The Role of the Civil Society in Shaping Education Change in Lebanon

Maha Shuayb, Ola Al Samhoury, Nehme Nehme, Cathrine Brun

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List of Acronyms

CERD: Center for Educational Research and Development

CLS: Centre for Lebanese Studies

CSOs: Civil Society Organisations

EU: European Union

INGOs: International Non-Governmental Organizations

MEHE: Ministry of Education and Higher Education

MOSA: Ministry of Social Affairs

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

RLOs: Refugee-Led Organisations

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

UCC: Union Coordination Committee

UN: United Nations

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

WB: World Bank

Executive Summary

The report explores the role of civil society in shaping educational change in Lebanon. Despite a vibrant civil society in Lebanon, education has seen limited mobilisation for reform, with teacher unions largely focusing on self-interest demands rather than broader educational reforms. While some civil society initiatives have engaged in the education sector, their influence on policy and systemic change has been minimal, often restricted by funding dynamics and political constraints.

The study aims to examine the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) and collectives in influencing education policy and reform in Lebanon, as part of a broader comparative study including Jordan and Palestine. Key research questions aim to unpack the forms of mobilisation, the actors involved, the evolution of agendas, and the factors shaping approaches to policy change.

The research employed a qualitative methodology, including mapping of 35 education-focused CSOs in Lebanon, from which 25 were selected for in-depth analysis. These organisations were categorised based on their activities into service providers, service-developmental, rights-based movements, professional associations, and developmental organisations. Interviews were conducted with representatives from these organisations, focusing on their approaches to change, theories of change, and relationships with policy actors.

Findings

The findings indicate that civil society organisations (CSOs) in Lebanon's education sector fall into several categories based on their focus and activities. First, there are five organisations dedicated solely to service provision, primarily targeting vulnerable groups such as Syrian refugees by offering educational support and improving learning environments. Another seven organisations combine service provision with long-term development goals, aiming to enhance educational quality, life skills, and community capacities. Three organisations concentrate on systemic change, advocating for social justice, governance, and community empowerment, often drawing on broader social movements. Additionally, seven groups, including teacher unions, focus on human rights and educational reform, though their efforts are often limited to issues like salaries and working conditions due to sectarian politics. Finally, two professional associations emphasise advancing standards within specific educational fields, with less attention to broader social change.

Regarding theories of change, three main approaches emerged. A few organisations aim for structural change through mobilising teachers and advocating for policy reforms. However, the majority focus on providing direct services, believing that incremental change can be achieved by strengthening disadvantaged students and communities. Some organisations adopt a social learning theory, aiming to change behaviours and attitudes among stakeholders as a way to indirectly influence the education system.

Several challenges and limitations were identified. Many organisations have shifted their focus from activism to service provision due to funding constraints, resulting in a

depoliticised civil society sector, a phenomenon referred to as NGOisation. The CSO sector is also highly fragmented, with limited coordination among organisations and minimal influence over public policy. Additionally, these organisations often face resistance at both community and governmental levels, making it difficult to effect policy change. Relationships with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) are typically limited or bureaucratic, rather than being collaborative partnerships aimed at policy reform.

In conclusion, while civil society organisations in Lebanon's education sector play a vital role in providing services and supporting vulnerable groups, their impact on systemic change and policy reform is limited. The neoliberalisation of civil society has contributed to the NGOisation of many initiatives, reducing their capacity for advocacy and structural change. The study underscores the need for stronger coordination among CSOs, enhanced collaboration with policy actors, and a renewed focus on advocacy to address the deep-rooted challenges in Lebanon's education system. Moving forward, it is essential to reimagine the role of civil society in education reform, with an emphasis on collective action, systemic change, and reaffirming the state's responsibility in ensuring equitable education.

Introduction

Lebanon's civil society is considered to be a vibrant one. Over the past ten years, there have been quite a few campaigns calling for various forms of reform, including political, economic, family laws, and waste management etc. Despite the flourishing civil society, education remains one of those fields where there has been limited mobilisation for change aside from teachers' unions' mobilisations focused on self-interest demands related to better pay without engaging with public educational demands, including reforms (e.g. teachers' mobilisations in 2013). A study of one of the largest strikes of teachers' unions and associations (public and private sector) showed that while raising a reform agenda, the strike steered away from education reform and refrained its calls to tackling political corruption (Shuayb, unpublished). During an interview the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS) did with the head of the Secondary Teachers' associations Hanna Ghareeb, he claimed that "less than two teachers would walk behind him if the slogans of the mobilisation would focus on education reform". Following this largest mobilisation, current unions and syndicates have been co-opted by the ruling parties. Alternative unions such as Teachers' Associations for contracted public school teachers was formed in addition to online collectives for teachers working in the afternoon school shifts for Syrian children.

Education reform has thus continued to take place behind closed doors at the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education including at CERD (Shuayb, 2018). As Lebanon relies on grants and external funding for covering the cost of its education reform, international donors have also played a role in shaping education reforms. Despite involving some few think tanks and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), education reform remains restricted to experts (often international) and policy makers without much influence by civil society actors. With the breakout of the Syrian conflict and the influx of over a million refugee into Lebanon, donors and UN agencies played a larger role in education reforms in Lebanon, especially as MEHE had to triple its capacity to enrol Syrian children into the public sector.

Education reform, however, is only one dimension of the work for change that civil society organisations and social movements concerned with education are engaged in. In this report, we explore the broader understanding of and initiatives for change by the civil society in the education sector in Lebanon. While civil society and social movements are often studied separately (Porta, 2020), in this research, we understand the two as nested and overlapping with increasing hybridisation of the two. To this end, we apply 'civil society' as an umbrella concept in this report. Civil society organisations and movements concerned with education have to some extent followed the trends of civil society in the country and the region more generally. There is often believed to be a correlation between democracy, democratic values and civil society with an understanding of the autonomous civil society – autonomous from the state and the market (Altan-Olcay & Icduygu, 2012; Doyle, 2016) . The international donor community in Lebanon operated on this logic with funding to civil society organisations believed to promote democracy and development (Doyle, 2016). However, close connections between elites and civil society, sectarianism and the extension of state control over its citizens by way of various regulations and monitoring mechanisms of civil society organisations, shows the limits to the autonomy of Lebanon's civil society. Furthermore, laws and regulations are used to prosecute activists in attempts to silence peaceful criticism against the authorities (AbiYaghi et al., 2019).

