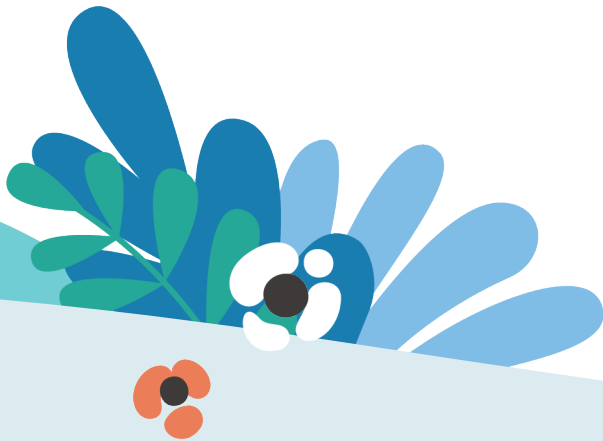# Mapping Volunteer Initiatives During COVID-19 in Lebanon

Disclaimer

The information on volunteer initiatives presented in this report is based on secondary data gathered from online published media, social media and various public reports during the period of April-August 2020. Therefore, this report does not reflect all volunteering or all community-based initiatives, as many are informal and may not be documented online. This report involves a sample of the larger volunteering sector in Lebanon, which is diverse and self-organizing.

Credits

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Foreword

The year 2020 was an exceptionally tough year for Lebanon. The country has been tormented by a series of socio-economic and political hardships, exacerbated by popular protests, the COVID-19 pandemic and the 4th of August Beirut port explosions. Against this dramatic picture and the magnitude of the damage caused to Lebanon and its people, the power of volunteers was tremendous.

As this report demonstrates, volunteers have shown commendable leadership and unity in the immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but equally important they were the first responders to the horrendous Beirut blast that took the lives of over 200 people, injured thousands and left many without any shelter: They were the first to transport the injured to hospitals, the first to clean up the streets of Beirut from debris, and among the main supporters to humanitarian actors in the provision of life-saving assistance in the healthcare, food, water, shelter and other sectors to those most in need. They set the gold standard for solidarity, and for that, they deserve our heartfelt thanks.

Realizing the ambitious 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires the constant mobilization of formidable talents and resources, particularly among the youth. It also necessitates acts of kindness and solidarity of ordinary people around Lebanon to help step up the pace for the achievement of the SDGs in Lebanon. Volunteers are a great enabler to this endeavour.

With the launch of this report, the United Nations Volunteers programme is tackling the power of volunteerism in emergency response, a topic that is particularly relevant at this critical juncture in Lebanon. Through a literature review and a mapping exercise, the report explores the channels, mechanisms and outcomes of volunteerism in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon. It also presents Lebanon's volunteers as a nimble and multi-sector workforce, making swift and major operational adjustments to meet the dire needs on the ground, dedicating freely their time, their passion and skills for the sake of people. This report also demonstrates the unique strength of volunteers' collaboration and coordination in planning, outreach, and execution efforts, unleashing a new wave of social solidarity efforts and ushering into a promising path for building back a better Lebanon.

Volunteerism is a crucial and valuable source of support in emergencies. It connects people together, enables them to work together for the best of their societies and empowers them to become agents of change in their own communities and country. This is what we believe is a core requirement for the achievement of the SDGs in a participatory and inclusive manner.

However, the dynamic and powerful role of Lebanon's volunteers in promoting the SDGs through collective actions and tangible results deserves strong and durable support from the UN, the Government, local authorities and other stakeholders. More efforts and investments are needed to increase volunteering opportunities, promote volunteerism and empower volunteers to be able to achieve transformative and lasting change in their communities, making the SDGs a reality for all.

Najat Rochdi
UN Deputy Special Coordinator for Lebanon
Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator

Mapping Volunteer Initiatives During COVID-19 in Lebanon

Introduction

The world is witnessing the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that is overstretching healthcare systems around the globe and placing strains on essential public services. The global consequences of COVID-19 are drastic, with approximately 27.6 million confirmed positive cases and around 895,000 reported deaths as of early September, 2020 [World Health Organization (WHO), 2020]. This pandemic is much more than a health crisis; it yields severe socio-economic consequences such as widening the economic, educational, and psychological well-being disparities [United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020]. Measures taken by governments internationally aiming to reduce the spread of infection lead to sudden changes and disturbances in societies' operations and lifestyles. Disruptions in education, employment, disposable income, and social interaction brought a sense of uncertainty among populations, heightening communities' assistance needs and taking a toll on their mental welfare. In the response and recovery efforts, volunteers stepped-in globally, promoting community cohesion and social solidarity, offering support that organizations and governments may not have the capability to provide by themselves. Therefore, volunteers need to be at the core of crisis preparedness and response plans, as they strengthen the community and respond to population needs.

