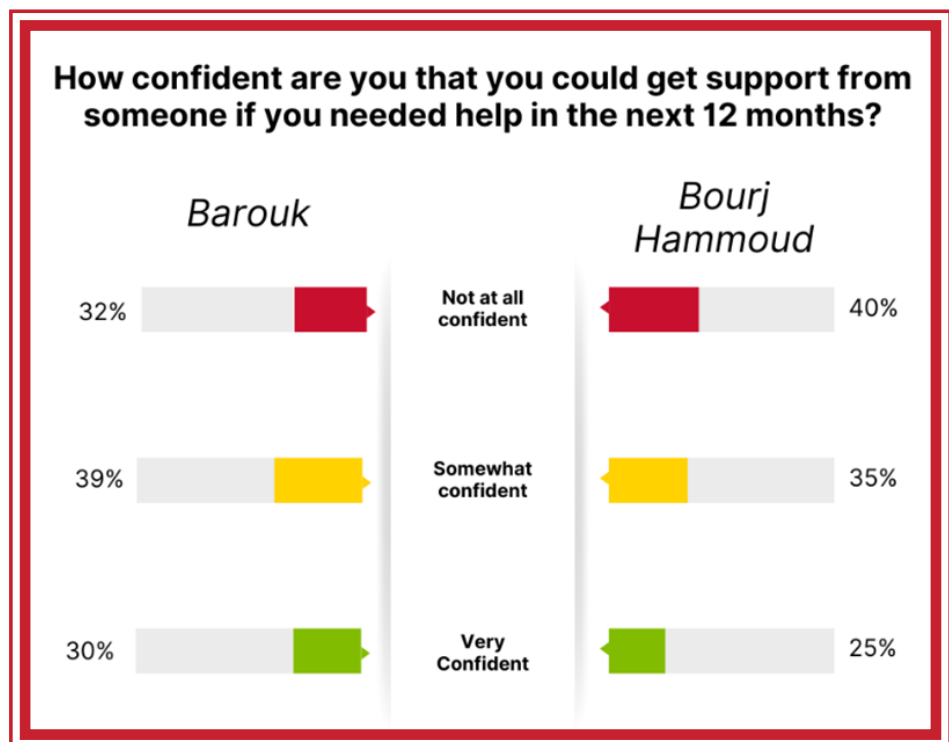


Figure 6: Levels of confidence in ISP network by location.

both Barouk and Bourj Hammoud, participants spoke about the vital role that informal, community-run initiatives play in helping vulnerable households access much-needed resources, including food, cash, and even school supplies. While individuals may struggle to mobilize and share resources among their support networks, these informal initiatives often comprise a vast array of community members who are well-connected to members of the diaspora and (I)NGOs that can facilitate access to essential resources. The presence and reach of informal initiatives serves as a reassuring boon for some households, helping to sustain their confidence in the reliability of their support networks, even amidst growing strain.



However, not all households share this confidence. In fact, in Bourj Hammoud, 40% of respondents are “not at all confident” in the reliability of their support networks. This theme of uncertainty appears in qualitative interviews as well, with many participants uncertain or doubtful that their social connections would continue to be able to provide, particularly when it comes to tangible support. Some respondents attributed this to the homogenous nature of their household’s support networks and the perception that everyone they knew was similarly affected by the economic crisis, and therefore unlikely to be able to share support in the future. This is further exacerbated by a decline in reciprocity, a practice that has in the past dictated expectations around the types and extent of support an individual can expect to give and receive. For many, the decreased capacity to reciprocate support meant that they intentionally avoided asking for help and/or withdrew from their support networks entirely. Interviews with participants indicated that decreased confidence in their capacity to give or reciprocate tangible support in particular also meant they were hesitant to ask for something they could not return in kind.

