Deliberative democracy in Lebanon: Prospects for democratic innovation

André Sleiman

Federal Foreign Office

OECD

OECD Working Papers on Public Governance

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Authorised for publication by Elsa Pilichowski, Director, Public Governance Directorate.

Abstract

This assessment is developed in the framework of the OECD Project "Citizens' Voice: Empowering Civil Society and the Media to Enhance Open Government" financed by the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented in the context of the MENA-OECD Governance Programme. It responds to a request from Lebanese governmental and non-governmental actors expressed during the inception phase of the project for policy advice on innovative channels for citizen participation.

The paper explores whether and how representative deliberative processes could be considered and implemented in Lebanon. It looks at the feasibility and viability of such processes in the country by identifying the central barriers in their initiation and implementation, as well as what impact could be expected. The paper does not provide an overview of deliberative democratic processes or broader citizen participation efforts in Lebanon, both of which have been covered by recent OECD publications. While the authors recognize the Lebanese civil society's efforts to form coalitions and weigh in on the policy process (such as for example for the National Human Rights Strategy and Action Plan, and the National Anti-Corruption Strategy), these practices are not covered in this paper, which focuses specifically on representative deliberative processes. These processes give randomly selected citizens – through a method called "civic lottery" – a framework to learn, deliberate, discuss and analyse a policy issue of concern and provide them with the opportunity to make informed recommendations to decision-makers.

The document is based on consultative interviews conducted with a range of governmental and non-governmental actors, experts and organisations, as well as a current and former members of parliament involved in public governance reforms. Two OECD roundtables, one organised on 7 July 2022 in collaboration with the Maharat Foundation, and a second on 23 March 2023 under the patronage of the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform (OMSAR), and in collaboration with the Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace (LFPCP), introduced the concept and examples of deliberative democracy and gathered input from a variety of relevant stakeholders for the assessment.

The findings of this document are indicative and are not designed to provide guidance on an implementable deliberative process, but rather to deliver an initial analysis on which more in-depth work could be based. The aim is to contribute to a national debate on the value of deliberative processes, raise awareness about their potential, and respond to the demand of a wide range of actors for support in potentially taking related efforts forward. The document could also be of use to inform donors potentially interested in supporting this type of initiatives.

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

Since 2019, Lebanon has been undergoing a severe financial crisis which has taken a toll on the livelihoods of citizens and public institutions. According to the World Bank, "Lebanon's economic and financial crisis ranks among the worst economic crises globally since the mid-nineteenth century" (World Bank, 2021[1]), and the Lebanese lira has lost approximately 90 percent of its value (IMF, 2023[2]). While the August 2020 tragic explosion of the Port of Beirut significantly worsened the situation, the root causes of the crisis have been described by many as political and systemic in nature, with far-reaching consequences for the future of democracy in the country (Assouad, 2021[3]) (Salloukh, 2016[4]). Public distrust in government and a growing feeling of disenfranchisement have reduced citizens' sense of agency. This attitude is reinforced by slow parliamentary activity against a backdrop of confessional and clientelistic power-sharing practices that is widely documented by the literature detailed in the references and further reading section of this report.

This paper, which builds on a series of interviews and workshops with Lebanese actors as well as desk research, explores the opportunities and challenges to foster deliberative forms of democratic participation in the Lebanese context as one complementary piece that could help address this deadlock, building on efforts from stakeholders inside and outside government. It comes as a complement to other forms of democracy (direct, participative or representative, for example) which have faced challenges in the country, including the postponement of elections for example.

Deliberative democracy, one of the many forms of innovative citizen participation as identified by the OECD (OECD, 2020[5]) is an opportunity to help restore citizens agency and trust in a democratic system. Indeed, deliberative processes give participants that are randomly selected through a civic lottery and stratified based on key criteria a framework to discuss and debate a policy issue of concern, consider a range of different arguments and opinions and make recommendations to decision-makers. They require accurate and relevant information and adequate time, so that those deliberating can go into the core of the issue being considered and find common ground. Deliberative processes are a form of participatory democracy between elections premised on active citizenship and aiming at capturing societal preferences regarding policy decisions related to a range of policy issues. Whereas the majority of other methods of citizen participation place the focus on the breadth of participation – aiming to directly involve those affected by a specific issue, deliberative processes focus on the depth of the deliberation itself and the need to have all parts of society being represented within a smaller group of participants. Common examples are citizens' assemblies, juries, and panels.

The paper, which was finalised in October 2023, looks at key elements deliberative processes should consider in their design, as well as different formats they could take. The prospects of piloting deliberative initiatives in Lebanon seem to be most promising at the sub-national level (municipality or union of municipalities) and at the level of smaller national government administrations that are involved in public service provision or public sector reform. A number of considerations are enumerated to allow for the success of such initiatives and to help enable citizens to reclaim their agency to participate meaningfully in public life.

1 Context

Since 2019, Lebanon is going through one of its most difficult economic and financial crises, coupled with political instability. **Polarisation along sectarian lines is growing whilst prospects for reform remain stagnant.** Public distrust, and alienation from formal politics are particularly acute in Lebanon (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021[6]). The country has gone through extended periods without a President of the Republic or a government and with an irregular parliamentary activity.

