Hear Us Now: Youth Voices Create Public Transparency and Strengthen Accountability in North Beqaa

Jasmin Lilian Diab, PhD
Bechara Samneh

April 2022

Table of Content

Acknowledgements

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CBO	Community-based Organization
KII	Key Informant Interview
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PoA	Peace of Art
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TBD	To be determined
ToR	Terms of Reference

List of Tables and Figures

1   Introduction

Background Note

Lebanon continues to endure what the international community has deemed an exacerbating economic, financial, political, health, and humanitarian crisis. More than half of the country's population (55%) currently lives at or below the poverty line, and unemployment rates continue to increase (now above 30%) amid an economic crisis that has seen the Lebanese Pound (LBP) lose more than 90%[1] of its market value.[2] The ongoing crisis is additionally severe on the country's refugee population. Lebanon continues to host the largest concentration of refugees per capita in the world (more than 40% of the country's population).[3]

The explosion in August 2021 at the country's main port at a time where the aforementioned crises had already begun taking over the country, has led to a more immediate emergency.[4] More than 300,000 people have been left homeless, over 5,000 people were injured and hundreds lost their lives as a result, with many continuing to lose their lives years later from injuries sustained during the blast.[5] The blast, coupled with the largely 'mismanaged' COVID-19 pandemic, has placed unimaginable strains on the country's already-ill-equipped medical and healthcare resources.[6] The World Bank describes the country as "sinking into one of the most severe global crises episodes" and "prolonged economic depression" of the twenty-first century.[7] To date, justice and accountability for the explosion has yet to be achieved, with little or no compensation for the loss of loved ones, livelihoods, and people affected by physical and psychological injuries.[8]

With food and basic needs costing more than five times as much as they did just two years ago and over half of the Lebanese population living in poverty, the most vulnerable (refugees, migrant workers, children, and elderly) continue to endure the situation at higher levels of intensity and vulnerability. According to a recent UNICEF assessment, 77% of households in Lebanon (and 99% of Syrian refugee households) do not have enough money for food, medication, and basic needs.[9] The situation is similarly dire for Palestine refugees in Lebanon where levels of stress, anxiety, violence, and child labor continue to increase in Lebanon's twelve registered refugee camps just to make ends meet.[10] With many of the country's main hospitals and health facilities either damaged or at full capacity,[11] and essential medical supplies in short

---

[1] AFP (2021), Lebanese pound lost almost 90% of its value in 18 months, The Jordan Times, https://www.jordantimes.com/news/region/lebanese-pound-lost-almost-90-its-value-18-months

[2] UN ESCWA (2020), ESCWA warns: more than half of Lebanon's population trapped in poverty, https://www.unescwa.org/news/lebanon-population-trapped-poverty

[3] UNHCR (2021), UNHCR Lebanon: Fact sheet, January 2021, Reliefweb, https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/unhcr-lebanon-fact-sheet-january-2021

[4] BBC (2020), Beirut explosion: What we know so far, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53668493

[5] Ibid.

[6] Bizri, A. R., Khachfe, H. H., Fares, M. Y. & Musharrafieh, U. (2021), COVID-19 Pandemic: An Insult Over Injury for Lebanon, Journal of Community Health 46(3): 487–493.

[7] World Bank (2021), Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes

[8] Fakih, L. (2021), Where's the Accountability for the Beirut Blast?, Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/22/wheres-accountability-beirut-blast

[9] UNICEF (2021), Lebanon: Children's future on the line, Reliefweb, https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-children-s-future-line

[10] Aisha, N. A. (5 April 2021), Poverty, COVID-19 add to plight of Palestinian children, AA.com, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/poverty-covid-19-add-to-plight-of-palestinian-children/2198519

[11] France24 (2020), Many of Beirut's hospitals 'non-functional' following deadly blast, WHO warns, https://www.france24.com/en/20200813-half-of-beirut-s-hospitals-not-functioning-following-last-week-s-deadly-blast

supply or entirely unavailable,[12] the people of Lebanon are not merely facing a health, political and economic crisis, but additionally endure severe obstacles in access to education, fuel, electricity, and connectivity in many areas.[13] International NGOs, UN Agencies, and international relief and humanitarian organizations have been heavily present on the ground to assist some of the country's most vulnerable, with the Lebanese Government doing little to provide protection for its citizens and the refugee communities residing within its borders.[14]

The aforementioned intersectional crises, have placed the voices of youth, their needs and their priorities in the back seat – with essentially no government policies fostering or cementing their economic and political participation. Local NGOs, international humanitarian organizations and academic institutions have stepped up to fill this void. Essentially, the absence of civic safe spaces for youth to voice their stances, express themselves freely, and integrated into a healthy society.

Overview of the Project: Hear Us Now!

This project aims to (1) bring statistical transparency to youth's opinions, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions about social, cultural, political, and familial freedom of speech barriers within our society, and find what activities facilitate youth's freedom of speech; (2) create discussion and widespread accountability by engaging the online and offline community, institutional stakeholders, and youth though an advocacy Call to Action based on our research findings, and (3) provide evidence that creative civic spaces are an integral part of our community and change negative attitudes, perceptions, and opinions by facilitating free speech, dialogue, and releasing enmity and tensions that have been built between our communities over decades.

The project's target audiences include: (1) parents who are affected by the divided social, cultural, and religious and sectarian segregation youth are growing up within; (2) youth who may not be aware that they have ideas or opinions they wish to express and who are not freely expressing themselves due to not having the skills, tools, or who are influenced by prejudgments, family and/or sectarian pressures, post-war mentalities, etc.; (3) community stakeholders such as teachers and school officials who have a direct influence on our future generations and the future of the region; (4) donors who would like to change their focus or thematic interventions to specific topics limiting free speech, free expression, and topics preventing our youth from enacting lasting positive change within society and culture, and (5) other non-governmental organizations who want to help youth create social and cultural change in the region but are uncertain about the direct and indirect pressures/influences youth are facing that prevent significant change from occurring.

Table 1. Project Overview

COVERAGE	Lebanon
SCOPE	Regional
PROJECT TITLE	Hear Us Now: Youth Voices Create Public Transparency and Strengthen Accountability in North Beqaa
TOTAL DURATION	TBD
SECTORS	Human Rights; Advocacy; Political Participation

---

[12] TRT World (2021), Lebanon medicine importers warn of drug supply shortages amid cash crunch, https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/lebanon-medicine-importers-warn-of-drug-supply-shortages-amid-cash-crunch-48078
[13] Gavlak, D. (2021), Gas, Electricity, Medicine in Short Supply in Lebanon, VOA, https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/gas-electricity-medicine-short-supply-lebanon
[14] Human Rights Watch (2020), Lebanon: Ensure Aid Goes Directly to Those in Need, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/16/lebanon-ensure-aid-goes-directly-those-need

DONOR	Ark International
TASKS	Advocacy and Lobbying; Capacity-building; Provision of Information, Knowledge Resources and Support
SDG Alignment	

2   Methodology

Research Objectives

As per the ToR, the purpose of this research is to:

- **Better understand** youth's opinions, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions about social, cultural, political, and familial freedom of speech barriers within our society, and find what activities facilitate youth's freedom of speech;
- **Create a discussion** and widespread accountability by engaging the community online and offline, institutional stakeholders, and youth though an advocacy Call to Action based on our research findings; and
- **Discuss the ways in which creative civic spaces are an integral part of the community** in North Beqaa and change negative attitudes, perceptions, and opinions by facilitating free speech, dialogue, and releasing enmity and tensions that have been built between our communities over decades.

