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**Jockeying for Power and Data amidst Corruption  
The Case of the IMPACT Platform in Lebanon**

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*Mira Zaghbour*

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Members of the Examining Committee:

Dr. Sylvia Bergh

Dr. Sunil Tankha

The Hague, The Netherlands

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***Disclaimer:***

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the International Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

***Inquiries:***

International Institute of Social Studies  
P.O. Box 29776  
2502 LT The Hague  
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460  
e: [info@iss.nl](mailto:info@iss.nl)  
w: [www.iss.nl](http://www.iss.nl)  
fb: <http://www.facebook.com/iss.nl>  
twitter: [@issnl](https://twitter.com/issnl)

***Location:***

Kortenaerkade 12  
2518 AX The Hague  
The Netherlands

# Contents

List of Tables	v
List of Figures	v
List of Acronyms	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Abstract	viii
Relevance to Development Studies	viii
Keywords	viii
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
1.1 What is the Problem?	1
1.2 Research Questions and Objectives	3
1.2.1 Research Question	3
1.2.2 Sub-questions	3
1.2.3 Research Objectives	3
1.3 Methodology	4
1.3.1 Methods	4
1.3.2 Positionality and Ethics	6
1.3.3 Risk Assessment	7
<b>Chapter 2 A Theory of Fields</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Strategic Action Fields	8
2.2 Micro-Dynamics: Incumbents, Challengers & Policy Entrepreneurs	9
2.3 Macro-Dynamics: Fields, Change & Exogenous Shocks	10
2.3.1 Field Environment: Relationships between Fields	10
2.3.2 Field States, Emergence & Exogenous Shocks	10
<b>Chapter 3 Lebanese Politics, Constitutional Dysfunction &amp; Elites</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1 A Brief History of Lebanese Politics	12
3.2 The Governance & Constitutional Makeup of Lebanon	14
3.3 The Lebanese State as an SAF	15
<b>Chapter 4 IMPACT's Emergence as an SAF</b>	<b>17</b>
4.1 The IMPACT Platform's Modules	19
4.2 The Deliberate & Accidental Emergence of IMPACT	21
4.2.1 The Story of IMPACT	21
4.2.2 Two Strategic Policy Entrepreneurs	22
4.2.3 A Deliberately Convolved Process	23
4.2.4 From One Resource Dependence to Another	24
<b>Chapter 5 Cooperation, Competition &amp; Coercion over Data &amp; Reform</b>	<b>27</b>
5.1 Horizontal Cooperation, Clientelism & Data	27

5.1.1 Social Protection, Municipalities & Cooperation	27
5.1.2 Privacy Risks, Clientelism & Competition	28
5.1.3 Design Level Capture & Databases	29
5.2 Vertical Conflict, Field Shocks & Criticism	31
5.2.1 The General Security: An Internal Governance Unit at Work	31
5.2.2 A Letter from the Prime Minister	32
5.2.3 Civil Society in Action	34
5.2.4 A Media Storm & Document Leaks	36
<b>Chapter 6 Conclusion</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>42</b>

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: List of Interviewees	5
Table 2: Risk Assessment Table	7

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Timeline of Events	18
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## List of Acronyms

AFD	French Development Agency
BE	British Embassy
CI	Central Inspection Bureau
CM	Council of Ministers
EF	Expertise France
ESSN	Emergency Social Safety Net Program
EU	European Union
FCO	Foreign Commonwealth Office
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GOAL	Governance, Oversight, and Accountability for Lebanon
GS	General Directorate of General Security
IGU	Internal Governance Unit
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMPACT	Inter-Ministerial and Municipal Platform for Assessment, Coordination and Tracking
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
MoI	Ministry of Interior
MoPH	Ministry of Public Health
MoSA	Ministry of Social Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPTP	National Poverty Targeting Program
NSSP	National Social Solidarity Program
PCM	Presidency of the Council of Ministers
PM	Prime Minister
SA	Siren Associates
SAF	Strategic Action Field
SKF	Samir Kassir Foundation
SMEX	Social Media Exchange
TPI	The Policy Initiative
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

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## **Abstract**

This study employs the Theory of Fields and the concept of political entrepreneurs as a theoretical framework to understand the jockeying for power around the IMPACT e-governance platform in Lebanon. The platform consists of a multi-stakeholder transparency reform effort and open data tool that involves state bodies, non-profit organizations, donors, civil society groups, and a predatory class of elites. Through an analysis of qualitative data gathered from interviews and a desk review, this study tells the story of how and why IMPACT emerged, who were the actors behind it, the shocks that shaped its trajectory, and where it found cooperation and resistance within the state and with non-state actors. The study found that IMPACT partially succeeded because of the presence and efforts of critical actors such as policy entrepreneurs and donors, as well as unexpected shocks like the pandemic. What was essential, however, was the collaboration of local government bodies and ministries, especially when benefits could be captured by elites. However, the platform faced resistance from those elites when it threatened their impunity, but it also faced valid criticism from non-state actors as well. This paper therefore contributes to the policy field of research by shedding light on the unforeseen positive and negative effects of relying on donors and the non-profit sector to enact transparency reform within the state, as well as the dynamics that arise in a predatory clientelist state when data is viewed as a resource.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

Policy reform efforts within corrupt states is a popular field of study within the public policy world. However, understanding how reform occurs when non-state actors collaborate with parts of the state and with donors generates entirely new dynamics, especially when there are important resources involved, such as personal data. This paper endeavours to add to the research on policy reform, clientelism, and corruption by examining a unique case of multi-stakeholder reform and jockeying for power within an environment that is incredibly hostile to reform. The nuance this study introduces is that those reformers will not be seen without faults of their own, especially when interacting with civil society and the media. This case can therefore contribute to the policy and development fields by providing a critical understanding of the failures and successes of reform efforts within contentious environments.

## **Keywords**

Policy, Reform, Entrepreneurship, Transparency, Data, Corruption, Clientelism, Capture, Local Governance, Predatory Elites, Social Protection, Donors.



# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 What is the Problem?

What happens when an e-governance platform containing valuable data and designed to enact transparency reform makes its way through a political system fraught with corruption and negligence?

Launched on March 2020, the Inter-Ministerial and Municipal Platform for Assessment, Coordination and Tracking, known as the IMPACT platform<sup>1</sup>, consists of the “First e-Governance platform in Lebanon” (Central Inspection, 2022b). The platform showcases data gathered across ministries, municipalities, and other administrative bodies of Lebanon for multiple projects. Those projects are distributed across three main pillars: digital governance, crisis response, and development (Central Inspection, 2022a).

The digital governance pillar concerns the digital audit of public sector bodies, while the crisis response pillar includes the pandemic response, vaccinations, lockdown mobility permits, and post-blast damage assessments. The development pillar includes the mapping of rural and local development data across municipalities and ministries, along with data for social protection programs. The central goal of the platform is to digitally oversee all projects by letting researchers, auditors, and any other person access the data online to audit the public sector (Central Inspection, 2022a).

IMPACT is led and owned by the government’s Central Inspection Bureau (CI), a public oversight and investigative body tasked with four primary functions: overseeing the work of public bodies through inspections, improving administrative processes, providing guidance to relevant institutions, and coordinating joint projects between administrations (Central Inspection, 2022d).

The platform is part of GOAL (Governance, Oversight and Accountability in Lebanon), a program housed within Siren Associates (SA), a UK registered not-for-profit organization whose mission is reforming the public sector by collaborating with relevant state institutions and civil society (Siren Associates, 2021b, p.2). To that end, SA collaborated with the CI to jointly develop the IMPACT platform. The CI now manages the IMPACT platform with technical support from SA. GOAL is funded by a grant from the British Embassy (BE) since the year 2020 (Siren Associates, 2021a, p.4).

GOAL’s purpose consists of “enhancing oversight agencies’ work standards, providing them with the right toolbox for their work, rallying political support around them, and helping them in regaining popular trust” (Siren Associates, 2021b, p.4). More specifically, GOAL was initially used by SA to strengthen the CI’s capacity to conduct oversight, guidance, and cross-sectoral coordination. However, its scope expanded as IMPACT ended up taking over the management and oversight of the COVID pandemic response, social protection programs, post-blast assessments and other matters (Central Inspection, 2022a). To do so, the CI and SA collaborated with concerned ministries such as the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) along with the World Bank (WB),

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<sup>1</sup> <https://impact.cib.gov.lb/>

the World Food Programme (WFP), and the World Health Organization (WHO). The CI's main task within this setup is to maintain oversight over those programs and publish relevant data on their platform.

However, the matter of how IMPACT emerged, their efforts to contribute to transparency and accountability in the public sector, and the involvement of additional actors within it remains unclear. Furthermore, the problem of how an e-governance platform could increase transparency and accountability in a political environment dominated by incumbents who thrive on corruption and impunity is one that needs exploring. Indeed, Lebanon is ruled by a complex class of elite, existing both within and outside the state, who command vast resources, have captured the government, and obstruct any substantial policy effort that might threaten their rule.

Moreover, Lebanon is currently undergoing an economic, political, and social crisis because of the rule of those elites, which has left the government even less capable of implementing reform. Indeed, the ruling class of Lebanon has been so notoriously corrupt that the World Bank dubbed this crisis a “deliberate depression” orchestrated by a political elite “that has long ruled the country and captured the state and its associated economic rents” (World Bank, 2022c, p. xi). As such, those elites usually respond to reform efforts in a manner that protects their interests.

So, this case presents a contradiction. How and why would a class of political incumbents allow for transparency efforts to manifest and threaten their status quo? Usually, they do not. They respond in ways that would protect their position and/or further their interests, especially when there is a valuable resource introduced into the political field: data. Furthermore, this platform was also built with the intent to enact transparency reform within the state, which means that the elite have both something to gain from this initiative (data as a resource), and something to lose (their impunity).

The questions of how IMPACT came to be, the actors who spearheaded its establishment, the shocks that altered the national landscape, and the jockeying of players in this newly formed political field, are worth exploring. This emergent political field became the residing place of struggles around data and transparency reform, which dragged non-state actors such as civil society and the media into it.

## 1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

### 1.2.1 Research Question

*Applying the Theory of Fields, how and why was the IMPACT team able to operate within certain fields of the state amidst jockeying for power by political incumbents and its interactions with non-state actors?*

### 1.2.2 Sub-questions

1. *Who are the actors involved in IMPACT and which factors allowed for its emergence as a strategic action field?*
2. *How did local political incumbents attempt to capture the benefits provided by IMPACT?*
3. *How did local political incumbents attempt to obstruct IMPACT, and how did non-state actors respond?*

Sub-question 1 will be addressed in Chapter 4 to set the stage for Chapter 5, which will answer sub-questions 2 and 3.

### 1.2.3 Research Objectives

This paper endeavours to trace the story of IMPACT's partial successes and insertions into the public sector, along with the political dynamics it engendered with state incumbents and non-state critics.

One of the paper's objectives will be to highlight the strategies used by state and political incumbents to maintain their power and capture potential benefits when reforms are introduced.

From a policy perspective, this study aims to shed light on the complex political dynamics of cooperation and conflict that emerge when reformers attempt to enact transparency reform with non-state actors within an environment of corruption.

Finally, this study will draw on the Theory of Fields and policy entrepreneurship to provide a framework to assess those dynamics and will contribute to the literature on policy reform, clientelism, and contentious political processes.

## 1.3 Methodology

The methodology used in this study is qualitative as it is based on qualitative interviews and a desk review of various relevant documents.

### 1.3.1 Methods

The study was highly exploratory at the start as events related to IMPACT were still unfolding throughout the writing of this paper. Due to this, the research question of this study was modified multiple times. Additionally, there was little to no critical research on the IMPACT platform aside from news articles and policy focused articles released by The Policy Initiative (TPI)<sup>2</sup>.

The methods used in this paper consisted of a desk review of relevant documents pertaining to the platform and its actors, including stakeholders, critics, and politicians. The desk review ran parallel to the interviews that were conducted between the months of July and September 2022. The study was guided by the findings from the interviews and the constant triangulation with the data gathered from the desk review.