The country displays the main symptoms suggested by political scientists as constituting severely fractured states:

- divided loyalties and fragmentation along sectarian lines;
- competing visions of statehood and national identity; and
- acute competition for the distribution of resources among sectarian groups (Castellino and Cavanaugh, 2013[7]).

A main driver of the country's numerous crises has been attributed by many to the political system, **a sectarian-based power-sharing system, also known as a "consociational" model of democracy.** This model heavily depends on elite negotiation (Ezzeddine and Noun, 2020[8]), with inter-sectarian competition for resources being particularly pronounced during cabinet formations.

It is widely accepted that **Lebanon's electoral system has further contributed to disenfranchising citizens**. In the 2022 general election, 49% of the Lebanese voted, with 69% being the OECD average (OECD, 2023[9]). The turnout was lower than the 2018 and 2009 elections (49.7% and 54%, respectively), a relatively low result considering the stakes associated with the 2022 election (financial crisis, shutdown of public services, Beirut port explosion, etc.). The view is that **confessional dynamics are replicated by an electoral system based on a sectarian formula** for the allocation of parliamentary seats (Nicolas, 2021[9]). As a result, a shaky balance of power between rivalling political factions is reflected in Parliament. In turn, the political composition of the Parliament is mirrored in the make-up of the cabinet in order to preserve a delicate power-sharing arrangement between the zu'ama'. **The design of electoral laws** is another key element. Electoral supervision bodies dispose of limited legal leverage and resources to ensuring the integrity and fairness of the elections (El Kak, 2022[10]). Finally, candidates are not equally represented in the media, which are mostly funded, owned, or controlled by the zu'ama', and legal leverage to balance candidates' access to airtime is not adequately implemented (Maharat, 2022[11]).

This backdrop helps to explain the **low levels of citizen participation in policy-making** (as described in the OECD open government scan of Lebanon (OECD, 2020[12])), the lack of cross-confessional political parties, and limited windows of opportunity for civic groups and citizens to influence political processes.

Against this backdrop, **Section 2** explores **the potential for deliberative democracy** to help address some of the above-mentioned challenges. **Section 3** provides **an assessment of different options for prospective deliberative pilots in Lebanon and the pros and cons of each**. The **last section** includes **actionable considerations to keep in mind.**

2 Can deliberative processes form part of a solution for Lebanon?

Lebanon's appetite for change: a momentum to seize

While Lebanon has to some extent integrated certain citizen participation mechanisms within its policy processes, these can be greatly expanded, drawing on the strength and vibrancy of the country's non-governmental sector. In a context of unprecedented financial hardship and continued political deadlock with a ruling elite that has lost many of its citizens' trust following numerous crises including the Beirut Port explosion in 2020, the need to find new and effective ways to ensure that individuals residing in Lebanon (including refugees) have a voice in the policies and decisions that concern them is paramount. The importance of democratic innovation and citizen participation in Lebanon has been underlined in the OECD's publication *Citizens' Voice in Lebanon: The Role of Public Communication and Media for a More Open Government* (2021[13]) and the *Open Government Scan of Lebanon* (OECD, 2020[12]).

The October 2019 uprisings **represented a turning point** – possibly a critical juncture – which will have a crucial impact on what comes after (Capoccia, 2016[14]). Hundreds of thousand Lebanese demonstrated across the country against corruption, failing public services, and a wrecked economy. The uprisings included a range of slogans that outlined a deep-seated desire for transparency and accountability following decades of mismanagement and corruption.

The outcry for change came not only from civil society leaders and well-educated typically middle-class circles, but also from the bottom up and from a variety of classes. The protests demonstrated the everyday person's appetite to be involved in policy matters, as attested by the many open discussions held in public spaces over the course of the uprisings (Halabi, 2020[15]). Beyond the act of demonstrating, Lebanese developed spaces for and engaged in direct political dialogue on many squares and streets. A flurry of debates, discussions, and marches were organised at a small-scale by citizens, students, professors, and activists.

Initiating action in the form of marches and sit-ins, young people and women have been the driving force behind the movement, in a political system where these groups have been chronically under-represented. The prominence of Lebanese women in the protests signals their determination to reclaim their role in public life (Sleiman, 2019[16]). Indeed, women constitute only 5.6% of municipal councils, 6.25% of Parliament, and 20.8% of the labour force (World Bank, n.d.[17]), thereby ranking Lebanon 119th on the 2022 Global Gender Gap Index.

Another important element to underline is the **unprecedented number of parliamentary seats that independent lists gained in the most recent elections, compared to just one seat in 2018** (with an increase in votes received from 2.1% in 2018 to 16.2% in 2022 (Rabah, 2022[18]). These results are reminiscent of the non-confessionally driven Beirut Madinati (Beirut, My City) municipal election campaign in May 2016, which received 32% of the votes (Harb, 2016[19]).