Research Questions

- To what extent are youth bound by their communities and families' beliefs and ideologies?
- What social and cultural barriers prevent youth from freely expressing themselves and components of their identity? To what extent have Peace of Art's activities contributed to their feeling able to express themselves?
- To what extent/why do youth from different backgrounds feel safe enough to express themselves when it comes to issues that define their identity or belief systems in civic spaces? (e.g. on issues related to politics, social dynamics, cultural realities, religion, gender identity, etc.) To what extent do they feel safe to do so outside these spaces?
- Through which mediums (e.g. art, music, theater, journalism, or other activities, social media, etc.) are they most comfortable with expressing themselves and influencing society and culture, and why?
- What makes young people more or less likely to participate or interact with different social or political opportunities?
- To what extent do the youth feel obligated or responsible to communicate and influence the social, cultural, and political structures in their communities, and why?
- In their opinion, whose responsibility is it to fund and create civic spaces in Lebanon (i.e. the government, international NGOs, CBOS, etc.), and why?

Methods, Procedures and Ethics

This research adopted a mixed methods approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. The data collection phase of the project included: (1) Detailed document and literature review; (2) Surveys to understand the characteristics and opinions of the research group; (3) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and (4) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The aforementioned types of data collection assisted the research team in grasping an in-depth understanding of the research participants' perceptions and opinions on the freedom of expression, beliefs, ideologies, self-expression, social dynamics as well as cultural barriers. The methods administered were participatory, inclusive and target group sensitive. These methods ensured that the findings were derived from a collective contribution from a wide range of target groups, triangulated and validated, and that gender considerations are integrated into the data collection and analysis methods, where relevant.

- **A detailed desk review** was undertaken in order to adequately frame the study, develop a background note, and also delve into the realities of the region in question as well as the situation of youth at the national and local levels.
- **Surveys** ensured that the anonymity of participants and that their security is upheld, and only asked biographical data and closed-ended questions to contribute to the quantitative analysis component of the study.
- **KIIs and FGDs** adopted open-ended questions to gain a deeper grasp of opinions and perceptions, as well as supported the quantitative data with more narrative findings. Purposive sampling was used to seek KIIs with participants, which were held in Arabic and then translated into English by the research team where needed. KIIs were semi-structured, ensuring coverage of the research questions while leaving ample room to explore and engage the unique contributions of each specific respondent. A Key Informant list was developed in coordination with the Peace of Art team at the inception stage. Data was collected face to face, during fieldwork, and remotely via online mechanisms where necessary and appropriate. Key team members from the Peace of Art team, namely Social Workers, were trained by the Lead Researcher and Research Assistant on how to conduct fieldwork and adequately administrate the research tool.

Sample.
- **Group 1.** Approximately 2,500 marginalized Lebanese Sunni, Shiite, Christian and Syrian Sunni refugee youth, males and females, ages 14-25, who attend Peace of Art's fine arts programming each year (sample frame). A sample size 93 youth will be selected to take part in this research.
- **Group 2.** Marginalized youth in Fakiha, Ras Baalbeck, Ain, Jdaideh, Zaytoun, Nabi Othman, Labweh, and Hermel who have not attended Peace of Art's programming. The estimated population of these areas is over 5,000 persons. Thus a sample size of 96 youth, marginalized Lebanese Sunni, Shiite, Christian and Syrian Sunni refugee youth, males and females, ages 14-25, will be contacted and asked to participate in the study.

Data Quality Control and Analysis Plan. This study ensured data quality through the application of the BOND Principles (Voice and Inclusion, Appropriate, Triangulation, Contribution, and Transparency)[15] and the ALNAP criteria (Accuracy, Representativeness, Relevance, Generalisability, Attribution, and Clarity around contexts and methods).[16] Data triangulation was used as a method to cross-check data.

Ethics and Safeguarding. All interviews and other discussions were conducted in accordance with the best ethical practices in research, particularly with respect to ensuring participants' safety, anonymity, the protection of data, and risk mitigation. The consultant adhered to all of Peace of Art's associated policies where requested and outlined.

Limitations. Purposive sampling always depends on the resources and time available, the objectives of the study, as well as the ongoing socio-political realities and emerging security situation. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges and limitations for this research, namely in terms of access and ensuring safety of the research team and participants. Continuing high rates of COVID-19 are likely to be under-reported, with a health system already on the brink of collapse. To mitigate risk, this research adapted accordingly, and maintained social distancing and COVID-19 preventive measures. Interviewers and participants wore masks and sanitized regularly. This was largely adopted as an approach due to electricity and network unreliability, and some participants not having access to online platforms in the first place. To mitigate this risk, when arranging the FGDs or in-person KIIs, potential participants were asked whether they have any symptoms of COVID-19. If the answer was yes, an alternative means of connecting with them was facilitated.

---

[15] BOND, Evidence Principles, https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/evidence-principles
[16] ALNAP (May 2017), Strengthening the quality of evidence in humanitarian evaluations, www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/alnap-eha-method-note-5-2017.pdf

Informed Consent Form/ Human Research Participant Protection Form. Prior to any data collection, researchers informed all interviewees/participants in FGDs and KIIs of the nature and purpose of the research, as well as explained the informed consent form prior to commencing fieldwork to ensure that the content of the form is grasped (Annex 1.). Participants were additionally informed that they can decide to revoke their consent at any point of the interview, and also refuse to take part entirely. Participants (whether in KIIs or FGDs) were informed that the information they were providing would not be included in the report in a way that would enable anyone to identify them. Informed consent to participate was required from each individual participant. All consent processes were followed in the first language of the participant. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants was assured and maintained throughout the fieldwork and in the analysis, all the way up to the completion of this report. No identifiers beyond the gender, sex and age of participants was identified alongside whether or not they partook/did not partake in PoA's programming.

