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Navigating Social Assistance in Lebanon: Experiences and Insights of the Bottom Poor

Policy Brief

Introduction

This policy brief draws on the findings from a perspectives-based research study examining access to social assistance among vulnerable Lebanese households identified within the “bottom poor.” It presents first-hand insights of how households perceive and experience social assistance programs, with specific focus on barriers to access, targeting processes, and feedback and appeal mechanisms. Grounded in these lived experiences the brief offers practical recommendations to support ongoing efforts to strengthen the inclusiveness, transparency, and rights-responsive nature of social assistance in Lebanon, while also underscoring the importance of sustained financial investment in a strong social security system in Lebanon.

Lebanon’s overlapping crises have deepened poverty and placed additional strain on an already fragile social protection landscape. In this context, social assistance programmes such as the National Poverty Targeting Programme (NPTP) and the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), now under AMAN, continue to provide essential support for many households. At the same time, the perspectives collected in this study suggest that some among the “bottom poor” perceive themselves as underserved or hard to reach. Within this group are individuals or households experiencing extreme poverty and multiple, overlapping deprivations, including unstable incomes and limited access to education, healthcare, housing, and nutrition. Many perceive themselves as persistently excluded from formal systems such as labour markets, social protection schemes, and public services, and these vulnerabilities are often compounded by gender, age, disability, or geographical marginality.

For this study, multidimensional vulnerability scoring models were used to identify the bottom-poor quantile within available databases to guide the sampling of the target population and ensure voices were captured from those most affected by intersecting forms of deprivation.

Background: Fragmented Safety Nets amid Crisis

Historically, Lebanon’s social protection landscape has developed within a context of institutional fragmentation, political patronage, and uneven regional investment. In 1963, the National Social Security Fund and the cooperatives serving public-sector employees and military personnel were established as contributory social security mechanisms intended to provide robust protection for formal workers. Over time, however, these systems primarily benefited those employed within the formal sector, leaving informal workers, unemployed individuals, women outside the labour force, and residents of more peripheral areas with limited coverage. During the war and postwar periods, these formal systems gradually weakened, while alternative arrangements, often shaped by political networks or informal community support, became more prominent.

Since 2019, Lebanon has experienced overlapping crises, including the financial and economic collapse, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut Port explosion, and the 2024 Israeli war. These cumulative shocks placed unprecedented strain on the state’s ability to extend relief to affected groups. In response to the compounded crises, the government expanded coverage of the National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP) through the

Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) to cover 168,000 of the poorest and most vulnerable Lebanese households. The Government of Lebanon (GoL)'s social assistance programmes have become central components of the governmental response, providing cash assistance to households identified as facing specific vulnerabilities and economic hardships. These programmes, however, evolved largely as short-term or emergency initiatives rather than as part of a comprehensive social policy framework. Moreover, the GoL has also made significant strides in advancing the social protection agenda by signalling its commitment through passing National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) and Law 319 establishing pension reform to the NSSF, as well as implementing the rights-based National Disability Allowance (NDA) with the support of partners. Still, the government's reliance on donor financing and crisis-driven design meant that several long-standing structural needs remained unmet. The integration of NPTP and ESSN under the AMAN initiative also represents an opportunity to enhance coordination and improve delivery. Yet, challenges related to fragmentation, transparency, and sustainable funding continue to be perceived by various stakeholders.

Voices from the Bottom Poor

The study indicates that households identified among the “bottom poor” navigate a social assistance landscape they perceive as fragmented, difficult to access, and not always clearly communicated. Participants described challenges related to interruptions in aid, limited information flow, and uncertainty around targeting criteria. These experiences shaped overall perceptions of fairness, effectiveness, and predictability within the system. At the same time, the assistance remains an essential lifeline for many, particularly during periods of crisis. Strengthening outreach, transparency, feedback channels, and sustainable funding were commonly highlighted as areas that could improve trust and usability.

→ **Disrupted assistance:**

Respondents reported experiencing interruptions in aid during crises. Disruptions either happened without clear notice, or their reasons and duration were not clearly communicated. While multiple recipients experienced compensation disruptions, others reported receiving the delayed amount in a lump sum. For many the reasons for interruptions were not always clearly expressed. These inconsistencies contributed to uncertainty and stress among households dependent on regular and consistent support.

→ **Limited clarity around targeting**

Many beneficiaries expressed difficulty understanding eligibility rules or how assessments were carried out. The Proxy Means Testing criteria were largely perceived as unclear, and home visit assessments were viewed as inconsistent. These perceptions contributed to a sense of unpredictability around programme inclusion.

→ **Barriers to access and information**

Although initial registration was generally viewed as straightforward and clear, participants frequently cited technical issues, limited connectivity, and unclear guidance on where and how to apply or follow up. The transition from bank ATMs to money transfer services eased some logistical burdens, yet digital illiteracy, poor internet access, and transportation costs continued to affect those in more vulnerable or remote settings.

