

**Report of Findings from Focus Group Research:  
Public Perceptions of Corruption and Prospects for Anti-Corruption  
Initiatives in Lebanon**

*Final Report*  
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I. <i>Executive Summary</i> .....	4
II. <i>Focus Group Design: Key Objectives, Key Questions and Distribution of Focus Groups</i> .....	5
III. <i>Context</i> .....	7
IV. <i>Themes &amp; Findings</i> .....	8
1. <i>Confusion about the Meaning and Scope of Corruption</i>	
2. <i>Contradictory Reactions to Corruption</i>	
3. <i>General Atmosphere of Apathy and Skepticism</i>	
4. <i>Reactions to Anti-Corruption Initiatives: Alternation between Enthusiasm and Skepticism</i>	
V. <i>Specific Perceptions about the Laws</i> .....	22
1. <i>Access to Information</i>	
2. <i>Whistleblower Protection</i>	
VI. <i>Annex 1: Case Studies Utilized in the Focus Groups</i> .....	27
VII. <i>Annex 2: Implications and Ideas at a Glance</i> .....	28

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## **I. Executive Summary**

The Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies (LCPS) is a public policy think tank, established in 1989 in Beirut, which focuses on issues of reform and good governance in Lebanon. Its Focus Group Research Centre (FGRC) uses qualitative research, mainly focus groups, to gauge and understand public opinion on various issues. Through this research, FGRC seeks to provide decision-makers with powerful tools to explore people's needs, perceptions and expectations.

In 2008 and 2009, in support of efforts to draft new laws on access to information and whistleblower protection, FGRC conducted focus group research to understand the perceptions of the Lebanese public toward corruption and gauge their reactions to anti-corruption initiatives, including the proposed access to information and whistleblower protection laws. This report describes the findings of nine focus groups and 13 interviews held between November 2008 and January 2009 in Akkar (North Lebanon), Nabatieh (South Lebanon), Zahle (Bekaa Valley), Mount Lebanon and Beirut. The focus groups and interviews solicited the opinions of different stakeholders, including members of political parties, civil servants, representatives of the private sector, members of community-based organizations in rural and central rural areas and members of the general public.

This research showed that Lebanese citizens tend to lack a unified understanding of corruption, and that many individuals have a tendency to practice it out of habit. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of other options, as well as the perception that laws are not enforced and that accountability is often arbitrary and influenced by political decisions. The report also examines the responsiveness of Lebanese citizens towards the proposed laws on whistleblower protection and access to information, which were generally considered to be positive and constructive. At the same time, these laws were also met with feelings of skepticism and apathy. This report will explore these results and analyze the focus group findings regarding the details of the laws in question.

## **II. Focus Group Design**

The highest value of focus groups lies in the insights these groups can provide into the social dynamics that drive people's attitudes and behavior. The discussion among participants in a focus group models the word-of-mouth communication that occurs in people's daily lives. For this reason, concepts, words and phrases that people use to explain their views in focus groups can provide material for message development. Thus, discussion and even disagreement are encouraged to elicit distinctions among people's perceptions and push participants to articulate their views. Drawing on best practices from consumer market research and political public opinion studies, these focus groups also explore motivations beyond the rational, intellectual level and unearth motivations at the social, emotional and aspirational levels that drive human behavior.

The focus groups in this study were conducted as follows:

<b>FG #</b>	<b>Profile</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Region</b>
1	Active members of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) / activists in local communities	25-40	North (Akkar)
2	Active members of CBOs / activists in local communities	25- 40	Bekaa (Zahle)
3	Active members of CBOs / activists in local communities	25-40	South (Nabatieh)
4	Civil servants (middle management employees of ministries and security forces)	N/A	Beirut
5	Private sector executives	N/A	Beirut / Mt. Lebanon
6	Local private sector representatives	N/A	Zahle / Bekaa
7	Members of political parties / independent groups not represented in the Parliament	NA	Beirut
8	Members of the general public	18-25	Beirut
9	Members of the general public	30-45	Rural Mount Lebanon

In addition to the focus groups mentioned above, 10 interviews were conducted with municipality figures in Akkar, Zahle and Nabatieh. Interviews targeted members of municipal councils (MCs) within each municipality in order to approach the subject matter from different perspectives. Interviews were conducted with members belonging to different political blocs, whenever applicable, as well as independent MC members to ensure diversity of opinions and perspectives.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with representatives of the following political parties: Future Movement; Lebanese Forces, Progressive Socialist Party, Kataeb, Hezbollah, Amal and Free Patriotic Movement.

### **Key Objectives**

- Assess and measure people's understanding and perception of corruption and measures aimed at addressing it, including initiatives on access to information and whistleblower protection.
- Measure the levels of responsiveness to such initiatives, laws, and procedures.
- Identify people's willingness to disclose information relating to acts of corruption, as well as their fears and concerns.
- Assess people's expectations regarding the content and procedures of such laws.

### **Key Questions**

- How do people define corruption, how do they access information related to public affairs, and what do they know about whistleblower protection?
- To what extent are people willing to disclose acts of corruption? What makes them fear reporting corruption and what would motivate them to do so?
- How do people react to initiatives to enhance access to information and protect whistleblowers?
- What role do people perceive for themselves in such initiatives? What would make these initiatives as effective as possible?
- What would be the weaknesses of such initiatives? How can these weaknesses be addressed?
- What would make these laws user-friendly (in terms of their content and procedures)?

### **III. Context**

While analyzing the Lebanese public's choices and perceptions about subjects related to public policy and administration, one must consider the historical experience of Lebanon and the specific political culture that exists in the country. Without understanding the fragmented political system and how people relate to it and support it, one cannot understand the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which Lebanese citizens perceive their government, laws, civic actions and other matters in the public domain.