#### *1.3.1.1 Secondary Data Collection: Desk Review*

A desk review was undertaken first to develop informed questions for the interviews, and then to triangulate and flesh out some of the insights gathered from qualitative interviews:

- IMPACT reports of their general inspection and other projects
- SA reports on IMPACT
- News articles on IMPACT
- Televised, and written interviews with actors involved in IMPACT
- Grant documents from the UK Government
- CSOs and NGO reports IMPACT
- Press releases and tweets by actors concerned with IMPACT

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<sup>2</sup> TPI is an independent policy thinktank based in Beirut with a focus on critiquing existing local policies and providing alternatives for them (TPI). They were contracted by IMPACT to conduct research using the data on their platform.

### 1.3.1.2 Primary Data Collection: Qualitative Interviews

I held 16 qualitative interviews with policymakers, local government members, civil society members, and researchers to gather insights on their experiences and perspectives of the IMPACT platform. Details about the interviewees can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1: List of Interviewees

Code	Name	Organization	Position	Online/Offline	Date
IMP1	Judge Georges Attieh	Central Inspection Bureau (CI)	President of the CI and Judge	Offline	August 22, 2022
IMP2	Carole Sharabati	Siren Associates (SA)	Director of Research at SA and Director of the IMPACT project	Offline	August 12, 2022
MUN1	Huda Usta Kaskas	Beirut Municipality	Municipality Councilor	Offline	August 29, 2022
MUN2	Anonymized	Municipality (South of Lebanon, Jezzine region)	Municipality Councilor	Online	August 31, 2022
MUN3	Mohamad El Baba	Saida Municipality	Municipality Councilor	Offline	September 1, 2022
MUN4	Anonymized	Municipality (North of Lebanon, Akkar region)	Municipality Head	Online	September 8, 2022
NOT1	Notary #1	Beirut Neighborhood Notary	Beirut Neighborhood Notary	Offline	August 29, 2022
NOT2	Notary #2	Beirut Neighborhood Notary	Beirut Neighborhood Notary	Offline	August 29, 2022
CS1	Ayman Mhanna	Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF)	Executive Director	Offline	August 2, 2022
CS2	Mohamad Najem	Social Media Exchange (SMEX)	Executive Director	Offline	August 2, 2022
CS3	Marianne Rahme	Social Media Exchange (SMEX)	Legal Expert	Online	August 2, 2022
CS4	Assaad Thebian	Gherbal Initiative	Co-founder and Executive Director	Offline	August 3, 2022
CS5	Jessica Chemali	Legal Agenda	Deputy Director	Offline	August 11, 2022
EX1	Karim Merhej	Freelance	Researcher on governance and socio-economic development in Lebanon	Online	July 28, 2022
EX2	Sami Zoughaib	The Policy Initiative (TPI)	Economist and Research	Offline	August 16, 2022
EX3	Wassim Maktabi	The Policy Initiative (TPI)	Economist and Researcher	Offline	August 16, 2022

I used the snowball sampling technique to reach out to interviewees. My goal was to interview both stakeholders within the IMPACT platform and those external to it. The snowball sampling method allowed me to branch out from a familiar network of policy researchers and CSOs. This approach helped me gather critical insights into the IMPACT platform before interviewing those involved within the platform, such as CI and SA. However, some interviewees were not responsive, particularly ministries<sup>3</sup>, the BE in Lebanon, and the World Bank.

Interviews took on a semi-structured in-depth format to allow for new ideas and themes to emerge (O'Leary, 2017). I made this choice due to the uncertainty I held at the beginning of the fieldwork regarding the focus of this study. This allowed me to zero in on matters that were relevant to the political and policy context in Lebanon concerning IMPACT. I adjusted my focus progressively as I got closer to interviewing actors involved within IMPACT.

<sup>3</sup> I contacted three ministries: the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform, but there was no reply.

Most interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour except for the interviews with the notaries, which lasted 15 minutes. All interviewees allowed me to quote them by name, however, due to the sensitive nature of some of the information revealed to me, I decided to anonymize the names of some of the municipality councilors and both of the notaries. Finally, all interviewees, except for Judge Attieh, allowed me to record by phone.

Concerning the informed consent procedure, I took permission for the following by recording the interviewees' answers on my phone recording application:

- Identity anonymity.
- Recording or typing the interview.
- Checking the transcript and/or quotations used by asking if they'd like for me to send them either or both via email to check for accuracy.

### ***1.3.1.3 Limitations***

The limitations of this approach consisted of the high dependence on interviewing actors who were hard to reach, which made it difficult to get the perspectives of all stakeholders on the issue at hand, such as ministries and international organizations. Furthermore, the heavy reliance on qualitative interviews made it difficult to triangulate some of the information revealed to me and navigate some of the deflections to sensitive questions.

### **1.3.2 Positionality and Ethics**

Being a Lebanese citizen makes it easier for me to reach out to certain stakeholders in Lebanon, particularly some government bodies, as being a foreigner could have raised some suspicions. However, as a student researcher coming from abroad, it might have put some of the interviewees on guard as they might have been suspicious of the motivations of my research. This could apply mainly to those involved within IMPACT who might have felt worried about being painted in a negative light.

As for my own biases, it is relevant to mention that I used to be an anti-establishment activist in Lebanon. As such, throughout this study, I attempted to remain critical of reform efforts while simultaneously remaining open and considerate of the efforts and intentions of those attempting to do reform. It was difficult to do so at the start due to the cynicism I held regarding the politics of Lebanon since I was an activist during the October Revolution of 2019, which did not witness much success. However, I tried to keep my pessimism in check as best as I could.

### 1.3.3 Risk Assessment

Table 2 below was developed based on the “Security Guidelines for field research in complex, remote and hazardous places” report (Hilhorst et al., 2017) with which one can conduct a 3-step risk and hazard assessment of field research. Thankfully, none of these threats manifested and I managed to safely conduct my research.

Table 2: Risk Assessment Table

Threat	Likelihood (L)	Impact (I)	Level of Risk (LxI)	Measures to reduce Likelihood	Measures to reduce Impact	Final Level of Risk
Bag-snatching (road)	M (2)	H (3)	M (6)	Making sure not to walk alone at night (or even during the day) in certain areas	Store my data in multiple locations: online secure encrypted server, encrypted hard drive in my bag when needed, encrypted hard drive at home (I have 2 hard drives)	L
Detained by security forces	L (1)	H (3)	L (3)	Making sure to be clear with concerned officials when interviewing government workers and showing them the fieldwork letter sent by supervisor	Alerting family and friends in civil society groups prior to conducting interviews with government officials	L
Conflict erupts in the country	M (2)	H (3)	M (6)	Nothing I can do to reduce the likelihood of conflict in the country	Depending on the severity of the conflict (isolated shooting vs. all-out war), I will coordinate with my family to ensure safety	M

Having introduced the problem and methodology of this study, the rest of this paper will be divided into the following chapters:

**Chapter 2** will present a description of the theoretical framework.

**Chapter 3** will provide an overview of the literature on the Lebanese state’s dysfunctional governance and politics along with an analysis of the Lebanese state using the theoretical framework.

The findings and analysis will be fleshed out within **Chapters 4 and 5** to answer sub-questions 2 and 3 respectively. **Chapter 4** will start with an overview of the IMPACT platform followed by an analysis of IMPACT as an emergent field. **Chapter 5** will tackle the jockeying that occurred within this field, starting with the cooperation that occurred at the local government level, then moving to the direct attempts made by elites to obstruct the platform, and ending with the role played by non-state actors.

**Chapter 6** consists of the conclusion, which will wrap up the analysis of the findings by answering each sub-question along with the main research question, followed by a brief discussion of the theoretical and policy implications of this paper.

## Chapter 2 A Theory of Fields

The formation of the IMPACT platform as a transparency reform initiative and its accumulation of massive amounts of data has produced complex political dynamics within and outside the state. These dynamics would be best conceptualized within a theoretical framework that focuses on explaining the actions employed by various actors to gain the upper hand.

Such a theory can be found within the book written by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) called “A Theory of Fields”. The theory is rooted in political-sociology and combines works from historical institutional theory, organizational theory, social movement theory, and economic sociology (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.4). It is useful for establishing a link between the micro-dynamics of actors, regarding their relationships and political entrepreneurship, and the macro-dynamics of fields, meaning the broader context that both influences and is constructed by those actors.

This chapter will synthesize the relevant elements of the Theory of Fields and highlight their applicability to the case of IMPACT, without being exhaustive. Thus, this section will begin with defining Strategic Action Fields (SAFs), then, it will delve into the micro-dynamics of strategic actors, with an addition of the concept of political entrepreneurs, and will finally zoom out to study the macro-dynamics of field environments and stability.

### 2.1 Strategic Action Fields

The concept of Strategic Action Fields (SAFs) lies at the core of the “Theory of Fields” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Defined as “mesolevel social orders” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.3), SAFs consist of the “fundamental units of collective action in society” and contain various sets of rules, boundaries, collective actors, and endowments (2012, p.9). Actors within SAFs tend to share a common understanding of the rules and boundaries of the field, are in constant interaction with each other, and typically understand their relationships with one another (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

SAFs contain and can themselves be “collective actors” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.5). This means that an SAF can be both the field in which multiple actors interact, and those actors themselves. For example, an SAF can contain an organization that is interacting with the state, however, both the organization and the state can singularly be considered SAFs since they both hold within them multiple actors interacting with each other.

Furthermore, SAFs can be understood as “socially constructed arenas” whose boundaries can be more or less open to other actors (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.5) and in which collective actors work with or against other actors to advance their interests or vision, maintain their power, or vie for access to resources, etc.

Consequently, field theory sees actors as highly aware of their power differences while constantly attempting to maintain their standing or pushing for their interests (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). The focus on the dynamics of contention between players holding different levels of power and resource endowments is useful for examining how SAFs emerge, stabilize, or enter into crisis. This lens is beneficial to the IMPACT case since there



are a variety of actors who have a stake in the different functions of the platform, leading to different forms of contention and cooperation.

## 2.2 Micro-Dynamics: Incumbents, Challengers & Policy Entrepreneurs

Since SAFs are made up of strategic actors who gravitate around each other, it is important to conceptualize those actors. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) have defined those actors as “incumbents” and “challengers”, a typology that stems from social movement theory, with the authors’ unique addition of “Internal Governance Units” (IGUs) (2012, p.13).

They define incumbents as actors who “wield disproportionate influence within a field and whose interests and views tend to be heavily reflected in the dominant organization of the strategic action field” whereas challengers consist of those who “occupy less privileged niches within the field and ordinarily wield little influence over its operation” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.13). Internal Governance Units (IGUs) occupy a specific space within SAFs that is usually in support of incumbents (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). IGUs are tasked with “overseeing compliance with field rules” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.13-14) that are usually set by incumbents, and with “facilitating the overall smooth functioning and reproduction of the system” (2012, p.14).

Going further into the micro, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) introduce the concept of “social skill” (2012, p.46), also understood as “strategic action” (2012, p.17). Social skill is what makes up “skilled social actors” who tend to advance their goals within SAFs and gain the upper hand through the usage of collective meaning-making, resource mobilization and a strategic understanding of their opponents (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.46). Collective meaning-making is central to the concept of social skill: it describes the ways in which skilled actors, or strategic actors, produce meanings with and for others to further cooperation within their circles and push for their interests (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.47). Moreover, skilled actors are always on the lookout for opportunities to advance their interests: incumbents will use their social skills to reproduce the status quo and entrench their positions, whereas challengers will use any opportunity to shake up those incumbents and challenge the status quo.

My own addition to these micro-dynamics is the concept of policy entrepreneurship articulated by Kingdon (2014). The reason for this addition is to better highlight actors within SAFs who are willing to “invest their resources, time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money in the hope of a future return” particularly within the policy field (Kingdon, 2014, p.122). An example of such a return could be successful policy outcome, some change in policy discourse, or even some form of personal or political benefit, such as a promotion or the launch of a project (Kingdon, 2014). As such, policy entrepreneurs will be considered a sub-set of skilled social actors, whereby all policy entrepreneurs will be viewed as socially skilled actors working within the policy sphere, but not all socially skilled actors will be seen as policy entrepreneurs. Moreover, social skill is necessary for a policy entrepreneur to succeed. In the case of IMPACT, one can find a variety of skilled social actors within the state, civil society, the media, and the non-profit sector, but only a handful of policy entrepreneurs.

