



Funded by
the European Union

CAMEALEON

CASH • MONITORING EVALUATION ACCOUNTABILITY & LEARNING
• ORGANIZATIONAL NETWORK •

 **Norway**



POLICY BRIEF

The Role of Civil Society
as Local First Responders
in the Lebanese Emergency Response



NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL



OXFAM



ASFARI INSTITUTE FOR
CIVIL SOCIETY & CITIZENSHIP
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT



Acknowledgements

This policy brief was authored by the Asfari Institute team with editorial support from Sarah Al Bouery, Senior Research Assistant at the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut. It was produced in collaboration with Jean Paul El Khoury, Marwan Alawieh, Cynthia Saghir, Mona Mounzir, and Ingrid Betzler from the CAMEALEON Consortium, Lebanon.

We extend our sincere appreciation to all civil society organizations that participated in the key informant interviews and focus group discussions, generously sharing their experiences and reflections on the emergency response during the 2024 Israeli war on Lebanon. We are equally grateful to the local community leaders, municipal representatives, and other local stakeholders who contributed their time and insights to the data collection process. Their engagement and openness were invaluable to the depth and quality of this research.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CAMEALEON. Responsibility for the opinions expressed in this report rests solely with the author.

Citation

Asfari Institute. (2026). The Role of Civil Society as Local First Responders in the Lebanese Emergency Response – Policy Brief. CAMEALEON

Disclaimer

This publication was co-funded by the European Union and Norway. Its contents are the sole responsibility of CAMEALEON and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union and Norway.



Executive Summary

The 2024 Israeli war on Lebanon¹ underscored the reliance on civil society as an operational backbone in crises, while acknowledging the limits of state-led emergency governance. CSOs demonstrated agility, local knowledge, and trust-based networks, yet faced persistent obstacles in coordination, funding, and systematic integration. This brief synthesizes evidence from a series of primary data collection with relevant stakeholders around the recent emergency to identify and address structural weaknesses in governance, data management, and social protection. It provides actionable policy recommendations to formalize CSO roles, strengthen coordination systems, and embed inclusive and evidence-based practices, offering a roadmap to enhance preparedness, equity, and accountability in future national emergency responses.



Context and Background

The 2024 Israeli war on Lebanon (17 September–28 November 2024) unfolded amid severe state fragility, economic collapse, and institutional paralysis. As hostilities escalated and displacement surged, with nearly 900,000 people being displaced from South of Lebanon, Beqaa, and the Southern suburbs of Beirut, public institutions struggled to respond in a timely and coordinated manner². Shelter spaces were improvised in schools, municipal buildings, and religious institutions, while humanitarian needs rapidly expanded across food, health, protection, and emergency cash assistance.

In this context, civil society organizations became de facto first responders. A diverse ecosystem, including humanitarian NGOs, international organizations, women-led and GBV-specialist groups, migrant, disability, and refugee rights organizations, queer and feminist groups, healthcare providers, and grassroots initiatives, shifted quickly into emergency mode³. They conducted needs verification, facilitated referrals, delivered cash and in-kind assistance, maintained mobile health services, and supported high-risk populations through trusted community networks.

The response highlighted both strengths and structural gaps. Local actors ensured rapid outreach and protection for marginalized groups, but faced fragmented data systems, limited access to pooled funding, overloaded sectoral coordination, and reliance on informal information channels. Smaller and rights-based organizations in particular encountered barriers to equitable resource access despite their proximity to affected communities. For example, these organizations relied on volunteer networks, personal contacts, neighborhood initiatives, and small-scale crowdfunding or private donations, enabling rapid response despite limited resources and formal structures.

The 2024 escalation reaffirmed the central role of civil society in Lebanon's crisis response architecture. At the same time, it highlighted persistent weaknesses in emergency governance, raising urgent questions about how to better integrate local actors into anticipatory, coordinated, and state-supported response frameworks. This challenge is particularly striking given that emergencies in Lebanon are not exceptional events but recurring realities, making the continued absence of institutionalized preparedness and coordination all the more concerning.