Scholarship on civil society in Lebanon has exposed the obstacles for civil society organisations to engage in change, including constrains that accompany the close connection to existing power structures and organisations' economic survival. Thus, it has been common knowledge that the co-optation of parts of the civil society has made some organisations less willing to work for radical change (Altan-Olcay & Icduygu, 2012). Certainly, at the time of writing in 2024, conditions for an autonomous civil society are heavily constrained in the country. Rather than focusing on elite capture, sectarianism and other divides and constrains, however, we turn towards the ways in which the civil society organisations – placed between the state, individuals, the market and international donors (or international community) – understand and approach change in their work in education.

Aim of the study

The study which is part of a larger comparative one that includes Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine aims to examine the role of civil society organisations and collectives in shaping and influencing education change and policy reform. This report examines the case of Lebanon. More specifically, the study asks the following questions:

- What forms of mobilisations exist in the field of education in the three countries, who are the groups involved in mobilisation and what themes are the focus of mobilisation?
- How did the agendas and objectives shift over time and with the changing political and economic contexts?
- How do they define change, what kind of change do they succeed in achieving?
- What factors shape their approach to policy change?

To investigate the above research questions, we mapped and analysed CSOs in the field of education, their history, mission, vision, membership, and activities. A selection of the different types of CSOs were selected and their leadership was interviewed about their approach to policy change. We present the methodology and then the findings followed by a conclusion.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative methodology, involving the mapping of and analysing civil society organisations (CSOs) and conducting case studies through individual interviews with the leadership of selected organisations.

Mapping and analysing NGOs

The mapping exercise encompassed both registered and non-registered education-oriented groups that are currently active. Additionally, it encompassed various types of unions, including registered and alternative unions. Notably, international NGOs (INGOs) and international organisations (UN, WB, EU) were excluded from this study, as the primary focus was on local and national civil society initiatives. We identified 115 active civil society organisations in education through this exercise, these were identified through the CLS network – based in our active engagement in education for the past 15 years – through online searches and a snowball sampling technique.

From the organisations identified in the mapping, we selected 35 organisations and collectives, including various unions and syndicates which had a more active presence in educational change. We developed a coding framework to analyse those organisations further, based on mainly online information, we gathered the information for the categories in the coding framework, essentially aimed to capture the organisations' objectives, activities, approaches to instigating change, the scope of change they targeted, and their historical background.

Categories of organisations identified

Based on the analysis of organisations, we developed a categorisation of organisations identified:

1. **Service Provider-Developmental**: These NGOs operate on a spectrum from long-term development goals, such as enhancing community capacities and promoting sustainable growth, to short-term objectives like providing immediate services (e.g., healthcare, education, humanitarian aid, social support). While many currently focus on direct service delivery due to ongoing crises, their foundational mission often targets systemic change and sustainable development.

2. **Developmental**: Originating as part of broader social movements, these NGOs advocate for social justice, address systemic issues, and promote community empowerment within a collective effort framework.

3. **Rights-Based Groups or Movements**: These collectives are dedicated to advocating for rights of teachers or students and include teachers' unions (some inactive as they have been either dissolved or coopted by the state or ruling political parties, alternative teachers' syndicates (independent from the political parties) and as well as parents associations.

4. **Professional Associations**: Comprising individuals from the same profession, these organisations aim to advance their field and uphold high professional standards. They focus on enhancing professional skills, status, and working conditions rather than pursuing broader social change.

Interviews

In-depth interviews were then conducted with representatives from a subset of the 35 organisations, totalling 27 interviews from 25 organisations. These organisations represented a diverse range of networks, including syndicates, professional associations, and other types of NGOs. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The analysis of the interview data followed a combined approach, incorporating both inductive and deductive coding methods. Initially, a broad set of thematic headings was formulated by the research team to serve as guiding themes for the analysis. Simultaneously, team members closely examined the interview transcripts and identified additional themes and subthemes. These findings were then collectively reviewed and discussed within the team to arrive at a comprehensive set of main themes that emerged from the interview data.

Research ethics

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Lebanese American University (LAU.STF.MS6.8/Aug/2022). Further, all researchers have a certificate from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, a research ethics and compliance training program. Participants read carefully and signed the consent form and they voluntarily participated in the interviews. In addition, the names of participants were anonymised while analysing the data. Finally, at CLS researchers generate, process, and securely store all data related to the study in a password-protected storage repository, located on the organisation's internal network system, and only accessible to members of the CLS working on the project.

Background on CSOs in Lebanon

In the Lebanese context, civil society can be defined as a "realm" that lies between the state, the market, and the individual, encompassing both formal and informal structures such as community associations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), syndicates, cooperatives, faith-based organisations and trade unions (Ben Nefissa, 2002; Kingston, 2013; AbiYaghi et al., 2019). The country is known for having the most diverse and active civil society in the region (Hawthorne, 2005). Civil society organisations frequently fill gaps left by the absence of governmental authority, and thus play the role of social actors (Bennett, 1995; Karam, 2006). These organisations or associations also played a role in social and political change, particularly in the years following the end of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). The organic relationship between civil society organisations and the state in Lebanon means that the interaction between civil society and the state waxed and waned over time as the scope of work and approach to change among Lebanon's civil society organisations changed with different political periods.

Historically, the civil society in Lebanon played a significant role, gaining prominence during the Chehabist developmentalist era (1958–1964) with the emergence of volunteer-run associations aimed at transcending sectarian identities and promoting broad development goals (AbiYaghi et al., 2019). During the Civil War period (1975–1990), civil society focused on service provision and relief efforts. They offered education, healthcare, shelter, and relief services, and promoted social and economic development (Bennett 1995), often aided by the international donor community (Altan-Olcay & Icduygu, 2012).

After the Taif agreement, there was some diversification of civil society organisation and mobilisation for change along with an increasing number of civil society organisations (AbiYaghi et al., 2019; Haddad, 2017; Karam, 2009 in Haddad, 2017)[1]. After the war, civil

1 However, these movements' influence and independence were drastically constrained again from 2005 with the March 8 and 14 alliances.

society organisations broadened their activities to involve advocacy and human rights initiatives. Another shift in the organisations' role as noted by El Moubayed Bissat (2002) and Karam (2010) is the strengthening of their capacity for international cooperation, thus shifting their focus towards democratic reform, social equality, and human rights, encouraged by the availability of global funds. Initiatives and reforms included institutional reform advocating for reconstruction, reconciliation, and legal order (Karam, 2000). In addition, they promoted peaceful resolutions to political issues, resisted the intrusion of security services into freedom of expression, and called for an end to the sectarian political system (Karam & Catusse, 2009). The advocacies led to several successes including the monitoring of elections, the removal of sectarian affiliation from the Lebanese National Identity Card, and the passage of a law for missing and forcibly disappeared persons (El-Husseini et al., 2004).