War, political turmoil and external influences have combined to weaken and at times completely undermine the Lebanese state. Governed under a confessional system dominated by a union of traditional political forces, the Lebanese government has faced challenges in establishing a state that deals effectively with the cultural and political diversity of the country. As such, the Lebanese state has often not been sufficiently powerful to spread its 'ideology' to its citizens in a comprehensive way. This has manifested itself in uncertainty about national identity and repeated foreign intervention. This historical inability to formulate a working political establishment has had an impact on how Lebanese people perceive the public arena, its performance and its usefulness. The recurrent political deadlocks, crises and civil wars that have tainted the collective Lebanese experience for the past century have made Lebanese citizens skeptical of possibilities for improvement of public administration. Furthermore, instances of theft, corruption, criminal cover-ups, sectarian tensions, foreign intervention, nepotism and favoritism have, for too many Lebanese citizens, become the symbols of public administration in Lebanon.

This historical experience has fueled a certain degree of frustration, disappointment and skepticism among the Lebanese people. For this reason, it is critical that any initiative that is concerned with public policy reform and advocacy must take into consideration this general lack of trust and skepticism towards politics.

#### **IV. Themes/Findings**

The qualitative findings below are listed according to themes. Beneath each theme heading is a summary of the theme, followed by sub-themes, key findings, differences by subgroup and verbatim quotes representing key themes. Many quotes are also incorporated within the text.

##### ***1. Confusion about the Meaning and Scope of Corruption***

**1a. Summary:** Across focus groups, participants demonstrated **confused perceptions** of corruption. Some participants took a very narrow view of corruption, reducing it to petty bribery, favoritism and administrative inefficiency. Although they perceived it as a condemnable practice, participants often failed to draw a clear line between what is corrupt and what is not. Corruption was seldom seen as a two way process; the state<sup>1</sup> was often seen as the source of corruption, with citizens having to respond to that situation.

**1b. Sub-theme:** This confused perception among FG participants stems from their direct experience with the state, which in many cases related to the state's provision of resources for participants' basic needs. This idea was reflected in the tenor of focus group interaction: participants were often unsure how to define corruption, and sought approval from the moderator. Case studies<sup>2</sup> showed that people often have trouble identifying why a specific action would be considered corrupt or not corrupt. For example, the actions described in case study # 1 were barely considered to be acts of corruption because, according to participants, the project in question was successfully completed. This confusion is mainly due to a certain **lack of awareness of laws and procedures** in Lebanon, in this case laws of municipal procurement.

**1c. Key finding(s):** Across focus groups, participants expressed frustration with corruption in administrative processes such as obtaining ID cards, driving licenses, business registrations and other similar documents. Participants told stories about confusing procedures, illegal fees, deliberate delays and other difficulties they had experienced. They also recounted stories in which they had to explicitly ask for assistance from a political leader to get a job. In order to overcome these difficulties,

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<sup>1</sup> The word "State" (al-dawla) is not be understood in its strict meaning in political science, but rather as a term used by most Lebanese people to designate collectively the government, governmental agencies, ministries, security forces, etc: in brief, all that relates to the public arena in Lebanon.

<sup>2</sup> Rf. Annex; three brief cases of corruption were handed out to focus group participants, who were asked to classify them as either corrupt or non-corrupt acts.



participants stated, one often has to participate in corruption. It is crucial to understand that people often describe corruption as **the only method available to them in securing what they consider to be their rights** in the absence of sound mechanisms for public administration, equal opportunities and accountability.

**1d. Insights by Focus Group:** Generally, all focus groups, except for those made up of members of political parties and civil servants, showed a general confusion between corruption, state inefficiency and favoritism. The majority of participants provided examples such as waiting for hours in public institutions to get official documents, and understood corruption as something originating from the state. They often confessed to using corruption, but only as a response to perceived failures of the system. Thus, corruption was perceived as a one-way imposition, and participants placed the burden of finding a solution on political leaders and the government.

There was also a tendency to classify an individual as corrupt when the behavior described was indicative of incompetence, not corruption. Participants were often fervent in their reactions to descriptions of inefficiency and incompetence. Inversely, participants showed a tendency to accept corruption if it yielded the needed results. Furthermore, participants showed a lack of knowledge about the laws governing certain transactions and public institutions. This was especially apparent in the inability of participants (CBOs, general public and private sector) to identify why certain cases are considered corrupt, especially the one about the municipality contract award. (Rf. Annex 1)

Focus groups conducted with private sector professionals indicated similar perceptions, except for the fact that private sector participants were often able to identify corruption accurately when it related to business transactions in their particular field, such as smuggling of goods and products, selling expired food and consumables, and unlawful interventions in bids and tenders. Some of them admitted having undertaken such practices because *“if they don’t do it, someone else would, so they would rather benefit”* (private sector FG in Zahle). This perception relates to the general lack of control sufficient from responsible bodies, or in the opinion of some participants, to implicit involvement from the authorities, impunity and failure to enforce laws. Other participants (private sector interviews) vehemently attacked lax procedures and accused officials of being implicit in corrupt acts.

Members of political parties identified the different layers of corruption, but considered that fighting corruption is not always a priority, and is sometimes not possible, especially when parties are tied to political coalitions. However, there were exceptions to this rule, as certain participants stated that fighting corruption is a national priority that has to be tackled urgently. Some participants also listed what they consider to be the achievements of their parties in that domain, including new measures being taken at government ministries. Some participants stated that corruption finds its roots in

the political system and acute poverty among people, as well as unbalanced development and unequal distribution of resources. Some participants also declared that they had reported corrupt ministers, thereby permitting their prosecution, despite them being members of their own party. Other participants linked reform plans and fighting corruption to structural changes that, they said, have to be introduced into the political system as a whole. They therefore stated that fighting corruption is not a national priority in itself, but naturally becomes enforced when the whole system is reformed. Other participants declared that it was impossible to fight corruption in the current polarized political situation, stressing that administrative reform is the proper first step; however they did not consider this to be a priority. Other participants expressed the opinion that corruption is committed, like everything in Lebanon, through consensus. These participants thought that moving forward with any anti-corruption initiative could not be done within the current political situation.

