

Reenergizing Clientelist Channels: Which Municipalities Abused Aid Forms?

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The financial crisis and the repercussions of the pandemic pushed 55% of the Lebanese population into poverty.¹ Despite this, the country's only formal poverty targeting scheme is limited to the Ministry of Social Affairs' (MoSA) National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP). This has caused the number of NPTP applications registered on IMPACT between April and May 2020 to triple, compared to those between the years of 2012 and 2015, combined.²

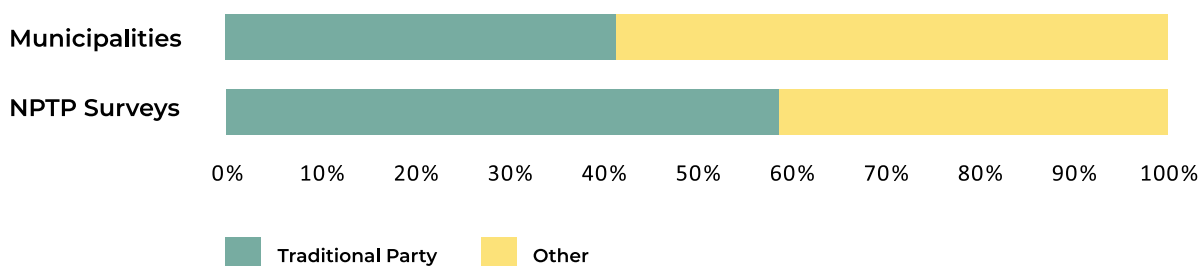
In this brief, we leveraged data from IMPACT, Lebanon's first e-government platform that centralizes governance issues at the local level, to study the behavior of municipalities on the registrations of vulnerable households. Our findings show that municipalities led by traditional parties submitted more NPTP applications than family-run or independent municipalities, although to different extents. This could suggest that municipalities captured by some political parties have over-reported vulnerabilities for clientelist motives.

Clientelist trends in NPTP applications

Between April 2020 and April 2021, municipalities submitted 468,662 NPTP applications, with nearly all (99%) sent out in April and May 2020 before the suspension of the MoSA aid dashboard.³ While this alarming number is a result of the compounding financial and health crises, our analysis of the data on IMPACT indicates an overuse of the aid form by municipalities, particularly those controlled by traditional political parties. This suggests that ruling parties have not only mobilized informal social assistance networks,⁴ but have also submitted aid forms for clientelist motives.

When one looks closely at the activities of 1,002 municipalities on IMPACT, we find that 158 municipalities had at least 90% of their submissions concerned with filling-out NPTP applications. Out of those 158 municipalities, 73 are led by traditional political parties and 85 by families or independent candidates. Even though 41% of municipalities (414) are controlled by traditional parties, they accounted for 61% of MoSA aid submissions (figure 1).

Figure 1: Share of municipalities and NPTP applications by municipality's political allegiance



1 UN ESCWA. 2020. "Poverty in Lebanon: Solidarity is Vital to Address the Impact of Multiple Overlapping Shocks." Policy Brief n. 15.

2 Presidency of the Council of Ministers. 2016. "Emergency Technical Poverty Targeting Program – Technical Audit."

3 The MoSA aid form was suspended on May 11, 2020. The number of applications also includes applications submitted by unidentified municipalities (4,043).

4 Harb, M., et al. 2021. "The Territories of the Covid-19 Response in Lebanon." Beirut Urban Lab.

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In addition, we assessed the effect of a municipality's political allegiance on the number of NPTP applications submitted per capita and found that traditional political parties controlling municipalities submit, on average, significantly more aid forms relative to their populations than family-run or independent municipalities. This result holds even when taking into account the registered population, level of development, and geographic characteristics.⁵ When disaggregating the political parties, only two parties stand out in our analysis: Hezbollah and Amal. Indeed, their affiliated municipalities submit significantly more NPTP applications per capita than municipalities run by families and independent candidates.⁶ The effect of other parties—namely the Future Movement, the Free Patriotic Movement, and the Lebanese Forces—on NPTP applications per capita falls short on being statistically significant. A possible explanation is that Hezbollah and Amal Movement could be parties that are more organized than others and thus have larger and more direct networks with constituents.

Given the prevalence of obscure aid assessments in Lebanon, leveraging open-data sources such as IMPACT could effectively and efficiently target neglected vulnerable populations. This analysis shows, however, that when traditional parties controlling municipalities are asked to submit their residents' aid applications, they are more likely to over-report vulnerabilities than independent or family-run municipalities. In light of emerging social protection programs in Lebanon, such as the World Bank's Emergency Social Safety Net Program, it is of paramount importance to insulate the vulnerability assessments from the capture of political elites. Without this, the aid will be used to re-energize the patron-client relationship elites have long built with constituencies.

5 Results are significant with a 90% confidence level.

6 Results are significant with a 95% confidence level.