It's worth noting that before 2005 and the withdrawal of the Syrian Army from Lebanon, civil society organisations were significantly curtailed, and their activities were obstructed (Kingston, 2013). However, after the withdrawal of Syrian forces, associations increased pressure on the government to increase transparency, enhance accountability, respect the rights of women and foreign workers, and reform the electoral system. Marking this year as a significant turning point in the state's interactions with civil society actors whereby it adopted a more liberal approach employing "soft power" strategies, one of which is clientelism (AbiYaghi, 2012; AbiYaghi et al., 2019). According to AbiYaghi (2012), this strategy is followed by the state to exert control over civil society actors enabling elites, as usual, to sustain informal dependency networks, thus preserving the socio-political status quo.

The Syrian refugee crisis caused by the Syrian war in 2011 exacerbated the dominance of the international donors' agendas and policies over the government's leadership and introduced a new "humanitarian market" (Mitri, 2015) likely increasing the number of associations (Haase & Haddad, 2015). There is no exact number of CSOs in Lebanon, yet the most precise number is based on a study conducted by MOSA and UNDP between 2003 and 2005, identifying 6,032 domestic civil society organisations (as cited in Haase & Haddad, 2015).

Historically, as we have shown here, after each humanitarian crisis in the country, there was a peak in newly established organisations (AbiYaghi et al., 2019). Civil society organisations continue to fill the void of state welfare provisions rather than mobilise for change, accompanied by less willingness of international donors to support more radical change-projects (Altan-Olcay & Icduygu, 2012). Coordination among CSOs exists in the form of networks and coalitions, yet they are criticised to be serving international donors' priorities whereby local actors would be forced to adjust new or ongoing projects to fit the SDGs or other agendas (AbiYaghi et al., 2019; Mitri, 2016). These insights led AbiYaghi et al. (2019) to conclude that Lebanon's civil society is caught in an "implementation trap", limiting CSOs' impact on shaping national development policies.

Historical overview of education and mobilisation in Lebanon

Understanding the role of civil society in Lebanon requires a look at the historical evolution of the Lebanese educational system. During the Ottoman Empire, education in Lebanon was predominantly managed by religious and sectarian institutions, with little oversight from the state. This allowed various religious communities to establish

their own schools, leading to a fragmented educational landscape. The entry of Western Christian missionaries, facilitated by agreements between Western powers and the Ottoman authorities, further diversified this landscape. To counter the growing influence of these missionaries, the Ottomans established “al-Maarif” schools, particularly in major cities, to serve the Muslim population.

The educational landscape continued to evolve during the French Mandate period, which began after World War I with the formation of Greater Lebanon. The French authorities reinforced the sectarian nature of education, with approximately 90% of schools being private religious institutions by the mid-1920s. These institutions operated with minimal oversight, further entrenching sectarian divisions. In 1924, the French introduced a unified curriculum for primary education, which was placed under strict mandate control, yet this did little to unify the fragmented system. The period was characterized by a lack of clear educational goals and an inability to fully integrate the various sectarian schools into a cohesive national framework.

After Lebanon gained independence in 1943, significant shifts occurred in the educational sector. Initially, private sectarian schools outnumbered public ones, with around 1,300 private schools compared to fewer than 300 public schools. However, within a decade, this balance shifted dramatically. Public schools began to proliferate, and by the mid-1950s, their numbers exceeded those of private schools, reflecting the state’s increasing role in education. This period saw the state attempting to assert control over the educational system, which had previously been dominated by sectarian institutions, particularly Catholic schools.

The post-independence era, particularly during President Fouad Chehab’s tenure (1958–1964), marked a significant period of educational reform. Chehab’s administration focused on building infrastructure, expanding public schools, particularly in rural areas, and regulating higher education. The establishment of the Lebanese University in 1959 was a major milestone, as it became the primary institution for training teachers and providing higher education. Chehab’s efforts were aimed at creating a unified national education system that could compete with the powerful sectarian institutions. However, these reforms faced significant resistance from private sectarian schools, which viewed the state’s efforts as a threat to their autonomy and influence. This resistance manifested in various forms, including strikes and legislative lobbying.

Despite Chehab’s efforts, the following decades saw a decline in the state’s commitment to education. Successive governments struggled to maintain the momentum of Chehab’s reforms, leading to a fragmented approach to educational planning. The Ministry of Education, established to oversee the sector, found its role increasingly complicated by the distribution of educational responsibilities across multiple ministries and government entities. This dispersion of authority led to inefficiencies and inconsistencies, hindering the development of a cohesive educational policy.

During this period, teacher unions and associations began to form, reflecting the growing demand for better working conditions and rights. The Private School Teachers Union, established in 1938, was one of the earliest unions in Lebanon. However, public sector teachers did not enjoy the same level of organisation, as labour laws restricted their ability to form unions. Instead, public school teachers formed cultural and educational associations, which evolved into groups advocating for improved wages and working conditions. These associations played a crucial role in representing teachers’ interests,

particularly in vocational and technical education, where issues of rights and recognition were most acute.

The early 1970s saw significant teacher mobilisations, highlighting the ongoing struggles within the education sector. One of the most notable movements was the 1972 strike by public primary teachers. The teachers demanded a 40% wage increase, the legalisation of teachers' associations, and improvements in various aspects of the education sector. The strike, which garnered widespread support from secondary teachers, the General Labor Union, and the general public, was met with a repressive response from the Ministry of Education, including house arrests and salary withholdings. Despite these harsh measures, the strike led to the establishment of teachers' associations, although many of the teachers demands remained unmet.

These mobilisations underscored the deep-seated challenges within the Lebanese educational system. Teachers, despite facing significant opposition, continued to push for better conditions and higher standards in education. Their efforts were often supported by broader segments of society, including students, families, and political parties, reflecting a widespread recognition of the importance of education to Lebanon's future.

Throughout these developments, the Lebanese educational system remained marked by tensions between sectarian interests and state control, fragmented planning, and the persistent efforts of civil society to advocate for better educational standards. The history of education in Lebanon is thus one of continuous struggle, with teachers and civil society playing a central role in pushing for reforms and improvements despite the many obstacles they faced.

Findings

Analysis of civil society in education

From the 35 civil society organisations analysed, we selected 25 civil society organisations to interview whose mandate was focused more specifically on educational change and reform. The initial analysis followed up by interviews examined their mission, vision, history and approach to change allowed us to group these civil society organisations into the following main categories.