**1e. Implications and Ideas:** Anti-corruption initiatives would benefit from an attempt to raise awareness and broaden understanding of what corruption is, and what acts constitute corruption. It would also be helpful to focus on the duty of citizens in upholding the rule of law. Corruption should be opposed because it directly and negatively impacts upon people's livelihood and because it undermines the rule of law, which is a fundamental protector of the rights of citizens. Such a campaign could build on citizens' frustration with inefficiency and their eagerness to receive better public service.

**1f. Verbatim Quotes:**

- *"In this country, things cannot be done without recourse to corruption at certain points."* - Member of general public, 30-45 year olds
- *"My uncle is a judge; I studied law, because I will take his place when he retires, which he will do this year. I am doing all it takes, and I am already talking with our MPs to that end. They will make me succeed in the exams and will directly appoint me. You might consider this as corruption, but I deserve this better than anyone else. Isn't he my uncle?"* - Member of general public, youth
- *"Corruption is spread out in the State in Lebanon; it is everywhere and we have gotten used to it."* - Member of private sector, Zahle
- *"Corruption is not only about a poor employee at a public administration getting some money to complete a procedure. It is much more than that; there are huge deals that are being set up and no one knows about them"* - Civil servant

## **2. Contradictory Reactions to Corruption**

**2a. Summary:** The second theme that emerged strongly from the focus groups was the **contradictory reaction to corruption** among participants, who considered corruption a negative and harmful phenomenon that should be stopped and eradicated, yet also admitted to participating in it. Participants expressed strong feelings that, without corruption, people would never get access to the goods and services to which they have a right, resulting in a **general justification of corruption as a normal and widespread practice**.

**2b. Sub-themes:** Corruption is broadly practiced because people consider it **efficient and practical**. Focus group participants declared that using the system without participating in corruption would be much more time-consuming and expensive than bribing someone and getting things done. Participants gave examples which included using the services of middlemen or paying bribes to public officials to cut a long procedure short. Public sector executives shared these perceptions and stated that, for them, long procedures would mean losing money. Participants expressed resentment toward the inefficiency of procedures and the general absence of effective controls from the state.

On the other hand, although participants considered bribery to be an act of corruption, they also justified it, across focus groups, because civil servants are underpaid, and are thus probably **in need of the money** they are getting through bribery, even if it entails corruption. This perception reinforces the often confused understanding of corruption among people, in which people focus their attention on petty corruption and ignore other forms of corruption. The use of corrupt methods is thus justified and accepted as a legitimate way to get one's rights from a system that is, in the words of a CBO activist from Akkar, "*already considered hostile, put in place to punish you rather than serve you.*"

Participants across focus groups admitted using nepotism and personal connections to get to public and private jobs. They considered that they are encouraged to do so by the public sector itself, because "*it is the only way to get things done,*" despite the fact that they also believe that this contributes to sustaining the same situation of which they vigorously disapprove. It therefore seems that the pervasiveness of the phenomenon makes it acceptable to participate in corruption since it is the **perceived norm**.

Focus groups also showed that participants evaluate corrupt people according to **intentions and benefits**. This finding was reflected through the story of one focus group participant who admitted having illegally procured her high school diploma.

Although she considered this to be an act of corruption, she nevertheless justified it because, according to her, she deserved the diploma since she had maintained high grades throughout the whole year, but fell ill during the final exams and therefore could not be present for the exams.

This result was also apparent in the responses of most focus group participants to one of the case studies, which was about a mayor who awarded a public works contract to his relative. The story states that the project was completed successfully and has fulfilled the technical requirements. While this clearly constitutes a case of corruption and conflict of interest, the vast majority of those interviewed in focus groups expressed their approval of such an act because the final outcome was satisfactory. Analyzing responses to this case study in particular has also shown a certain degree of **lack of respect for or ignorance of laws**, where none of the participants was able to link this case to the existence of laws prohibiting such practices and punishing conflict of interest.

As a result, one may deduce that breaking the law is not necessarily considered a crime or an act of corruption in Lebanon. An act is considered corrupt if it entails harm to others. Sticking to procedures and legalities is not always considered a value in and of itself.

**2c. Key Finding(s):** The general acceptance of corruption is linked to the belief that corruption is the only way people can see to get goods and services to which they feel entitled by right. This idea was reflected in the tenor of focus group interaction: participants often became cynical and sarcastic when the moderator asked them if they had ever tried to file complaints or to follow legal channels for reporting corruption. The dynamic of these instances revealed that participants were surprised by what they considered as a lack of common sense on behalf of the moderator, who was told by many participants “*don't you live in this country?*”, clearly showing their **lack of belief in the efficacy of non-corrupt options**. Participants had the perception that even if they were to file a complaint, no one would do anything about it. One of the participants stated that even judicial bodies responsible for punishing corruption are themselves often corrupt. The key insight from these interactions is that corruption is perceived and dealt with as **a de facto reality** of many or all aspects of public life in Lebanon.

It is important to note that other participants acknowledged participating in corruption even in cases where legal channels work. Participants mentioned cases of

buying school certificates and driving licenses, as well as paying to have their taxes lowered. Furthermore, private sector executives mentioned smuggling merchandise, dodging taxes and using political connections to win municipal bids. These clear acts of corruption were justified in a classic recurring phrase “*the situation is this way,*” denoting a general tendency toward **fatalism**. Phrases such as “*if everyone is doing it, why not me?*” was also mentioned repeatedly. This attitude finds its roots in the general distrust Lebanese citizens often feel toward the political system; citizens, as they explained during the focus groups, feel that they have lost faith in the possibility of change, and many of them expressed a desire for emigration, especially young people.