Exploring the potential contribution of deliberative forms of democracy in Lebanon comes against this backdrop, where it has been challenging for those living in Lebanon to actively contribute to decision and policy-making processes (Salloukh, 2016[4]), and where the need to have a different form of citizen-government engagement has been recognized by many actors. Studies have shown that **increasing citizen's understanding of policy issues through deliberative mechanisms can potentially help break cycles of clientelism**, particularly at critical junctures like elections (Wantchekon, 2009[20]). As clientelism creates confessional silos, the introduction of deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies **could help reduce polarisation and shift important policy debates away from the confessional prism** and related divides, allowing to progressively reframe the discussion around the common good.

It is important to note that deliberative democracy should not be considered as a panacea for Lebanon's woes, nor a replacement of other forms of democratic expressions, such as elections, demonstrations, civil society advocacy, etc. Rather, it is an innovative addition to further diversify the array of democratic tools in order to support change, but also a means to improve the democratic quality of the political debate between elections and support the forging of cross-party consensuses**.**

A global momentum for democratic innovation

Representative deliberative processes give randomly selected citizens – through a method called "civic lottery" – a framework to learn, deliberate, discuss and analyse a policy issue of concern and provide these citizens with the opportunity to make informed recommendations to decision-makers. **Deliberative processes aim at re-creating "mini-publics" in the form of citizen assemblies (CA) or citizen panels/juries to capture public judgment regarding a wide range of policies** (see box 2.1 for examples). The OECD's "Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions Catching the Deliberative Wave" report finds that both OECD and non-OECD member countries have increasingly established deliberative processes to create representative spaces for everyday people to exercise their rights beyond voting. Public authorities have commissioned these processes to face a wide range of policy challenges, most often to address issues that have a direct impact on a community's life, such as planning, health, and the environment.

Box 2.1. Examples of deliberative processes

Deliberative Committees in Belgium's Francophone Brussels Parliament: Belgium's Francophone Brussels Parliament established mixed committees, comprised of 36 randomly selected citizens and 12 elected MPs from the relevant Parliamentary Committee of the topic to be discussed. A Committee can be called in two ways: either MPs decide that a citizen contribution to a certain public issue could be valuable, or the initiative comes from citizens through a dedicated digital platform. The 48 members of the committee meet on five weekends or more, debated, and formulated recommendations, which were then followed up by both the parliamentarians and the Brussels government. The committees are indeed an integral part of parliamentary regulations that allow the process to be constantly evaluated and adjusted.

Germany: citizens' assembly on the role of Germany in the world : To support parliamentary groups' work in the German federal parliament, a randomly-selected citizens' assembly lasting over ten online weekend sessions was conducted in 2021. It aimed to propose recommendations on the role Germany can play in the future on various global issues, and the tasks Germany wants, should, and must perform in the world. This builds on a previous exercise initiated in 2019 by Mehr Demokratie and the Schöpflin Foundation. The results and recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly were presented to the Parliament in March 2021 for discussion, under the patronage of the President of the Parliament. The topics and questions discussed during the Assembly were identified during a preparation phase where all parliamentary groups as well as social actors in the fields of foreign policy, security, foreign trade, development, and international politics were invited. To select the citizens joining the assembly, municipalities were first randomly selected. They then drew a pre-determined, random number of people from their population registers. The participants in the Assembly were distributed according to place and size of residence, age, gender, educational level, and background in such a way that they roughly reflect the German population. In a second round of selection, a sort of "mini-Germany" was established from the group of people selected, who positively responded to the invitation. In order to avoid power disbalance, the ratio of 1 MP to 3 citizens helped to counterbalance the power dynamics in the discussions between citizens and politicians. The deliberations take place in small groups of 7 to 8 participants with skilled facilitators to warrant equal participation and avoid political pressure. In addition, a targeted training for MPs—with a focus on core values such as active listening, co-creation and respecting other people's opinions—was offered. 97% of the participants (citizens and MPs) stated that the debates were conducted in a respectful manner and took everyone's opinion under consideration.

Austria's Climate Assembly: Established as a result of the Austrian petition for referendum on climate change in June 2020, the Climate Assembly, or 'Klimarat', brought together 100 randomly selected citizens to discuss and develop ideas for climate protection measures in Austria. Representing a 'microcosm' of Austrian society, citizens above the age of 16 were randomly selected by Statistics Austria to reflect the population in terms of gender, age, level of education, income, and place of residence. To provide scientific guidance and ensure the independence of the Assembly, a Scientific Advisory Board and Advisory Committee, consisting of scientists and representatives of a wide range of governmental and non-governmental organizations respectively, were appointed to participate in the discussions. The Assembly met six times in the spring of 2022, and their findings were presented to the federal government in mid-2022.

The French Citizens' Convention on Climate: After months of social unrest in 2019, President Macron announced the creation of a French Citizens' Convention on Climate, which gathered 150 randomly selected citizens to deliberate on how to achieve a 40% reduction of greenhouse gases by 2030 while respecting social justice. They met for 21 days spread out over one year and heard from

over 100 experts, academics, and stakeholders. In 2020, they produced a final report comprising 149 recommendations on the issue, a part of which was subsequently adopted.