¹ Human Rights Watch. (2024). Lebanon Events of 2024.

² Mercy Corps. (2024). Lebanon at War Crisis Update. ReliefWeb.

³ Asfari Institute. (2024). Stories Behind the Headlines.



Problem Statement

Lebanon's emergency response system has historically⁴ relied on CSOs and informal volunteer networks, as state institutions remain under-capacitated, fiscally constrained, and politically fragmented. Decades of conflict, internal displacement, several fiscal crises, currency instability, and institutional paralysis have eroded the state's ability to deliver services during shocks under a framework of a national response, leaving CSOs as primary responders in crises such as the 2020 Beirut Port explosion and the 2024 escalation. While the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) has increasingly engaged in coordinating social protection⁵ and emergency programs through initiatives like AMAN and the National Disability Allowance⁶ (2024-present), these efforts remain uneven and limited in coverage. Coordination and data mechanisms are weak, with fragmented information systems and limited interoperability, forcing CSOs to implement ad hoc verification and delivery systems. Social protection programs, though expanded, remain insufficient, disproportionately affecting displaced, marginalized, and non-Lebanese populations. Amid these gaps, CSOs maintain high trust and legitimacy, particularly among vulnerable groups, underscoring their indispensable role, but also highlighting systemic vulnerabilities in Lebanon's national response capacity.



Findings and Discussion

During the September 2024 escalation, civil society organizations, municipalities, and local initiatives acted as de facto first responders, filling gaps left by fragmented state institutions. Coordination with formal humanitarian and government systems remained uneven, with multiple bodies such as the Government Emergency Committee, Disaster Risk Management Unit, Higher Relief Commission, and line ministries such as the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) sharing responsibilities without a single mandated authority. Interactions that did occur were often mediated by personal relationships rather than institutionalized mechanisms, leading to parallel action, role ambiguity, and duplication. The Ministry of Social Affairs emerged as a more strategic coordinator over time, strengthening displacement tracking, needs assessments, and Internally Displaced Populations support programs, but state-CSO intersections remain partial and uneven.

→ Enabling Factors

CSOs' rapid and adaptive response was shaped by prior crisis experience, local embeddedness, and community trust. Long-standing relationships enabled quick access to shelters, volunteer mobilization, and in-kind support, while operational flexibility allowed organizations to adjust programs in real time.

→ Constraints faced by civil society responders

Structural and systemic constraints limited scale and sustainability. Resource and financial shortages, reliance on volunteers, and delayed or rigid donor funding hindered response capacity. Weak coordination frameworks and unclear government engagement forced many CSOs to operate independently, producing uneven coverage and persistent gaps.

→ Regional and Global Insights

Lebanon reflects broader MENA and global patterns: CSOs routinely act as early responders, leveraging proximity and trust, but remain marginalized from institutional decision-making. The Lebanese experience underscores the normalization of civil society as essential to emergency response while highlighting gaps in anticipatory governance and structured inclusion.

⁴Asfari Institute. (2026). The Role of Civil Society as Local First Responders in the Lebanese Emergency Response. CAMEALEON.

⁵Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA). Assistance to Most Affected Households post-2024 War.

⁶UNICEF. (2024). The Ministry of Social Affairs announces a new nationally funded emergency cash assistance and the continuation of the National Disability Allowance for people with disabilities in Lebanon.

—→ Implications for Policy

The findings point to the need for stronger institutional anchoring of CSOs within national emergency frameworks, clearer coordination structures, and flexible funding mechanisms that recognize civil society as a strategic partner rather than a contingency actor. Strengthening MoSA's role, bridging coordination gaps, and embedding anticipatory planning can improve both efficiency and equity in future crisis responses.



Policy Options and Recommendations

Drawing on lessons from CSO-led interventions and the evolving role of state actors such as MoSA, these recommendations propose actionable policies to strengthen national emergency governance, integrate civil society, and ensure equitable, evidence-based, and accountable response mechanisms.