Table 1: Type of civil society organisations analysed in Lebanon

Lebanon	
Civil Society Organisation	**Type of Number**
Service	5
Service-Development	7
Right-based Movement	8
Professional Association	2
Development	3

From the historical overview of education mobilisation in Lebanon, we showed that the main groups and initiatives that mobilised around education reform were teachers and students through unions and alternative unions. According to Abdul-Hamid and Yassine (2020), the broader civil society have not played a significant role in the education sector in Lebanon. However, in periods where civil society organisations were more involved in change processes generally such as during the post-Taif agreement period, as alluded to above, civil society organisations and social movement initiatives were more influential in education. Most of these initiatives are primarily engaged in service provision. In the mapping of organisations, we identified a diverse sector with a multitude of organisations,

but with limited influence over public policy and broader change in the sector. In this section we discuss the different categories of groups and institutions that we identified through the mapping and which we analysed in more detail.

We found that many organisations were established with an ambition to change and existed more as a social movement initiative than a civil society organisation. However, what we refer to as the 'NGOisation' of activism and civil society in general in the country led to many of those initiatives changing their focus towards service provision, largely as a funding strategy. Crucially, there are different approaches to change among the civil society actors and thus their interests and influence must be seen to take place in different spheres as we return to below. In this section, we describe how civil society organisations in education in Lebanon may be categorized according to their work in education. In doing so, we are interested in their existing roles and work more than their origin.

Abdul-Hamid and Yassine (2020) showed that the CSO sector working in education has been fragmented with little coordination between themselves and with other stakeholders. Early on in the Syrian refugee crisis, the MEHE sought to formulate a framework for CSO coordination and operation in the sector, closely related to the service delivery that those organisations were needed for. The most formalised network of local NGOs in education is the working group for implementing partners under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, closely tied to the international response in the country. Civil society organisations' funding increased with the Syrian crisis and many became more involved in non-formal education.

In the literature on civil society in Lebanon, there are different ways of categorising civil society organisations in function (such as service provision versus advocacy, see Al Hindy et al. 2018); thematic such as (educational, legal and environmental), ways of organising (from grassroot organisations to nation-wide coalitions (Touma, 2018). In the mapping and analysis of civil society organisation in education, we identified organisations existing along an axis from a high interest in working with and contributing to systemic change with the government to organisations that are largely given up on what they see as a failed state with inability to solve the crisis in the education system and hence developing their own change strategies. Within the national civil society, we have also included Refugee Led Organisations (RLOs). [2]

Based on the mapping, the history and current activities of organisations and initiatives, we divided the organisations into five different categories according to their current activities:

2 As for any international organisations, it is challenging to register a refugee led organisation in Lebanon. Hence, many RLOs rely on Lebanese allies to be able to formalize an organisation (El Abed et al., 2023). Most international organisations prefer to work with registered NGOs. Those few registered Refugee Led Organisations have become part of the architecture of the humanitarian crisis response and are thus prominent and present in the refugee response on par with Lebanese organisations in similar roles. There are significant Syrian refugee led initiatives and organisation in Lebanon in the field of education. Some of the main ones that have also managed to formally register their presence in Lebanon (El Abed et al., 2023), are Multi Aid Programmes (MAPS), Basma and Zeitoune, Jsoor and Sawa for development. Similarly, Palestinian organisations have challenges in registering formally in the country. There are nevertheless some important and prominent Palestinian organisations in the field of education that attract international funding, such as Al Jana and Najdah Ijtema3eya.

Service providers

Among the 25 organisations that we mapped and analysed we located five NGOs whose work in education is purely service provision. Some organisations are involved in a range of fields of which education is only one and where in other fields there may be a stronger emphasis on social justice and development. Other organisations focus on education alone. Their services in education range from learning in order to advance literacy and other skills and psychosocial support and broader emphasis on wellbeing in school and in the communities. Some of the work aims to improve educational spaces to enable safe learning for students and their teachers. Thus, some services take a more holistic approach than others to learning. The services target all age groups from pre-school to adolescents. There is a prominent focus on Syrian refugees and 'other vulnerable groups.' There is more emphasis on public schools and non-formal education with limited emphasis on private schools. To this end representatives of the service provider organisations talked about their work as part of the country's 'emergency response' with an emphasis on how many children and their families the work has reached.

Service provider-developmental

In the mapping we analysed seven organisations within this category. They are non-governmental organisations that work on a scale ranging from long-term development goals, such as enhancing community capacities and promoting sustainable growth, and short-term goals such as offering direct services to meet immediate needs. These services might include providing healthcare, education, humanitarian aid, or social support. Some NGOs currently focus on delivering these essential services due to the compounding crises and thus help to fill the deep void left by the state or private education providers. In most cases, despite the organisations being predominantly a service provider, their foundational mission was geared towards fostering broad, systemic change and sustainable development in the communities they serve.

Similar to the service delivery type of organisations described above, the target groups are still disadvantaged and vulnerable children, including refugees. Services and development focus come together in the aim to improve the quality of education in Lebanon. In addition to services, there is more focus on general life skills including leadership skills, peace and conflict resolution, civic engagement and an emphasis on the transition to work. The language used in their self-presentation and in interviews is more tuned towards justice, solidarity and socioeconomic equity and sustainable development with inspiration from Freire's conscientisation, social awareness and collective action.

Social developmental

Some very few organisations are more clearly involved in development work with a change agenda. We analysed three such organisations in our mapping. The organisations were generally established as part of a larger social movement within the framework of a broader collective effort. These NGOs were founded to advocate for social justice, address systemic issues, and promote community empowerment. They were not generally involved in service delivery. However, some of their activities and initiatives did also lead to improved services.

Generally, the organisations we analysed in this category were working to find solutions for a broken education system. The scale of their worked varied from school level to focus on more systemic issues with an emphasis on movement building and collective work with principles of leadership, engaged citizenship, good governance and social justice. There is a greater sense of participation, knowledge generation and change from within together with an emphasis on structural change including reform. Interestingly in organisations situated more in development and with a social change agenda, there is also more emphasis on knowledge and research

Rights-based groups or movements

Groups and collective efforts dedicated to advocating for and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms often through more advocacy-based initiatives and working methods that include mobilisation of members. Various forms of unions dominate this category but there are also organisations more focused on rights-based advocacy. We analysed seven such groups in the mapping. We showed above that in the history of mobilisation for change in education, the teachers associations and union landscape in Lebanon is diverse (Abdul-Hamid and Yassine, 2020), there are different groups for different levels of education, different employment status (such as permanent and contractual) and type of school (private or public). As mentioned above, Lebanese law prevents civil servants from organising in unions, which has added to the diverse landscapes of unions and committees. There are thus also alternative unions such as Teachers' Associations for contracted public school teachers was formed in addition to online collectives for teachers working in the afternoon school shifts for Syrian children. Only Lebanese teachers are part of the associations, Syrian and Palestinian teachers cannot organise in the same way. Teachers' unions and committees have been influential in some ways. Yet, their current mobilisation is concentrated more towards teachers' salaries and working conditions rather than reform in the sector. It is also suggested that teachers' unions to some extent are driven by sectarian politics (Abdul-Hamid and Yassine, 2020).