Internationally, self-organized groups have been vital in enhancing societal resilience during crises. For several countries, volunteerism is embedded in national COVID-19 response plans or strategies. For example, in Tunisia, volunteer health students are included in the pandemic psychological crisis intervention model to enhance the community's access to professional psychosocial support (Zgueb et al., 2020). Similarly, the Australian Government (2020) includes the role of volunteer support workers in the management and operational plan for serving people with disabilities in light of the pandemic. Notably, in the MENA region, community volunteers have planned and implemented online and in-person responses to express social solidarity. They shared diverse services ranging from grocery shopping for the elderly population to awareness campaigns to counter misinformation. During confinement, they utilized innovative digital communications tools to maintain social connections, assess needs, and even restore interrupted educational services through online skills and capacity building. Formal and informal volunteering can fill in service gaps during crises and bring economic and development value by closing gaps in services for the most vulnerable. In a study performed by The Volunteer Circle (2020), through their network of organizations alone, they found that during quarantine volunteers in Lebanon yielded cost-savings of approximately $3.4 million. It is estimated that those volunteers impacted approximately 74,000 individuals through health services and more than 39,000 through basic assistance, food security, and livelihood services (The Volunteer Circle, 2020).

This UNV Online Volunteer project aims to **(1)** examine literature on volunteering during crisis, and **(2)** map the community and volunteer initiatives in response to COVID-19 in Lebanon.

Volunteerism During Crisis

Motivation

Social and behavioral sciences involve the study of the benefits of and motivations for volunteerism and community involvement. Evidence on factors that predict volunteering is mixed, including a wide range of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Factors can often be linked to religious beliefs, family values, interest in a social issue, seeking professional development, and others (Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 2016). Most studies, however, are based on volunteering in a non-emergency context. Recent findings on volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that groups, such as individuals with a diagnosed health condition, were newly identified as likely to volunteer (Mak & Fancourt, 2020). During the early months of the pandemic in Australia, a study found that only one-third of volunteers could continue volunteering after physical distancing restrictions were introduced (Biddle & Gray, 2020). Notably, being able to maintain volunteering appeared to have mental health benefits for the volunteers (Biddle & Gray, 2020). New forms of volunteerism emerged globally to fill in the preparedness and response gaps that governments could not provide. Using technology tools, individual and social groups mobilized their talents and understanding of community needs into collective action (Spear, Erdi, Parker & Anastasiadis, 2020). This translated into mobile applications and digital tools to match volunteers with those in need of grocery delivery, fashion designers with hospitals and clinics who lack sufficient gowns and masks, delivering accurate health communication, facilitating social support groups, and many other forms of volunteer services (Spear et al., 2020).

> Volunteering is essential in times of crisis. Where government and public good institutions are failing to deliver social services, volunteers are self-organizing and self-mobilizing to fill the gaps.

Yeran Kejijian, UNV Country Coordinator, November 2020.

> If I don't volunteer and those like me don't volunteer, then who will?

Refugee youth Malak, 24, while sanitizing Wavel Palestinian refugee camp, where she grew up. Anera, June 5th, 2020.

> The volunteers are very qualified, and they really love volunteer work. There is a very high level of social responsibility now, even way more than two years ago. I sense willingness in youth to support their community. Some come from abroad on vacation in Lebanon, even before arriving, they contact me and ask me to volunteer during their time here.

Wed Labban, Lebanese Food Bank, NGO Coordinator, July 30th, 2020.

Benefits

Volunteerism has benefits on societal and personal levels. Studies consistently show that volunteering can improve emotional, mental health, and well-being outcomes (Casiday, Kinsman, Fisher & Bambra, 2008). While strengthening community ties, volunteering can bring people closer during crises, through social solidarity, even during social distancing. The Arab region has historically celebrated a culture of volunteerism, reflecting some of the collective societal and religious beliefs of supporting others. Volunteers in the Arab region can serve as agents for development. Self-organized initiatives can provide a sense of agency and participation in community development, empowerment, and cohesion, especially when communities prepare and respond to crises (UNV, 2018).