3   Findings

Overview of Survey Results and Analysis

A survey was sent out to 191 respondents across different regions in the Baalbeck area (Al Fakha, Al AIn, Arsal, Al Zaytoun, Jdeideh, Annabi Othman) with the aim of learning about their freedom of expression and their sense of safety in regards to it. The population sample was divided into two main groups: Participants that took part in PoA's activities, and participants that did not take part in PoA's activities. The age range of the respondents varied from 13 to 25 years old, while the gender balance was distributed between 35% of those that identified as male and 65% that identify as female.
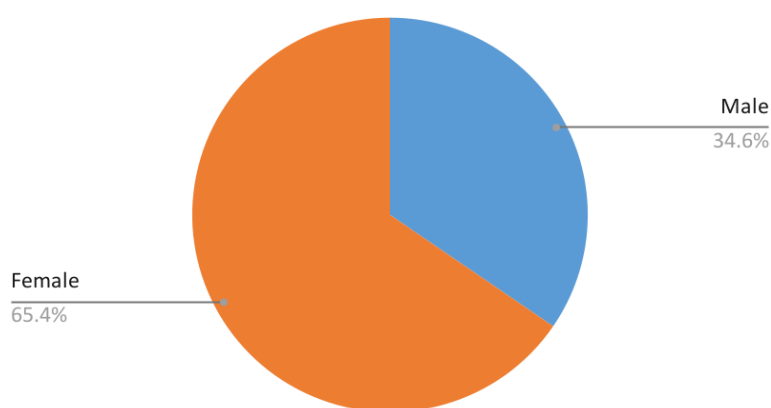

Figure 1. Survey Population Gender Distribution

Although 82% percent believe that they are an expressive individual, 19% of the respondents believe that it is unsafe for them to express their opinions freely in general, while 3% chose not to answer that question. Within the previous PoA participant population, a striking ratio of 2:1 was observed for respondents that do not find themselves as expressive people and at the same time believe it is unsafe for them to be expressive.   This may correlate to the effects of an unsafe environment and its effects on the youths' personalities that are in development at this stage of their lives.   In addition, and within the same population, a 2.3 ratio was observed for female respondents feeling unsafe expressing themselves versus male respondents.
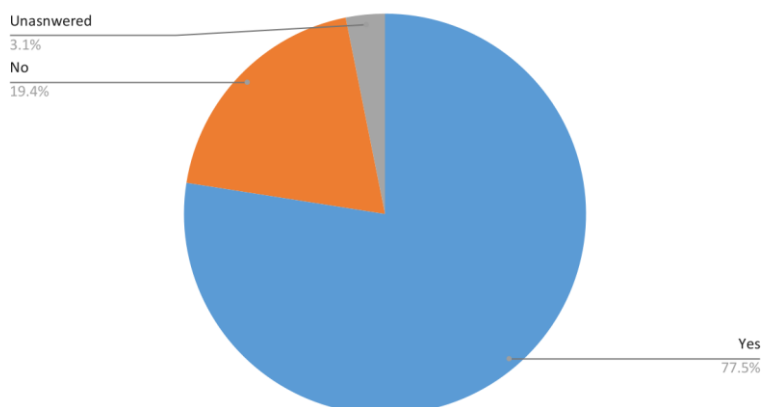

Figure 2. Individual Expression in General

To further understand the barriers that impede youths' expression, the survey further explored the extent to which respondents feel safe expressing themselves in two main contexts; within family environments, and within the wider community. Although just above half of the population feels that they are able to express themselves honestly in their family environments, the shift in the response rate is immense when it comes to the wider community context. The percentage of respondents that feel that they can express themselves fully in the wider community drops from 59% to 27% indicating the many barriers and challenges that the youths face when it comes to self-expression in that region. Some of those barriers pertain to the traditional values that the society upholds, belittling their opinions, or simply not providing the right space for them to express themselves.

"I am constantly criticized because of my opinions and ideas, especially within my family. Because my ideologies are different than what the society and my family adhere to, I never express my opinion."
--Female respondent, age 16

Expression within the Family Environment

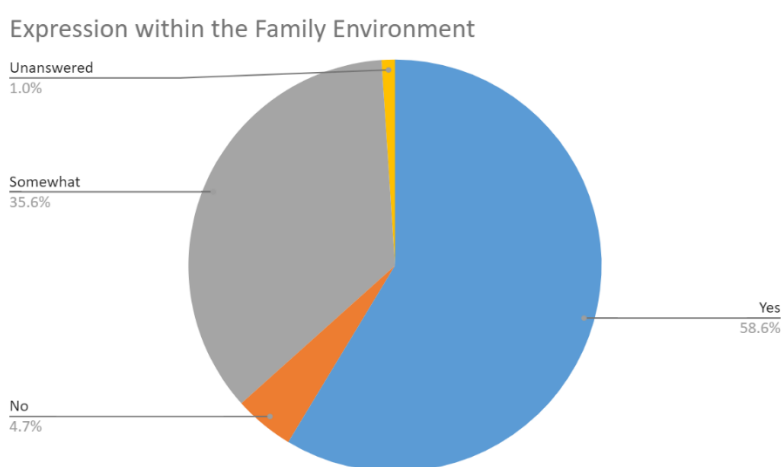*Figure 3. Expression with the Family Environment*

"Religion is seen as superior to everything else, and it is considered a red line that is impossible to cross. Most times we face some problems in expressing anything that contradicts what the people around us believe is right."
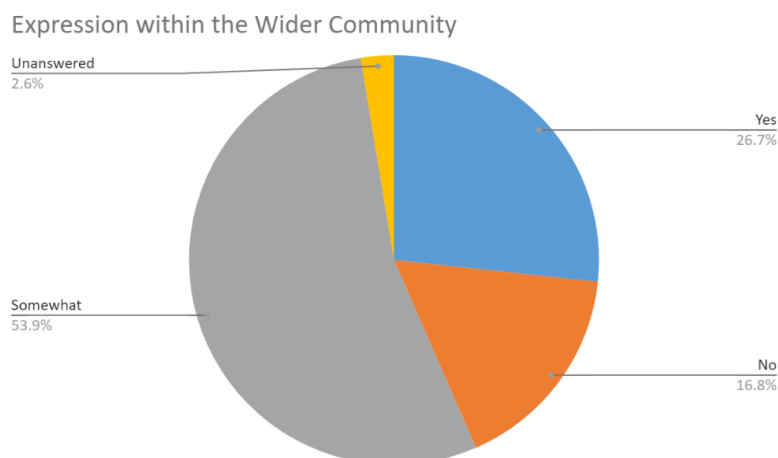*--Male respondent, age 17*

Expression within the Wider Community

Figure 4. Expression within the Wider Community

"No one listens to me, no one understands me, my society is standing in the way of my ambitions and dreams. I have not tried, not even once, to express my feelings because I am confident that no one will understand my opinion. They always misinterpret what I say and understand my opinion in their own way. This society is not understanding and is indifferent when it comes to listening to the opinions of others, especially teenagers who are going through their toughest phase. Extreme fear overcomes me whenever I am about to express my opinion. I am afraid that those around me will not understand what I mean."
--Female respondent, age 18

Furthermore, when asked about the different platforms through which they feel most comfortable expressing themselves, more than half of the respondents were distributed between Art and Music, while just below a quarter indicated that Social Media helps them express themselves better. The remaining were more or less equally distributed between theatre, journalism and writing, and other modes of expression which included photography, dance, sports, and healthy conversations (with oneself or others).