It is important to note that neither incumbents nor challengers should be viewed as inherently morally 'superior'. Challengers are not necessarily doing 'good' by challenging the status quo, and incumbents are not 'bad' for holding power. An incumbent can also be a challenger depending on the situation. They are simply in contest with each other, with the one holding less power than the other.

## 2.3 Macro-Dynamics: Fields, Change & Exogenous Shocks

### 2.3.1 Field Environment: Relationships between Fields

As the authors emphasize strongly within their theory, SAFs are experiencing constant change. But what is the source of this change? The authors integrate an understanding of external field dynamics, events, and relationships to explain such changes (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). They argue that all fields are embedded within a "broader field environment" that consists of "complex webs of other fields" (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.18). The typology of this embeddedness is classified into three sets of binary distinctions:

- The first set consists of "distant" and "proximate" fields, whereby proximate fields are those who are related to and routinely influence the field in question, while a distant field is one that is completely unrelated to a particular field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.18).
- The second set consists of "dependent" and "interdependent" fields, both of which are proximate fields, but define a different type of relationship to a particular field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.18). A field that is highly influenced by another field (called the related field) is said to be a dependent field, usually existing in a vertical or hierarchical relationship with one another, whereas interdependent fields tend to exercise somewhat equal influence upon each other in a horizontal manner.
- The third set consists of "state" and "non-state" fields: state fields are themselves incredibly complex and consist of "dense collections of fields" representing the state, which can exhibit vertical and horizontal relationships with each other, while also exerting considerable influence on non-state fields, and vice-versa (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.19).

These distinctions matter for our analysis since the interactions between actors involved with the IMPACT platform has generated different types of relationships between both state and non-state fields. The vertical and horizontal distinctions will be especially useful for understanding which state fields IMPACT actors could insert themselves into without obstruction and which fields were more cooperative.

### 2.3.2 Field States, Emergence & Exogenous Shocks

Shifts in power within SAFs can be better understood through the typology of field states articulated by Fligstein and McAdam (2012), which are: emergence, stability, and crisis.

An emergent field is one in which strategic actors have entered together into an arena in which they hold different interests and worldviews without an agreed upon set of rules but are nevertheless "forced increasingly to take one another into account in their actions" (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.87).

Once a field is considered stable or settled, it can be built upon a combination of three forms of organization:

- Coercion, which usually consists of “the threat or actual use of physical force or the withholding of valued resources” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.14).
- Competition or Conflict, which is when collective actors compete for their interests over a common resource, project, or vision, without the manifestation of violence (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012)
- Cooperation occurs when actors try to create an alliance or agreement to maintain the SAF and distribute resources among themselves (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

The reproduction and stability of an SAF relies on the incumbents’ ability to maintain their positions and resources, while challengers remain on the look-out for openings to challenge the system (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Such openings consist of different types of “exogenous shocks” that can hit the field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.99). Those shocks could destabilize an SAF and potentially send it into crisis. An exogenous shock can consist of the entry or “invasion” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p.99) of an outside group into the SAF, a change in a related field, or “rare macroevents” such as a pandemic or a war (2012, p.101).

The Theory of Fields is promising for the purpose of studying the micro and macro-dynamics of politics in relation to the IMPACT project. This framework will guide the analysis of how actors within an SAF organize themselves, how they jockey for power and influence, and which opportunities or threats arose as a result of exogenous shocks.

# Chapter 3 Lebanese Politics, Constitutional Dysfunction & Elites

## 3.1 A Brief History of Lebanese Politics

Lebanon is currently in the throes of multiple crises: economic, financial, and political. Accusations of corruption, mismanagement of funds, patronage and sketchy financial schemes have mounted over decades. Political instability and sectarian conflict have been constant within the Lebanon for years. Indeed, everyday politics are characterized by deeply entrenched and politicized sectarian sentiments that run all the way from cultural and interpersonal behaviours to the state-of-affairs within the government.

The constitutional setup of Lebanon was doomed to fail from the start. The National Pact of 1943, an unwritten agreement enacted by the President and Prime Minister (PM) of Lebanon at the time spells out their vision for an independent Lebanese state (Bahout, 2016). It is responsible in part for the way in which state power was divided among religious communities of Lebanon (Bahout, 2016). The Pact unofficially states that the President of Lebanon must be a Maronite Christian, the PM a Sunni, and the Speaker of Parliament a Shia (Bahout, 2016). Moreover, it specifies how government positions must always be assumed by officials from specific sectarian communities to preserve sectarian balance (Bahout, 2016). This power-sharing system effectively rendered the government a “corrosive machinery for the distribution of spoils” (Bahout, 2016, p.7).

The National Pact was succeeded by the Taif Accord, which came in the aftermath of Lebanon’s 15-year civil war (1975-1990) (Haugbolle, 2011). The Taif Accord was brokered by Saudi Arabia and Western forces in 1989 to end the war (Makdissi and Marktanner, 2009, p.3). Integrated into the Lebanese Constitution, the Taif accord aims to create “a more balanced sectarian formula of power sharing” to minimize sectarian conflict and allow for the political representation of all 18 sects within the state (Makdissi and Marktanner, 2009, p.3). This accord therefore allowed for the warlords of the civil war to reinstate their power by dividing and taking over public bodies for their own enrichment. Those warlords are currently the ones considered the political elite of Lebanon.

The promise of the Taif accord to minimize sectarian conflict has not been fulfilled. According to Bahout (2016, p.14), sectarian tensions escalated drastically when Prime Minister Rafic El-Hariri was assassinated in 2005, with the prime suspects being the Syrian regime whose military forces were subsequently ousted from Lebanon. Politics became heavily polarized and contentious in the aftermath, leading to the formation of the March 14 Alliance, who opposed the Syrian regime’s involvement in Lebanon, and the March 8 Alliance, who was defined by its pro-Syrian stance (Berti, 2017).

The makeup of the March 14 bloc goes as follow: the alliance is made up of the Future Movement, the political party claiming to represent Lebanon’s Sunni community, joined by the Lebanese Forces party, who claim to represent the Lebanese Maronite Christian community, along with the other smaller parties (Berti, 2017). The March 14 Alliance was backed by Saudi Arabia, the United States, and the European Union (Zovighian, 2008). The

March 8 alliance is made up of Hezbollah, a Lebanese Islamist militant group and political party backed primarily by Iran and Syria, who claims to represent the Shiite community of Lebanon, along with the Amal Movement, a political party led by current Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, who also claims to represent the Shiite community (Berti, 2017). They are joined by the Free Patriotic Movement, currently led by Gebran Bassil, politician and son-in-law of President Michel Aoun, which also claims to represent the Christian Maronite community of Lebanon (Berti, 2017). The geopolitical and sectarian animosity between those two blocs meant that, at best, they could not work together (Berti, 2017).

Political deadlock worsened throughout the years, leading to a stagnant economy and little to no substantial state reform. Popular discontent slowly built up and reached a breaking point on October 17, 2019, which saw the birth of the October Revolution. Proclaimed as leaderless and non-sectarian, the revolution swept over the country and called for the fall of the regime (Kassir, 2019). Political developments ensued shortly after, consisting of the resignation of two Prime Ministers and their governments, one within ten days of the revolution, and the other in the aftermath of the August 4, 2020, explosion (Chehayeb, 2021b; Sykes, 2020).

The August 4 explosion, considered one of the largest non-nuclear blasts in history, decimated the Beirut port and part of the city at 6:07pm of that day, killing nearly 220 people, injuring over 7,000, and displacing more than 300,000 people (Mroue, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2021). Around, 550 tonnes of ammonium nitrate<sup>4</sup> of the 2,754 tonnes stored in Hangar 12 of the Beirut port ignited on that day after fireworks, which were stored in the same hangar, allegedly caught fire due to nearby maintenance work (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The explosion marked a grim turn for the country as morale sunk even lower and the economy plunged deeper into crisis. It also represented the epitome of incompetence, negligence and carelessness of the ruling elite and their officials, going all the way from the President to the custom officials responsible for the storage of the nitrate.

The economic crisis ran in tandem with these events since the end of 2019, leading to the fall of the Lebanese Pound to historically low levels as it lost more than 95% of its value by January 2022 due to lack of foreign currency in the country (Agence France Presse, 2022). Having previously been heavily reliant on the financial and services sectors to attract foreign currency, the economy began gradually crashing in 2019, with no end in sight. Adding to that, the public sector's enormous amounts of debt led to an unavoidable default. These dynamics were compounded by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns (Bisat, Cassard and Diwan, 2021).

Thus, due to the incompetence and corruption of the political elite in power, the government became bereft of any capacity for substantial reform or social protection without outside aid. Throughout the recovery effort from the blast, there was an explicit narrative (including from the World Bank) calling for state bodies to be excluded from receiving donor aid money since the state was considered too corrupt to be trusted with it (Fawaz and Harb, 2020). Popular and international mistrust of the state, coupled with its weak institutional

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<sup>4</sup> Ammonium nitrate is a “combustible chemical compound commonly used in agriculture as a high nitrate fertilizer” but can also be a component for the making of explosive (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

capacities and lack of effective governance set the stage for the private sector, NGOs, and aid agencies to step in and sometimes collaborate with the government to enact state reform, forming thus a “Republic of NGOs” (Fawaz and Harb, 2020). One of such initiatives was the IMPACT platform.

## 3.2 The Governance & Constitutional Makeup of Lebanon

It can be said that Lebanon has been in a perpetual state of crisis, corruption, and political deadlock over the years. The current economic crisis is but a consequence of Lebanon’s broken governance and dysfunctional power-sharing system.

Indeed, Bahout argues that the confessional power-sharing system resulting from the Taif accords has turned the Lebanese state into one undergoing constant political deadlock (Bahout, 2016). Yahya (2017) states that this power-sharing system has allowed for sectarian identities, political stakes, and economic interests to coalesce, consequently enabling the political elite to “hijack communal representation” and mediate state-citizen relations. As such, the reduction of politics to religious and sectarian interests has resulted in “poor governance, the entrenchment of undemocratic practices, and patronage politics” (Yahya, 2017).

This had led to the formation of patronage networks and the establishment of a neo-patrimonial state that intersects with sectarian representation. Those networks can be understood as patronage systems, which, as defined by Grindle (2012), are the primary way for citizens to reach non-elected positions through political or personal discretionary appointments. With the establishment of those patronage systems, the public sector has become “bloated”, “lethargic” and “rife with corruption”, with too many positions being filled and no substantial work being done to improve governance (Azhari, 2021).

Lebanon can therefore be understood as a predatory state, which, according to Evans (1989), is defined by the formation of a small elite who engage in rent seeking, patronage, and the monopolization of resources to turn the “rest of society into prey” (1989, p.570). Indeed, Baumann argues that the economic meltdown produced a mode of predatory governance in Lebanon which reinforced the “rentier capitalist class” (2019, p. 62), rendering the people of Lebanon even more reliant on the elite.

There are many types of elites in the country, with different levels of power. Political party leaders constitute a powerful class of elites who can operate within the state (such as the leader of the FPM party and parliament member Gebran Bassil, or leader of the Amal Movement Nabih Berri who is also Speaker of Parliament) and outside the state (such as Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah). They are generally considered the most powerful elite in the country as they command the most resources and political influence in the country. There are also public officials within the state who can be considered part of the elite, who, while holding less power and resources, remain highly influential within and outside the state, such as: heads of ministries, general security officials, and army leaders, etc.

Regarding the army, or the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), they are generally viewed as apolitical and independent from the political elite, but this is far from the truth (Moussa, 2016). The appointments of high-level army officials is done according to the sectarian power sharing balance and their allegiance to elites (Moussa, 2016), producing officers with enough

power to be considered elites in their own right, such as the Army General. As for religious elite, they are considered “products of and selected by elite institutions” whereby their primary role consists of reproducing the political system that sustains them and their allies (D. M. Henley, 2016). Finally, private sector elite also make up part of the incumbents due to their connections with political parties and their involvement in corruption schemes within the public sector.

To summarize, the resulting mode of governance in Lebanon can be understood in a twofold manner with an “experienced kleptocracy” at the top made up of predatory incumbents who have successfully engineered a “kakistocracy”, meaning a government deliberately made up of incompetent people, that ultimately benefits them at the expense of the collective good (Merhej, 2021, p.7).