**2d. Insights by Focus Group:** The focus groups with CBO activists showed that there exist two different perspectives on corruption within CBOs. One perspective emphasizes the importance of individual actions, in the sense that corruption exists because people pay bribes, and would subsequently be eradicated if people were to stop doing so. The other perspective holds that “*corruption is inherent to the Lebanese confessional political system*” and that it cannot be remedied but through a holistic reform of the system. For people who held the first position, fighting corruption was not seen as a systematic process of checks and balances, or a systemic implementation of law and respect for citizens’ rights, but rather an individual choice or behavior nurtured by education, morals and social norms. These participants stressed the importance of educating people on citizenship and rule of law, but rarely spoke about the role of the government in creating a systematic procedure to combat corruption. They believed that fighting corruption should use a bottom-up approach, whereby people would understand that corruption is harmful, and would therefore refrain from adopting corrupt behaviors out of personal conviction and ethical commitment. Participants who subscribed to this belief focused on ethical and moral questions, while generally lacking a more concrete and tangible idea of how to exert pressure in order to change people’s existing behaviors in the absence of compulsory measures prohibiting and punishing corruption. Participants who subscribed to the second position advocated the adoption of a comprehensive approach for reforming the whole system, while at the same time, often blamed people for their apathy, inaction, and complicity with corrupt acts.

While members of the general public often perceived the government and public administration as corrupt, the focus group of civil servants revealed an interesting finding. The civil servants expressed similar opinions to other groups in terms of the overall situation. The vast majority criticized the public sector for being subject to corruption, political favoritism, sectarianism and general lack of accountability. Nevertheless, they also expressed bitterness towards citizens, whom they saw as partners in abusing the public sector and encouraging corruption. They expressed

frustration with citizens who do not bother to question procedures or file complaints and stated that they have been consistently working to make things easier for citizens to do so within their respective administrations.

In contrast to members of CBOs, public servants believed that change happens from the top. Many believed that changing the public sector cannot be done without changing the political leadership, using a significant analogy: *“stairs cannot be cleaned starting from the ground floor; it is a process that should start at the top”*, referencing the belief that many officials and political leaders are implicated in large-scale corruption. They also blamed citizens for their distrust in public administration and their recourse to middlemen and intermediaries<sup>3</sup>. Civil servants believed that Lebanese citizens often perceive the state as the enemy and do not trust mechanisms for accountability, even if some of them are sound and reliable. According to them, this situation finds its roots in the history of disbelief and doubt that has nurtured resentment towards many aspects of the public sector in Lebanon.

All members of political parties interviewed expressed their disapproval of corruption; nevertheless, almost none of them thought that fighting corruption should be on their priority lists. They expressed doubt that corruption could be handled soon since the political polarization in the country is too sensitive to push for anti-corruption initiatives. Some participants expressed the opinion that the strategic goal of protecting Lebanon from foreign influence surpassed the need for reform.

**2e. Implications and Ideas:** Anti-corruption initiatives could begin by adopting an awareness campaign which concentrates on linking the fight against corruption to the rule of law and amelioration of socio-economic conditions; these conditions were considered by all focus group participants to be the main problem facing the Lebanese society. Anti-corruption initiatives could also work on promoting the concept of “means rather than end”, to counter the perception, mentioned above, that the ends justify the means, even if they entail breaking the law.

## **2f. Verbatim Quotes**

- *“How do you implement the law if people perceive this implementation as destroying their livelihood?”* - Member of Municipal Council, Nabatieh, South Lebanon

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<sup>3</sup> It is very common in Lebanon to delegate middlemen to complete various procedures in interactions with public administrations. This has led to the creation of specialized offices of middlemen for specific procedures. Through their network of “connections” in different institutions, they succeed in completing different kinds of procedures in less time (and with less money required) than would otherwise be the case. They were considered by civil servants, together with the people employing them, as contributing to the spread of corruption.

- “The municipality did not fix the road beside my house because I supported a different political party; I had to contact another ‘big guy’ in order to exert pressure on them.” – Member of the private sector, Zahle
- “It is futile to abide by the law, if the law never gets implemented; I will stop being corrupt when legal channels are working.” - Member of the general public, 30-45 year olds
- “The state is not capable of punishing corrupt criminals because they are more powerful than the state itself. In the end, it is the small corrupt employees who get punished.” - Civil Servant, Beirut
- “Some people came to my house and were surprised that it was humble. They asked how it was possible that I was a director of a governmental agency and was not well off!” - Civil servant, Beirut

### **3. General Atmosphere of Apathy and Skepticism**

**3a. Summary:** Participants expressed a generally negative perception of the public sector in Lebanon, and were often suspicious and apprehensive of matters relating to public administration. While participants felt that they should be entitled to good service and effective and transparent administration, very few believed that they themselves shared responsibility for building such a corruption-free environment. Furthermore, many people had cynical reactions to any suggestion of trying legal channels for fighting corruption, displaying a general sense of **apathy, hopelessness, and feelings of helplessness**.

**3b. Sub-Themes:** A sense of **alienation** from public decision-making was apparent throughout focus groups. People often do not consider themselves to be part of the state, neither do they seem to have a direct interest in sustaining it; the language they use to depict it often denotes discontent and hopelessness. Words such as inefficient, corrupt, incompetent, absent, indifferent, neglectful, and fragmented were recurrent throughout focus groups. As a result, people seem not to feel bad if they abuse the public sector, because they perceive that the state is not giving them their rights as citizens. For instance, one participant asked, “*why should I pay all the taxes if I don’t get anything in return, especially since there are people who do not pay their taxes, and they will never be sued?*” This attitude seems typical of Lebanese citizens and generates a relationship that is often **competitive and mutually abusive** rather than participatory and inclusive.