> In a country with amplifying needs, the vibrant and active volunteer community is eager to contribute to local development and support the country in its dark days. They have proven their role in mediating between third sector resources and the needs of the people.

Nadine R. Makarem, The Volunteer Circle, Executive Advisor and Co-Founder, September 8th, 2020.

Re-imagining Volunteerism

The pandemic played a vital role in reshaping volunteerism. Observed changes include the shift to virtual volunteering utilizing digital tools and communications platforms; another is adding safety protocols to protect the volunteers and served populations such as social distancing, sanitization, and personal protective equipment (Sandage, 2020). Although more complicated for organizers to manage it, online volunteering during COVID-19 allows the community to serve as a meaningful leisure activity for the volunteers, and a remedy for loneliness during lockdown (Lachance, 2020).

The Global Technical Meeting (GTM) on reimagining volunteerism presents volunteers as agents for advancing towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially during this critical Decade of Action (UNV, 2020-b). Volunteering practices in the 21st century have taken many forms and dimensions, from online to onsite, to be inclusive of a wide array of social, cultural, economic backgrounds and identities (UNV, 2020-c). Advancements in the technological landscape play a role in modifying volunteer practices by introducing innovative channels and tools for organizations and initiatives (UNV, 2020-c).

One of the main objectives for the Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda is to measure and document volunteers' impact (UNV, 2020-a). This report highlights the vital role of volunteer initiatives and civil society organizations in Lebanon in response to the COVID-19 pandemic amid dire economic conditions.

Context of Lebanon During the Mapping Period

FEB 21 — First confirmed positive case of COVID-19 in Lebanon

FEB 22 — Imposed travel ban on a list of epidemic countries

FEB 29 — Closure of all schools and universities nationally

MAR 11 — First reported recovered case

MAR 11 — Closure of restaurants, malls, night clubs & touristic attractions

MAR 15 — Beginning of lockdown

MAR 15 — Closure of places of worship

APR 5 — Beginning of Lebanese repatriation phase

APR 29 — Mandated use of face masks in public

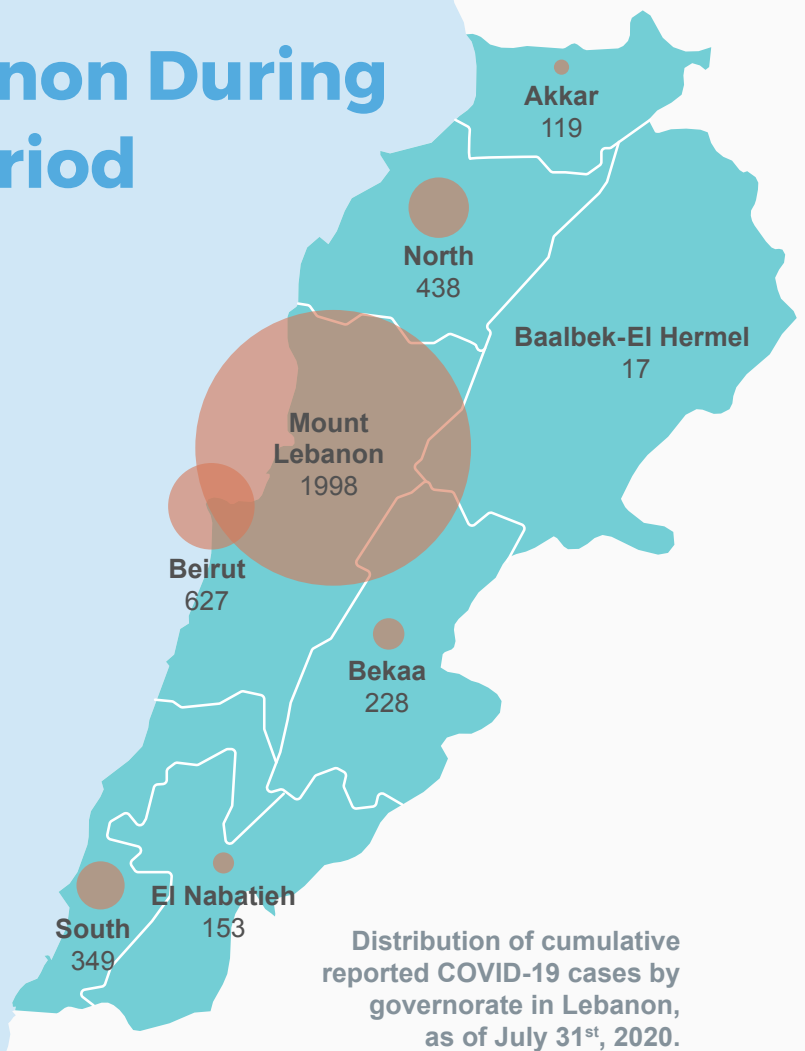**MAY 5** — Lockdown extended for 2 more weeks until May 24th