Citizens' Assembly against corruption in Montenegro

In cooperation with the European Parliament, the Parliament of Montenegro convened a randomly selected Citizens' Assembly in 2021. The focus was on corruption in the health system in the public sector. The recommendations of the 50 participants were adopted by them with a two-thirds majority, while some achieved unanimous approval. A second edition of the assembly was held with a focus on the level of implementation of the original recommendations and citizens views regarding key issues.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Mostar Citizens' Assembly

A deliberative process initiated by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe was convened in 2021 to revive local democracy in Mostar, a city in Bosnia and Herzegovina that had not seen local elections for over 12 years because of political gridlock between ethnic parties. The topic for deliberation that was selected by citizens with the involvement of local elected officials was how to address city cleanliness and use of public spaces. Over the course of four weekends, 47 randomly selected citizens learned, deliberated and agreed on a set of recommendations to city officials. The selected group was representative of the city's diverse population. The final report included 32 recommendations that addressed issues of waste management, public green spaces and environmental education, but also reform of public companies and anti-corruption issues. Despite initial hesitance by political leaders, they eventually supported the process, and the Mostar City Council adopted all recommendations put forward by the citizens' assembly, with some of them already implemented. This was one of the first citizens' assemblies that was co-initiated by an international organization. It was held in an ethnically diverse society with low levels of interpersonal and institutional trust and in a city that experienced heavy intercommunal fighting during the war in the 1990s, and that is still a strongly divided post-conflict environment. Particular attention was given to inclusiveness in the design and facilitation of the process.

Note: https://deutschlands-rolle.buergerrat.de/en/citizens-assembly/ , https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/) and https://klimarat.org/english/ , https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/democracy-and-participation-in-europe/shortcut-archive/shortcut-9-deliberative-committees-a-new-approach-to-deliberation-between-citizens-and-politicians-in-brussels and interviews with Jonathan Moscovic and Damir Kapidžić

These processes have been used at all levels of government, particularly the subnational level (see box 2.2). 65% of the cases collected by the OECD have been commissioned by a local government, 21% by a regional authority, 12% by a national or federal government, and 2% by an international body (OECD 2021).

Box 2.2. Deliberative democracy exercises at the local level in Brazil

Citizen Council in Fortaleza on waste management: In 2019, the Municipality of Fortaleza (Prefeitura de Fortaleza) and Fortaleza's Observatory (Observatório de Fortaleza) organized a representative deliberative process on waste management with the support of Delibera Brasil. Citizens from all geographical sectors of Fortaleza received an invitation signed by the Mayor to participate in the civic lottery to select the 40 members of the Citizen Council. The Council received information from a diversity of sources to learn about the context and challenges of waste management at the Municipal level. The members of the Council deliberated during five in-person sessions and produced 19 recommendations which were presented to the local authorities in December 2019.

> **Deliberation for budget allocation in the Municipality of Sao Paulo:** Delibera in partnership with Tide Setubal Foundation and Our Sao Paulo Network (Rede Nossa Sao Paulo), piloted two virtual deliberative processes in São Miguel Paulista and Jaraguá-Pirituba. In both pilots, 30 randomly selected citizens, broadly representative of their communities in terms of gender, age, education and occupation, formed a mini-public to make recommendations to the local authorities on priorities for public spending for the period 2021 - 2024. Both deliberative processes produced a series of proposals integrated in the Municipality's digital participatory platform. 2 proposals have been selected as priorities for the 2022 Budget. These positive results have sparked interest from the Municipality to apply this methodology to the budget allocation process in the 32 sub-entities of the Municipality and is considering broadening the use of deliberative processes for other planning instruments as well as the creation of a Municipal deliberative process.
>
> Source: *Sources: Delibera (2019[76]), Fortaleza Citizen Council Executive Summary (Sumário Executivo Conselho Cidadao de Fortaleza), https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Suma%CC%81rio-ExecutivoConselho-Cidada%CC%83o-de-Fortaleza.pdf ; Netto; Cervellini, Lavalle (2021[75]), Action Plans of the sub municipalities and virtual mini-publics: the cases of São Miguel Paulista and Jaraguá-Pirituba (Planos de ação das subprefeituras e minipúblicos virtuais: os casos São Miguel Paulista e Pirituba-Jaraguá), https://centrodametropole.fflch.usp.br/sites/centrodametropole.fflch.usp.br/files/cem_na_midia_anexos/12-nota_tecnica_minipublicos01.pdf*

As for other types of participatory processes, deliberative democracy is not a substitute for representative, election-based democracy. **Rather, it provides citizens a space to complement representative democracy between elections** by informing public decisions, and supporting elected representatives to make difficult decisions, planning for the long-term or breaking political deadlocks, It helps move towards a democratic continuum, where different forms of democratic participation (such as representative, deliberative or direct) can complement and reinforce each other.

Deliberative processes aim at **renewing the relationship between the people and their political representatives**, leading to increased trust in government. By giving everyday people the space to learn and contribute to the common good, **these processes enable a culture of participation amongst citizens.** Policy-makers and elected representatives can play an important role in such processes, whether by providing testimony or expert opinion on the issue at stake, or by listening to the citizens recommendations. This in turn can have a positive impact on the citizen-government relationship. To ensure commitment to the process, the selected assembly members are often compensated for their time and effort.