### 3.3 The Lebanese State as an SAF

Tying this literature back to the theoretical framework of SAFs, the Lebanese state can be understood as an established, highly predatory, and clientelistic SAF. Those traits manifest differently across various state bodies. SAFs embedded within the overall state SAF will be called state sub-fields. These subfields can consist of public officials’ offices, ministries, municipalities, and other state bodies, or combinations of those state bodies who have something at stake.

According to Fligstein and McAdam (2012, p.68), the state SAF is typically built to serve interests of those that are dominant within the state. However, they add that the state SAF should not be seen as a “unified actor” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 74). This means that different sub-fields within the state can exhibit different characteristics and form various relationships with one another, or with non-state actors. To make that more clear, vertical relationships will be understood as the hierarchical relationships between state sub-fields, with the more vertical the state sub-field, the more power it holds, and the more other sub-fields depend on it. Horizontal relationships will define state sub-fields who display different levels of interdependence between each other, without a considerable power difference (such as municipalities and ministries).

Thus, it can be argued that the more vertically embedded the state sub-field is, that is the closer it is to the center of the government –where the incumbents operate– such as the PM’s Office, the Council of Ministers<sup>5</sup>, the President’s Office, the Parliament, among other bodies, the more its boundaries become impenetrable. These state sub-fields, where multiple incumbents interact, have rigid field boundaries, do not share information with outsiders, such as auditors and non-state actors, and are in control of the majority of endowments within the state.

The less vertical the sub-field is, that is, the closer to the periphery it gets, the less rigid its boundaries become, and the less hierarchical relationships become. For instance, most ministries are horizontally related to one another, exhibiting interdependence or distant relationships, with some holding more power than others. These state sub-fields, while relatively easier to access by non-state actors, such as NGOs or auditors, retain characteristics of

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<sup>5</sup> Meaning the government cabinet made up of ministers

patronage and clientelism that could either ward off initiatives that go against the interests of incumbents, and capture those that do.

Furthermore, since municipalities lie at the periphery of the state and act as the interface between the people and the government, they are less difficult to enter. They constitute a sub-field that could be highly used for clientelist purposes, due to their constant interaction with people. Also, seeing as municipalities in Lebanon lack support and funding to varying degrees, they tend to form more relationships with non-state actors to fund projects and implement them. As a result, municipalities exhibit more proximity to non-state actors, which means there are more opportunities for clientelism to take place at this level than others.

This proximity to residents is also true for notaries who act as elected representatives that operate at the neighborhood or village level within the state (Stel, 2015). Their duties consist of “issuing residence documents and personal status papers” but they also tend to act as a focal point for social relations in the neighborhood or the village and are usually considered an important member of the community (Stel, 2015). Since notary offices are typically made up of one or two people, they don’t always constitute a sub-field, but can be seen as important actors within the state field.



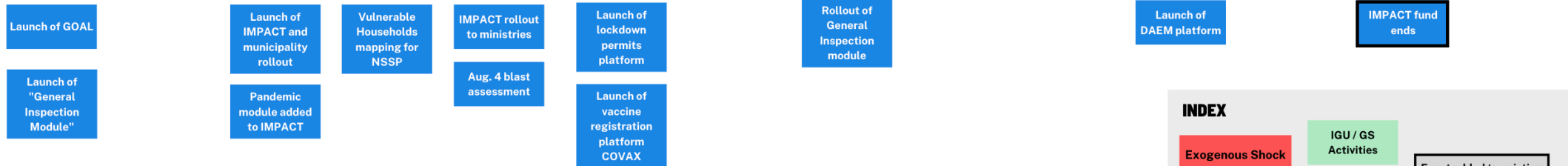
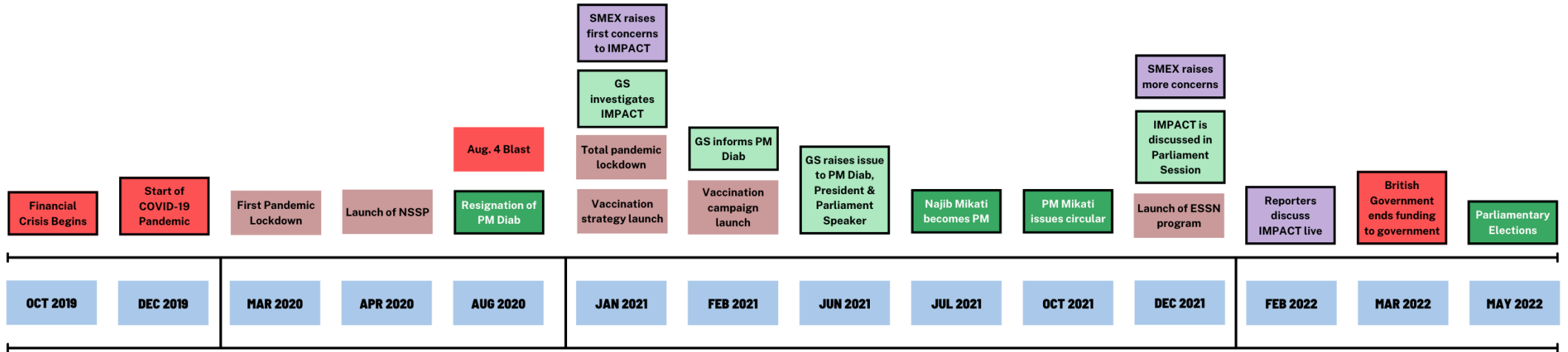
## Chapter 4 IMPACT's Emergence as an SAF

This chapter will tackle the first sub-question regarding the emergence of IMPACT as an SAF by providing an overview of the IMPACT platform and a brief discussion of the data it contains. Then, the following section will analyse how IMPACT embodies an emerging SAF containing a variety of state and non-state actors, along with the factors that shaped its emergence.

In the next page Figure 1 showcases the timeline of events related to IMPACT. It is partly based on the timeline released by the IMPACT team in a presentation made in February 2022 (Central Inspection, 2022a), with additions of my own which were highlighted with a black frame around each box. This timeline will be fleshed out in the following sections.

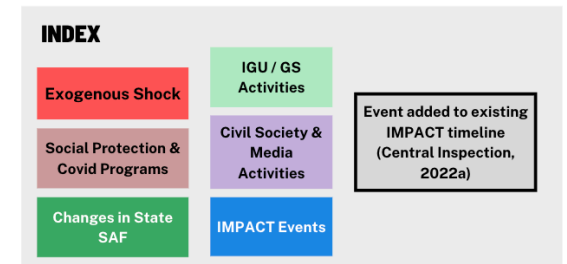
Figure 1: Timeline of Events

**EXTERNAL EVENTS**



**IMPACT EVENTS**

(Central Inspection, 2022a)



## 4.1 The IMPACT Platform's Modules

As a platform, IMPACT is meant to showcase data collected across different modules for the public to audit and inspect. The platform contains a variety of modules which were added gradually such as: development, social protection, crisis response, the COVID pandemic. Throughout these additions, more international actors became involved such as: the WB for funding social protection programs, the WFP for implementing social protection programs, and the WHO for the pandemic.

Diving deeper into the platform, it includes six primary modules (databases), out of which only the first four will be focused on:

1. General Inspection: The mapping of 123 public administrative bodies was officially rolled out in June 2021 (Figure 1). Administrative bodies can fill out information – that becomes public on the IMPACT website – pertaining to the following<sup>6</sup> (Central Inspection, 2022c):
  - a. General information on administrative bodies (name, address, website, etc).
  - b. Mapping information concerned with the completion status of the planning, strategy and implementation plans for administrative bodies.
  - c. Internal control information to monitor the status of existing auditing mechanisms.
  - d. Details on the right to access to information such as the number of requests and related matters.
  - e. Financial administration matters.
  - f. Public resources and assets.
  - g. Transactions and workflow.
2. Pandemic management: COVID-19 Lockdown modules allowing for the submission of mobility requests during the lockdown, their reviewing, monitoring, and management at different state levels. It was mainly municipalities and the Disaster Risk Management Unit within the Council of Ministers (CM)<sup>7</sup> who were involved with this module. There were around 14.9 million lockdown permit requests by February 2022 (Central Inspection, 2022a).
3. Vaccination management: Vaccines were managed through the COVAX platform which oversaw the registration of residents for vaccination along with the determination of priority groups, appointment bookings, and the issuing of e-certificates (Central Inspection, 2022a). Around 3.8 million individuals – citizens, non-citizens, and refugees – were registered on the COVAX platform by February 2022 (Central Inspection, 2022a).
4. Social Protection:
  - a. The management of the National Social Solidarity Program (NSSP), a direct cash payment program targeting households impacted by the economic

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<sup>6</sup> Not an exhaustive list.

<sup>7</sup> The executive cabinet made up of ministers in government, headed by the Prime Minister

consequences of the pandemic (ILO, 2021a). The program involves the co-operation of the MoSA, the Ministry of Interior (MoI), the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM)<sup>8</sup> and CI's supervision through IMPACT (World Bank, 2020b). As for international actors, it involves the WB, UNICEF, UNDP, and the ILO (ILO, 2021a). Applications for aid were done through municipalities and notaries via an online form launched by IMPACT (Zoughaib et al., 2022).

- b. The launch of the DAEM platform to manage the registration and screening of applicants for the ESSN<sup>9</sup> program (World Bank, 2022b). The ESSN program, launched by the World Bank, consists of a cash transfer program totalling \$246 million over 3 years to the extremely poor and vulnerable residing in Lebanon (World Bank, 2021b). The IMPACT platform digitized the process of registration, validation, scoring and eligibility checks. The project was implemented by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) and WFP and was done through a self-registration process.
5. Crisis management: The facilitation of August 4 post-blast damage assessment through the issuing of forms to assess and map damages (Central Inspection, 2022a).
6. Local development: A rural and local development platform in which local government authorities can enter data on their localities' demographics, infrastructure, health, education, agriculture, etc. (Central Inspection, 2022a).

While those databases do seem impressive, there are concerns regarding the value of the data itself, how it was collected, and how useful this e-governance platform is.

Assaad Thebian, director of Gherbal Initiative<sup>10</sup>, raised these concerns by arguing that most of the information on the platform is not directly related to e-governance data, but are merely “feelings” about data (CS4). By that, he means that they represent vague information that does not touch on anything concrete within the state (CS4). Indeed, some of the data Thebian considers crucial is not found on the platform, such as: budgetary information of different public bodies, the number of employees in the public sector, the actual content of the decisions and acts made within public bodies (rather than just the title and date), among other information that the CI is responsible for obtaining (CS4). Additionally, Ayman Mhanna, executive director of the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF)<sup>11</sup>, commented that on the IMPACT Open Data platform, “almost every single one of the numbers on it is outdated” (CS1).

The critique on the substance of the data found within IMPACT points to a larger issue: while the usefulness of the data on IMPACT may seem arguable, the project did manage to

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<sup>8</sup> The President of the Council of Ministers is the Prime Minister

<sup>9</sup> Lebanon's Emergency Crisis and Covid-19 Response Social Safety Net Project (ESSN)

<sup>10</sup> An NGO in Lebanon whose mission is to bridge the gap between the public sector and citizen by pushing for transparency and access to information reform (Gherbal Initiative, 2022). They also have an extensive database containing public records. They were contracted by IMPACT to review their platform in terms of security and privacy concerns.

<sup>11</sup> SKF is a "non-profit civic organization working within the civil society and cultural circles" focusing on promoting democracy, freedom of expression, and cultural freedom (SKF, 2022). Based in Lebanon.

support and run essential services within a short-time period, but with partial success, depending on the field of action. Elucidating upon how IMPACT emerged in this next section will help clarify this matter.

## 4.2 The Deliberate & Accidental Emergence of IMPACT

### 4.2.1 The Story of IMPACT

The IMPACT platform, born from the GOAL project, is housed within the CI. GOAL was written in 2019 by Judge Georges Attieh (IMP1), the President of the CI since 2017 (Institut des Finances Basil Fuleihan, 2022). It aims to improve the CI's capacity to perform oversight and guidance (IMP1).