Comfortable Self-Expression Tools

- Other 9.6%
- Social Media 19.2%
- Journalism 6.2%
- Theater 9.6%
- Art 23.3%
- Music 32.2%
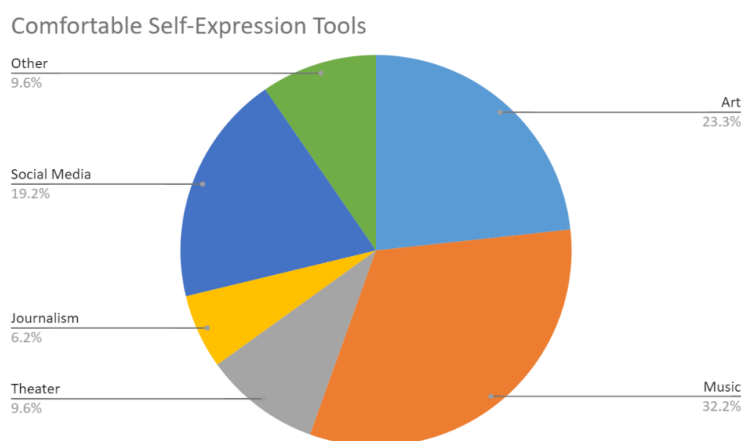
Figure 5. Self-expression Tools

The reliance on art as a safe way of expressing oneself highlights the important role that PoA plays with the youths in the region. In fact, when previous PoA participants were asked whether PoA activities have impacted them positively and whether the program had helped them express themselves better, a striking majority of 97% and 96% answered Yes to both questions respectively. In addition, 99% agreed that PoA fosters an environment in which they feel safe. In comparison to the 73% that do not or somewhat feel able to express themselves in the wider community, this striking majority that finds itself able to express itself in a safe space like PoA highlights the importance and role of the civic space in fostering the youths' healthy development of self-expression in the area.

Ability to Express in PoA

- No 1.1%
- Yes 98.9%

Figure 6. Ability to Express in PoA

"Each person has ideas and beliefs that represent them and sometimes tries to share them with their society. Unfortunately, we are shocked by the barriers that t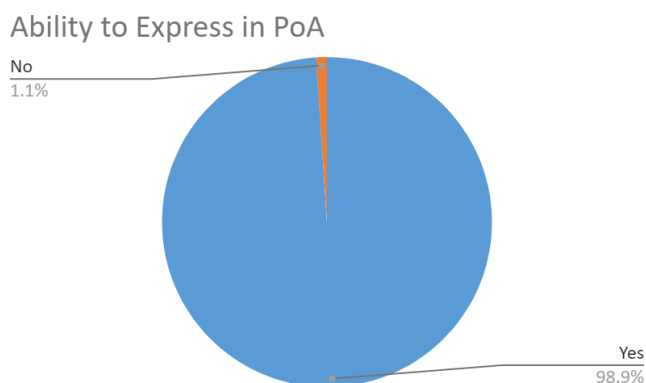he "Eastern" society places to the extent where it can even negatively impact our mental health. This leads to the burnout of the individual, transforming him from a person full of potential and hope - to someone who is scared of taking a step forward and becoming a change-maker in the society. If we want the youths to overcome these never-ending obstacles, we need to support [the youth] and build their capacities adequately."
--Male respondent, age 22

Emerging Themes

Self-expression inside civic spaces. The extent to which youth from different backgrounds feel safe to express themselves across social, cultural, identity and religious levels inside civic spaces varied across the sample. Findings highlight that there is in fact a difference in responses between youth who took part in previous PoA activities, and those who had not taken part in any of PoA's activities along these lines. Participants who did in fact take part, insist that their ability to express themselves was facilitated by the space PoA creates for them, insisting that this was in fact "the only places where they feel comfortable." As one female respondent puts it, "Whenever I express my opinion outside Peace of Art, I often get subjected to violence, but this is never the case when I am speaking within the safe spaces of PoA." As another respondent reiterates: "Peace of Art is the safest space that I know."

The importance of the civic space PoA creates for youth in the regions of focus is highlighted across multiple central themes. These include: (1) the overall feeling of safety; (2) the overall feeling of acceptance; (3) the overall feeling of freedom to discuss matters openly; and (4) the permissible environment PoA creates for self- and identity exploration. Participants in PoA's programming largely reiterate the importance of the PoA model in fostering dialogue and communication, as well as in opening up the floor for discussions on intersections that were otherwise unexplored. These include intersections across identity, society, culture, ethics, human rights and gender. As one male respondent insists, "Peace of Art allowed me to discover myself and to develop my personality, it is the space that I was finally able to find myself in."

For participants that took part in PoA's programming, one pivotal contributing factor to the "safety" that they feel is the fact that PoA is independent, and distant from partisan politics and political discourse. As one female respondent puts it, "I feel comfortable expressing myself to myself [in writing], with my friends, and at Peace of Art. This is because it is a safe civic space that does not belong to any political party, and has no political affiliations." The aforementioned has additionally contributed to the creation of a safety net for participants – particularly one that surrounded them with likeminded people. As one female respondent explains, "[…] my family, and the friends I made at Peace of Art listen to me. I feel I am able to express myself in Peace of Art and the civic space because people are more accepting."

"I feel comfortable expressing myself at Peace of Art, with the people that accept me, it is a breather for us because we are able to communicate with others, express ourselves, and it is a safe environment for all of us."
--Female respondent, age 18

"There are some things that I can't talk about except at Peace of Art. This is because it offers a safe space. Even in this safe space, I don't discuss religion because I don't want to be imposing on others. In these spaces, we are working on improving and letting go of old traditions. In Peace of Art there is nothing that bothers us, everything is clear, and they are always encouraging us to follow and achieve our ambitions. Before Peace of Art, I was unable to explore my talents but now I feel things have changed and that I have changed."
--Male respondent, age 15

The existence of the civic space PoA provides has further assisted with the resilience of the young population in the regions where they operate. This, according to respondents, has rendered them less vulnerable and more empowered against bullying from their peers outside this space. As one male respondent elaborates, "I used to feel weaker before and get bothered by what people say, like in high school where they would use racist slurs, especially teachers. But now I feel stronger and it doesn't bother me as much. Peace of Art empowered me to express myself freely in a safe space regardless of being Syrian or Lebanese and that helped a lot. They allowed me to speak, and they listened to me, and that was what mattered to me. Peace of Art does not make you feel like you are different, or Syrian, or that you shouldn't talk." The existence of such a space (such as PoA) did create traction and spark interest within the community among young people who had not taken part in any of the organization's programming – ultimately not only highlighting the need for such spaces, but also the importance of such spaces to young people across the region. As one male participant who had heard about PoA, but had not taken part in their activities puts it, "I was able to see how Peace of Art was helping individuals grow and work on themselves, and I hoped to be able to the same as well."