- **Enact a Comprehensive National Emergency Governance Framework**
Adopt a comprehensive Disaster Risk Management law consolidating mandates, clarifying roles across national and sub-national levels, and formalizing the inclusion of municipalities and CSOs in emergency decision-making. Ensure protections for marginalized groups in line with international human rights standards.
- **Formally Integrate Civil Society into Preparedness and Early-Warning Systems**
Mandate the inclusion of CSOs in national early-warning, preparedness planning, and emergency decision-making structures, with clear responsibilities, communication channels, and coordination mechanisms.
- **Strengthen Coordination and Information Management**
Establish a centralized, accessible platform for real-time data on responders, services, and resources. Institutionalize mechanisms to integrate informal and relationship-based coordination practices into formal emergency structures.
- **Mandate Inclusive and Dynamic Vulnerability Assessment**
Require coordination bodies to implement context-sensitive vulnerability analyses that identify evolving needs, include marginalized and less visible groups, and incorporate multi-source data, including local knowledge and community feedback.
- **Institutionalize Localization and Inclusive Response Standards**
Adopt policies that lower administrative, financial, and partnership barriers for grassroots, peer-led, and rights-based organizations. Integrate safeguarding, protection, and do-no-harm standards into all emergency response planning and funding modalities.
- **Standardize Evidence-Based Operational Practices for CSOs**
Require that all emergency response actors, including CSOs, follow standardized procedures for mapping needs, tracking assistance delivery, and monitoring outcomes, ensuring accountability, equity, and strategic alignment with national preparedness frameworks.
- **Strengthening Emergency Response through Network-Based CSO Collaboration and Pooling of Resources**
CSOs are encouraged to adopt collaborative, network-based response models similar to the experience of the Yalla Care Coalition, which demonstrated the value of pooling resources, coordinating outreach, and jointly mobilizing support for emergency response targeting marginalized communities.

⁷ While Lebanon has established various coordination and consultative platforms such as the National Early Warning System Platform that include civil society actors, particularly large national and international NGOs, these mechanisms do not amount to formal, institutionalized integration of CSOs into national preparedness planning or early-warning governance structures. For example, following the 2006 war and in subsequent crises, coordination spaces have operated through sectoral working groups and ad hoc crisis platforms, often convened with government counterparts and international agencies. More recently, consultative bodies under frameworks such as the Lebanon Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) have included civil society representation. However, these mechanisms remain consultative and reactive in nature. They do not embed CSOs within statutory early-warning systems, anticipatory planning bodies, or national emergency decision-making structures with clearly mandated roles, accountability lines, and operational authority. This gap persists despite the recurrent nature of emergencies in Lebanon, which underscores the continued absence of institutionalized, state-anchored preparedness frameworks that systematically integrate civil society actors beyond crisis-specific coordination arrangements.



Conclusion

Lebanon's repeated crises demonstrate that civil society is central to emergency response, yet current systems fail to provide adequate institutional support, coordination, and inclusion. Strengthening national emergency governance requires formalizing CSO participation, consolidating coordination mechanisms, and embedding anticipatory planning and dynamic vulnerability assessment into policy frameworks. Institutional reforms, including a comprehensive DRM law and enhanced MoSA-led structures, coupled with standardized operational protocols and inclusive localization strategies, can ensure that future crises are met with a coordinated, equitable, and accountable response, leveraging the strengths of both state and non-state actors while protecting the most vulnerable populations.

⁸ The Yalla Care Coalition was established as a call to action to coordinate emergency responses for marginalized and oppressed groups through a network-based approach. The coalition brought together eight organizations, including Haven for Artists, Marsa Sexual Health Center, Queer Relief Fund, LebMASH, Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality, Skoun, SIDC, and MOSAIC, all of which work with marginalized communities to provide data collection, support, and aid services. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, the coalition launched fundraising efforts in May 2020 through a GoFundMe campaign to address the needs of the LGBTQI+ community.