The CI functions within the executive branch of the state and is attached to the PCM. It serves primarily as an oversight body responsible for uncovering violations of laws and regulations within the state of Lebanon (Central Inspection, 2022d). It also serves as a “public reform authority” by providing guidance and advice to public administrations to “improve administrative processes and coordinate joint operations between public administrations” (Central Inspection, 2022d). Its budget in 2021 amounted to almost 9.7 billion Lebanese pounds, which is the equivalent of 484,115 USD at the average black-market rate of the year 2021 (assumed to be 20,000 LBP/USD) (Central Inspection, 2021). The CI can thus be considered relatively small and underfunded institution. Indeed, Karim Merhej, freelance researcher on governance and socio-economic development in Lebanon, believes that the CI has too little of a budget and employees to properly conduct their inspection work (EX1).

To remedy this weakness, GOAL aims to strengthen the CI through the assistance of non-state actors. According to Judge Attieh, he and Carole Sharabati, Director of Research at SA, pitched the GOAL program to donors within the European Union (EU) and the UNDP<sup>12</sup> (IMP1). As a result, GOAL was funded partly by the British Embassy (BE) and partly by the ‘Agence Française de Développement’ (AFD)<sup>13</sup> (IMP1). However, none of the monetary funding reached the office of the CI (IMP1). SA were the recipients of the BE fund, whereas ‘Expertise France’ (EF)<sup>14</sup> received the AFD fund, who provided purely technical assistance to the CI (IMP1). The BE fund is most relevant to this case since it supported the creation of IMPACT. This fund was used by SA to fulfill the GOAL program by working with the CI on “a holistic approach that includes training and methodology, a risk analysis unit, support for strategic planning, and ... support for the digitization of audit at CI” (IMP2).

To that end, GOAL was launched in October 2019 (Figure 1). However, the idea of the IMPACT platform was not there yet. With GOAL, CI inspectors began using digital

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<sup>12</sup> It seems that the UNDP did not end up funding GOAL but were only mentioned by Judge Attieh as one of the international organizations they pitched their concept note to.

<sup>13</sup> AFD, the French Development Agency (in English), is a French government agency, officially a public financial institution, that implements France's development policies (AFD, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> EF is an “interministerial agency for international technical cooperation” integrated within AFD that is focused on providing support to partners internationally regarding public policy problems through financial and technical assistance (AFD, 2022).

audit tools on the premises of public bodies, but this required too much time and resources (IMP2). Thus, they innovated by having administration workers enter the data themselves on a digital system deployed by the CI that inspectors could access digitally (IMP2). This process seemed to be internal up until the COVID pandemic began in December 2019. When ministries and municipalities got connected to the digital system to help manage the pandemic response, “the IMPACT brand started to be known” (IMP2). IMPACT was therefore officially launched in March 2020, first with the cooperation of municipalities, and then later with ministries in August 2020 (Figure 1).

#### 4.2.2 Two Strategic Policy Entrepreneurs

Judge Attieh can be understood as a policy entrepreneur and a skilled social actor who found that the state SAF was not the arena within which the CI could thrive. Instead, he built an alliance with SA, a non-state actor, and particularly with Carole Sharabati, another policy entrepreneur and skilled social actor, to reach a common goal. The IMPACT actors all together represent a group of challengers to the state incumbents contributing to the formation of an SAF centered around IMPACT.

Multiple interviewees highlighted the crucial role played by Judge Attieh and Sharabati in establishing IMPACT. Zoughaib claimed that their “political entrepreneurship” (EX2) was an essential factor for establishing the platform. Jessica Chemali, deputy director at Legal Agenda<sup>15</sup>, claimed that Sharabati was someone who deeply understood the politics of the administration, along with Judge Attieh (CS5). Ayman Mhanna, executive director at SKF, was slightly more critical by arguing that Sharabati’s belief that one can “trick the system by creating processes that are corruption and impunity proof” is too good to be true, but he remained positive about Judge Attieh and Sharabati’s roles in this initiative (CS1).

Indeed, as policy entrepreneurs, they conducted an effective process of resource mobilization by looking for opportunities and resources that would give them an advantage in reaching their goals, such as reaching out to donors through their networks and pitching a convincing concept note. Also, their ability to build a common vision of reform and transparency that was recognized by others is a characteristic of social skill, particularly that of collective meaning-making (Fligstein and McAdam, 2019).

Consequently, they managed to join together two institutions, the CI and SA, to find points of insertion within the state to manifest their vision of transparency. The first points of insertion being municipalities shows the lack of rigidity of their field boundaries since these sub-fields are accustomed to working with non-state actors and implementing projects with donors.

Regarding ministries, Mhanna argues that the way in which the government was set up incentivizes ministries to work with donors so that incumbents can employ their people under donor payroll, without spending any of the state budget on them (CS1). This indicates that perhaps, ministries were open to working with IMPACT as it provided them with more opportunities to link with donors and receive funding. Indeed, IMPACT arguably opened

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<sup>15</sup> Legal Agenda is a "Beirut-based nonprofit research and advocacy organization" focusing on social and legal issues (Legal Agenda, 2022).

the door for the MoSA to manage the ESSN and Nssp programs later on. Therefore, the formation of this cooperative relationship between CI, SA, municipalities, and ministries indicates the emergence of the IMPACT SAF.

### 4.2.3 A Deliberately Convolutd Process

The emergence of this field was facilitated by the unconventional way in which the funding was acquired by Judge Attieh and Sharabati (IMP2). According to Sharabati, the BE initially gave SA a very small fund of 30,000 pounds for their pilot when they presented the concept note for GOAL (IMP2). As they started showing results, the funding grew to 500,000 pounds in the next cycle and kept on increasing after (IMP2).

Triangulating this information with official grant documents from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)<sup>16</sup> confirms this information but also raises some questions. According to the FCO's official summary document on Lebanon for FY20-21<sup>17</sup>, SA did receive a grant of 500,000 pounds for the GOAL project (FCO, 2021c). However, the report summary document from FY19-20 does not include the exact amount spent on GOAL, nor the name of the organization who received the fund (FCO, 2021a). Also, in another annual report for FY19-20 there is no mention of SA nor GOAL (FCO, 2021b). This may indicate that donors were reluctant to release information about the GOAL project when it was first launched. Furthermore, the total fund amount, whose disbursement ended in March 2022 (IMP2) is yet to be determined. It is unclear yet why the total fund amount has not been disclosed neither in the documents reviewed<sup>18</sup> nor in the interviews.

The complex manner in which those funds were acquired along with the donors' initial secrecy around the GOAL project may seem unnecessarily complex at first glance. However, the complexity of this process is directly implicated in the success of the establishment of IMPACT.

Regarding this process, Mhanna argues that there were two major reasons why IMPACT managed to establish itself amid a political climate that favors impunity and corruption: a lack of awareness of the scope of IMPACT by some in the government, and the usage of a convoluted process to implement it (CS1). Sami Zoughaib, researcher at TPI, concurred with the first reason by arguing that politicians might have thought that the CI was a "toothless and spineless institution" that could not potentially harm them (EX2). He goes on to say that "the fact that they were able to create IMPACT was not something that they saw [coming], otherwise they wouldn't have put Attieh" (EX2).

It can be argued that these two reasons are directly related to one another. Indeed, the perceived weakness of the CI, in the eyes of state incumbents, gave enough room and motivation for policy entrepreneurs such as Judge Attieh and Sharabati to creatively acquire funding without directing any money into the state. Doing so was perhaps useful for not catching the attention of incumbents who would want to capture or obstruct such efforts

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<sup>16</sup> The British Government's department for international development.

<sup>17</sup> Financial Year 2020-2021 starts on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, and ends on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> There is a possibility that the total amount might be disclosed somewhere but that I did not manage to find it. However, it should not be this difficult to find this information, especially after having perused many reports released by the FCO, SA, and CI.

from the start. Thus, as a weak state sub-field, the CI was perhaps the best starting point for reform efforts, leading to the emergence of a new SAF. This awareness showcases the strategic understanding of Judge Attieh and Sharabati regarding their opponents in the field, which are the state incumbents. However, the fact that state incumbents were not yet aware of what was at stake during the formation of the IMPACT platform is another indicator of field emergence (Fligstein and McAdam 2012).

#### **4.2.4 From One Resource Dependence to Another**

Furthermore, the role played by international donors was crucial for the establishment and survival of IMPACT. Those donors make up a proximate and related field (upon which IMPACT depends) that highly affects the IMPACT SAF. However, the positive impact they can have within the state comes with limitations. One of the positive impacts consists of adding more stringent reporting and monitoring mechanisms within municipalities, which, according to Beirut Municipality Councilor Huda Usta Kaskas, makes donor presence “good and required” within municipalities (MUN1). However, their funding can also be utilized by incumbents to enrich their clientelist networks. Not only that, but the reliance on donor funding can mean moving from one resource dependence (the state) to another (donors) when the recipient has no other recourse.

When IMPACT originally acquired funding from the BE and AFD for their inspection work, they relied on gradual iterations of results to receive more funding. However, an exogenous shock to the field changed the situation radically. The COVID pandemic, considered a macroevent, became a turning point for the platform in December 2019 (Figure 1). The pandemic opened a window of opportunity for IMPACT to take over the auditing of the pandemic by linking together ministries and municipalities to get insights about COVID decisions, needs and incidents (IMP2). Zoughaib stated that one of the factors that “brought IMPACT to life” was the pandemic, since very suddenly, the government needed a “centralized system that can record data and provide public services such as vaccination”, functions IMPACT could fulfill (EX2). This process ultimately allowed the MoPH to make more informed decisions about lockdowns, hospital needs and priority vaccination groups much faster, which ended up saving the lives of many (IMP2).

This macroevent produced a crisis that the state could not take on by itself, but that IMPACT could, thanks to their proximity to donors and non-state actors. Seeing as skilled social actors are on the constant lookout for improving their position and advancing their goals within an SAF, it only makes sense that Judge Attieh and Sharabati would take on the pandemic within IMPACT. Indeed, Judge Attieh claimed that the pandemic allowed IMPACT to showcase their transparent work in overseeing and managing the pandemic response – specifically with the success of COVAX (IMP1). Their work elicited “a lot of appreciation from the EU for doing this work ... due to all the accountability and privacy measures [they] placed by following GDPR regulations” (IMP1). He claims that consequently, Lebanon became the first country in the Middle East to receive EU certifications for the vaccine (IMP1). It seems then that IMPACT’s role in helping manage the pandemic with more transparency could be considered a success.



This macroevent thus provided the CI and SA with more solid footing within the IMPACT SAF and changed the stakes involved in the field. They became essential actors needed for the management of the pandemic since this macroevent destabilized the state SAF and sent it into crisis, making it unable to take on the pandemic alone. However, it did the opposite for the IMPACT SAF and stabilized it further. As for the proximate field of international donors, the relationship between IMPACT and this field was strengthened as the latter proved themselves capable of handling this macroevent.

Indeed, Judge Attieh states that it was their work with COVAX that allowed them to tackle other projects:

Concerning the World Bank, when they wanted to apply the ESSN project in Lebanon, they came in with the condition that they wanted a tool like IMPACT and mentioned wanting to have a partnership with CI thanks to the proven transparency and oversight of the CI. As such, we gained the trust of the international community through our previous work. (IMP1)

Other interviewees also acknowledged how IMPACT became the main venue for international organizations' projects. According to Zoughaib, the World Bank heavily pushed for the use of IMPACT (EX2). Chemali also stated that no other platform could take on the tasks required by DAEM (ESSN) since "there is a minimum of transparency that the international community requires, or else they wouldn't fund them" (CS5).

However, Zoughaib notes that the World Bank's ownership of the ESSN program presents an issue of political ownership (EX2), since the continuity of the projects depends on whether donor conditions are fulfilled. Merhej (EX1) raised a similar concern regarding the BE's funding of IMPACT:

What I hope is the case is that there is a transfer of knowledge, skills, and technology. Let's suppose the British Embassy decides to pull their funding, would the project stop? (EX1)

While the World Bank's fund remains until now, the BE funding for the IMPACT project was discontinued in March 2022 (Figure 1). According to Sharabati, this was because the UK government decided to no longer fund any governments (IMP2), the reason for that remaining unknown. Now, only the World Bank fund remains for the ESSN program (IMP2).