Aside from the lack of satisfaction of basic needs, this sense of alienation also stems from a sense of disappointment with political life. Across focus groups, participants identified the major problems facing the country as political deadlocks, sectarianism and the difficulty of changing the status quo. Participants also mentioned the deterioration of living conditions that is perceived to be a direct result of all the latter. Focus group participants often expressed distrust for the ruling political elite, variously describing them as weak, corrupt, irresponsible and incapable of building a state. Participants used phrases such as “*if there were to be a state, it would have happened a long time ago*” and other statements accusing politicians of protecting corruption. One private sector executive asked, “*Who are these corrupt people? Are they orphans? No. they are protected by those sons of b\*\*\*\*s on top*”.

Furthermore, many of the people interviewed in focus groups expressed the feeling of being disrespected by the state, and therefore also feeling disrespect toward the state. They often perceived the state and the laws as **arbitrary and lacking equality in implementation**. Some participants gave the example of Chahe Barsoumian, a government minister who was tried on corruption charges while, according to participants, other corrupt officials were left free. Participants mentioned the unwillingness of certain ministers to remove corrupt employees from their ministries due to political power sharing and backing. This is clearly linked to the previous theme on the general acceptance of corruption, where participants expressed frustration and disappointment with the current state of affairs but also admitted participating in corruption and exhibited little feeling of responsibility or regret, because, “*simply, this is how things are*”.

When asked about their role in fighting corruption, many participants reverted to questioning the ‘system’ and its **inherent impermeability to change**. When probed about possibilities of change, participants answered with phrases such as, “*change all the politicians, change the system, change the country*” and then dismissed that idea by saying, “*but you cannot do that, it is impossible*”. When asked about the laws and the probability of seeing them approved by the Parliament, participants were cynical and asked, “*Who do you think the corrupt are? They are the same people and they will never pass laws that incriminate them,*” When probed about the reasons why the people keep electing the same politicians, many answered that current political leaders are fooling constituencies through fast-track delivery of services and emphasis on communitarian political discourse.

**3c. Key findings:** Focus groups indicated that citizens use the words of “*al-balad*” (the country) and “*al-wadaa*” (the situation) to designate and describe their frustration. These terms were translated in the report as the Lebanese ‘system’. When asked to give reasons for corruption, or for their skepticism or hopelessness, participants often



responded, “*It is impossible to change. The ‘balad’ is like this.*” When asked to explain what “*Al-balad*” meant, the response was “*everything,*” This frustration is not just directed against the political establishment; in fact, participants use these words to explain the **interconnectedness of social values, politics, individual behavior and general norms.**

Accordingly, “*the situation is like this*” indicates both a *disapproval of the current situation* that is considered wrong, as well as the *impossibility of bringing about any change* because this is how things are. This somewhat paradoxical belief both disapproves of corruption, while at the same time approves of it because it is the norm; it clearly shows what kind of **contradictory feelings** people have with regard to corruption and anti-corruption efforts.

**3d. Insights by Focus Group:** Participants from CBOs in Nabatiyeh had holistic views for potential solutions, in the sense that change cannot occur except through foreign intervention, mainly from the US or the UN, or drastic revolutions. “Changing the system” appeared as a leitmotif when participants were probed about the possibility of change; however, they expressed skepticism about new initiatives because of distrust for the ruling elite and doubt their commitment to reforms and change. On the other hand, CBO activists in Akkar, although also quite skeptical, were enthusiastic about new initiatives and spoke a lot about what can be done in their local communities. This was not the first time that participants from Akkar seemed to prevail over people from other regions in their level of awareness and commitment to socio-political change. However, the information that we have does not allow us to draw conclusions about the reasons behind these geographic variations.

**3e. Implications and Ideas:** People seem to want to abide by the laws and would be willing to participate in anti-corruption campaigns if these campaigns demonstrated potential to deliver the recommended change. Such campaigns would also have to demonstrate that they were serious and non-partisan. However, it is crucial for any such campaign to take into consideration this general feeling of skepticism. The campaign should therefore develop the proper strategy to mobilize people. This could be done through demonstrating that change is possible. The people’s deep frustration can be an opportunity if a truly viable solution is provided.

### **3f. Verbatim Quotes**

- *“We would love to see our country ruled by laws and sound mechanisms; but it is about time to know that this will never happen; at least not in our lifetime” – 30-45 year old, general public*
- *“People are skeptical, but they are lazy; they don’t want to do anything (...). Even if they do, nothing is guaranteed anyway because the whole system is corrupt” – Civil servant, same participant at two different moments in the same FG*
- *“What change are you talking about? The same people who are supposed to protect you are those who have consistently stolen your resources. They cannot be parties and judges at the same time; anyway, the whole system is corrupt, including judiciary bodies, that supposedly, you would use to fight corruption” – Member of a political party not represented in the government*
- *“We have lots of bad habits in Lebanon. Awareness should be built through targeting citizens with the main message that the state is not evil, paying taxes is not bad, the state is your friend and it is yours” -Civil servant, Beirut*

#### **4. Reactions to Anti-Corruption Initiatives: Alternation between Enthusiasm and Skepticism**

**4a. Summary:** The relatively weak support for potential anti-corruption initiatives in Lebanon is tied to a general feeling of hopelessness and helplessness, and is also accompanied by a sense of skepticism and apathy which result from deteriorating living conditions and distrust in the political ruling elite. All of these factors serve to reduce popular support for anti-corruption initiatives.