## Naeem’s story: Counting on community



*Like many in his community, Naeem\* has had to be creative during Lebanon’s crisis. The owner of a once thriving meat business in Barouk, he looked to invest in a small piece of family-owned land and begin a new agricultural venture that would both provide for his family while also caring for the environment of his village. As a result, Naeem has become a pioneer within his community when it comes to implementing eco-friendly agriculture projects and capitalizing on the influx of tourists from other parts of Lebanon.*

*Active in local politics, he has leveraged his leadership to identify vulnerable households and help mobilize resources in his community on their behalf. He and other activists moved quickly to build solidarity networks that helped distribute food and medicine at the height of the crisis and Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the widespread acceptance of these initiatives, their work has been met with opposition. Leaders of local political parties, who sometimes leverage aid to garner support from constituents, have placed pressure on Naeem and his networks to halt their efforts. Committed to helping their neighbors, they have adapted to using a more diffused model for distributing assistance, pairing individual members of the solidarity network with households in need.*

*According to Naeem, local solidarity efforts, big and small, have sustained Lebanon during the crisis, and he hopes that they can continue to build upon this sense of solidarity. Despite divisive rhetoric that can foment division around local solidarity initiatives, there is a new generation of enthusiastic young people who are ready, willing, and able to lead.*

\*Name changed to ensure anonymity







Credit: Khaled Habashiti/Xinhua

## How does **ISP** compare to other measures of vulnerability?

### Operationalizing ISP as vulnerability indicator

The ISP score was calculated by summing the value of the following ISP components: network size,<sup>17</sup> dynamics,<sup>18</sup> resources,<sup>19</sup> reciprocity,<sup>20</sup> reliability,<sup>21</sup> and diversity<sup>22</sup> (Refer to Annex 1 for details on the quantitative survey questions pertaining to each component). Each of the components were equally weighted with a maximum value of one per component; therefore, the ISP score has a maximum value of six. The indicators comprising each component were also equally weighted according to the number of indicators in the component; for example, if the component consisted of three indicators,<sup>23</sup> each component was multiplied by  $\frac{1}{3}$  so that the maximum value is one. ISP scores were considered “vulnerable” if they fell outside one standard deviation below the mean ISP score.

These diagrams illustrate the overlap between households identified as vulnerable by different vulnerability measures. Households considered vulnerable according to the ISP index (those with an adjusted ISP index score below 1.35, which is one standard deviation) are compared to those considered vulnerable according to the FCS (those exhibiting poor or borderline food consumption), the rCSI (those frequently employing distress food coping strategies), the LCS-EN (those employing crisis or emergency strategies obtain essential needs), and the MDDI (those who exhibit multidimensional deprivation).<sup>24</sup> The size of each circle corresponds to the number of households considered vulnerable per each measure.

<sup>17</sup> “If your household had a problem and needed help, how many people beyond your immediate family could you currently turn to who would be willing to assist you?”; “In general, would you say that the network of people your household can turn to when you need help is:” (Large/Average/Small/ Does not exist (no network of people)); “In general, in the last six months, would you say that the number of people you could turn to when you need help has:” (Increased/Stayed the same/Decreased).

<sup>18</sup> “Overall, in the last six months, how has your ability to get help from someone changed?”; “Overall, in the last six months, how has your ability to help those in need changed?”

<sup>19</sup> Resources received; Resources provided.

<sup>20</sup> Resources provided; Resources provided.

<sup>21</sup> How confident are you that you will be able to get support from someone if you need help in the next 12 months?

<sup>22</sup> Who you provided to; Who you received from.

<sup>23</sup> Indicators are similarly coded; for example, if an indicator has three answer options (e.g., no response; low; medium; high), then the answers are coded as 0,  $\frac{1}{3}$ ,  $\frac{2}{3}$ , or 1.

<sup>24</sup> Vulnerability thresholds used in this analysis follow standard guidance. [The rCSI](#) vulnerability threshold is met when the the quotient of the severity weights and the frequency and usage frequency of distress food coping strategies exceeds 19. [The FCS](#) vulnerability threshold is met when the quotient of food group consumption frequency and food group weighted values is below 28. [The LCS-EN](#) threshold for vulnerability is met when a household employs either crisis or emergency strategies to secure their essential needs. [The MDDI](#) threshold is met when a household reports at least two deprivations in terms of the non-monetary dimensions of poverty measured by the index.