> *"Peace of Art is the biggest thing that happened to me, it allowed me to express myself. It helped me a lot to express myself because it is a space that accepts the other opinions and different perspectives and that is the goal we should aim for. At first, my personality was not strong at all, I was always scared and would directly cry. With time, I started turning my weaknesses into strengths, and this is because of Peace of Art."*
> *--Female respondent, age 16.*

Self-expression outside civic spaces. The extent to which youth from different backgrounds feel safe to express themselves outside civic spaces such as PoA was a pivotal finding of this research. Participants in PoA's programming alongside their peers who had not taken part, both explicitly outlined the challenges and impediments associated with self-expression on the social and cultural levels – ultimately highlighting the fact that "oppression" and "dismissal" of public opinion is rampant at all levels. Many respondents insisted that they did not feel safe expressing themselves, particularly when it came to political, religious or social issues, insisting that the social fabric and the "narrative" around these issues is "not to be challenged or dispute." On another level, and through a more intersectional lens, gender barriers associated with speaking out remain prevalent throughout the region, particularly in the areas of women voicing their opinions or raising their concerns. As one female respondent insists, "I do not feel I'm strong enough to express myself because my society has created too many barriers for me, especially if something happened to me that I'm not supposed to talk about,[17] and in our society's perception; a woman is not allowed to talk."

Outside the civic space created for youth at PoA, schools do not provide a "safe space" for youth to express themselves – ultimately due to the fact that they reflect the discrimination and restrictions of the community in which they are present. As one female respondent testifies, "[…] even schools are not a safe space, the safest are the civic spaces, because there is no discrimination." Alongside the physical space young people are present in, the people they are surrounded by also contribute to their ability to express themselves freely – with the extent to which they feel comfortable to express themselves varying based on who they are around. One female respondent explains, "[…] there is no general rule as to how much I can express myself. It depends on who is around me. Sometimes I feel I can express 50% of what I am really thinking, while at other times I feel maybe I can be 20% honest about my thoughts."

> *"In our community and similarly in different regions, most of the people don't accept things. This means the "private" is always kept in secret, and I only speak the necessary. Many people*

---

[17] The respondent did not wish to elaborate further here on what she meant. The interviewer observed that this quote may also allude to survivors of sexual assault who are not allowed to express or talk about their experiences because of how certain patriarchal communities perceive the matter. This statement has not been confirmed by the interviewee.

> *aren't accepting, especially my parents because they worry a lot about what people will say and societal pressures to conform."*
> *--Male respondent, age 16*

> *"I can never express my opinion and I am never given the space to do so because our society is so backward that anything I say I directly get criticized for it and they consider my thinking to be wrong. Therefore, I think that the freedom of expression in our region is very restricted."*
> *--Female respondent, age 16*

Societal restrictions around what youth describe as "certain topics" remains prevalent even when young people do want to express themselves – and youth navigate this space daily. This is predominantly due to the fact that young people feel that their opinions will be criticized, and that they would not be taken seriously in general. One male respondent explains, "I feel comfortable enough to express myself, although there are certain topics that we cannot discuss. In society, there are those who criticize this, but I try my best not to hide my opinion. When it comes to political opinions, it might seem that there is freedom, but underneath it is all a dictatorship. We cannot express everything the way we want, especially in politics, we always have to be careful." Notions and understandings around the freedom of expression remain either completely absent or understood to a very restricted extent. Based on this reality, young people across the region have struggled to communicate the importance of the freedom of expression to their parents, older generations and people in general.

> *"Safety is not guaranteed, true that we live in a 'democratic' country, but the country doesn't act on it - especially that I feel like I can't express myself in different regions."*
> *--Female respondent, age 15*

> *"We have a law for freedom of expression in Lebanon, but if you say anything against the government, you will face a lot of problems, especially with all the political parties. I am not involved in any, but this is what I generally see, and whenever I see something wrong and I try to express myself. I am always told to be careful about what I say and get threatened."*
> *--Male respondent, age 18*

This has largely coerced young people into "hiding their identities" and their "knowledge" while also not truly embracing themselves until they reach PoA. Beyond the notion of acceptance, a general lack of trust is prevalent at the community level – particularly when it comes to sharing "sensitive information" about identities, affiliations, personal beliefs and political opinions. To combat this reality, youth respondents have explained that they have resorted to different coping mechanisms in the arts – this is particularly true for young people who do not take part in PoA programming. As one female respondent highlights, "[…] you cannot express your opinion, you cannot trust anyone, and you have to hide everything in your heart. I don't express myself or feel able to talk to anyone – I cry, write, sing, or listen to music. That's how I express myself." On another level, youth have associated the inability to express themselves with society's racism, conservatism and its resistance of particular communities. As one Syrian male respondent explains, "I hide my identity because many judge me for being Syrian. I have to hide it so that I can live in society. I know it is a right, but there are many instances that I can't express myself because there are many people that will not understand me, and their reaction might be negative."

Mediums of expression. Mediums where youth felt most comfortable expressing themselves varied across different forms of artistic expression. For their part, participants that took part in PoA's programming highlighted that they resort to everything from performing arts such as dance, to film, to writing, to painting and photography. Participants in PoA's programming additionally highlighted their resort to social media as an outlet as well – particularly when their profiles are private and cannot be read or seen by family

members and particular members of the community they do not feel comfortable with. As one female respondent frames it, "[I use] social media, because that's where my parents can't see what I post. It has helped me meet people with similar opinions and express myself more because there is no one to dictate what I should say or do."

> *"Singing and dancing allows the emotions and feelings to flow and be expressed. Dancing is also a sport that really allows me to vent and let go of all negative energies. I am now more confident from the moves, songs, and feelings that I am able to deal with and express."*
> *--Female respondent, age 16*

Beyond expressing themselves on personal matters, young people use various forms of expression (such as film and writing) to highlight causes that are important to them, to advocate and to draw attention to everything from human rights, to violence, to the hardships that their communities face. As one male respondent explains, "I took part in a project where I was filming, and the topic was about violence. I spoke about violence against children and what we face in our community. I can do many things, and I feel that through film I can highlight what we don't like in our society and try to limit it by doing so." Another male respondent also elaborates on this point, insisting that he typically discusses issues such as "wars and the economic situation that we are in," through his writing in order to avoid keeping things "bottled up" and bring forth important messages he wishes to relay to society. Other respondents described keeping a journal, composing and playing music. Participants who had not taken part in PoA programming resorted to what they described as more "limited" options for expression, such as writing or focusing on a hobby.

> *"I feel that art has the ability to deliver a certain message; whatever I feel, I paint. It has helped me a lot, especially at times where I felt that I am unable to express what is inside of me. So when I am by myself I let all my emotions flow. Sometimes I cry; sometimes I write."*
> *--Female respondent, age 15*

Creating civic spaces at the national level. Discussions on the role of various actors in funding and creating civic spaces brought forth suggestions on how collaborative efforts across multiple different actors can both foster and create this space – while many respondents remains hopeful that these types of spaces would be cemented through political will and at the level of decision makers at all levels. As one male respondent elaborates, "Actors should be able to reach the parliament in order to draft and ratify laws that could help support the existence of safe spaces and expression." While there remains an overall lack of understanding of whose "duty" it might be, there is an overall consensus about the need for decision makers to be part of the process. Alongside decision makers, discussions elaborated on the importance of fostering civic spaces as part of schools and universities in order to ensure that "dialogue and communication are fostered in a safe space alongside education." On a more tangible level, discussions on the role of municipalities in creating these spaces in the immediate future was a recurrent theme in responses, as municipalities are seen as the sole local authority that can provide the space, funding and support at the regional level.