**4b. Subthemes:** When asked about their opinions of potential anti-corruption initiatives, participants including civil servants, members of the private sector, members of CBOs and average citizens considered them to be often politically motivated and of no effect in changing the already strong and established system. Participants referred to public debates on corruption such as the Al-Fasad TV show on New Television, Najah Wakim’s book *“The Dirty Hands”* and the promises made by president Lahoud at the beginning of his term. Participants cited these examples as proof that there is **no serious political will to fight corruption**. They particularly recalled the imprisonment of former minister of Industry Chahe Barsoumian and considered it to be an action of political reprisal: regardless of whether he was guilty or not, participants argued that he was the only one who was jailed, whereas many others were implicated in corrupt acts. All of these examples were considered to result from and/or promote political agendas. Furthermore, participants expressed deep resentment towards the absence of any significant reactions to the scandals revealed

by Wakim's book. This particular episode has apparently played a major role in nurturing distrust and apathy.

Indeed, participants expressed considerable concerns about the efficiency, seriousness and effectiveness of anti-corruption initiatives. They viewed anti-corruption discourses, no matter where they came from, as usually **politicized, partial and manipulated** for political bargaining. Participants further questioned the ability of any initiative to remain impartial in view of the current political polarization in the country, and thus tended to be very skeptical about the possibilities for success.

The seemingly random aspect of anti-corruption initiatives has also served to undermine their legitimacy, for many participants noted that what all previous anti-corruption initiatives lacked was **follow-up, consistency and permanence**. They expressed their frustration with the lack of concrete legal actions, investigations, and penalties against corrupt officials. Many participants conveyed their lack of trust in such initiatives, stating that they do not see serious results happening on the ground. Anti-corruption initiatives developed by civil society were considered to be done in good faith; nevertheless, participants were skeptical of these efforts as well because of the magnitude of the prevailing problem. Participants considered such campaigns to represent an urgent need; nevertheless, they questioned the effectiveness of such initiatives as well as their ability to produce change.

**4c. Key Findings:** Participants in focus groups were asked to list problems facing the country. None of them specifically mentioned the word "corruption", but rather described forms of favoritism and unequal opportunities that were considered by many to be a form of corruption. Having said this, **fighting corruption was not generally considered to be a priority**, while security, political stability and economic matters were identified as the foremost needs. Furthermore, although they did acknowledge that corruption is a very serious problem, members of Lebanese political parties did not consider it to be a national priority at this time.

Furthermore, focus group participants conveyed a general atmosphere of fatigue and impatience in hearing about new campaigns, and seemed to have little interest in being involved in such efforts. Across focus groups, when asked about campaigns regarding anti-corruption initiatives or new laws to be passed, participants replied with skepticism. They perceived the most important problem to be the **enforcement and implementation** of laws rather than simply passing them; for this reason, they were especially interested in seeing how such laws would be applied. Participants stated that, if such a campaign were enforced in reality, they would be willing to support it, but that they are not willing to be disappointed again.

**4d. Insights by Focus Group:** The group comprising members of the general public aged 18-25 demonstrated enthusiasm and more openness and hope than other groups. Though they did express their skepticism and their difficulties in coping with the current system, they were more open to volunteering for anti-corruption campaigns and expressed their strong desire to see them happen.

Older participants were generally incredulous as to the capability of civil society to drive change and make impact. They tended to assert the central role of political will and the impossibility of change if not backed by political leaders. Pessimism was more noticeable in this age bracket; older people would probably need more time and effort to become enthusiastic about the initiatives.

Focus groups revealed that, while all people are eager in principle for a transparent, corruption-free public administration, they will be likely to continue using the same corrupt channels in the absence of accountability and implementation of law. This was obvious during focus groups where participants did express some kind of enthusiasm, especially when asked about specific aspects of the laws, particularly the one on whistleblower protection. However, this enthusiasm was never permanent, and participants generally kept a skeptical attitude and refrained from “*dreaming*,” in the words of one civil servant. People do not see themselves as responsible for questioning officials and demanding change in the administration’s performance. This will be further elaborated in Themes C and D below.

**4e. Implications and Ideas:** Participants are generally frustrated with the lack of enforcement and the perceived non-seriousness of anti-corruption discourses and promises. However, participants were positive and open to new initiatives promoting reform policies if they could be shown to be serious, solid, and impartial. Thus it would be useful for the campaign to build a strong message to the citizens presenting the current campaign as serious, committed, unbiased, and consistent, and demonstrating that it will be able to deliver concrete results.

#### **4f. Verbatim Quotes**

- *“We have opened a complaint box. For three years we did not get one complaint. The people just don’t use it.” - Civil servant*
- *“Since we were born, Lebanon has not changed; in fact, it did, it got worse! Nothing is going to change.” – Member of the general public, 30-45 year olds*
- *“The issue is not about the laws themselves; we have good laws that were never implemented. Actually, even if they pass this law, no one will ever use it, but passing it would make them look good in front of foreign countries.” – Member of CBO, Nabatieh*

- *“Passing the law will not change anything, but passing it is a positive thing. Lebanon is like a car with a drunken driver. Fixing the car’s breaks will not stop the accident. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t fix the breaks. Who knows, at least if the driver changes, he will have a good working car!”* - Member of political party
- *“Changing the corrupt political class is the solution for corruption, but let us not fool ourselves, it is not going to change in the foreseeable future. To clean the stairs we should start from the top, but if we can’t, maybe we should sweep the floor from the middle!”* – Civil servant, Beirut

## **V. Specific Perceptions about the Laws**

This section reports perceptions of FG participants on Access to Information and Whistleblower Protection laws. It relates the main impressions of participants as well as specific demands and expectations, especially with regard to particular clauses of the law on the protection of whistleblowers.