MAY 22 — Extension of imposed restriction measures for another 2 weeks until June 7th

JUN 7 — End of lockdown

MID-JULY — New surge in infections

JUL 31 — 4555 total registered positive cases

Lockdown

Timeline of significant COVID-19 related events in Lebanon between February 21st and July 30th, 2020.

Akkar
119

North
438

Baalbek-El Hermel
17

Mount Lebanon
1998

Beirut
627

Bekaa
228

South
349

El Nabatieh
153

Distribution of cumulative reported COVID-19 cases by governorate in Lebanon, as of July 31st, 2020.

On February 21st, the first confirmed positive case was reported in Lebanon. Since then, the Lebanese government rapidly responded through precautionary and early crisis management measures, including testing those arriving through air or land borders, early closure of academic and business sectors, flight restrictions, curfew, full country lockdown, etc. The timeline provides visual representation of significant COVID-19 related events in Lebanon between February 21st and July 31st. The map represents the spatial distribution of cumulative reported cases by governorate, as of July 31st, 2020. At that time, there were 482 cases with locations not disclosed yet, bringing the total to 4555 positive reported cases. The figures were based on data published by the Ministry of Public Health.

Reference: Ministry of Public Health (2020). *Lebanon National Operations Room Daily Report of COVID-19, July 31st, 2020. Report # 135*. Retrieved from: http://drm.pcm.gov.lb/?lang=en-us

Socioeconomic Conditions

In October 2019, mass protests spread across the country in response to political mismanagement and corruption.

80% | **The unprecedented devaluation of the Lebanese Lira** | > | **Severe inflation in the cost of living that affected all sectors**

Challenges in accessing essential services were exacerbated, including access to food, electricity, healthcare services, and education. Pushed into poverty and indebtedness, **more than 70% of the population was in need of aid as of May 2020** (The World Bank, 2020; UN News, 2020).

The World Food Program (WFP, 2020) estimated **nearly one million people living below Lebanon's poverty line** as of early September 2020.

Lockdown measures, although shown to be beneficial in reducing the risk of infection (WHO, 2020), lead to losses of jobs propelling poverty and indebtedness, especially with the fragile social security nets and lack of unemployment benefits (UN News, 2020). Lockdown also created significant health and safety concerns for individuals who live or have to use confined and overcrowded areas, such as the displaced population in informal settlements, essential and informal workers who rely on public transportation, and prisoners in detention centers.

These challenging socioeconomic conditions led UN officials to sound an alarm, especially concerning vulnerable Lebanese, migrant workers, and refugees who are pushed further into poverty and extreme poverty. The pandemic impacted vulnerable workers and small-scale businesses, whose income dropped significantly or stopped while having little to no household savings (ILO, 2020). Many of the 250,000 migrant workers in Lebanon experienced lack of protection and safety became unemployed, did not get paid, or were left homeless or abandoned by their employers in front of consulates (Human Rights Watch, 2020). As of late April 2020, the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) estimates that 40% of migrant workers lost their jobs since the COVID-19 related lockdown measures began, and several migrants became under immediate threat of eviction (ARM, 2020). Non-Lebanese nationals also reported experiencing denial and discrimination while seeking access to services such as COVID-19 testing, health care and cash or basic needs assistance.

The crisis had notable effects on women and children.

Female workers experienced high dismissal rates from the workforce and increased responsibilities due to the disproportionate childcare and household duties (ILO, 2020).

Quarantine and social isolation exacerbated the already high national levels of gender-based violence for women and girls, which **calls for increased access to legal and humanitarian protection** (NCLW, WHO, UNFPA, and WHO, 2020).