The resource dependence of IMPACT upon donors therefore acts as a double-edged sword: while it may provide them with international backing and resources to implement their own projects without experiencing too much interference from incumbents, this dependence can also be short-lived and highly conditional on donors.

## **Analysis**

The formation of IMPACT has engendered the emergence of an SAF containing actors such as the CI, SA, international donors, municipalities, ministries, and the sub-fields within the state SAF. This SAF includes a mix of incumbents and challengers, with the state acting as incumbents as they hold the majority of resources in the country, and IMPACT actors acting as challengers to the state.

The CI and SA kept on finding ways to establish themselves further within the field and to gain the upper hand by relying on the proximate field formed by donors. This was made possible through the policy entrepreneurship and social skill of Judge Attieh and

Sharabati, for whom the weakness of the CI played in their favor as it allowed them to operate under the radar of state incumbents who underestimated the CI. These conditions pushed them to craft a convoluted process to acquire funds through resource mobilization, collective meaning-making, and a strategic understanding of their opponents without being obstructed, but only temporarily.

Finally, the pandemic, a major macroevent, allowed for the IMPACT SAF to become more settled as it strengthened their legitimacy in the eyes of donors and their usefulness as crisis managers in a time of need. However, with the CI no longer being highly resource dependent on the state, they depend now on donors instead to provide them with technical expertise and knowledge, which can also backfire if the funding ends, as was the case with the BE fund.

# Chapter 5 Cooperation, Competition & Coercion over Data & Reform

This chapter will examine the ways in which the IMPACT SAF becomes subject to cooperation, competition, and coercion within different state sub-fields in two sections.

The first section will cover sub-question 2 by examining the dynamics of cooperation and competition that occur when data is seen as a resource to be captured and a tool for clientelism, especially when it enters the sub-fields of municipalities and notaries.

The last section will answer sub-question 3 by covering the political fights between state incumbents and IMPACT, along with the competitive and collaborative dynamics that arose with other non-state actors.

## 5.1 Horizontal Cooperation, Clientelism & Data

### 5.1.1 Social Protection, Municipalities & Cooperation

The NSSP program, which consisted of direct cash payments to vulnerable families impacted by the pandemic, was launched in April 2020 after the first lockdown of March 2020 (Figure 1) (ILO, 2021b). The program faced multiple delays and challenges throughout its run (ILO, 2021b).

IMPACT was instrumental in the management of the program as it helped create a link that was sent to municipalities and notaries who would in turn send it to vulnerable families to apply for aid (ILO, 2021b). Families who registered in the National Poverty Targeting Program database (NPTP) were also factored into the targeting process of the NSSP. The NPTP is a social safety net program launched by the MoSA and the PCM in 2011 and consists of the first targeted aid program in Lebanon (WFP, 2022). It provides cash assistance that covers food assistance, health, and education benefits (WFP, 2022).

TPI conducted in-depth research on municipalities and their involvement with the NSSP program. TPI's research covered other topics related to IMPACT<sup>19</sup> as they were contracted by IMPACT to conduct this research (EX2). Their research showed that there were some municipalities that “stayed overnight to keep submitting forms”, according to Wassim Maktabi, researcher at TPI (EX3). However, rural and development needs forms were much less in use compared to individual aid forms for the NSSP program (EX3). In another study, they found that municipalities that were fully captured by political parties<sup>20</sup> (particularly Hezbollah and Amal movement) tended to submit more NSSP aid forms than family-run or independent municipalities (Zoughaib et al., 2022). The authors claim that this pattern is not

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<sup>19</sup> Other topics included: municipal transparency (Mahmalat et al., 2022a; 2022b), local governments and clientelist networks (Zoughaib et al., 2022; Mahmalat et al., 2022c), and local governance and open data (Maktabi et al., 2022).

<sup>20</sup> In a conversation with Maktabi (not in the interview), he clarifies that ‘politically captured municipalities’ means municipalities that are fully led by traditional parties, whereas ‘partially captured municipalities’ means municipalities that are partially led by traditional political parties or are family run.

coincidental since parliamentary elections were approaching (May 2022) and political parties were looking to renew their clientelist networks by providing services to their supporters (Zoughaib et al., 2022).

Indeed, the findings from the interview with the councilor (MUN2) of the municipality located in the South confirm TPI's research. This municipality is partially captured by the parties of Hezbollah and the Amal movement and is partially family run (MUN2). The councilor, who is not affiliated with the parties, stated that their main interaction with IMPACT consisted of registering COVID cases they had in the village (MUN2). They were unaware and uninvolved with other parts of IMPACT (MUN2). Their lack of reliance on social protection programs provided by the state through IMPACT could be due to the fact that the family connections that some unaffiliated council members had were providing them with significant aid (MUN2). As such, it is not only the fact that this municipality was partially captured that made them submit less or no aid forms at all, but the fact that they had connections with non-state actors who aided them.

As for the Saida municipality, the councilor stated that they were mostly involved with IMPACT through their COVID and lockdown components (MUN3). Unfortunately, the councilor was not involved in the social protection module, so it was impossible to get information from him on that matter. However, he emphasized the importance of working with non-state actors such as NGOs to fund their programs because the municipality's state budget was too small to support their work (MUN3). The head of the municipality located in the North of Lebanon within Akkar, one of the poorest areas in Lebanon, also highlighted how important it was for them to collaborate with non-state actors to get funds for projects (MUN4). The municipality's budget from the government is also too little to support them (MUN4), which explains their reliance on non-state actors.

## **Analysis**

Municipalities tend to rely heavily on non-state actors, be it due to extreme poverty and vulnerability, lack of support from the government, or existing ties with non-state actors, such as family ties. As such, the municipality sub-field is much more cooperative and less rigid in its boundaries when it comes to non-state actors. However, there remain risks with this closeness, since politically captured municipalities will be on the lookout for opportunities to support state incumbents through clientelism. IMPACT's social protection program has potentially provided them with such an opportunity.

### **5.1.2 Privacy Risks, Clientelism & Competition**

Regarding clientelism at the municipality level, a highly revealing finding comes from Municipality Councilor Kaskas (MUN1). She stated that the municipality of Beirut did not have a social registry of the most vulnerable in Beirut, which meant that when IMPACT came to the municipality to request names for the NSSP form, each councilor brought the names of those they personally wished to help (MUN1). The councilor stressed that this wasn't something IMPACT could have prevented (MUN1). This finding shows that the state elite,

through years of deliberate negligence (by not having a social registry in Beirut), are more than capable of circumventing transparency measures to feed their clientelist networks.

Furthermore, from a privacy perspective, there is a major risk that municipalities and notaries could get access to the data submitted on the NSSP forms. For instance, the head of one of the municipalities in the North, within the area of Akkar, stated he made his own form to send to those who wanted aid and then filled the data himself back into the original form sent by IMPACT. His goal was to be able to check the data himself and ease the process of correction when people entered the data incorrectly. It's unclear whether there were ulterior motives behind this strategy, but the fact that he was able to do so is a major privacy concern. Mhanna (CS1) stated that when a public internet connection is used instead of a private one, the data filled by municipalities could potentially be at risk. This was a concern SKF raised to IMPACT when they were contracted by them to review their work.

This risk is also present with notaries. One of the notaries interviewed stated that not all notaries in Beirut took up the work for the platform, as some found it too burdensome and took too much of their time, while others did not have the capacity to do something digital (NOT1). Furthermore, he added that he believes plenty of notaries were incentivized to use the platform by political parties to get access to sensitive data for the purpose of elections or other political gains (NOT1). He says however that this was just a feeling of his, not something that he had seen or could prove (NOT1).

As for the second Beirut notary who was interviewed, he stated that the IMPACT team did not follow through with him when he gathered aid applications for NSSP, and as such, the families had to go to the MoSA themselves to request the aid (NOT2). It is unclear whether they ended up receiving the aid. However, it is important to note that while the first notary presented himself as politically independent from traditional parties (NOT1), the second notary had pictures of himself shaking hands with a known political party leader (NOT2). He however claimed that he was no longer affiliated with the party (NOT2). While these findings are only indicative of an underlying problem, due to the sample size of two notaries, they do highlight the fact that the political affiliations of notaries can make a difference in how programs are rolled out at the local state level.

## **Analysis**

Thus, even though municipalities and notaries were the best starting point for IMPACT's social protection programs due to their cooperation, those sub-fields were also competitive due to the clientelist motivations of some of its members. This was a cost that IMPACT perhaps considered during their work, probably because these sub-fields were closest to vulnerable people who needed aid. As such, the IMPACT SAF can be characterized by mixed levels of cooperation and competition at the municipality level, depending on the political affiliation of the municipality and its degree of need for aid.

### **5.1.3 Design Level Capture & Databases**

As such, the fact that clientelism is a quality of most municipalities in Lebanon is no secret to the IMPACT team. Sharabati (IMP2) asked whether it would be better to not use municipalities to deliver aid and avoid clientelism at the cost of not reaching vulnerable people. She

compares the situation of the NSSP with the ESSN program, with the latter relying on a self-registration process instead, which might not have as much reach as municipalities, particularly for those who are “far away and weak” (IMP2). She says that this matter was discussed with the World Bank and the MoSA who agreed that for the ESSN program, launched in December 2021 (Figure 1), it would be better to avoid municipalities due to their lack of neutrality (IMP2). However, even when IMPACT and the World Bank moved away from working with municipalities and notaries, incumbents still found ways to influence those programs to their benefit.

Indeed, Zoughaib (EX2) argues that clientelism and capture can occur at any level within social protection programs. For example, social workers who validate the eligibility of registered households with home visits can potentially be influenced to ignore incorrect information (EX2). Another example concerns the duplication of names within beneficiary lists. For instance, since the NSSP<sup>21</sup> program relied on multiple databases, such as the NPTP database, there were many issues with duplicate names along with the presence of outdated and missing information (ILO, 2021b). The duplication of names might be a tool used by incumbents to have some of their constituents receive double the aid. Indeed, Sharabati claims that the deduplication of names would have been easier had there been a unique ID system in the government (IMP2).

As such, elite capture can occur within the design aspect of social protection programs, according to Maktabi (EX3). He claims that:

[Political elites] can capture the design of the program by directing the benefits in a skewed way to [their] constituents, [either by interfering in] the assessment part or the delivery part. But based on what actually happened, they were not able to do any of these things. [For example], they tried to change the currency of disbursement [of the ESSN] to the Lebanese Lira to deposit the USD at the Central Bank<sup>22</sup>. (EX3)

He added that “there's a de facto risk that was incurred by delaying the ESSN until March 2022 leaving a very close proximity to the parliamentary elections” (EX3). Sharabati also mentioned this issue regarding the NSSP program and argued that the timing of registrations matters because “when you get close to elections, you start to worry about the neutrality of municipalities” (IMP2).

Thus, even when municipalities were no longer relied upon for aid applications, incumbents potentially had enough reach to circumvent this and renew their clientelist networks. According to Maktabi, adopting a political economy perspective when considering such programs can help explain this (EX3). He claims that “the linchpin of the political economy model is the sectarian patrons making sure that their constituencies are dependent on them”, which is why the elite favor targeted programs since it gives them room for discretion (EX3).

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<sup>21</sup> NSSP was a temporary cash-transfer program that launched as Lebanon was undergoing lockdowns.

<sup>22</sup> ESSN is a social safety net program funded via a \$246 million World Bank loan

## **Analysis**

The interactions between municipalities, notaries, and IMPACT represents a case of field jockeying with actors trying to gain the upper hand around each other. Here, IMPACT policy entrepreneurs and their proximate allies (the WB for example) tried to innovate by implementing a self-registration program and minimize municipality level clientelism – even though these sub-fields were open to their insertions and had the advantage of reaching more beneficiaries. However, incumbents still managed to overcome this tactic by influencing the design level of the program, thanks to their patronage networks.

This dynamic within the IMPACT SAF clearly portrays the power hold of the incumbents at the top of the hierarchy over almost all sub-fields within the state. These sub-fields exhibit both a cooperative and competitive relationship with outside actors involved with social protection programs. This dynamic exists for the purpose of enriching existing clientelist networks ahead of critical political moments, such as municipal or parliamentary elections. Thus, while it was easy for IMPACT to find cooperation with municipality sub-fields and notaries, this cooperation could potentially come at the cost of renewing the incumbents' clientelist networks.