The "deliberative wave" that has been documented by the OECD comes in response to low levels of trust in governments and a growing global trend of popular protests resulting from increasingly disenfranchised citizens who object to top-down policy choices. More and more citizens are calling for democratic innovation to engage in public life and for political decisions to be a result of fair and reasonable discussion among individuals. They stem from the realisation that representative democratic processes and institutions premised on elections are no longer fully fit for purpose in the twenty-first century (OECD, 2020[5]; Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021[6]).

While deliberative processes are not a silver bullet and further efforts are needed to ensure these processes are representative, inclusive, and integrated into the democratic architecture of countries, **OECD research concludes that their use in the current global context of disfranchisement may restore a vital two-way communication between citizens and government to find a common ground and help in rebuilding trust.** Evidence shows that these processes can have a positive impact on decision making and on participants' trust in government, if recommendations are implemented. In 39% of the cases collected by the OECD (2020[5]), more than half of the recommendations were implemented by public authorities, and in 70% of the cases, participants were able to discuss the results face-to-face with government officials. OECD countries are taking these innovations one step forward, moving from ad hoc

processes to institutionalised mechanisms. This is the case in Belgium, Canada, Colombia, France, and Portugal for example.

Caveats to consider in the Lebanese case

Because of their potential to diversify the actors involved in public decisions, as well as their time-consuming and somewhat expensive nature, efforts to conduct **deliberative processes can be met with opposition from existing governmental actors.** This poses a substantial problem, given that deliberative processes should be built with the condition that a public authority commits to responding or acting on the recommendations that emanate from the process (OECD, n.d.[21]). Furthermore, recent years have witnessed a wave of Lebanese youth – a segment of the population that could be most interested in deliberative efforts - leaving the country in search of jobs elsewhere (LCPS, 2022[22]).

Another challenge to take into consideration is **citizens' mistrust in their public authorities and the perceived lack of transparency which might hinder people's engagement in deliberative processes**. Many participants are likely to **exhibit cynicism and scepticism** toward the added value of the exercise as they would not believe in the public authority's commitment to effect change afterwards. According to the preliminary findings of a recent survey conducted by the European University Institute in March 2023 among a sample of 1,350 Lebanese:

- 88% of the respondents had not heard of deliberative citizens' assemblies before (3% not sure and 9% reportedly yes).
- 40% thought such assemblies would be a good idea for Lebanon versus 45% of sceptics and 15% undecided. The key qualitative reason for sceptics is the expectation of these assemblies not being listened to by politicians.
- When asked if they would participate in an assembly if invited, only 19% said yes, versus 76% who said no and 5% who were undecided. The key reason for people choosing "no" is not having enough time or having to stay away from work, even though the survey prompt did mention that participation would be compensated, as recommended by the OECD (Garbiras-Díaz, Vierlinger and Niessen, 2023[23]).
- The study also included an experimental component investigating legitimacy perceptions of hypothetical deliberative assemblies versus other forms of policy-making salient in Lebanon. Results showed that hypothetical policy decisions made by deliberative assemblies – regardless of policy domains discussed, or precise policies decided upon – were considered legitimate in 65% of cases; a high result when compared to average approval ratings derived from similar studies done in other countries, which lie at about 45% (Garbiras-Díaz, Vierlinger and Niessen, 2023[23]).
- Deliberative assemblies were also perceived as more legitimate than party elite discussion, where the study gauged approval ratings at 54% respectively (Garbiras-Díaz, Vierlinger and Niessen, 2023[23]).

Even if a public authority were to commit to implementing the recommendations, its ability to compensate the participants to attend the deliberative process and to implement the resulting decisions would remain limited in view of the severe depreciation of the Lebanese pound and the financial weakness of the public sector. Similarly**, with the current socio-economic pressures on the people living in Lebanon, disengagement from politics is a real risk**. There may be a concern that individuals' primary and daily considerations are not likely to be taking part in a process involving a government that they have little trust in.

This was observed in one of the rare deliberative experiments that were implemented in Lebanon in 2020 (see **Error! Reference source not found.**3 and Section 3**). Opinions expressed during the c onsultation stages of the planning process tilted toward a rejection of any representation in the CA**

of state officials. Similarly, organisers received rejections from public officials re-asserting the prevailing belief in the "state-expert hegemony" (i.e., limiting policy decisions to elected politicians advised by technical subject matter experts).

The response of the officials invited to the Lebanese CA also showed a disdain or suspicion of the ability of "ordinary citizens" to decide on policy matters, based on the premise that these people should not be entitled to participate in policy-making based on a just a few presentations. The organisers therefore chose to proceed without the participation of politicians. However, it was important that the CA engage with state actors because of questions of governance, legitimacy, and trust. Eventually, CA members decided to include members of political parties instead of officials.