### ***A. Access to Information***

1. Participants showed a general lack of awareness regarding the Access to Information act. Many instantly thought of accessing information related to **official procedures**. Most of the participants **did not think of access to information in the context of holding officials accountable** and understanding how government sectors work. Civil servants were supportive of the idea and were quite positive and encouraging. The general public focus groups showed a lack of understanding of the benefits of accessing information unless it was for **immediate personal gain**. Participants were interested in ways to get their papers and procedures accomplished, but were less interested in finding out about, for instance, governmental or municipal spending. Participants showed little interest in accessing information that is related to monitoring officials or policy issues. They generally did not believe that it was their job to monitor the government, partly because they feel helpless and alienated: they often don't believe that they have any say in politics and policy issues in Lebanon.

2. Focus Groups also showed that citizens rely on **word of mouth** to access information regarding government procedures. Many named websites for specific ministries but have never visited them. Participants showed confusion and lack of knowledge about their right to access information such as public budgets, policies and procedures. Furthermore, there is an overwhelming perception that government offices and local municipalities will not give out this information. The **general lack of trust** persists in this area as well. Participants often expressed that the government will always be hiding information from them. According to civil servants, citizens will always have a suspicious feeling that the government is hiding things, even if they were given the information they requested.

3. With the exception of civil servants, most focus group participants showed confusion regarding the usefulness of such acts. Furthermore, many could not respond to questions regarding what kind of information they would like to know about. In the minds of participants, there is **no link between accessing information and accountability**. While many considered such a law to be positive, it was clear

that they did not know exactly how to use it. Also, when groups were asked if they considered access to information to be their right, many fell silent. This stems from a **persistent lack of a culture of accountability** in Lebanon and from an overall lack of adequate citizenship values. In fact, civil servants complained about the lack of motivation on the part of citizens who do not take the time to question procedures.

4. The majority of focus group participants, including CBO activists, had not thought seriously about accessing information or finding out about the work of their municipalities or government. This can be explained by the sensitivity of municipality leaders during the interviews; many became suspicious when asked about accessing information about their municipality, and the majority would revert to a defensive position. Both citizens and officials (especially municipality leaders) have mixed feelings about such questions, revealing a general social discomfort about access to information.

5. The focus group comprised of civil servants showed a very different outlook on the role of civil society. While CBO activists saw their work as mostly awareness-raising and educating citizens, the civil servants thought civil society organizations should serve as pressure groups and lobbying organizations. The majority of the civil servants had **positive views of the civil society contribution** toward addressing corruption. Many spoke about the possibility of change if the right pressure were to be exerted from citizens, civil society and senior civil service officials.

6. Although they were mostly informed and concerned about issues related to their particular scope of work, **civil servants were highly supportive of this law**. They expressed their willingness to disclose information and considered it the right of every citizen to understand how the public administrations work. They also expressed the opinion that such a law would enable citizens to **monitor the work of their elected representatives**. Nevertheless, many expressed doubt that citizens would use such a law or ask for information. On another note, civil servants expressed the need for advanced technological capabilities in order for this law to be implemented properly. Some of them mentioned the necessity to have electronic versions of files to facilitate access to information. Some civil servants also mentioned the need for more staff.

7. None of the questioned parties had any objections to the law. They did, however, believe that citizens would need awareness-raising about the content of the law and the concept of accessing information and its impact on fighting corruption and encouraging transparency.

## Verbatim Quotes

- “You cannot get any information from any ministry if you do not have personal connection with the employees; transparency does not exist.” – Member of the private sector
- “We have information on our administration’s website about general fees and procedures, but we don’t publish any reports there on our work, productivity and goals. This has to be changed.” - civil servant
- “We always publish what we have done in our municipality and our records are open to whoever wants to see them, but no one cares anyway and we are rarely approached for that.” - Municipality Council member, Nabatieh

### *B. Whistleblower Protection*

1. There exists a **general lack of awareness** regarding the concept of Whistleblower Protection. Many people related it to Witness Protection Programs.

2. Many people thought that **anti-corruption mechanisms already exist** but are not used or implemented. Many stated that if this law passed, it would end up like many others before it: largely un-implemented, forgotten, or manipulated.

3. When asked about what would make such an initiative work, many stated that they would trust an **entity that is independent** from existing structures, and that would bring in **civil society activists** to monitor the government and follow up on corruption files. Most of the people believed that the entity should be **mixed**, bringing together state officials and civil society activists, provided that all involved persons were trustworthy and well-reputed as **non-partisan and professional**. Minister Ziad Baroud was given as an example of the type of ideal individuals that would be highly regarded by Lebanese citizens to occupy such positions. Participants considered that any involvement in politics from this committee would jeopardize its legitimacy. Furthermore, participants expressed a lack of trust in civil servants who are considered to be backed by politicians and who came to their posts due to political connections and nepotism. Civil servants also believed that such an entity could be created as a hybrid institution that is independent from any existing structure, but has a clear mandate from the government with regard to its roles, responsibilities, prerogatives and operating structures.



4- Focus groups have shown a **fear among participants of reporting corrupt acts**. There exists a widespread belief that the non-corrupt will be punished for reporting corruption, in line with the widespread perception regarding the arbitrary implementation of laws and systems, as was elaborated earlier in this report. Furthermore, people do not usually believe that revealing the names of the corrupt will do anything in the absence of true accountability; they used the example of Najah Wakim's revelations, which, according to participants, were never investigated. People questioned, when asked about the laws, the implementation process and the nature of the system, reverting to perceived structural problems. In this regard, one participant stated, "*the Lebanese system sustains corruption and protects it*".

Across focus groups, participants showed a **general preference for anonymity in reporting corruption**. People were generally afraid of revealing their names and demanded full secrecy. While **civil servants refused anonymity** and considered it to represent a major problem for credibility; they expressed anxiety that they might suffer from unfounded accusations as a means of reprisal or blackmail. The civil servants considered that reporting corruption could not be anonymous; otherwise any employee could resort to filing unfounded complaints, thus creating what they perceived as chaos in their departments.