Professional associations

Within the education field, subject specific organisations composed of individuals from the same profession who collaborate on advancing their field and maintaining high standards of practice, such as history. These associations usually focus on the specific needs and goals aiming to enhance the professional skills, status, and working conditions of individuals within the profession, rather than pursuing broader social change or vision. In the mapping we analysed two such associations.

Reflections on the categorisation of organisations

What is striking in this categorisation is the absence of activist networks and organisations that could be classified as social movements. The closest would maybe be some of the rights-based organisations and alternative unions. While some of the organisations may have fallen into this category of activism in the past, this was hardly present in the identification of current initiatives.

The network analysis indicates that while there is a diverse array of civil society organisations involved in education in Lebanon, their collective impact on systemic change is constrained by several factors. The NGOisation of civil society has led many organisations to shift their focus towards service provision, often at the expense of advocacy and structural reform. This shift is largely driven by funding strategies, which prioritise immediate service delivery over long-term change. Additionally, the sector remains fragmented, with limited coordination among organisations and minimal influence over public policy.

The findings suggest that for civil society in Lebanon to have a more substantial impact on educational reform, there needs to be a stronger emphasis on collective action and advocacy. Building more effective partnerships, both within the civil society sector and with governmental and international actors, is essential. Furthermore, there is a need for these organisations to re-engage with their original missions of driving systemic change, rather than merely providing services within the constraints of a neoliberalised civil society. By doing so, civil society in Lebanon can play a more transformative role in shaping the future of education in the country.

In the next part of the report, we will delve into the understandings of change and the work for change that staff in the organisations were reflecting on

Approaches to change

In order to understand the level of engagement the 25 surveyed organisations work on, we decided to code their response using the macro, meso and micro levels. For the macro, we refer to any change that aims to address policy change whether directly by working with policy actors, or through advocacy, lobbying or working with pressure groups including unions in order to influence education change. The change aspired to be achieved was structural. By meso, we refer to NGOs working with teachers or the communities to influence practices or conditions. By micro we referred to influences practices in the classroom and impact on individual students in particular

Theories of change

We understand theory of change to be about how an organisation understands change and seeks to achieve change. In the material we identified three main and interrelated categories of theories of change:

Social movement and structural change: The first type of change is the least present among the organisations surveyed and is about aspiring and seeking to create structural change that can shape policies directly by pushing for a specific policy agenda or by mobilising teachers to engage with the change directly. The tactic used by an association and by one teachers' union was to create a group of teachers to generate a general awareness or consciousness to push for a certain change. For some of these groups, the focus appeared to be more tuned towards teachers' working conditions, including pay, but recently there were signs of further emphasis on teachers' identity and position in the education system. The few organisations working for this type of change highlighted the importance of investing in teachers' capacities and skills (if they were a specialist association) or awareness of their role as the first step towards structural change. One

of the groups was advocating for structural changes within the educational system to make it more equitable. The organisations interviewed believed that the current situation of compounded crises, and the deep crisis in the education sector specifically, were obstacles for engaging directly with policy change given that the conditions for the teachers needed improving first, before teachers would be prepared to engage in broader change. Yet, the same organisations had some engagements with the policy actors. For example, one organisation had signed an agreement with an official body highlighting their role in providing technical support and education advice for the official body in a specific subject area:

> "We personally think that teachers are the main leaders that can make a change. If they are not convinced that we need to make a change in this sector, nothing can be done although media and parents play important roles."

Despite having the aspirations to influence policy, most of the groups interviewed did not have specific strategies. Some had identified certain potential areas of engagement while others were largely responding to the current developments in the education crisis, thus a reactive rather than proactive approach was the norm. It is worth noting that while the leadership especially in some of these organisations aspired to influence policy, they struggled to push for mobilisation amongst teachers who were more focused on improving their own conditions.

In this theory of change, teachers are seen as the main agents of change who have the power to influence policy change.

Incremental change from the ground up: The largest proportion of the groups we interviewed believed that it was not possible to engage directly with changing the educational system. Instead, they sought to address the shortcoming of the system by providing direct services to affected groups within the education system. Their involvement took the form of interventions such as providing access to schooling, remedial education and resources for schooling (such as covering costs of education). The interviewees argued that by strengthening and supporting disadvantaged students, they are contributing to creating incremental and accumulated change as these students would in turn contribute to changing the system.

Some of the interviewees stated very clearly that they believed change does not happen from the top but from the ground up. Hence, they did not want to engage directly with policy change and believed investing in either the private sector or in NGOs could be a more efficient way of leading change.

Social learning theory: Another theory of change, closely related to working from the ground up, was adopted by some organisations and groups focused on changing the behaviours and attitudes of different groups of stakeholders such as students, parents, teachers and school leaders. This social learning theory was expected to change the way groups engage with the education system and the community. In many ways it was an indirect approach to influencing change. Organisations did not have any specific strategy or initiatives to influence policy directly. Some of them did not have direct connections with policy makers, while others were mainly engaged with policy makers as implementors of an intervention or a strategy.

It is important to note that the different groups we interviewed did not only adopt one theory of change. Some of them also sought to change the behaviour while also aiming to create structural change through a social movement.

Several other organisations stated that do not have a theory or change nor do they seek to engage with change. For instance, one group stated that they existed to provide research a s this was the main interest of the group. While some members within this group might aspire for change, as a collective they did not focus on change.

Factors influencing theories of change

In this section, we focus on the factors that influenced organisations' theories of change as set out in the interviews.

Influence by global trends: Meeting global and international standards and trends was a common feature in some of the interviews we conducted with local groups. These were mostly present in the area of peace education and conflict resolution where individual and behavioural change was the main kind of change aspired by the group. Some of the groups interviewed were working directly with international peace organisations or received funding from them. Other organisations sought to meet certain global standards in technology or reading and hence receiving certification from international organisations was a key measure of success.

Loss of faith in the ability to change: However, loss of faith in the ability to change the education system resulted in the dominance of a charity model of work where alleviating the suffering and marginalisation of certain groups pushed these groups to focus on very local and small groups. This impelled some of these organisations to do even more localised work contained in one small area, focusing on a small population with the aim of providing support.

Valuing the private sector: Linked to the lack of faith in reforming the public sector, some organisations highlighted that the private sector had a better chance of leading reform. Some of the collectives interviewed were part of non-profit religious education organisations, yet also considered somewhat part of the private education.

A focus on individualism: It was quite apparent that a focus on changing individuals rather than groups was a common approach for many of these organisations and groups. As a result, many of these collectives focused on changing a behaviour or a set of skills with the hope of this individual change could result in a bigger change. Yet there was no communal or common spaces or systems for these individuals to work together within.