The reluctance of officials to consider citizen recommendations for policy design were also echoed during a meeting organised by the OECD, OMSAR and LFPCP in Beirut, on 23 March 2023. The meeting gathered 34 participants including OMSAR's Minister and advisors, the Head of Civil Service board, an advisor to the Prime Minister, parliamentarians, public servants, legal experts, and CSOs, who confirmed this as one of the key barriers. **It will be therefore essential to stress that deliberative assemblies provide the space for citizens to learn and get information from all points of view prior to shaping collective recommendations.** The established practice is that citizens participating in such exercises **benefit from the preparatory work done by experts who spend months collecting data, studying patterns, analysing and assessing different variables, etc.** Furthermore, citizen assemblies should be considered as representative bodies that complement elected assemblies, **not as replacements**. In other terms, CA participants, similarly to members of Parliament are both selected for representation purposes – to capture public judgment – without knowledge prerequisites on a given policy or issue. Just like the public administration and specialised advisors inform the decisions of elected officials, the deliberative practice invests in subject matter experts to provide adequate information to CA members. Furthermore, the political establishment might be less open to the idea of experimenting with deliberative democracy than certain new political parties for example.

Box 2.3. The American University of Beirut's Citizen Assembly on Energy Justice

In October 2020, a CA on electricity and energy justice was organised in Lebanon upon the initiative of two academic institutions: the American University of Beirut and the University of College London Institute for Global Prosperity. It was held in five sessions over three days and focused on one neighbourhood in Beirut. The initial plan consisted in recruiting 70 members but, due to the covid-19 restrictions, 33 members of the public were recruited at random, while ensuring representation of various community groups. 13 energy experts, facilitators, and coordinators were engaged in the planning process. The community around the CA also involved stakeholders from the area, who were invited to advise on themes of the CA and support participant recruitment, energy experts, as well as observers and evaluators. As the CA convened, it had around it a diverse community of over 60 experts and citizens.

Members worked and deliberated in four sub-groups of 8–9 members, each led by an expert facilitator. Following expert input, citizens were invited to discuss and vote on key thematic areas and provide recommendations for the way forward. Members of the CA had individual voting powers; they were asked to make decisions related to three key issues. Members realised that the deliberative process was not about imagining an impossible future, but rather about developing solutions (1) that make progress on the issue, (2) can be implemented, and (3) can gain political traction.

Since this experiment was a pilot, the role of evaluation was crucial and organisers followed an evaluation framework (Standards for Citizens' Assemblies, 2020) that relied on (1) an assembly members evaluation survey and constant solicitations for feedback, (2) debrief meetings following every

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session and after the completion of the CA, and (3) observation notes during the CA taken by independent evaluators.

Source: (Shehabi and Al-Masri, 2022[24]) and (Shehabi et al., 2021[25])

To conclude this section, **despite the challenges mentioned, there is an opportunity to further explore the possibility of conducting representative deliberative democracy exercises, given their importance in addressing the challenges raised by sectarian power-sharing arrangements and building on the relative democratic re-awakening following the movements that arose in 2015 and 2019.** This opportunity also builds on the government's commitment to pursue the open government principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation, as elaborated in the OECD Open Government Scan of Lebanon and echoes the priorities of many international development partners working in the country.

3 Assessment of prospective deliberative pilots in Lebanon

There are **several options for Lebanon to consider as the country explores the possibility of introducing deliberative pilots.** The below describe them and **underline pros and cons**.

At the national level

At the national level, the following options could be considered:

- A National Citizen Assembly
- A deliberative process piloted at the level of a parliamentary committee or sub-committee
- A deliberative process piloted at the level of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers
- A deliberative process piloted at a ministry level.

The first type of deliberative process that could be envisaged in Lebanon **is a platform similar to a National Citizen Assembly that would be convened by Parliament, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, a public institution, or a line ministry depending on the topic of the CA.** The first option is ambitious as it entails a wide consensus from all political blocs in support of a deliberative process. In addition to funding and logistical constraints, two main challenges emerge. The first one is the ability to mobilise the membership making up the "mini-public" participating in the deliberative process. Maintaining the availability and commitment of a relatively large deliberative assembly throughout such a process, which usually stretches over a long period, might be challenging in view of the novelty of this concept in Lebanon. The second challenge, assuming Lebanon's political leadership accepts to engage, is to identify a well-delineated topic to deliberate on. Since 2020, Lebanon's Parliament has failed to tackle essential legislation on a wide variety of topics – all of high priority – to meet the demands of the people and the international community. These topics include the national budget, the independence of the judiciary, the Capital Control law, and other financial reforms. The slow progress on all these fronts does not seem promising for a deliberative process.

Alternatives could be envisaged, however, such **as a deliberative process piloted at the level of a parliamentary committee or sub-committee, involving a smaller assembly, as was the case of Belgium's deliberative committees** (Cesnulaityte, 2021[26]). This option is not devoid of political challenges but seems more attainable as it would mainly require the approval of the committee's chairperson – and perhaps the approval of the Parliament Speaker if politicians deemed increased formality as preferable. A parallel committee made up of citizens would then be invited to deliberate on a specific draft law that is being discussed. In terms of agenda-setting and ease of implementation, this option may be worth exploring with interested members of Parliament.