Inflation has resulted in more than 50% increase in the price of female hygiene and menstrual products as of July 5th 2020, and continues to increase, creating a concern of "period poverty".

Children experienced an abrupt pause in education with unequal access to home education tools such as internet, electronic devices, and constant supervision (UNDP, 2020). Many children from vulnerable families became at a heightened risk of homelessness and poverty in the light of the pandemic and economic crisis (UNDP, 2020).

In a Save the Children (2020) survey:

80% of participating female students (12-24 years old) reported finding remote online learning difficult.

60% of youth expressed the need for financial assistance after the job loss faced by family members.

40% of children (15-18 years old) said that the situation is taking a toll on their mental health (UNDP, 2020).

Parents were struggling during confinement and continued struggling to afford nutritional and dignity necessities for infants, especially milk formula and diapers, posing major well-being concerns.

Civil society advocates and volunteers rapidly assembled themselves to respond to these rising community needs in the light of COVID-19 and the economic crisis through diverse, innovative, and supportive services. Youth, students, and recent graduate volunteers in Lebanon led the majority of volunteering initiatives to serve the community, promote health, and mitigate the overstretched health sector. They serve as a model for social solidarity in times of hardship (Ghoussain, 2020).

> "Across a variety of sectors and fields, volunteers can take care of all aspects of any response, from planning to coordination to implementation. When faced with COVID-19 and the Beirut explosion, volunteers locally and abroad provided their skills, time, and effort to achieve what no other stand-alone entity could have.

Nadine R. Makarem, The Volunteer Circle, Executive Advisor and Co-Founder, September 8th 2020.

About the Project

This UNV project highlights the significant and critical role volunteers and community-based initiatives play in responding to emergencies and crises. Specifically, the objective is to identify and explore the characteristics of volunteer initiatives responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of Lebanon.

Methods

Two UN Online Volunteers gathered secondary data on initiatives from mid-April till early August 2020, primarily through examining online published media, social media and various public reports.

100 Total volunteer initiatives > **29** Fundraising initiatives / not involving volunteers (Not included) **71** Final Initiatives included

Researchers also extracted quotes and testimonies on the role of COVID-19 volunteers in Lebanon from key informants and senior representatives of community-based organizations (CBOs). Initially unplanned, through snowballing techniques, a brief semi-structured interview was conducted with Wed Laban, Lebanese Food Bank Coordinator, who reflected on her experience with generating collaborations between volunteer initiatives during the pandemic.

NOTE: The August 4th blast that hit Beirut shifted the trajectory and focus of the mapped initiatives and required intensive volunteer efforts. More details on the role of volunteers in the blast recovery efforts can be found in **this photostory**.

Key Findings

After examining available information about a sample of initiatives, a set of characteristics was outlined in a matrix to guide the researchers in subsequent data gathering. Detailed descriptive information was collected on each identified initiative's characteristics, including its sector, funding source, reported collaborations, service(s) type(s), main service sector, and service scale. Concurrent with data collection, recurring themes from the categories were extracted, and a guide was generated, allowing the categorization of services and initiatives.

Service Characteristics

Mapped initiatives stemmed from a diverse variety of backgrounds. Some initiatives were derived from pre-existing civil society projects; others were newly developed formally and informally to respond to the rising community needs. Services covered a broad spectrum of types, and three major service sectors were identified. The initiatives took place across Lebanon's diverse geographic areas, but the majority of identified initiatives are based in and near Beirut.

MULTI-SECTORAL COLLABORATIONS

- Health intstitutions
- International NGOs
- Government
- Local NGOs
- Self-organized volunteer groups
- Academia

22 SERVICE TYPES
in **3 MAJOR SERVICE SECTORS**

- Livelihoods and Basic Needs Assistance
- Education
- Health

MAIN FINANCING SOURCES

Crowdfunding

Monetary donations
National and international

Given the sensitivity of health risks associated with in-person volunteering during a pandemic, initiatives developed hygiene and safety protocols to protect the volunteers, and the served population. This required high levels of professionalism and planning in advance to minimize the needed hours in the field.

> Food safety practices are implemented during the distribution of bread, and we have taken the highest health, sterilization, and hygiene standards, including the use of personal protective equipment, in order to ensure the safety of both, the volunteers and the beneficiaries of the initiative.