Definition of successful change

To further understand collectives understanding of change, we asked interviewees to describe a successful change.

Extent of outreach: The most mentioned measure of success was the degree of outreach achieved by collectives and groups, in particular those providing a service such as training, teaching or providing access to education. In some cases, the number of enrolled or people benefitting from a programme was a measure of success, other interviewees

referred to other types of outreach where larger sectors of the community they served became involved in the mission and vision of the NGO such as developing volunteering centres:

> "we can now reach the parents and more social groups. We target the dialogue among Lebanese and Syrians against hate speech…Our programmes proved success. We work with 3.5-6 years old children before school and then we work with 6- 17 years old youth in activities."

Signing agreements with officials or UN agencies: Recognition of the collective or organisation's efforts by policy actors like MEHE, CERD, or UN agencies was considered a pivotal success factor. Such recognition not only amplified the organisation's ability to implement its practices but also expanded its access to opportunities in some cases.

Attitude change: One of the most frequently cited indicators of success among the interviewed participants was the transformation of attitudes and perceptions within certain groups, including parents, teachers, or students. These changes encompassed shifts in their outlook towards either learning or identity or values.

Promoting participatory practices: The process and not only the outcome was an important measure of success for some organisations. Promoting participatory and consultative process and trust amongst the different participants was seen to be an important measure of success.

Establishing networks and collaborative initiatives: Some groups have identified several key indicators of success on connectivity. One prominent measure involves the capacity to form a collective and unite individuals under a common mission and vision. The development of this group's capabilities and their joint pursuit of a shared objective is considered a significant marker of achievement. Another measure of success revolves around the ability to forge connections among diverse groups. In this context, strategic alliances are emphasized as a crucial gauge of success. Lastly, one organisation highlighted that they assess project success by partners' willingness to engage in further collaborations. This fosters the creation of enduring and sustainable relationships and partnerships.

Legal change: Reforming laws and regulations is seen to be a key indicator of success, highlighting the structural change that some of these collectives aspire to achieve. This success indicator was mainly highlighted by the unions and syndicates.

Looking at the above measures of success one could see that overall, the interviewed groups had a narrow objective of change. Many of them had objectives contained within a project or a specific deliverable. Service providers organisations focused on outreach. While a few unions or syndicates perceived their group as part of a social movement, almost none of the others saw their role to be that. The added value of collaborating with the Ministry and policy actors such as the UN was mainly to widen implementation of practices rather than to introduce structural or policy changes.

Perception of policy change

> "No matter how many NGOs there are, **we cannot move forward for a long time. You need something done by the ministry and policymakers in order to make a change. Change starts from the Ministry, educational policy and how it is implemented**, how you can create a citizen out of schools from all backgrounds, and one who gets emotional when seeing the Lebanese flag instead of other ones."

There was an overall despair by most interviewed organisations about their ability – or rather inability – to influence policy or reform a system. One interviewee noted that their only way of potentially contributing to policy reform is if they are asked individually as consultants to contribute rather than being able to influence as a group or an association.

A common perception amongst participants was that the responsibility of policy change had shifted from the civil society to the government actors and donors and many highlighted that they do not wish to play the role of policy actor. This is particularly the case for some syndicates whose emphasis is to mobilise for improving pay and work package conditions. Including policy reform in the agenda of these syndicates was a struggle for a few of the leaders who wanted to do that. While these syndicates played a major role in pushing for certain education reforms in the 1970s with the expansion of compulsory education, this agenda is no longer part of the priority or within the identity of the syndicates. Yet, a shift was beginning to emerge as new leadership was trying to push for changing focus and priorities towards reform. Going beyond the self-interest of the groups to the interests of the whole sector was a vision being promoted by some of the leadership. The need for research and data was seen to be critical for any attempt to bring about change or aspire to change the system

As noted above, within the emphasis of structural change, the teachers were considered a main actor for change. Two organisations that are primarily teacher- and educators-lead collectives aimed to create structural and policy change by shaping teachers' identity which would in turn, transform the way teachers see and deal with the system. Both organisations aspired to change policy but indirectly as it was believed preparing the teachers was a condition necessary for any potential change in the system. However, none of these organisations had prepared a vision or a plan of what needs to change and how to do it. Strengthen teachers' voice and representation was the theory of change for these organisations so they (the teachers) can influence and shape policy making. These organisations identified influencing policy as a direct but long-term objective which can be only realised by doing accumulative activities which prepare teachers to become in a position to shape policy.

While most groups felt helpless against in its capability to inform the system, others opted to create a parallel system whether through alternative education, or alternative spaces where community members can join and develop different opportunities. Some associations even aimed to replace the current public system with these alternative spaces or ways of providing education. Others just offered these alternative systems so that children who are excluded and marginalised in the educational system can access education. The sensitive political position of one of these organisations being led by the refugee community and thus putting it in a critical position where its work can be targeted and frozen by Lebanese officials in a regime that is overall anti refugees. While restrictions on academic freedom is practiced increasingly on Lebanon and non-Lebanese actors, refugees are at a higher risk of being deported by Lebanese authorities. Within these restrictions and the growing impact of humanitarian agencies, the predominant role of

civil society in Lebanon amid the worsening economic and refugee crisis have resulted in the majority of NGOs playing a service provider role. Creating change by providing services to students and teachers or the community seemed by the most widely present paradigm for creating change given the general belief that policy change is unrealizable. While a few of these NGOs have a close relationship with MEHE, this relationship was focused on implementing the work of these NGOs in the schools rather than shaping the policy work.

Role of Research and Research Centres in Making a Change

According to our interviewees, research plays a crucial role in mobilising for educational change in Lebanon. Interviewees identify two critical roles for research: social and policy reform.

The social role of researchers and research centres is related to identifying societal issues and preparing future researchers to conduct meaningful research. Five CSOs highlighted the vital role of research in identifying and addressing social and educational issues for organisations to work on with the condition of vulgarising the findings to facilitate its dissemination to the community. To do so, a few participants recommended that research centres use various communication channels to reach the public and help make a change. Researching society and people's ideologies and direction is necessary to induce a rational change, as one participant from a right-based movement reflected.

Few NGOs and right-based movements have a collaborative relationship with research centres and universities. Collaboration would aim to generate reports about their work, expand the application of particular training programmes, or induce policy changes. It was noted by a right-based movement that there is a disconnection between MEHE and research centres, as the former doesn't refer to knowledge producers when making critical decisions or when attempting to reform curricula, leading to substantial financial waste. This suggests that research centres have a policy reform role whereby they hold the government accountable for its decisions and often fill the gap by following a scientific method to recommend informed decisions.