## **5.2 Vertical Conflict, Field Shocks & Criticism**

While IMPACT primarily worked with municipalities and ministries, they also had to climb vertically up the state to reach more closed off subfields, such as the PM's office. However, no issues had arisen regarding their inspection work at this level until the beginning of 2021, which comes a year after COVID had begun. There are two main exogenous shocks that changed the landscape in which IMPACT operated: the Beirut Blast of August 2020, and the pandemic, which ultimately led to the launch of the lockdown mobility permits in January 2021. Another factor was the official launch of the 'General Inspection' module in June 2021, which might have caused some internal contention. These events affected the IMPACT and state SAFs, leading to new dynamics with some new actors in the field, such as the General Security body, civil society, and the media.

### **5.2.1 The General Security: An Internal Governance Unit at Work**

IMPACT was put under major fire when cybersecurity concerns were raised by the General Directorate of General Security (GS) when the NSSP program ended and when the lockdown mobility permits platform was launched in January 2021. The GS is an intelligence body within the Government of Lebanon that falls under the Ministry of Interior and is considered the "First Office" or 'First Bureau' of security within the state (General Security, 2022). They can be understood conceptually as one of the state's Internal Governance Units (IGU) as they are responsible for enforcing rules and disseminating information relevant to incumbents within the state.

The GS reportedly became aware of the platform at the beginning of 2021. The GS began looking into the platform when the lockdown mobility permits were launched in January 2021 by IMPACT, which placed IMPACT under the media's spotlight for their work. This might have prompted one of the General Security officials to submit information

containing security concerns to the Director General of Public Security, Major General Abbas Ibrahim (Mashlab, 2021). The information submitted concerned the hosting of IMPACT's data on a foreign server in Germany and its management by SA, which they considered to be a major security risk since they could not monitor who gets access to the data (Mashlab, 2021). They were further suspicious of this issue since the project was funded by international donors (Mashlab, 2021). It is unclear yet what exactly moved the GS to do so at this time, so one can only speculate around external events.

On February 15, 2021, the Major General sent a "Top Secret" document to the former PM Hassan Diab to inform him of the matter, which prompted the formation of a committee headed by the Minister of Communication and officials from government security branches to study the platform (Mashlab, 2021). On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, the matter was raised again by the Major General to President Aoun, PM Diab and Parliament Speaker Berri since the committee did not take any action (Mashlab, 2021). Finally, the issue was discussed in a Parliament session on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021, (Al Manar, 2021) which made the matter public to media outlets, and civil society groups. It was mainly after this parliamentary session that IMPACT became subject to criticism from non-state actors regarding critical privacy issues within IMPACT, which will be elaborated on in the last section of this chapter.

## **Analysis**

The actions undertaken by the GS are thus indicative of a state IGU intent on maintaining and reproducing the power of state incumbents. They did so by shedding light on a project, IMPACT, that they might consider a risk to their power. Their actions may be linked to the macroevent of the pandemic which led IMPACT to take on the role of managing the pandemic lockdowns, as they were the only ones capable of doing so, which eventually got the attention of the GS. The IMPACT SAF therefore began showing conflictual dynamics between challengers and incumbents through the actions of the GS acting as an IGU. However, they were not the only actors who entered into conflict with IMPACT. Indeed, it seems that the actions taken by the GS set in motion other dynamics that ended up reinforcing the incumbent's position within the IMPACT SAF, such as that of the Prime Minister (PM), which will be discussed in the next section.

### **5.2.2 A Letter from the Prime Minister**

Another macroevent that led to pushback against IMPACT's work was the August 4, 2020, explosion. While the link may not seem clear at the beginning, the resignation of PM Hassan Diab in the aftermath of the blast, along with his cabinet of so-called technocrats, eventually led to the appointment of current PM Najib Mikati, who is known as a powerful political and business elite. Diab however, was a university professor with political aspirations; he did not have the same political weight as Mikati. He was arguably placed as PM in the wake of the October 2019 revolution to give the impression that his cabinet was one of technocrats, not of politicians. When Mikati was appointed as PM on July 26, 2021 (Chehayeb, 2021a), things began to change for IMPACT.

Only a few months after his appointment, on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 (Figure 1), PM Mikati issued a circular in which he requested that the President of the Central Inspection "abstain



from sending [information] requests to public administrations, institutions and municipalities ... unless such requests are processed through the Prime Minister and follow his directives.” (Impact Team, 2021). The PM thus claimed that the CI were overstepping when requesting information from public bodies, and that they should refrain from doing so unless they specifically went through the Prime Minister’s office first for permission and guidance. It could be that another factor that motivated the PM to issue this circular was the official rollout of the “General Inspection” module in June 2021 (Figure 1), which was initially the first project undertaken by the CI, back before the pandemic had begun. Its official rollout and publicization might have ruffled some feathers in some of the vertical state sub-fields.

In response to the circular, the IMPACT team wrote an open letter<sup>23</sup> in *L’Orient Today*, a local newspaper, asking the PM not to block their work (Impact Team, 2021). They argued that while the Central Inspection was “attached administratively to the Prime Minister” it remains a “cross-sectoral body created by decree at the start of President Chehab’s mandate in December 1959” (Impact Team, 2021). In a news article, a former professor of public law at the Lebanese University argues that the PM is under the misconception that “the oversight bodies follow him hierarchically, but the reality is that the relationship between the Central Inspection and the Prime Minister Office is an administrative relationship only, meaning that the Prime Minister does not have the right to dictate to the inspection how to act as long as they do not exceed their powers” (Yassine, 2021).

Judge Attieh’s comment on the matter was one that expressed confusion:

Najib Mikati sent a letter to me. You can’t know the reason because when you confront them, they don’t say why, they say you’re doing good work, but then why would you do that in the first place? (IMP1)

By this, Judge Attieh meant to showcase how difficult it was to get a straight answer from politicians such as Mikati who would try to obstruct their work, but at the same time, pretend like nothing is wrong with their work when confronted about it.

## Analysis

This dynamic effectively shows that political state incumbents do not need to justify or explain themselves when they act coercively; they can simply do so within the state SAF and with non-state actors since they hold the majority of the power. Moreover, this letter portrays the unexpected effects a macroevent can hold over an SAF. Due to the blast, the state SAF was sent into a mode of crisis which led to the resignation of PM Diab and the appointment of Mikati. The introduction of a new actor in the state SAF ultimately affected the overall IMPACT SAF.

The entry of PM Mikati into the IMPACT field meant that their work would no longer be accepted the way in which PM Diab had permitted it. Indeed, the ‘General Inspection’ module was no longer tolerated by Mikati, and perhaps, the GS’s concerns were taken more seriously by Mikati this time around, leading to the circular. Since PM Mikati holds more political weight, the power scales shifted within the IMPACT SAF and as a result, their

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<sup>23</sup> <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1277417/open-letter-to-prime-minister-najib-mikati-do-not-block-reform-and-innovation.html>

work became more limited. It is unclear whether their inspection work on IMPACT remains functional behind the scenes, but the fact that most of the data on the platform is now outdated (CS1) could indicate that the pushback from the PM was somewhat successful in obstructing their work.

### 5.2.3 Civil Society in Action

While political incumbents within the state were motivated by the preservation of their interests and impunity in blocking the IMPACT platform's work, this was not the case for non-state actors, such as the Social Media Exchange NGO (SMEX)<sup>24</sup>, who had legitimate concerns regarding the platform.

SMEX raised the alarm concerning IMPACT's lack of a privacy policy in January 2021 (Figure 1), around the time the GS had become aware of IMPACT, by tagging the IMPACT account in a tweet (SMEX, 2021a). Their sudden concern over the IMPACT project's privacy policy is related to the lockdown mobility request platform launched around that time, a direct consequence of the pandemic. The IMPACT team replied by saying were working on releasing a privacy policy soon (SMEX, 2021a).

In an interview with SMEX director Mohamad Najem (CS2) and legal counsel Marianne Rahme (CS3), Najem stated the following:

When we first started on a light basis, they were happy with us. But then when we started writing in depth and with details, Carole called me on a Sunday and I was in the South and I didn't want to reply, and she said that I was sharing misinformation and this is all fake news, all of these are false news. (CS2)

It seems that, while IMPACT was happy with their criticism at the beginning, they soon grew frustrated with SMEX. However, Sharabati's take on the matter seemed positive:

I liked this back and forth with SMEX. Look, when they first started, they weren't very well informed about our work, so we were a bit pinched; we called them and asked for an online meeting and discussion among technical teams. With time they did their homework and they built their knowledge, ... so their reviews became beneficial to us ... So, all in all, I think we need more SMEX out there. (IMP2)

Rahme seemed more critical as she believes that SMEX should not have had to urge the IMPACT team to add a privacy policy in the first place, but that instead, IMPACT should have led with that from the start (CS3).

SMEX's involvement continued once they became aware of the issue of the German servers later in September 2021 (Figure 1), which comes two days after the Parliament session in which IMPACT was discussed (SMEX, 2021b). They asked for a clarification from IMPACT and the Ministry of Health, however, Najem stated that:

We don't really care if they're on the German servers or not, the issue is who has access to them and what is the access method. We consider, however, that maybe even in Germany, it might be safer, but because they insisted that these forms are Lebanese and [that] they're

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<sup>24</sup> SMEX is an NGO in Lebanon concerned with digital rights, freedom of expression and access to information issues (SMEX, 2015).

in Ogero, [and] they proclaimed this very highly, we went for it. But this isn't because we wanted them in Ogero that we did this. (CS2)

The fact that SMEX considered the data safer in Germany rather than in Ogero (Lebanon's biggest Internet Service Provider) sheds doubt on the intentions of the GS, but not on the concerns of SMEX. It may be that the data will be exposed to risks whether it was stored in Germany or Lebanon, but it remains valid for SMEX to raise their concerns regarding the privacy and security of the data within IMPACT (Kataya, 2022; SMEX, 2022; SMEX, 2021b).

Indeed, Mhanna argues that, while the back and forth between SMEX and IMPACT may have been useful, it is important to situate the criticism of IMPACT within the broader policy context in Lebanon (CS1). He states that the GS does not have a clean record regarding cybersecurity (CS1). Indeed, they were suspected of being involved in the 'Dark Caracal' spyware campaign which targeted the mobile phones thousands of individuals within at least 21 countries (Auchard, 2018). Mhanna elaborates:

Whenever a security institution and public administration with a dismal record in good governance, privacy and digital rights raise concerns about IMPACT and other digital rights, I tend to side with IMPACT here because the GS, which has absolutely not made any kind of accountability or transparency about 'Dark Caracal', is not in a strong position to argue about IMPACT. (CS1)

Consequently, Mhanna suspects that the motivations behind the leaks and letters sent by the General Security might be for them to get access to the data that IMPACT has on their servers (CS1). Indeed, Municipality Councilor Kaskas speculates that not only would security bodies and the political elite want access to the data so that they could glean crucial information from it, but also, to modify it:

With IMPACT ... consider one army official somewhere and because he lives in a certain house, we have his data and phone number, ... they want to remove him from the list so he doesn't pay money. It boils down to money in the end. Or there would be someone who has all the estate or someone from a political party who bought estates they shouldn't have bought, all of that shows in the data, so they want to wrap up this situation, remove them from the registries, and erase them completely. (MUN1)

By this Kaskas meant that there might be data gathered by IMPACT that reveals information that certain political or security actors would prefer didn't exist, such as certain financial dues for officials or estates they did not want disclosed (MUN1). As a result, the elite would want to access this data to remove this revealing information.

## **Analysis**

In this dynamic, SMEX primarily acted as a non-state challenger within the IMPACT SAF, but with a critical attitude towards the IMPACT actors themselves (the CI and SA). The IMPACT actors in this specific relationship should be seen as incumbents since they are the ones with the power and resources over the data. The latter are challenging their handling of the data since they have a stake in the privacy and security of the information. This dynamic also portrays clearly the ways in which the social skill of strategic actors manifests when there is a competitive relationship within an SAF. This competitive relationship is built on a difference in vision regarding data privacy and security, not one in which actors are competing over control of a resource.