On the other hand, some participants expressed a fear that by revealing acts of corruption, they would jeopardize their **personal relationship** to the person committing these acts (especially in cases of municipal corruption). This also shows a tendency among Lebanese people, also due to the nature of the family structure in Lebanon, to encourage the resolution of issues among concerned parties without reverting to the law. For this reason, even if someone is considered corrupt, the will to hold him/her accountable is often diffused. This is partly due to a confused perception of corruption and the role of citizens in relation to it.

5- There were **varying opinions about incentives**. The question of financial incentives for reporting corruption generated significant debate, as many felt that it would bring chaos to the system, for people would make false reports. Some participants also considered that reporting corruption should be done out of civic responsibility and should not have utilitarian purposes. Nevertheless, the majority agreed on **moral incentives** such as promotion and recognition. Civil servants raised the issue of **unfair salaries**, and considered it to be a great temptation for involvement in corruption in most cases. They expressed the need to revise public sector salaries, taking into account those who are the most exposed to corrupt temptations with limited control mechanisms, such as customs officials.

6- Focus group participants considered the protection of whistleblowers to be crucial for the law, especially **protection against physical harm**, and all kinds of **reprisals**, especially **loss of employment and intimidation** (in the case of civil servants), as well as against prosecution.

7- Civil servants can be considered to be the likely first users of this law because, according to them, this law can be useful for their work. They mentioned, nevertheless, that the law of civil servants prevents them from revealing information about their work and therefore will prohibit them from fully using this law. As a result, the issue of **contradictory existing laws** will have to be addressed.

8- There is a need for **clearer definition of the scope of work of the laws**; especially in relation to the scales and types of corruption that this law will be handling and how it will be implemented: whether the body to be established will be a judicial or quasi-judicial body, how the members will be appointed and by whom, and how the commission's decisions will be implemented.

9- Finally, there is a **resounding ambiguity** that runs throughout the focus groups: despite a general sense of apathy, when participants were offered a law, they were eager for its sound implementation and seemed quite impatient and demanding of deliverables, success stories and tangible results on the ground. This of course means that the proposed campaign has significant expectations to meet in order to create the desired impact. Mere passage of the law will not suffice; what is required is a **long-term strategy** in order to ensure its sound implementation.

### **Verbatim Quotes**

- *“There is a problem with the law. As civil servants, we are prohibited from publishing any article or revealing any information about our work; we are prohibited to tell if we were pressured by our directors. If we face a problem we have to go to our director, but what if the director was corrupt?”* - Civil servant
- *“We cannot change the system, but we can break it apart through a coordinated effort from civil society, parliament, media and people to infuse more checks and balances into the system.”* - Civil servant
- *“I am afraid to reveal any information about corruption. I am afraid that I will disappear and nothing will be resolved anyway”* – Member of CBO, Zahle

**VI. Annex 1: Case Studies Utilized in the Focus Groups**

1- The Head of the Municipal Council bids for a works contract in the village and the contract is awarded to his cousin. The contract is completed and the works meet the standards required.

FOR THE MC HEAD:	Corruption	Non-Corruption
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FOR THE CONTRACTOR (cousin):	Corruption	Non-Corruption
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2- A civil servant gets paid 20,000 LL for completing a procedure for a citizen, whereas his colleague wanted 50,000 LL for completing the same procedure.

FOR Civil Servant 1:	Corruption	Non-Corruption
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FOR Civil Servant 2:	Corruption	Non-Corruption
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FOR THE CITIZEN:	Corruption	Non-Corruption
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3- A commissioner from the Ministry of Finance helps a company to reduce the taxes it should pay. It ends up paying 25% of the total amount due. The commissioner did not want to be paid for this action, but the head of company offered him a fancy pen of 500 USD.

FOR THE MOF COMMISSIONER	Corruption	Non-Corruption
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FOR THE HEAD OF THE COMPANY	Corruption	Non-Corruption
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**VII. Annex 2: Implications and Ideas at a Glance**

THEME	<b>RELEVANT IMPLICATIONS AND IDEAS</b>
1. Confusion about the Meaning and Scope of Corruption	Anti-corruption initiatives would benefit from starting to spread a clear understanding of what corruption is, and what acts specifically constitute corruption. It would also be helpful to focus on the duty of citizens in preserving the rule of law. Corruption should not be fought just because it is annoying and destroying the livelihood of people, but also because it defies the rule of law, which is a protector of citizens. The campaign could build on citizens' frustration with inefficiency and their eagerness to have better public services in order to gain support.
2. Contradictory Reactions to Corruption	Anti-corruption initiatives should adopt an awareness campaign concentrating on linking the fight against corruption to the rule of law and the amelioration of socio-economic conditions, which was considered by all focus group participants to be the main problem that is currently facing Lebanese society. Such a campaign could also work on promoting the concept of "means rather than end" to counter the perception that the ends justify the means, even when they entail breaking the law.
3. General Atmosphere of Apathy and Skepticism	People want to abide by the laws and would be more likely to participate in anti-corruption campaigns if these campaigns were able to demonstrate that they can deliver the recommended change. Any such campaign would have to demonstrate that it is serious and non-partisan. However, it is crucial for the campaign to take into consideration this general feeling of skepticism. The campaign should develop the proper strategy to mobilize people. This could be done through demonstrating that change is possible. The people's deep frustration can be an opportunity if a real viable solution is provided.

<p>4. Reactions to Anti-Corruption Initiatives: Alternation between Enthusiasm and Skepticism</p>	<p>Participants are frustrated with the lack of enforcement and the perceived non-seriousness of anti-corruption discourses and promises. However, participants expressed positivity and openness to new initiatives promoting reform policies, if they were proved serious, solid, and impartial. Thus it would be useful for the campaign to build a strong message to the citizens, presenting the current campaign as serious, committed, unbiased, and consistent, and demonstrating that it will be able to deliver concrete results.</p>