Despite a few organisations collaborating with research centres, twelve organisations shared that they conduct their own research. The majority of NGOs use their own research at the micro and meso levels, while a few research initiatives and NGOs work on research at the macro level or policy level. At the micro level, some NGOs would conduct research to improve teaching methods and students' learning process, including identifying any learning difficulties and improving online learning, mainly during Covid-19. Other NGOs follow a data-driven intervention approach and conduct needs assessment to start a new initiative based on the community's requests and needs. Monitoring and evaluation is a research measurement method that few organisations shared as part of their own research, whereby they evaluate their work efficiency in the field and adjust accordingly. Similarly, other organisations, including a research initiative, conduct action research whereby they repeatedly identify gaps in the learning process and apply the recommendations on the ground. Two of the interviewed organisations that conduct research at the micro level also target meso-level or school level, such as creating models for training and coaching or creating a synergistic model to improve the relationship between society and schools.

At the policy level, very few organisations elaborated on their achievements in research to change curriculum educational policy and draft or change specific laws. However, one of the concerns a participant from a right-based movement raised is the lack of financial resources that allow the group to collaborate with research centres to conduct a national study that can lead to policy change. There is also a debate about whether researchers should get involved in policy change. Some researchers would prefer to receive a request to conduct research in order to make a change at the policy level, while others believe that their role extends beyond just doing research, as they should also be activists and work on lobbying to make a change in the education sector.

Nevertheless, change is needed at the academic level to keep promoting the role of researchers in the education sector. Training PhD students in research skills was an issue raised by a participant from a research initiative who explained that usually students lack skills and do not get support from their universities. In this initiative, this organisation connected PhD students together and trained them to become future researchers, yet this programme stopped due to financial and logistical challenges. Such effective research training would help maintain the use of research in the change process. Add to that, focusing on multidisciplinary research is needed to identify the exact issues in society as a participant recommended. However, based on her personal experience, replacing technical research reports produced by universities was met with resistance. This suggests that change may be needed at the university level to achieve a more significant change in the education sector, yet there may be some barriers to such innovation within academia.

Promoting the importance of research in making a radical change is recommended by some of the participants who believe it is an important milestone in developing any country. They emphasize that not only collaborations should be established with researchers and research centres, but governmental bodies, mainly MEHE, should check the research outcomes and work seriously towards making a change. However, personification of decision-making and corruption are major challenges that cause resistance for change as we will discuss in the following section.

Resistance to change

Organisations in Lebanon face various types of resistance based on the nature of the changes they aim to implement. The majority of the organisations interviewed encountered resistance at the community level. This resistance stemmed from several factors, including intolerance of the organisations' work, indifference to their outcomes, and difficulties in building trust with community members and stakeholders. For instance, some organisations reported that resistance came from their direct beneficiaries, local communities, or religious leaders. In regions where the presence of Syrian refugees caused tension, it became challenging for organisations to educate both Lebanese and Syrian students together. Additionally, efforts to raise awareness on sensitive topics like sexual harassment were met with opposition from religious leaders. Despite these challenges, some organisations were able to persist by building trust over time with their beneficiaries, which eventually reduced resistance to their goals.

Another significant level of resistance encountered by organisations was at the governmental level. Sixteen out of the organisations interviewed reported facing resistance from a government they described as repressive, unsupportive, and corrupt.

Interviewees, particularly those from rights-based movements, spoke of government repression, including threats against protesters to deter them from demanding their rights. The Lebanese government, often through political allies holding influential positions in the education sector, has long used such tactics to weaken teachers' movements. Another repressive measure highlighted was a decree that bans public school teachers from forming a syndicate, thereby limiting their ability to organise and advocate for their rights. Power dynamics also play a role in preventing unions from effectively demanding rights for students and teachers, with historical examples of the government cancelling or dividing unions to weaken their influence.

In addition to governmental repression, several organisations expressed dissatisfaction with the government's lack of support and its failure to incorporate research and expertise into policymaking. These organisations criticised the government for prioritising personal interests over informed decision-making.

Specific CSOs provided examples of how government policies and laws have slowed progress. For instance, NGOs working with Syrian refugees noted that the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) introduced policies that restricted access to formal education and limited the ability of Syrian volunteers to work in education due to the lack of residency permits. These NGOs, often led by Syrian refugee activists, faced legal threats from Lebanese authorities, which undermined their ability to mobilise against these restrictive regulations. Rights-based movements also highlighted that private sector teachers were hesitant to demand their rights or participate in protests due to fear of being fired by school administrations. Existing policies, laws, and regulations do not provide adequate security for private sector teachers to advocate for their rights. Furthermore, mobilisations within rights-based movements have not emphasised gender equality, with internal resistance to reforms such as implementing a female quota for representation.

The issue of power sharing, or "Muhasasa," among Lebanon's political parties has exacerbated nepotism and corruption, further hindering efforts to bring about reform. Some organisations reported facing political pressure, such as being forced to work under conditions set by specific political parties or having to relocate their operations, which slowed down their efforts for change. One rights-based movement was weakened when politically affiliated leaders were elected, reducing the effectiveness of stakeholders in demanding their rights. Despite these challenges, some organisations were able to overcome resistance through community trust and support.

Additionally, several rights-based movements pointed out the negative impact of neoliberalism, an external political factor that has weakened Lebanon's public education sector. This trend, amplified by the Paris 3 donor conference, has increased the risk of privatising the education system and exacerbated educational inequality among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Interviewees emphasised that Lebanon's neoliberal policies have lowered the quality of education by failing to establish strict criteria for hiring teachers, leading to inconsistencies in educational standards and quality, and the appointment of unqualified teachers driven by profit motives rather than a focus on teachers' rights and demands.

Amidst these challenges, it is important to note that some organisations reported facing no governmental resistance, particularly those that are well-established, have political or religious support, or do not have significant demands from the government. The

following section will explore the different relationships between organisations and the government.

Relationship with the Government/MEHE

The relationships between civil society organisations (CSOs) and the Lebanese government, particularly the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), have evolved in various ways, reflecting the different strategies employed by these organisations to effect change. Some CSOs maintain a neutral relationship with the government, focusing on bureaucratic or logistical interactions, such as obtaining approvals or accreditations, without attempting to influence MEHE policy. This approach stems from a lack of faith in the government's responsiveness to broader educational reforms.

Rights-based movements, on the other hand, have a more confrontational relationship with the government, particularly MEHE, as they advocate for salary increases and other rights. However, this relationship is often strained due to resistance from a repressive system, which has historically shaped it into a negative dynamic. For instance, negotiations between MEHE and movements like the teachers' Union Coordination Committee (UCC) have involved using official exams as a bargaining tool, but recent false promises have led some rights-based movements to prioritize ground protests over negotiations.