Another alternative is to organise **an assembly at the level of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PoCM).** Instead of studying draft laws, the assembly would be working on national strategies and action plans leading to desired political and administrative reforms. The PoCM is typically the locus of

inter-ministerial cooperation, where officials representing several institutional stakeholders meet in inter-ministerial committees to discuss cross-cutting reforms. Proposed subjects could be drawn from specific sections of the 2020 National Anti-Corruption Strategy, the Digital Transformation Strategy 2020–2030 (launched in October 2022 with the support of the OECD, among other actors), or more ambitiously, could be related to the development of the much-awaited financial and economic recovery plans. A strong backing by the Prime Minister is needed to initiate the process, but the buy-in of the dominant political forces will also be instrumental for its success. In any case, a deliberative pilot should start with more specific and tangible issues that demonstrate the added value of deliberative assemblies.

Another option could be a **Citizens' Jury or Panel that deliberates on key policy issues at a ministry-level.** The organisation of such a jury or panel can be decided directly by the minister, with the buy-in of the ministry's senior leadership (i.e., General Directors). Although not mandatory, the validation of the Council of Ministers, either at the beginning or at the end of the process can provide additional leverage for the legitimacy of the process, through the issuance of a decree.

There are many advantages to the organisation of a deliberative process at the ministry-level, such as easier access to experts and tangible topics that relate to real-life problems. In addition, smaller entities (such as ministries as compared to the Parliament for example) are usually more inclined to innovate. Smaller exercises would also be more implementable in terms of funding and logistics.

A key challenge is the identification of a minister who would be willing to engage in such an exercise. To mitigate this, it is possible to envisage a collaboration with "smaller" ministries or those that are more open to innovation and reform. **These could include OMSAR**, which has extensively worked on open government reforms, anti-corruption, and digitisation – key topics of interest for the Lebanese and the international community in the current crisis context. Building on the OECD's Open Government Scan of Lebanon, OMSAR could be supported to play a leading role in this regard.

Another possible candidate could be **the Ministry of Environment**, which is responsible for major services that have been the subject of controversies, like waste management, the preservation of biodiversity, quarries, among other topics. Finally, the **Ministry of Information** could be a suitable partner to address topics like media freedom, enabling the right to access information, and combating mis-and dis-information as well as hate speech.

At the municipal level

The second type of deliberative process that could be envisaged is **at the municipal level**. Initial efforts in this regard had been tested as part of an OECD project with support from Italy in promoting Open Government in the municipalities of Byblos and Dhour Choueir-Ain Sindiyaneh (Bürgerrat, 2021, p. 85[27]).

Municipal officials (mayors or heads of municipal federations) are more open than national politicians to cooperate with civil society organisations and engaging with community actors. This is because daily contact with citizens is par for the course for mayors; and partnership projects with development partners (whether national CSOs or international donor organisations), are a defining feature of municipal work. The reliance on external funding and assistance has been a growing trend since the 2019 financial crisis. Cooperation with civil society is therefore a familiar practice and has acquired an almost vital importance.

The advantages of piloting a deliberative assembly at the local level are many. At the organisational level, they include greater agility in co-designing, managing, and validating the deliberative process. Mayors and heads of municipal federations are the main decision-makers to set the process in motion and they only require the green light of the municipal council. Contrary to Parliament, municipal councils in Lebanon are more cohesive (Sleiman, 2020[28]), because they are characterised by fewer political and sectarian divisions. They are primarily concerned with issues of local development and service provision

at a relatively small scale, which are less polarising than national political issues. As such, the thematic spectrum of the deliberation can be very large, ranging from urban planning to mobility, public service provision (waste management, healthcare, electricity, public safety, cultural life, etc.) and administrative modernisation (internal management, digitisation, administrative services) and public integrity (access to information).

Another advantage is the easier access and outreach to potential participants. Most municipal areas are small and tight knight communities. Even if most inhabitants are seasonal residents who spend most of the year in urban centres, communication channels are active and regularly relay news and updates about the community, often reaching the diaspora. Informing local communities about the process and mobilising them to participate will therefore not pose a major challenge. Similarly, engaging in a deliberative process at the level of union of municipalities should not prove difficult, especially in rural settings, if the region is moderately diverse politically and confessionally.

In either case, organisers of this deliberative process should be mindful of the political/party interests of the municipal counterpart. Are they able to engage in this process autonomously or will they require the "go-ahead" of a higher political/sectarian authority? Will they consistently display signs of commitment during the entire process? It will be essential for the co-organisers of the process to agree on its purpose, the implementation roadmap, and the profiles of the prospective participants to re-create a "mini-public" that matches the characteristics of the municipal area.

In Lebanon, people who are 21 years and older are entitled to vote in their towns of origin, which are rarely where they live and work. That is why mayors are usually reluctant to involve non-voters in local decision-making. It should be clearly communicated to the municipal counterpart, from the onset of the process, that the raison d'être of deliberative democracy is precisely to shed light on experiences that are typically overlooked in traditional democratic mechanisms, and to give voice and agency to all participants.