Khibzak Baytak Initiative, April 2020.

> All (food) boxes are carefully sanitized and hygienic measures are implemented throughout the entire process to ensure the health of the working team and the families they're helping.

Beirut.com, March 23rd 2020, by Fatima Al Mahmoud, about "Men Aleb Lal Aleb."

Organizations and groups reported relying on digital communication methods as channels for outreach, needs assessments, planning, and coordination while maintaining physical distancing measures. Various funding sources were utilized, including grants, corporate donations, NGO funds, and others, but the most common method was crowdfunding and monetary national and international donations. For transparency, majority of initiatives shared reports of their services provided on social media and some shared copies of their budget and expenditure records. Inititaitves also recieved non-monetary support, such as acts of appreciation, moral support, and community solidarity. For example, celebrities and popular T.V. channels publicly promoted some initiatives and encouraged others to donate. Another form of non-monetary support was volunteer training and capactity building offered by different ministies.

Initiatives were specific and tailored to the needs of groups within the community in Lebanon. In response to the rising "period poverty", volunteers collected and delivered menstrual and hygiene products donations for women and girls. Community support campaigns were developed, promoting gender equality and fighting the rising domestic violence rates. For families with infants, volunteers delivered water, infant formula, diapers, food, and other care supplies. Some initiatives served school children through tutoring, safe spaces and donations (e.g. books, tablets, food and water).

Youth from temporary settlements volunteered to serve their community by disseminating culturally-sensitive health promotion messages from reliable sources. Members of the migrant workers' community in Lebanon organized themselves to serve migrant domestic workers by providing essential services (e.g. food, medicine, and hygiene kits), organizing repatriation back to the workers' countries of origin and advocating for their health and safety rights through civil society networks.

Specific services were tailored for the needs of individuals with chronic illnesses, such as volunteer health students and professionals providing them with care at home, so they minimize their risk of exposure to COVID-19 in healthcare facilities. For example, volunteers from associations that serve cancer patients delivered their medication to their homes and advocated on their behalf with third-party payers and insurance agencies to ensure uninterrupted treatment. They also offered wellbeing and recreational sessions over Zoom, including nutrition, yoga, and psychosocial support sessions.

> In return to the great sacrifice that medical teams are making to counter COVID-19, civil society's importance is evident in such initiatives (Baytna Baytak) that provide all the support to maintain the safety of the entire nation.

Sahar Anakout, Alhurra news reporter, April 15th 2020.

Initiatives were also tailored to the cultural practices of the society. The Holy Month of Ramadan was during lockdown this year, a month usually known for food assistance and charity events. These events and public activites were posponed and therefore volunteers performed home-based deliveries or delivered to local distribution sites instead. They delivered iftar, financial assistance, clothing and toys for children and families.
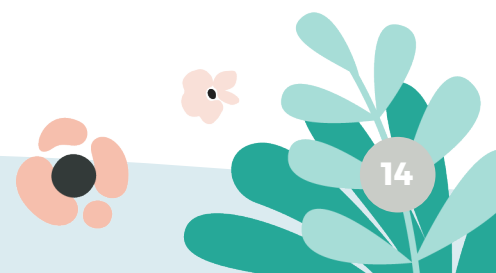
Challenges and Strengths

Some challenges faced by initiatives were linked to the COVID-19 lockdown measures and the economic crisis. Organizations and initiatives had to adapt by limiting in-person interactions, through relying on smaller groups of volunteers in the field and shifting to online volunteer management and communication. Several had to rely on alternative methods for reaching the served population, such as conducting needs assessments over the phone, offering online mental health support, or creating online platforms for connecting individuals in need with volunteers. In some cases, relying on information and communications technology tools for service created a limitation of reaching members of the community who lack access to digital devices or internet. The Lebanese Lira's devaluation placed constraints on the possible service quantity, especially among initiatives that rely solely on crowdfunding and monetary donations. Protective equipment created new added financial costs on volunteers and organizations, and in some cases reduced the amount of aid the served community received.

> Instead of working alone, we choose to collaborate and support initiatives. We don't want to wait until the initiatives are legalized or registered, we want to support their important work and momentum while there is a need.

Wed Labban, Lebanese Food Bank, NGO Coordinator, July 30th 2020.