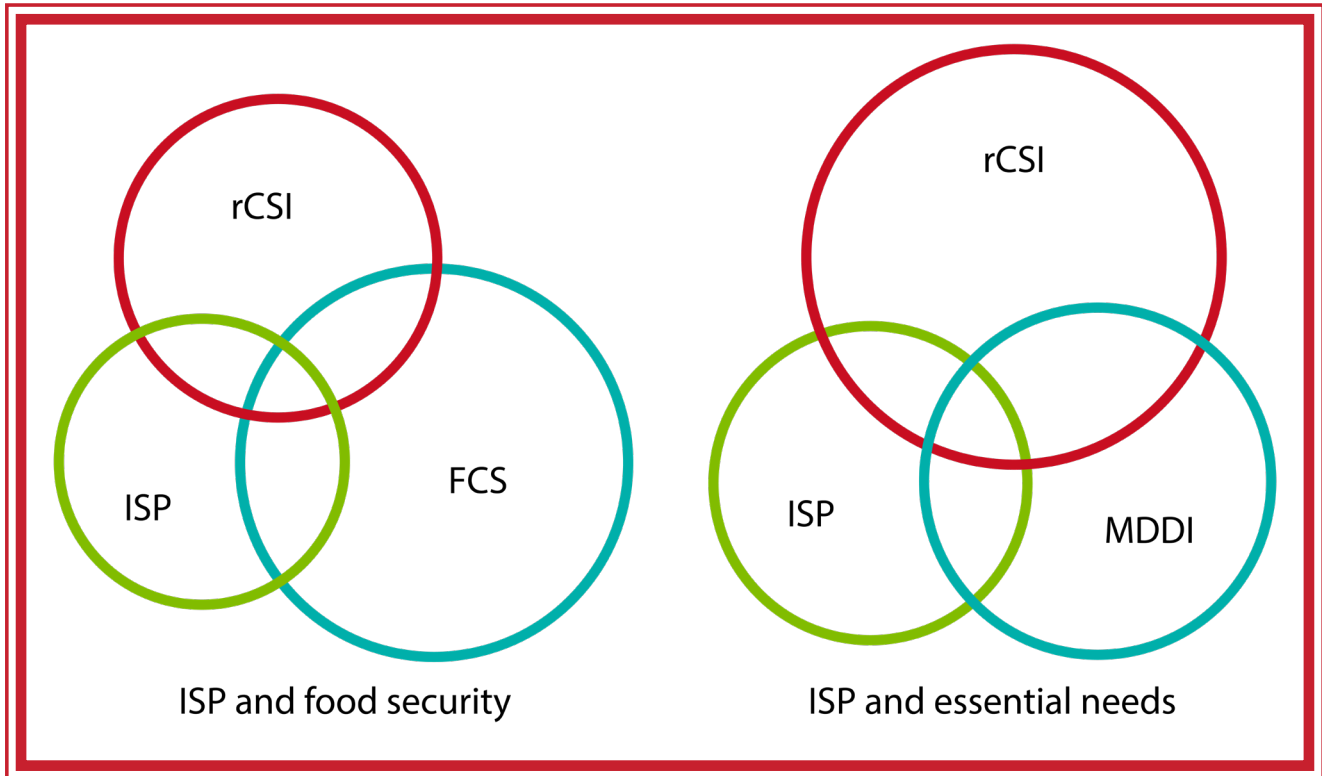


Figure 7: ISP and food security vs ISP and essential needs.

To understand how ISP relates to other wellness indicators, the ISP score and components were compared to previously-mentioned wellness indicators; specifically, the reduced Coping Strategies Index<sup>25</sup> (rCSI), Multidimensional Deprivation Index<sup>26</sup> (MDDI), Livelihood Coping Strategies–Essential Needs<sup>27</sup> (LCS-EN), and Food Consumption Score<sup>28</sup> (FCS). The charts above demonstrate that Mercy Corps’ ISP indicator measures a distinct aspect of household vulnerability. Indeed, 45% of households identified as vulnerable by the ISP indicator were not identified as vulnerable according to the FCS and rCSI, and 39% of households identified as vulnerable by the ISP indicator were not identified as vulnerable according to the MDDI and LCS-EN.

The lack of complete overlap between households identified as vulnerable by the ISP and other wellness indicators can be attributed to conceptual differences between the wellness indicators and the specific phenomena they measure. It is also an important visual reminder that household vulnerability is a latent variable that can only be measured indirectly. While the four comparison indicators measure household consumption (FCS), deprivations (MDDI) and reliance on coping strategies (rCSI, LCS-EN) as proxies for food security and access to essential needs, the ISP indicator instead measures characteristics of a household’s support system, which have yet-undefined implications on quantifying household wellbeing during crises.