Some organisations report having no contact with MEHE but maintain positive relationships with other ministries, such as the Ministry of Social Affairs. Others used to have good relations with MEHE, largely due to connections with specific individuals, but these relationships have deteriorated as those individuals have been replaced.

Conversely, older, well-established organisations often describe their relationship with MEHE as positive and collaborative. These organisations work closely with MEHE and CERD on training programmes or participate in committees aimed at adjusting the curriculum.

The ways in which CSOs relate to the government impact their potential for driving change. The phenomenon of NGOisation, where civil society efforts shift towards service provision due to external funding constraints, has increasingly dominated the strategies of many organisations, often at the expense of more transformative goals. This shift has been compounded by changing funding conditions and the ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon, which have led organisations to adjust their operations to fit within financial limits dictated by international donors.

As funding sources have dwindled, particularly after the onset of the Ukrainian war and the Syrian crisis, many organisations have recalibrated their goals and activities to align with the expectations of their funders, often leading to a more professionalised and less grassroots-driven approach. The influence of international donors has, in some cases, led to better efficiency in project implementation but has also steered organisations away from their original missions.

In many cases, international organisations have effectively taken over roles traditionally held by the government, particularly in the education sector, including that which concerns refugees. This shift has raised critical questions about the direction of mobilisation and activism for change, as CSOs navigate a landscape where international organisations are the primary drivers of educational policy and practice in Lebanon.

This dynamic situation, where government leadership in education reform is lacking and international organisations dominate, has led to a reconsideration of where and how CSOs should direct their mobilisation efforts. The challenge remains in balancing the need for service provision with the pursuit of more systemic, long-term change in Lebanon's educational landscape.

Collaborations and partnerships

In the interviews we conducted, collaborations and partnerships were frequently mentioned. However, in practice, most of these 'horizontal' collaborations between civil society organisations (CSOs) are largely operational and focused on project implementation. For instance, one organisation might take the lead in coordinating the delivery of new technology to a network of schools, while involving other organisations to execute specific activities related to this project. There is limited collaboration among organisations when it comes to mobilising for broader change. Interviewees noted that differing views among CSOs make it challenging to build solidarity across various initiatives. Although solidarity networks do exist at international, national, and local levels, they are often centred on issues like women's rights rather than education. Moreover, it was emphasised in the interviews that government policies and funding opportunities tend to promote individualised responses rather than encouraging a collective, solidarity-based approach among organisations.

Vertical collaboration, on the other hand, was more evident in the relationships between organisations and the communities they serve, such as teachers, parents, and students. This vertical relationship is also extended to international organisations, particularly in the context of NGOisation, where international actors play a significant role in shaping the work and strategies of local CSOs.

Sectarianism, political affiliations, and the dominance of international humanitarian and aid agencies in drawing policies contribute to the nature of collaborations and coalition-building, often complicating efforts to form unified movements or coalitions for broader social and educational change. These dynamics can further fragment the civil society landscape, making it more difficult for organisations to work together effectively.

Conclusions

Despite Lebanon's vibrant civil society history, the ability of civil society organisations (CSOs) to drive systemic change, particularly in education, is constrained by multiple factors, including NGOisation, governmental repression, sectarianism, and the influence of international donors. The findings of this study indicate that while many organisations are actively engaged in service provision and immediate community support, there remains a significant gap in efforts aimed at broader systemic change or policy reform. Many organisations have narrow objectives focused on specific projects or deliverables, particularly those centred on outreach. While some unions or syndicates view themselves as part of a broader social movement, most organisations do not see their role in this way.

Over time, the focus of many CSOs has shifted due to external pressures, primarily funding constraints, leading to the depoliticisation of their work. Rather than mobilising for structural change, these organisations are increasingly engaged in providing essential services, filling gaps left by the state, particularly in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. The 'NGOisation' of activism and neoliberalisation of civil society work and funding has contributed to this changing role of the civil society in Lebanon.

Historically, teachers and students, particularly through unions and alternative unions, have been the primary drivers of reform, however in the past three decades their focus has shifted to one that is primarily concerned with improving work and pay conditions. While this is a critical reform, the no longer push for educational reform or change. Nonetheless, a shift is emerging, with new leadership pushing for policy reform and emphasising the need for research and data, indicating a need to explore how to support this development.

Civil society's broader involvement in education reform has been limited, with notable influence only during periods of general social change, such as after the Taif Agreement. There is a common belief that the responsibility for policy change has shifted to policy

actors as well as humanitarian agencies and government donors. There is also a pervasive lack of belief in the possibility of change. A loss of faith in the ability to reform the education system has led many organisations to adopt a charity model focused on small, localised efforts to alleviate suffering and marginalisation. Some organisations, doubting the feasibility of public sector reform, believe the private sector, including non-profit religious education entities, is better suited to lead change.

While some organisations aim to influence policy and achieve structural change by mobilising teachers, the majority focus on providing direct services to support disadvantaged students, believing in incremental change. Another approach involves changing stakeholders' behaviours and attitudes to indirectly influence the education system, with some organisations combining these theories.

Moreover, the relationship between CSOs and the government, particularly the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), varies widely. Some organisations maintain a purely logistical or bureaucratic relationship, others face direct opposition and repression, while a few well-established groups enjoy collaborative relations with MEHE. However, the lack of cohesive efforts towards educational reform across the sector is evident. Collaborations among CSOs tend to be operational rather than strategic, with limited efforts to build solidarity around broader change agendas. Sectarianism and political affiliations further complicate these collaborations, hindering the formation of unified coalitions for change.

Some groups, feeling powerless to influence the system, have opted to create parallel systems, such as alternative education spaces for marginalised children. This approach is particularly critical for refugee-led organisations, which face political sensitivities and restrictions.

However, organisations in Lebanon encounter resistance at various levels when attempting to enact change. At the community level, resistance stems from intolerance, indifference, or difficulties in building trust with stakeholders. Governmental resistance is widespread due to repression, lack of support, and corrupt policies, all of which hinder rights-based movements and NGOs. Policy and legal frameworks also pose challenges, impeding progress in education reform. Furthermore, sectarian politics and external factors, such as neoliberalism, exacerbate resistance, leading to privatisation and inequality in the education sector. Despite these obstacles, some organisations navigate resistance through community trust, while others are shielded by political or religious support.

This study emphasises the need for Lebanon's civil society to reassess its role and strategies in the education sector. There is a critical need for stronger collective action, enhanced partnerships, and re-engagement with advocacy and systemic reform to address the deep-rooted challenges in Lebanon's educational landscape. Without such efforts, the ability of civil society to influence meaningful and lasting change will remain constrained.

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