The most prominent challenge, however, will be to secure the necessary resources to sustain the functioning of the assembly as municipalities will unlikely contribute materially. Even before the 2019 financial crisis, Lebanese municipalities were financially struggling (Sleiman, 2022[29]). After the Lebanese pound's lost 98% of its value, municipal budgets of all sizes have been decimated. With the unbridled hyperinflation, some municipalities have been left with a yearly budget of no more than 3,500 USD. Even large municipalities have seen their spending power dwindle in significant proportions.

4 Reflections on future steps in support of deliberative democracy in Lebanon

Regardless of the type and level of deliberative process, the following are important considerations for actors interested in exploring the piloting of a deliberative exercise in Lebanon:

- **Raise awareness on the importance, benefits, and limitations of deliberative democracy**. The potential of any such process needs to be explained not as a panacea to Lebanon's woes, but as an enfranchising tool that can contribute to addressing key challenges, as well as a means to strengthen interpersonal trust and build alliances among reformers. It is also necessary to stress that deliberative democracy is not meant to replace other forms of democratic expression in the country, but to act as an innovative addition that complements and diversifies the democratic tools available to citizens in order to effect change. This awareness-raising work could be done by media outlets, CSOs and government partners like OMSAR. The target audience should however not only encompass citizens, but also political actors and members of parliament.

- **Select the right partner, for example, a public authority whose leadership is interested in democratic innovation and eager to engage in a deliberative process**. Partners could also be mayors, ministers, parliamentary committee chairpersons, or high-ranking officials. OMSAR as the leading office for open and digital government reforms could be one option, the Ministry of Environment, Transportation or Social Affairs another, given the impact of environmental projects on communities and the difficult trade-offs climate change reforms often entail for example. If interest may be lacking in many ministries, some entities especially at the local level may be motivated to create positive change in their community in innovative ways. Underlining the exploratory or pilot nature of the exercise will be essential here, particularly for sceptics of this type of effort. Ensuring the partner has a high level of credibility and motivation in creating change will be essential.

- **Ensure sound planning and implementation of the process**. Ensuring the exercise is implemented in a proper manner was highlighted as paramount during the discussions for the development of this paper. The OECD Good Practice Principles (n.d.[21]) could serve as important guidance in this regard. Ensuring the obligation to follow-up and act on the recommendations of a citizen assembly, conducting effective evaluation and documenting the potential success of the exercise, especially in the case of a pilot was noted. This could enable the exercise to have a snowball effect and ensure the longevity and sustainability of efforts. Existing efforts from international academics could support this type of work.

- **Ensure the process is gender-diverse and as inclusive as possible, including vulnerable communities (women, youth, migrants, etc.)**. An economic class-based stratification would also be useful given the Lebanese context. Having women (for example) as facilitators or as part of the experts invited to the process could be a valuable strategy to encourage more diversity in the types

of citizens participating in deliberative exercises. Another important aspect to tackle in parallel in order to ensure gender-diverse processes is taking into account the impact of gender norms in Lebanon on women's decisions to participate in a potential deliberative exercise. Increased youth participation should in principle be an easier target to achieve. Including migrants is an important yet possibly contentious issue.

- **Select a relevant, specific, and tangible topic that the media and/or civil society are focusing on.** Participants interviewed for this paper identified several cross-cutting issues that have captured different groups in Lebanon's attention such as banking secrecy, corruption prevention, and electoral reform among many others. Other less controversial topics could be envisaged such as waste management, urban planning, environmental projects (such as river dams – a topic of recent interest in the country), road safety and infrastructure Furthermore, interviewees underlined that conducting these exercises in different municipalities (or cluster municipalities) on the same topic could help create cross-cutting agendas, strengthening them in the face of barriers that the dominant political elite may place. This could be done with the collaboration of relevant ministries.

- **Keep the pilot process short.** This is to ensure people remain committed throughout the process, but also given the current hardships the Lebanese people are facing, it would be difficult to ask citizens who are struggling to commit to a lengthy process. Keeping the process short also helps to show tangible results, which is needed to garner support for the process.

- **Work with reputable media and non-governmental actors to help secure citizen buy-in and trust, and build the needed capacity to ensure a proper roll-out of a deliberative exercise** (including on monitoring, evaluation, and communication) (OECD, 2020[12]). Such organisations could act as facilitators or provide oversight or train local municipal authorities to conduct a deliberative process. The facilitators should have good social capital in the communities they will be running the process and have key skills to effectively manage a consultative process.

- To address a situation where public authorities would not provide funds for a deliberative process, **secure international financial support (ideally from a wide range of donors), with the necessary transparency and accountability safeguards, or crowd-source efforts in collaboration for example with the Lebanese diaspora.** External funding should work to ensure that (1) incentives are given to participants (financial compensation or symbolic incentives); (2) contributions are taken seriously (recommendations are implemented); and (3) logistics and expertise are sufficiently provided. On the other hand, public authorities should be asked to cost-share by contributing non-materially (e.g. by using their convening power and hosting the meetings). These issues would be key to address to ensure the sustainability of the process.

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