<sup>25</sup> [www.resources.vam.wfp.org/data-analysis/quantitative/food-security/reduced-coping-strategies-index](http://www.resources.vam.wfp.org/data-analysis/quantitative/food-security/reduced-coping-strategies-index)

<sup>26</sup> [www.resources.vam.wfp.org/data-analysis/quantitative/essential-needs/multidimensional-deprivation-index-mddi](http://www.resources.vam.wfp.org/data-analysis/quantitative/essential-needs/multidimensional-deprivation-index-mddi)

<sup>27</sup> [www.resources.vam.wfp.org/data-analysis/quantitative/essential-needs/livelihood-coping-strategies-essential-needs](http://www.resources.vam.wfp.org/data-analysis/quantitative/essential-needs/livelihood-coping-strategies-essential-needs)

<sup>28</sup> [www.documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp196627.pdf](http://www.documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp196627.pdf)



Statistical comparisons of the ISP score and components between households that scored within a critical threshold of the other wellness indicators<sup>29</sup> were calculated to measure the relationship between ISP and humanitarian vulnerability. The overall hypothesis is that if a household is highly vulnerable, then they have a lower ISP score.

In general,<sup>30</sup> households with a FCS and LCS above critical levels had higher ISP scores,<sup>31</sup> suggesting that a higher level of ISP produced a protective effect on a household's ability to consume adequate levels of food and overall capacity to cope with a lack of food or lack of money to buy food in the medium and long term.

Furthermore, most individual ISP component levels<sup>32</sup> tended to be higher among less vulnerable households, according to the tested wellness indicators. Interestingly, households with high and/or severe MDDI and Crisis/Emergency rCSI did not have a statistically significantly different ISP score than households that were not vulnerable among the whole sample; however, in Barouk, the ISP scores were much lower<sup>33</sup> among households categorized as non-vulnerable according to the rCSI and MDDI.

Previous research has aligned with these findings, as the ISP as a construct and measure is conceptually linked to multiple dimensions of household vulnerability. For example, the strength of a household's informal social protection network likely has implications for its food security and essential needs status. In South Sudan, for example, Mercy Corps research showed that households that were better socially connected were more likely to consume a diverse diet.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Poor FCS (FCS  $\leq$  28), High rCSI (rCSli  $\geq$  19), Crisis & Emergency LCS, Severe (MDDI  $\geq$  0.5) and/or Poor (MDDI  $\geq$  0.33) MDDI.

<sup>30</sup> No disaggregation.

<sup>31</sup> FCS (d = 0.39; p < 0.00); LCS (d = 0.23; p = 0.02)

<sup>32</sup> ISP components network size, resources, reciprocity, diversity, and dynamics. ISP component reliability was not statistically significantly different among non-vulnerable and vulnerable households.

<sup>33</sup> Severe MDDI (d = 0.81; p < 0.00); Severe/Poor MDDI (d = 0.94; p < 0.00); rCSI (d = 0.53; p < 0.00)

<sup>34</sup> Kim et al. (2020)





*Photo by Anthony Gale*

The cross-sectional analyses presented in this report suggest interesting associations between our measure of ISP and distinct yet conceptually related measures of vulnerability. However, it is not yet possible to discern how and why they may be associated. The next phase of this study and subsequent rounds of data collection will unpack the nature of these linkages over time. In particular, LCAT will work to assess the extent to which changes in ISP are associated with changes in the other vulnerability measures and discern how reliably we can use the ISP module to predict household vulnerability. Through this exercise, we will assess the ways in which informal social protection is a relevant and useful vulnerability indicator in Lebanon that can help aid actors more accurately and efficiently identify household vulnerability as well as anticipate future humanitarian needs given the rapidly changing dynamics of the crises.

The next report in the ISP series will be based on a second data collection round that is scheduled to take place in early 2024. Several socioeconomic changes have already occurred since the first data collection round began in late September, 2023, which may be captured in the next report in this series. For example, the arrival of internally displaced households in our monitoring sites, driven by insecurity in the South, may be placing increased strain on ISP networks, as already limited resources are shared with additional households. Additionally, Lebanon's Consumer Price Index (CPI) jumped almost 1,000-points in October 2023 alone, largely due to sudden increases in school fees as the new academic year began. This spike also reflects precautionary price increases by retailers in reaction to market uncertainty caused by conflict in Gaza and South Lebanon. Fearing a return to the currency instability seen in early 2023, local markets may drive increasing prices, adding to the general inflationary pressures of dollarization and elimination of discounted exchange rates for customs and VAT.

