

Local Governments and Open-Data: How Have Municipalities Interacted with the IMPACT Platform?

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As Lebanon was coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, municipalities were placed at the forefront of the management of infection outbreaks. With the aim of prioritizing open-data, the Central Inspection Board (CIB) launched the IMPACT platform in April 2020, a public monitoring tool. Due to the critical situation in which they are, almost all municipalities (1,036) responded to the request and have accessed the platform at least once, but not on a constant basis over time.

The IMPACT platform tasked municipalities to report on a range of issues including COVID-19 metrics and decisions, development indicators, their needs, and their vulnerable households. A closer look at the data shows that in the period of April 2020 to February 2021, the interaction of municipalities with the IMPACT platform was largely limited to two forms: The Ministry of Social Affairs' (MoSA) aid form, known as the vulnerable household survey, and the quarantine modification form, which is where municipalities reject the registration of new COVID-19 cases in their areas.

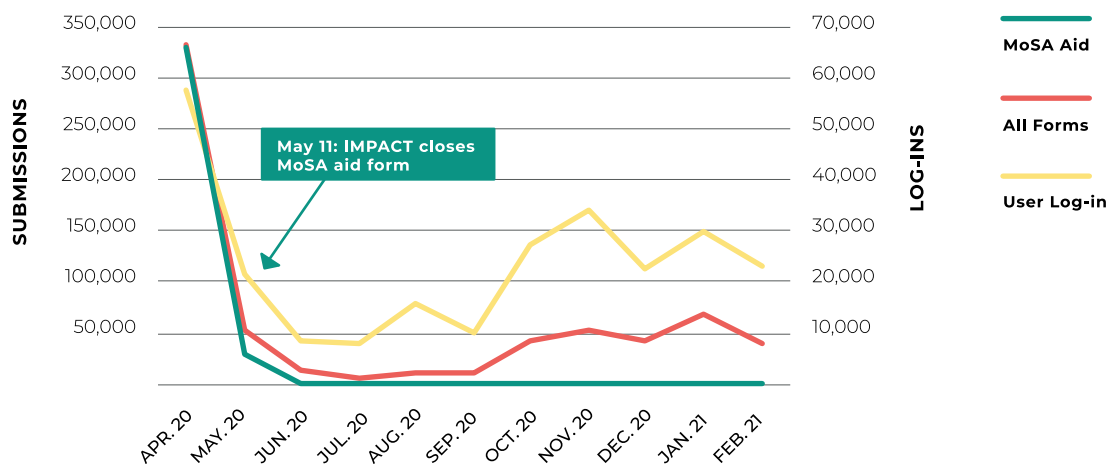
Both forms present potential benefits in the view of municipalities. Indeed, submitting aid applications gives municipalities direct benefits at the political, economic, and social levels by offering financial support to vulnerable households, which could help decrease social tensions and reenergize clientelist channels. And when municipalities reject the registration of new COVID-19 cases in their areas, it can help delay or hedge municipal lockdowns, particularly after the government adopted a decentralized lockdown strategy in October 2020.

Incentives drive municipalities' inconsistent interaction

At the national level, municipalities used IMPACT the most during the early stages of its launch: Nearly one half of all forms (48%) were submitted in April 2020 alone, followed by 8% in May. The peak in form submissions, particularly in April, coincides with a three-week window set on filling out MoSA's National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP) applications. In fact, of the total forms registered in the month of April 2020, 99% were vulnerable household surveys.

The suspension of the MoSA aid form in May 2020 sparked an abrupt change in the interaction of municipalities with the IMPACT platform (figure 1), indicating that there was a loss of incentive for municipalities.

Figure 1: Evolution of MoSA aid submissions and IMPACT log-ins over time

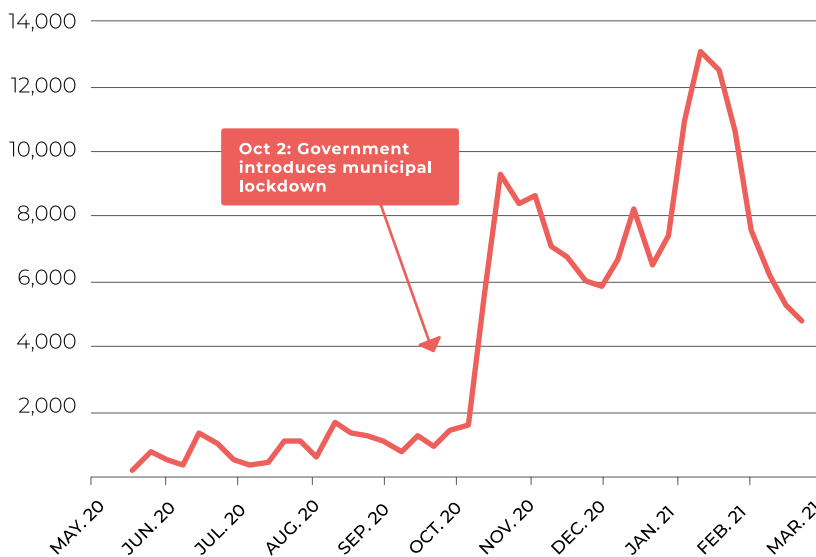


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Between June and September 2020, municipalities' engagement with the IMPACT dashboard significantly decreased to an average of 10,400 log-ins per month, compared to 39,500 log-ins registered between April and May 2020. Municipal engagement increased again in October 2020 and remained relatively steady until February 2021, with an average of around 27,300 log-ins per month. This increase coincides with the government's decision to impose municipal lockdowns (figure 2), which drove municipalities to regularly review the accuracy of their daily registered infections. As a result, IMPACT's quarantine modification form accounted for 72% of all form submissions, compared to 5% between April and September 2020. Knowing that municipal lockdowns were implemented based on the ratio of daily COVID-19 infections per 100,000 residents, municipalities were incentivized to reject quarantine cases in their areas in order to hedge or delay lockdowns.

Figure 2: Evolution of quarantine modification activities over time



Lesson learned

Lebanon's local governments have shown cooperation with the IMPACT platform and enabled residents—the primary stakeholders—to follow their activities. The findings of this analysis, however, also suggest that some municipalities have frequented IMPACT forms that carry short-term incentives over others that do not, leaving an inconsistent interaction with the platform. As the role and importance of local governments continue to grow today, municipalities must be impartial and pro-active in cooperating with open-data initiatives that serve to rebuild citizens' trust in state institutions.