Attitudes and societal understandings at the community level. Opinions, attitudes, feelings, perceptions and prejudgments youth experience at the intersection of their social, cultural and familial experiences within their society and communities has impacted them greatly. Respondents highlighted everything from getting hurt, to being unable to form healthy relationships, to being exposed to verbal abuse, to experiencing various forms of violence when they express what society/the community deems as "unwanted" or "unwarranted" opinions. According to respondents, these opinions are largely those that counter traditional societal norms, patriarchal dynamics, gender binaries, as well as social and political prevalent practices. As one female respondent explains, "I see people getting hurt because of their opinions all the time. And because I do not want to get hurt or exposed to any type of violence because of my

political opinion or religious affinity, I tend to stay silent. I feel that this puts barriers between me and others, and I am unable to form relationships with people because of this."

Other respondents have expressed that this constant need to control their emotions and thoughts within the communities where they live has led to them feeling repressed, and at times, depressed as well. Beyond strains on their mental state, young respondents outline their fears of needing to resort to negative coping mechanisms to counter "the pressures they feel to stay silent" – including drugs, and in extreme cases, self-harm or taking their own lives. On this matter specifically one female respondent states, "I feel repressed most of the time, I keep things inside of me, and I'm not talking about myself. But, I feel that a person might resort to suicide or drugs if they constantly live in such a state. Maybe if someone kept pressuring me enough and didn't let me express my opinion at all, then perhaps I would eventually resort to these methods." Respondents highlighted the importance of civic spaces in countering these realities – ultimately expressing their immense gratitude for civic spaces such as PoA, and the types of people PoA has introduced them too (often referring to these people as "like-minded individuals."

> *"I start overthinking at times, and this affects my mental wellbeing. I cry, I get angry, I don't physically hurt myself, but I stop engaging and participating in activities. It feels like depression. I used to feel marginalized because some people did not like the fact that I was expressing myself. But what PoA has done is introduce me to people that accept and respect my opinion."*
> *--Female respondent, age 15*

> *"Being uncomfortable to express myself pushes me to self-isolate from the community in order to feel safe. If I am around people that don't accept me for who I am, I feel marginalized."*
> *--Female respondent, age 16*

On a more alarming level, youth expressed the overall culture of impunity they live in, as well as the fact that multiple factions of their society live "above the law," and that access to justice remains unattainable. As one female respondent explains, "We have a lot of anger in our community, and tribal belongings. They don't answer to the law. Just yesterday four people died."[18] Youth's inability to express themselves has further extended into their political participation and their civic rights – as multiple respondents expressed that they did not get to choose who they vote for, or who they support in the country's regional and nationwide political landscapes. One female respondent recounts her personal experience with this: "When it comes to political opinions, I don't interfere, because even if you want to vote for someone they wouldn't let you if that's not the person you are "supposed" to be voting for. The standards of political culture are lacking and regressing because all the people are disappointed and dead from the inside. I went through that, and I hope it comes to end. I also hope the patriarchal approaches to our society come to an end, because I passed through it and I wouldn't want anyone else to pass through it."

> *"Especially in Baalbek and Hermel, the situation is very difficult. There are attacks, killings, and deaths, and this is not a solution. We can't kill others in just a few seconds if they challenge our opinions or beliefs, we need to change on all aspects."*
> *--Male respondent, age 17*

For their part, academic institutions are not safe havens for young people, and are seen as places where the societal limitations and restrictions are also present and reiterated to young people. While the educational space (schools and universities) are typically strongly rooted in engagement of youth in matters of concern to them, as the respondents elaborate, this is not their experience in their region, and they wish to combat this. One male respondent insists, "Schools don't always encourage self-expression they just

---

[18] The respondent did not elaborate on the details of this crime. However, this response may be indicative of a crime being committed that has not been reports, or that similar crimes remain unreported/under-reported.

care about grades – if the student is good or bad at academia. They care about core subjects like Math and Physics, but ignore that the student could be good in other things that are more expressive. Education can make a lot of changes, but the current curriculum/methodology is not right. Nor is the way we are not encouraged to express ourselves. There is no space for students to express themselves, although sometimes it is important – especially if the student is unable to express him/herself at home and needs to talk to the teacher about it."

"There is nothing called freedom of expression; if you express, you end up in jail.   I should talk, I need to talk, but even if I do, I feel it will lead nowhere.   I have spoken before, about women's rights. But I felt that in our community they don't exist and that the woman is not allowed to give her opinion."
--Female respondent, age 16

"There are some things that we need to hide to stay on good terms with others, such as religion."
--Female respondent, age 17

Young people expressed that they were often made to feel like their "hobbies" or passions were a "waste of time" by their families, and the communities they lived in. Often, pushing young people to hide various hobbies they have – particularly in the areas of artistic expression – from people that were not part of their "inner circle." The same respondents often informed the study that they would experience bullying as a result of their interests, or expressing themselves artistically. They have also expressed that fear of being bullies had heightened their anxiety. Participants additionally described strains to their psychological/mental well-being, depression, and an overall lack of what they describe as "proper social interactions" with others – a matter they say developed from fear of rejection and/or experiencing physical violence. In correlation with their inability to express themselves through their "real" hobbies, many respondents insisted that this would result in a need to "hide their true identity." For many young people, this has resulted in their talents remaining untapped and their "individuality" being restricted or confined. While some young people have discussed social media as a means to express themselves, their posts and activity on these platforms remain restricted – as they fear that "someone" their family knows might see them, or someone from the community might circulate or report them. Cyberbullying is also a recurrent theme in responses – particularly among young men who describe themselves as "artistic."[19]

"You cannot feel safe here, maybe abroad you can, but here they might kidnap or kill you if you are any different, or do not conform. They will kill you like the Ansar crime, and no justice will be served.[20] The majority of incidents in our region do not get reported. The government will not do anything. There is no law, only corruption. How are we supposed to feel free to express ourselves and feel comfortable with our talents, hobbies, and the things that make us unique or different?"
--Female respondent, age 15

"I can't express myself at home. I can sometimes at school, and to my cousin, but I can't express on social media even. I would love to, but I'm too scared. I don't have any other outlets. It scares me to express myself there [social media] even. I have Instagram, and whatever I post, they tell my parents. It's like there is freedom to some extent, but with restrictions."
--Female respondent, age 16

---

[19] Respondents did not elaborate on this; however, it is understood from a number of interviews that this may refer to the performing arts.