→ **Feedback and grievance mechanisms**

Respondents noted difficulties in obtaining information, contesting decisions, or reengaging with the system. Unanswered hotline calls and limited clarity around the discontinuation of benefits affected perceptions of fairness and eroded confidence in support structures.

→ **Emotional and psychological strain**

In spite of providing a critical lifeline, at times uncertainty about payment timing, fear of discontinuation, and limited avenues for clarification led to stress for many households. Social isolation, feelings of shame, and discomfort during application or cash redemption were also described.

→ **Gender-related barriers**

Women, particularly widows and female heads of households, reported increased administrative and caregiving burdens when managing aid processes. Some faced challenges in accessing benefits registered under the names of deceased or former spouses. At the same time, receiving assistance offered many women a greater sense of economic autonomy within the household.

→ **Role of social and political networks**

Several participants perceived that access to information or assistance could be influenced by local social or political actors. These perceptions reinforced a view that assistance was not always evenly distributed.

→ **Geographic disparities**

Households in rural or peripheral areas reported higher transportation costs, weaker connectivity, and more limited access to information compared to those in urban centres. These factors contributed to differences in perceived accessibility and support predictability.

→ **Perceived inequities across population groups**

Some Lebanese respondents expressed the view that aid to Syrian refugees appeared more consistent or better structured, which shaped local perceptions of fairness and deterred social cohesion. These reflections highlight the need for communication strategies that clarify programme mandates and criteria.

What needs to be done?

Lebanon is at an important moment for its social protection landscape. The adoption of the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) and the launch of the National Disability Allowance signal renewed attention to rights-based assistance, even as the country faces constrained fiscal space, reduced donor funding, and competing priorities between social protection and reconstruction. Within this context, insights from the implementation of existing cash assistance programmes offer an opportunity to strengthen elements of the social contract, particularly by clarifying programme processes, improving outreach to those facing persistent barriers, and supporting more responsive mechanisms during crises. Efforts to align humanitarian and government systems, improve data integration, and promote consistency and fairness across the assistance chain, from registration to payment, may help reinforce public confidence in the evolving social protection vision.

Policy Recommendations

Insights from the study point to several areas where existing efforts could be strengthened to enhance clarity, accessibility, and responsiveness within Lebanon's social assistance landscape. The following recommendations reflect opportunities to build on ongoing work by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), the Disaster Risk Management Unit (DRM), and partners, particularly in a context of reduced funding and increasing needs.

1. Support crisis-responsive continuity

Ensuring predictability of assistance during shocks remains important for households experiencing multidimensional vulnerability. Partners may consider pre-allocating emergency funds and developing a unified, publicly available coordination protocol for crisis periods. Regular updates to these protocols can help maintain clarity and manage expectations.

2. Strengthen communication and transparency

Improved communication channels, across traditional media, municipal networks, and digital platforms, could enhance beneficiaries' access to accurate information. A unified, Arabic-language information portal covering all MoSA-managed programmes may help address information gaps. Standardised outreach materials, including visual and low-literacy-friendly formats (e.g., videos, posters, illustrated guides), could further support accessibility. Local authorities such as municipalities and mukhtars can play a constructive role in disseminating information through community-based awareness activities.

3. Reduce barriers to registration and cash collection

To address challenges faced by individuals with limited mobility, digital access, or internet connectivity, mobile registration units and community help desks staffed by trained social workers may help expand reach. For cash collection, expanding payment points in partnership with multiple service providers and piloting mobile money options may reduce travel costs and administrative burdens, especially in remote areas.

4. Strengthen feedback and grievance mechanisms

Clear and responsive feedback channels can help mitigate uncertainty and improve user experience. Enhancing existing systems, such as making hotline 1714 toll-free, ensuring call-back protocols, and establishing transparent appeal procedures, may help improve responsiveness. Sharing periodic data on response times and resolution rates could further support trust in the system. Social Development Centres (SDCs) may also contribute to follow-up and case support within their areas of responsibility.

5. Promote equity and gender-sensitive approaches

Participants' perceptions and experiences highlight the importance of ensuring that targeting, outreach, and programme design recognise the specific needs of female heads of household, caregivers, and persons with disabilities. Incorporating gender- and disability-related indicators into monitoring and evaluation systems could help strengthen equity considerations across implementation.

6. Support long-term sustainability

In line with the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS), there is an opportunity for the Government of Lebanon and partners to explore avenues for more predictable, domestically anchored funding over time. Moving gradually from ad-hoc emergency approaches toward more stable and rights-based social protection frameworks may help reinforce the social contract and contribute to greater programme continuity.

In the long term, the Government of Lebanon could benefit from sustainable domestic funding and shift from an ad hoc emergency response to rights-based social protection, in line with the NSPS.

Further Reading

Bastagli, F. et al. (2019). *Social Protection and Inclusion in Fragile States*. ODI.

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