These and other factors are likely to have implications for households' access to informal social protection. Qualitative components of the study should be able to capture the specific causes of any potential change in ISP, shedding greater light on ISP's function and whether it can be used to predict other measures of vulnerability.

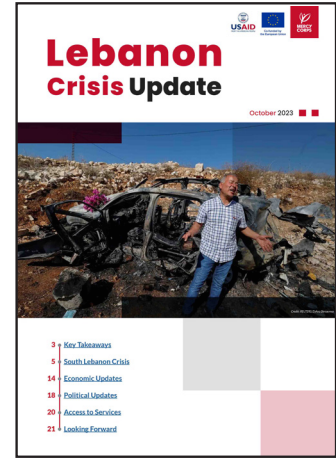
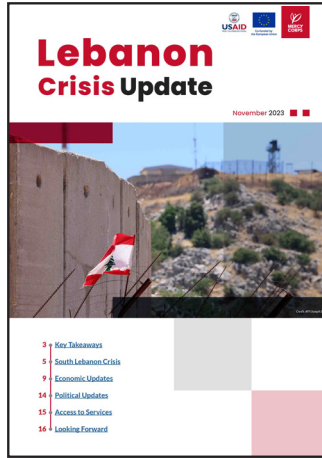
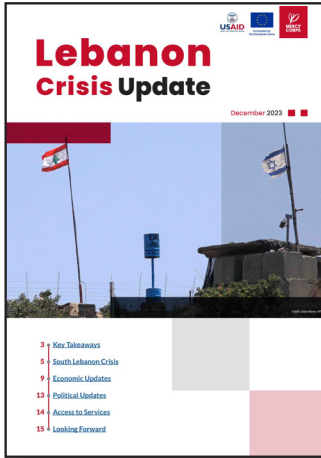


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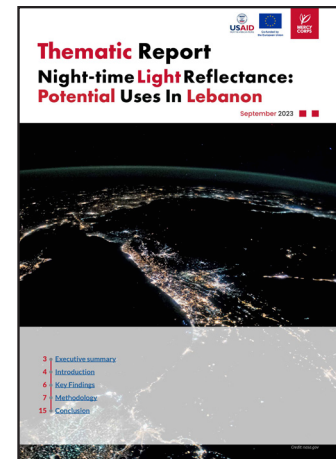
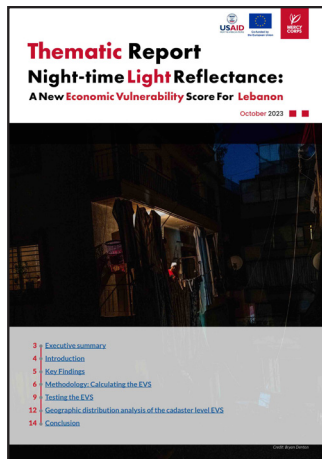
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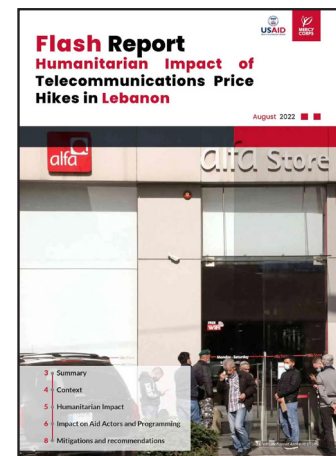
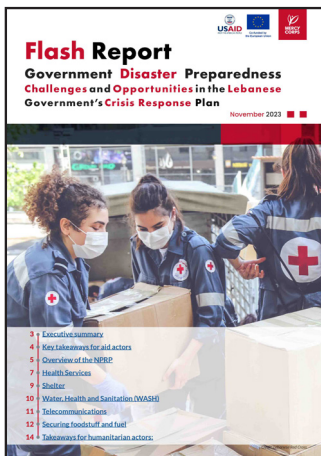
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