[20] The Ansar crime is recent murder of four women in Lebanon. Learn more, here: https://english.sawtbeirut.com/lebanon/ansars-crime-scenario-from-planning-to-execution-how-did-the-killer-lure-the-mother-and-her-daughters/

Civic spaces in facilitating enduring change. The role of civic spaces in facilitating lasting social and cultural changes within the communities in which they are present was highlighted by the youth that took part in this study. Heightened interest in being a part of PoA's programming, as well as engaging with their activities was a recurring finding as well. For their part, youth highlighted their appraisal of PoA's diversity, inclusivity and ability to make enduring change. As one female respondent puts it, "I am really interested in being in Peace of Art because this is where I find diversity and different backgrounds in one place. I feel that together we are able to achieve our goals and build a better future for our country." The importance of these spaces amid the ongoing culture of impunity described by youth is pivotal amid their inability to publicly express themselves without what they refer to as "consequences." As one female respondent insists, Lebanon (in her eyes) is not the "free country" that the world perceives it to be. She explains: "When they talk about Lebanon abroad, they say it is a democratic country in the region. However, when you come and see how things are, you will notice the complete opposite. There are many who came out on social media and were able to deliver their messages, only to be detained and tortured in real life."

According to respondents, the true importance of PoA (and civic spaces in general), lies in its mandate to raise awareness and education – two important aspects respondents find completely absent from their community-level narratives. As previously described, the academic institutions young people in the region attend remain entrenched in the political/partisan landscape of the country. As one respondent frames it, "Peace of Art is important because it allows us to think outside the political confinements of our society. Our schools do not do that. This is why Peace of Art is important. It is important that the educational system is not controlled by political parties. In all of our region, there is not a single university that provides a civic space, or even a narrative different from the ones we hear at home and at the community level."

On whose responsibility it is to foster these spaces and challenge the academic system, the majority of respondents insisted that this is the role of civil society first and foremost. According to many female respondents, civil society is also seen as the driver behind challenging gender norms and stereotypes – that are also reiterated in the academic system as well. As one female respondent insists, "There is a lot that we need to change for girls, perhaps through dialogue with others. There are too many conservative opinions, especially because I am a girl, they consider that girls can't do anything. They consider that she belongs to her husband or father, and I hate this mentality." Youth additionally highlighted the fact that the community is also losing other positive initiatives and spaces such as the scouts for instance. However, the reduction in the number of scouts, as well as emerging priorities as a result of the economic crisis has changed this. Peace of Art is needed now "more than ever" amid no alternatives within the community.

4   Ways Forward

An open and pluralistic civic space that guarantees freedom of expression and opinion as well as freedom of assembly and association, is a prerequisite for making development and peace sustainable. In order to overcome barriers and create positive cultural change in their region, young people must be equipped to do so. The creation of civic spaces, as well as the engagement of stakeholders in these spaces, will in turn foster a permissible environment for self-expression, artistic expression, as well as the freedom of speech. The study has found that civic spaces are an integral part of the community in North Beqaa and that they are one of the sole actors working on challenging/shifting negative attitudes, perceptions, and opinions by facilitating free speech, dialogue, and releasing enmity and tensions that have been built between our communities over decades. Along these lines, it is important to begin discussing the manner through which local communities can move forward in ensuring this for youth in the region.

Today, civic spaces such as PoA are under pressure in the region in question. Repressive laws are spreading, with increased restrictions on freedoms to express, participate, assemble and associate – making it close to impossible for youth to form their own identities and means for communication. While virtual spaces such as social media have helped civil society networks to grow, this has also given governments and local authorities the ability to control civil society movements and freedoms, often under security pretexts. As challenging narratives that are entrenched in society becomes increasingly difficult, particularly in the areas of inter-generational disconnect in the areas of beliefs and perceptions, it is pivotal for authorities to support opportunities to improve civic space at country level, while enhancing strategic responses to threats. Beyond this, local authorities must work with organizations such as PoA in order to strengthen good protection practices, including protection networks. For their part, civil society can raise the visibility and increase support for the work of defenders and continue to influence the narrative. On an international level, there remains a need to monitor civic space trends and the situation of human rights defenders, as well as mainstream civic space in wider UN policies, practices and operational activities.

"There is a need for awareness through art. This needs to be a slow awareness and not too fast so that they can soak in information and understand. Perhaps through sports as well, you can teach new values to the new generation through games, songs, or any activity such as capacity building and life skills. This way we plant the seeds of change at a young age so that when they grow they can move forward in a culture of acceptance and collaboration."
--Male respondent, age 17

In conclusion, the study has found that PoA serves as an important model of the civic space – one that remains lacking at all levels in the regions in which it operates. PoA continues to play a role on the political, economic and social levels of young people's lives. In particular, by allowing youth to express themselves, have an outlet for their passions and talents, as well as have a space to discuss matters that remain restricted within their communities. PoA has successfully done this through permitting youth to access information, engage in dialogue, express personal opinions/dissent or disagreement, and join together to collectively express their views in a safe space of like-minded individuals.

Hello, my name is [insert name of researcher], and I am currently working as part of a team of researchers led by Dr. Jasmin Lilian Diab on behalf of Peace of Art. We are conducting a research about freedom of expression in the Northern Beqaa region.

We would very much appreciate your participation in this Key Informant Interview/Focus Group Discussion. Participation involves an interview with you about your experiences with freedom of expression, as well as political, social and cultural barriers in your region.

If you are taking part as a Key Informant, interviews will take about 30-45 minutes to complete. If you are taking part in a Focus Group Discussion, the discussion will take about 75-90 minutes to complete depending on group dynamics.

The information you provide will be strictly confidential and never connected to you. Outside the Peace of Art and research teams, no one will know if you take part in this research or what you have said. We will put information we learn from you together with information we learn from other people we interview. No one will be able to tell what information came from you. When we tell other people about this research, we will never use your name, and no one will ever know what answers you gave. Only a few researchers will have access to this information, and all information will be stored safely under the care of the Lead Researcher, Dr. Jasmin Lilian Diab and her Research Assistant.

Your participation in this research will not benefit you directly or immediately, but it may benefit others and yourself in the future, as your responses may improve our understanding of the freedom of expression in your region, and this may translate into Peace of Art's programming, targeting and overall services and approach – particularly in your region.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. This will be the only time that we will ask you questions as part of this interview/focus group. If you do not want to be part of this research, you can decline to take part now. If you agree to participate, you can decide not to answer any question and can stop the interview at any time. Your decision about whether to participate in this research or to answer any specific questions will in no way affect any services that you receive, nor will it affect your professional standing. If you do choose to participate, please answer the questions honestly and openly, so that we can understand your experience and adequately inform the research in the areas of political, social and cultural realities, and their linkages to freedom of expression at the local and national levels.

Before you say yes or no to being in this research, we will answer any questions you have. If you join the research, you can ask me questions at any time during the interview. You may also contact Dr. Jasmin Lilian Diab at diabjasmin@gmail.com or Peace of Art's President Vera Mawla at veramawla@gmail.com if you have any questions or concerns.