A unique strength of collaboration and coordination was highlighted in the operation of the mapped initiatives. Efforts were joined in planning, outreach and execution between initiatives and external entities. For example, the Ministry of Public Health collaborated with academic and health faculties to train students and professionals to volunteer for contact tracing and serve with the COVID-19 call center. Scout associations ran a health awareness campaign across Lebanon during the re-opening phase, mobilized by UN agencies and different ministries. Several initiatives that gathered and delivered food donations created a network for collaborations and were supported by the Lebanese Food Bank, to avoid replicating efforts and ensure that those in need are receiving the necessary support.

> Dr. Hamad Hasan expressed how valuable the work of volunteers is, that reflects the most brilliant forms of solidarity among the people of the one homeland, stressing the pivotal role of the civil society and educators in supporting the formal measures taken by the government and the relevant ministries to mitigate the risks of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Dr. Hamad Hasan, MoPH, Minister of Public Health, April 7th, 2020.
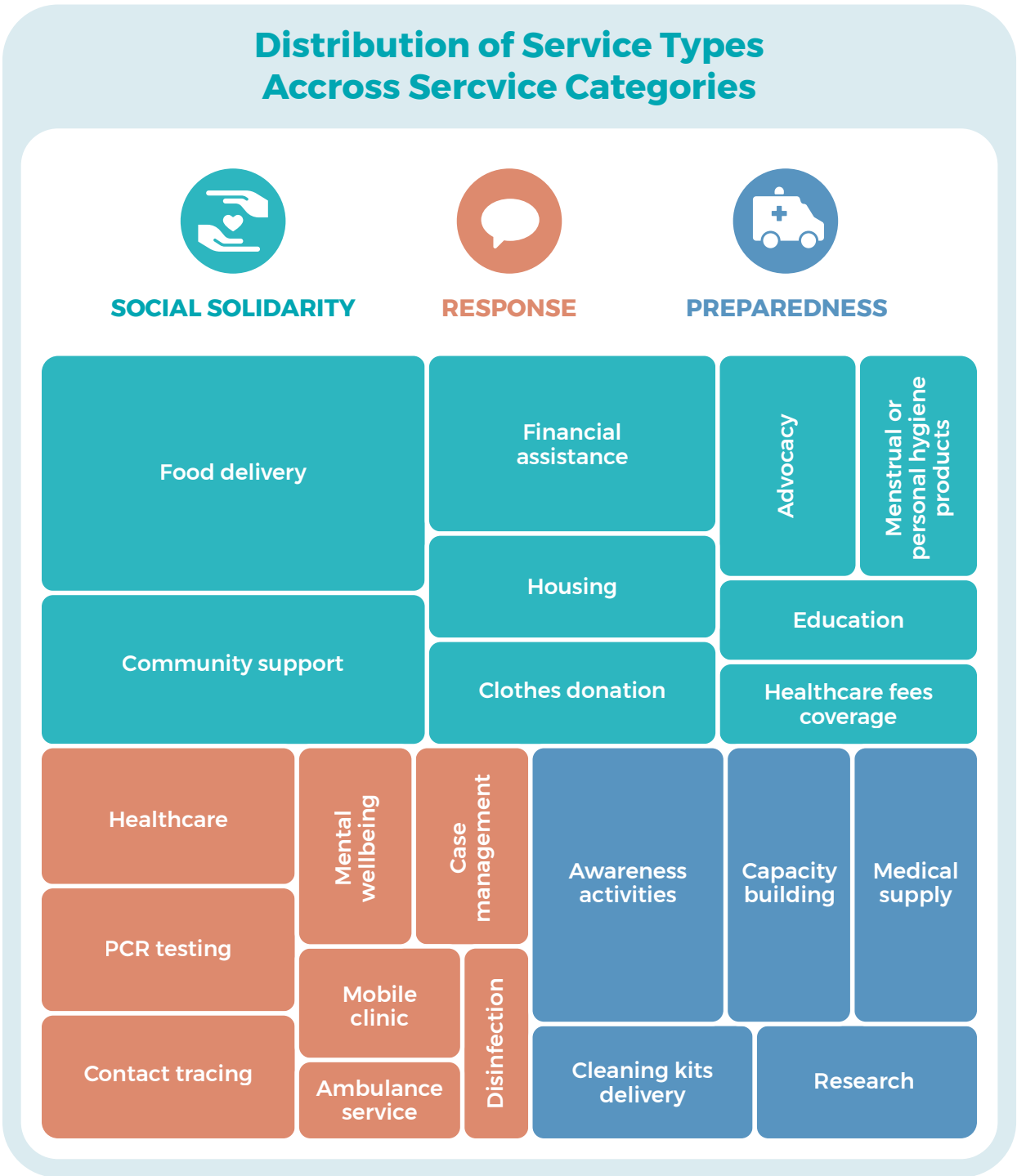
Main Service Categories