Their concern is well placed since IMPACT represents the first initiative in Lebanon that has ever collected such a large amount of data owned by the government. Regardless of the intentions of policy entrepreneurs such as Sharabati and Judge Attieh, the involvement of third parties within national data is one that rightfully warrants concern. However, while the relationship between IMPACT and SMEX is competitive, it is also cooperative as they both learned from each other.

As for IMPACT's relationship with the GS, it is fair to say that their relationship is one that is aggressively competitive and conflictual, potentially bordering on coercive if things were to escalate. The competition here may first seem at to be over the privacy and security of the data, but when looking at the history of the GS and their role in maintaining the power of incumbents as an IGU, their concerns should be taken with doubt. Indeed, the competition here could potentially be over control of the data, with not only intentions to get hold of the data for clientelist purposes, but also, to remove or edit information that may be sensitive for them. As for PM Mikati, his relationship with IMPACT seemed to be one of coercion as he only aimed to obstruct their work so as to minimize their ability to conduct substantial inspection work, which would threaten his impunity and that of his allies in government.

#### **5.2.4 A Media Storm & Document Leaks**

Other non-state actors, such as the media, also became concerned with the platform in the year 2022. The convoluted process that led to IMPACT's creation has become a source of controversy in the media because the project was donated to the government in a manner that did not seem transparent. According to Mhanna (CS1), this donation process was expedited in a manner that did not allow for its formalization, which put the President of the CI in a legal battle to defend CI's mandate:

But did the government procure it? The answer is no. It was donated. There are rules in Lebanon for how you donate services money or products for the government, requiring different levels of approval which were not done. So, the IMPACT opponents who are not the most transparent people in my opinion and are not necessarily doing it out of good intentions have a case against IMPACT because of the expedited way it was implemented. (CS1)

It may be that Mhanna (CS1) was referring to the GS and not the media nor civil society when speaking of the "IMPACT opponents" since he previously referred to their lack of transparency regarding 'Dark Caracal'.

Concerns regarding this convoluted process were raised by reporters who got hold of leaked government documents showing that the platform was donated to the government in a manner that seemed to lack transparency. Two famous investigative reports, Riad Kobeissi and Hadi Al-Amine, showcased the documents in an episode of their popular TV show "Yaskot Hokm el-Fased" (which translates to "Down with the Rule of the Corrupt") on a local news channel in February 2022 (Figure 1), in which Al-Amine interviewed the President of the CI (Al Jadeed News, 2022). The two reporters are known for being anti-establishment and investigating corrupt politicians and officials by going over leaked documents and conducting live interviews with concerned individuals.

They seemed highly critical of Judge Attieh and the CI due to the involvement of international donors, especially since IMPACT handles sensitive data, which were initially stored in Germany. They argued that donors were providing funding to the government through the CI in a manner that did not seem transparent. They claimed that the CI was supposed to prevent the occurrence of obscure funding arrangements between the government and donors, not participate in them. The document they displayed did not include the details of the donation made to the government, which laid the basis for their suspicions.

Judge Attieh tried explaining that the IMPACT platform was set up through a grant provided to SA who then trained and provided technical support to the CI, who ultimately owned the platform. The reporters were suspicious of this whole process and grilled the Judge over whether IMPACT was acquired through a bidding process or a donation. There remains confusion regarding how the project was setup since Attieh claimed it was not a donation in the TV interview, despite the leaked documents showing so.

Sharabati mentioned how difficult it was for the IMPACT team to wade through those accusations and to clarify what she termed “fabricated information” (IMP2):

First thing they ask, where did the money come from? We reply that IMPACT was supported by a British fund. Then they ask, where is the bidding process? ... Explain to them that this wasn't a public procurement done by the Lebanese government, [that] the government didn't pay any money on this project. This is a project done by an implementer that got funded by a donor grant ... In Lebanon, biddings are requested where they are not needed, and overlooked where they are needed. (IMP2)

Her statement implies that the way IMPACT was set up in collaboration with the government is not one that is common for the Lebanese public administration, which usually relies on biddings that typically allow for politicians to get a share of the pie. She argues further that:

It is easy to take half-truths and fabricate information to manipulate public opinion. And those who don't have enough details can be misled by the fabricated information, so some people have been misled by reading this stuff. (IMP2)

It remains unclear how the leaks occurred and who was behind them, but they effectively managed to frame IMPACT negatively in the eyes of the media and the people watching the show, while also raising further concerns about its establishment. Judge Attieh expressed his frustration with the defamation they experienced in the media:

The Lebanese Government has the right to give access to the data under GDPR regulations, and here the Central Inspection will make recommendations on whether the access is compliant with regulations or not. The authority is within the Lebanese Government. So why is there all this denaturation of reality and all this righteousness? There is defamation on purpose, I don't know why. (IMP1)

By “denaturation”, Judge Attieh could mean the way in which the IMPACT platform is being painted as a malicious project intent on capturing the data of people in Lebanon for a hidden agenda. Both Sharabati and Judge Attieh spoke of how much time and energy these media attacks took from them. Judge Attieh (IMP1) claimed that “a lot of our energy went to answer the false leaks, the false media, the official letters”, while Sharabati mentioned how, due to the leaks and misinformation, “at times, IMPACT was dragged into politics, we

responded with technical clarifications” (IMP2), despite their efforts to remain insulated from political fights.

### **Analysis**

Since the policy entrepreneurs operated under a new set of rules to establish IMPACT, this generated both hostility and confusion on behalf of different actors who have a stake in the platform, be it over resources or a specific vision. Regarding the latter, the reporters were rightfully concerned over the way in which the platform was established due to its unusual setup, the involvement of international donors, the storage of the data in Germany, along with the confusion over who owns and manages the data. However, the leaks were successful in getting the IMPACT team taken up in a media and political storm, which could be part of the elite’s attempts at obstructing IMPACT.

IMPACT’s efforts to stay away from politics were not only in vain, but they were also misguided: there is no such thing as a purely technical project when it is concerned with the management of the data of millions. IMPACT might have had an easier time when the technocratic cabinet of PM Diab was in charge, but as soon as the state SAF was shaken by the blast and a more powerful incumbent (Mikati) was placed as PM, they began experiencing shakeups. The politics of the state SAF and the power of those vertically situated within it cannot be ignored, especially when data may be seen as a valuable resource by such incumbents. Furthermore, it seems as if there is a certain spectrum of reform that is tolerated by incumbents, one in which horizontal insertions are allowed (within municipalities, notary offices, and ministries) and vertical insertions are not.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

The establishment of the IMPACT platform as a reform effort and a data collection and storage tool has been a remarkably complex process. To fully understand how and why the IMPACT team was able to find partial success within the state's contentious field, this paper examined the emergence of IMPACT as an SAF. It then tackled its relationships with different state sub-fields, along with their interactions with non-state actors. Throughout all this, attention was paid to the exogenous shocks that affected the IMPACT field.

Regarding the first sub-question, the actors primarily involved in the emergence of the IMPACT SAF were primarily the CI and SA, specifically the skilled social actors and policy entrepreneurs Judge Attieh and Carole Sharabati. The CI and SA acted as challengers to the state incumbents. Donors (i.e., BE and World Bank) functioned as a proximate and related field upon which IMPACT depended on, whereas the state SAF became part of the IMPACT SAF through some of its sub-fields. Civil society and the media acted as challengers to the IMPACT team within the IMPACT SAF. Many factors shaped the emergence of the IMPACT SAF. The first factor was the policy entrepreneurship of Judge Attieh and Sharabati. Both invested considerable energy and resources towards accomplishing a specific policy outcome (Kingdon, 2014), which is to increase transparency within the government. Their policy entrepreneurship required considerable social skill which entailed: the mobilization of resources through a convoluted process, engaging in collective meaning-making to build a vision of transparency, and holding a strategic understanding of their opponents by leveraging the CI's weak position. The second factor was the presence of donors, which helped the CI gain a more advantageous position vis-à-vis the state. The pandemic macro-event, the third factor, is directly related to the second. The pandemic allowed IMPACT to oversee the vaccination process, earning them the trust of the international community. So, even though the BE stopped funding the platform in 2022, IMPACT's resource dependence on the BE did not fully destabilize them thanks to having acquired social protection projects from donors after the pandemic.

To answer the second sub-question, the introduction of social protection programs created dynamics which motivated state incumbents to capture the benefits provided by IMPACT within specific state sub-fields. Since municipality and notary sub-fields were the most proximate to non-state actors, IMPACT managed to cooperate with them regarding the NSSP and the pandemic. However, elite capture was easiest at this level. Thus, this cooperation often brought competition over the data collected through aid forms. When IMPACT moved away from local governments with ESSN, incumbents still managed to capture some benefits by interfering with the design level of the program. Incumbents potentially manipulated the databases used by those programs to aid their beneficiaries. As such, since IMPACT found the easiest point of insertion to be municipalities and notaries, who were useful in reaching the vulnerable, incumbents exploited that opportunity to renew their clientelist networks, and even when municipalities were avoided, incumbents had enough power to interfere within the design stages of the aid programs.

As for the third sub-question, political incumbents managed to obstruct IMPACT project first when the GS as an IGU investigated the platform due to data privacy and

security concerns and raised the matter to the PM and other incumbents. This jockeying started when IMPACT became more influential when managing the vaccines, which put them in the spotlight. Second, PM Mikati attempted to coercively obstruct IMPACT by issuing a circular to stop their inspection work after they launched their 'General Inspection' module. The August 4 blast is a macroevent that can be linked to this dynamic since it caused the resignation of the previous PM, who tolerated IMPACT, and the appointment of Mikati, who did not. This shows that relationships between IMPACT and vertical state sub-fields are highly competitive since incumbents have a high stake in protecting their impunity from transparency reform efforts brought by IMPACT. This is not the case for civil society groups and the media, who had genuine intentions to challenge IMPACT over concerns of data privacy and the convoluted way in which IMPACT was acquired by the CI. These groups showcased that while the IMPACT team may act as a challenger to the state SAF, they can also act as incumbents when challenged on their work by non-state actors.

To answer the main research question, the IMPACT team managed to find partial success in their work first, because of the policy entrepreneurship and social skill of two of its most prominent actors, Judge Attieh and Sharabati, who partnered with donors who provided them with enough resources and legitimacy to launch their initiative. Second, this process was furthered by the pandemic macro-event who provided them with more legitimacy internationally and locally. Third, the IMPACT team managed to insert themselves within proximate state sub-fields because those fields favored cooperative relationships with non-state actors, both due to legitimate need and the opportunity it provided to incumbents in capturing benefits. However, they were only partially successful because their operations were obstructed when incumbents began having problems with their work. Furthermore, responses from civil society and the media shed some doubt on their work but also forced them to improve.

Thus, IMPACT could attribute its partial successes to the creative efforts of some of its actors, but also, thanks to some unforeseen exogenous shocks, as well as the mutually beneficial but competitive relationships with proximate state sub-fields.

The usage of 'The Theory of Fields' by Fligstein and McAdam (2012) was highly useful for this case as it provided a two-fold conceptualization of the micro and macro-dynamics that were present within the IMPACT SAF. The addition of the concept of policy entrepreneurship by Kingdon (2014) was useful for understanding how social skill is required for a policy entrepreneur to succeed in achieving a policy outcome. It would have been interesting to see whether more policy concepts, such as policy windows and policy frames, could have fit within this framework as well.

This research could inform future policy makers in Lebanon regarding the effects of introducing transparency reform policies within a corrupt state, as well as the consequences of relying on non-state actors to enact public sector reforms, both positive and negative. It also highlights the political struggles that can occur when aid data is viewed as a resource within an emerging reform field.

As for future research areas, it would be useful to dive deeper into each of chapters 4 and 5 separately. Regarding the former, the issue of how to cooperate with local government bodies such as municipalities and notaries when there is a high risk of clientelism



occurring is one that needs further investigation to highlight cases of success and failure. As for the latter, investigating the motivations and methods that IGUs use to reproduce the field that benefits incumbents are worth exploring to see if there are exceptions to the rule.

This case study should therefore be seen as an example of the unexpected effects of cooperation and competition when a reform initiative forms both an opportunity and a threat to state incumbents.

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