Following the identification of recurring themes within service types, services were grouped into three main umbrella categories: Social Solidarity, Response and Preparedness.

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY. In light of the massive economic, psychological, and well-being pressures of the pandemic, volunteers demonstrated noble social solidarity to ease the burden. In response to the heightened community needs, volunteers offered moral and monetary solidarity through community support, food delivery, finacial assistance, educational support, advocacy, housing and other basic needs support services.

RESPONSE. Volunteers played a crucial role in response to community needs resulting from COVID-19. Some of the main response services operated by volunteers include healthcare services, PCR testing, contact tracing, case management, mental health care, ambulance services, etc.

PREPAREDNESS. Community and volunteer initiatives aimed at boosting the readiness of Lebanon's healthcare system and society in the face of the pandemic. Demonstrated preparedness components include health awareness activities, capacity building, providing medical supplies, cleaning and hygiene kits delivery, research and needs assessments, etc.

The following diagram represents the distribution of the main identified services provided by volunteers across service categories. The box size visually represents the observed relative frequency of a service type compared to the total number of mapped initiatives.

Distribution of Service Types Accross Sercvice Categories

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY **RESPONSE** **PREPAREDNESS**

Food delivery	Financial assistance	Advocacy	Menstrual or personal hygiene products
Community support	Housing	Education	
	Clothes donation	Healthcare fees coverage	
Healthcare	Mental wellbeing	Case management	Awareness activities	Capacity building	Medical supply
PCR testing					
	Mobile clinic	Disinfection			
Contact tracing	Ambulance service		Cleaning kits delivery	Research	

Recommendations

In reflection on the findings of the report, the following recommendations emerge:

- **Including volunteers** in national disaster and crises response plans.

- **Prioritizing the safety** and protection of volunteers.

- **Creating robust national volunteerism infrastructure,** encompassing supportive, inclusive policies that honor, organize, and build capacity among volunteers.

- **Ensuring equitable reach of service** across geographic areas, and full inclusiveness of services.

- **Maintaining inclusion and effectiveness in service** through needs assessments and collaborations between initiatives.

- **Embedding disaster response** and community service into school and university curricula.

> "By integrating volunteering and civic engagement in national disaster response planning, the state will be able to mitigate any crisis by mobilizing different segments of its society."

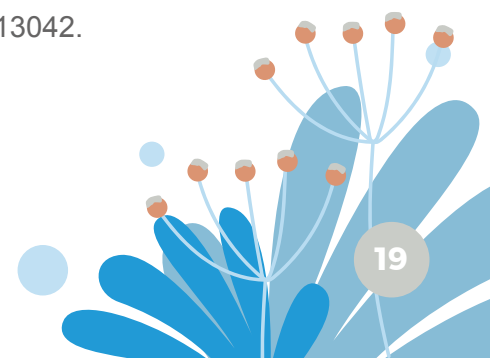**Yeran Kejijian**, UNV Country Coordinator, Country Coordinator, November 2020.

Conclusion

Volunteers are at the forefront of the COVID-19 response in Lebanon, offering diverse, creative, and innovative community services. Community-led groups quickly assembled themselves to face the pandemic and the rising community needs amidst the economic crisis, while being almost mainly supported by crowdfunding and donations. Significant economic challenges are faced by initiatives that have to handle the cost of direct services to the community and the cost of providing volunteers with personal protective equipment. Regardless of the challenges, to enhance preparedness and response, expressing noble social solidarity, volunteers serve tirelessly in-person and online while aiming to decrease the burden of illness and struggle in their communities. Strong collaboration and coordination are seen between initiatives reflecting cooperative efforts and sustainable practices. It is essential to include volunteers in a clear national COVID-19 response strategy that highlights their significant leadership role and prioritizes their safety and protection.

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