Do you have any questions now?
Do you understand everything I have explained? Yes or No
Do you agree to participate in this interview? Yes or No

Signature: _____
Date: _____

ANNEX 2. Research Tools

Overarching questions:
1. To what extent do youth from different backgrounds feel safe to express themselves across social, cultural, identity and religious levels inside civic spaces?
2. To what extent do youth from different backgrounds feel safe to express themselves (along the same lines) outside civic spaces?
3. Through what mediums (art, music, theatre, journalism, social media, other) are they most comfortable with expressing themselves and culture, and why?
4. Whose responsibility is it, or should it be, to fund and create civic space in Lebanon? (the government, international NGOs, CBOs, etc.) and why?

To understand:
- Youth (14-25 years of age) priorities to their families, communities, religious beliefs, gender, and the challenges they face expressing themselves inside and outside civic spaces in their regions.
- Find the opinions, attitudes, feelings, perceptions and prejudgments youth have of their social, cultural and familial experiences within our society and communities, and how these experiences affect them.
- Find what is needed for them to overcome barriers and create positive cultural change in their region.
- Find if civic spaces across art, and/or other mediums/activities are in fact effective in facilitating lasting social and cultural changes within their communities.

Tools and breakdown:
- Survey: for those who took part in Peace of Art's activities and those who did not (93-96 surveys each)
- KIIs from those who took part and those who did not (15 each)
- FGDs from those who took part and those who did not (2 each with 12 participants each)

[Control Group] Tool 1: Survey for those who took part in Peace of Art's activities (Quantitative, Baseline)

Demographic Data:
Name:
Age:
Gender:
Area of residence:
Email/phone:
Level of education:

In relation to Peace of Art:
- Have you taken part in Peace of Art's programming? Yes or No
- Please name the program you took part in.
- Did you find that the program impacted you positively? Yes or No
- Did you find that the program encouraged you to express yourself? Yes or No
- Did you find that the program fell under broader themes of social and cultural issues? Yes or No

- Do you find that Peace of Art tailors its programming and interventions adequately based on the contexts it operates in? Yes or No
- Do you find that Peace of Art tailors its programming and interventions adequately based on the populations/age groups it works with? Yes or No
- Do you find that Peace of Art fosters a safe space in their activities? Yes or No
- Do you feel free to express yourself within the spaces that Peace of Arts operates? Yes or No
- Have you encountered an instance at Peace of Art where you felt insecure? Yes or No

In relation to broader study themes:
- Do you consider yourself an expressive person? Yes or No
- Do you feel safe expressing your opinion in general? Yes or No
- Does Peace of Art make you feel safe to express your social and cultural opinions in general? Yes or No
- In what ways do you feel most comfortable in expressing yourself?
  - a. Art
  - b. Music
  - c. Theatre
  - d. Journalism
  - e. Social media
  - f. Other: _____
- Would you say you are completely honest with your family about your opinions and beliefs? Yes or No or Somewhat
- Would you say that you feel safe within your communities to express yourself honestly? Yes or No or Somewhat
- Based on your response to question 6, would you be able to describe your family/community's reactions when you express yourself about personal matters?

[Comparatively] Tool 2: Survey for those who did not take part in Peace of Art's activities (Quantitative, Baseline)

Demographic Data:
Name:
Age:
Gender:
Area of residence:
Email/phone:
Level of education:

In relation to broader study themes:
- Do you consider yourself an expressive person? Yes or No
- Do you feel safe expressing your opinion in general? Yes or No
- Have you heard of Peace of Art before? Do you feel it is a safe space to express your opinions in general?
- In what ways do you feel most comfortable in expressing yourself?
  - a. Art
  - b. Music
  - c. Theatre
  - d. Journalism

  e. Social media
  f. Other: _____

- Would you say you are completely honest with your family about your opinions and beliefs? Yes or No or Somewhat
- Would you say that you feel safe within your communities to express yourself honestly? Yes or No or Somewhat
- Based on your response to question 6, would you be able to describe your family/community's reactions when you express yourself about personal matters?

Tool 3: Tool for Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews

The following tool will be administered across different demographic groups in order to grasp various narratives that can inform the study qualitatively. It will initially be administered to the FGDs aforementioned. After this tool is tested within a group, it will then be administered through Key Informant Interviews in order to lay the grounds for potentially more honest responses that are untainted by the group. This will not only permit for a comparative approach across those who took part in Peace of Art's programming and those who did not, but will also permit the study to assess the impact that being part of a group has on responses, and the extent to which individuals will express themselves freely in a group vs. when they are alone.

Demographic Data:
Name:
Age:
Gender:
Area of residence:
Email/phone:
Level of education:

Line of questioning:
- To what extent do you feel like your community permits you to outwardly express yourself freely?
- To what extent do you feel you need to hide parts of your identity, belief system, or opinion in the community you live in?
- What other forms of expression have helped you express yourself? (artistic or otherwise).
- To what extent have these forms of expression assisted you in coping with your surrounding? To what extent did they serve as an outlet for your feelings, opinions and beliefs?
- Are there parts of who you are that you feel you need to hide from larger factions of the community? If there are aspects you hide, to what extent do they remain hidden? And what are some of the most sensitive parts of you that you feel you cannot share?
- Are there safe spaces where you feel like you do not need to hide these aspects of yourself? Are these spaces also where you feel you can express yourself more freely?
- Do you find that in Lebanon, at the national scale, freedom of expression is truly upheld?
- Do you find a sense of duty in expressing your opinion, pointing out something you find is wrong, pointing out corruption, pointing out a human rights violation, etc.?
- Have you ever outwardly condemned such behavior in any form of expression? For instance, on social media, through your art, or through other means?
- Why do you think it is important to authentically express yourself? Also, where are the spaces where you feel your self-expression is fostered and welcome?
- What do civic spaces mean to you? Give an example of a civic space based on your definition.

- Would you feel safer expressing yourself in civic spaces? Why?
- Do you find yourself responsible to inflict change in society on any level? If so, why or why not?
- What do you think is needed in order to overcome barriers and create positive cultural change in your region? Does the mindset need to change in your opinion?
- Do you find that civic spaces are in fact effective in facilitating lasting social and cultural changes within your/other communities? If not, what do you think would be an effective alternative?
- What do you think the role of education is in inflicting social and cultural change?
- If you have in fact felt unsafe to express yourself ever, how does feeling unsafe to express yourself impact your mental, physical and psychological health and wellbeing?
- Do you feel like you are part of a marginalized group because of how you think? Feel? What you believe? Or what you identify as?
- Whose responsibility is it, in your opinion, to provide society with safe spaces to express themselves? Whose responsibility is it, in your opinion, to foster and create safe civic spaces?
- To what extent do you feel that the law, government entities and security forces are accessible to you? To what extent do they make you feel safe?
- To what extent to the aforementioned entities either protect civic spaces (and the freedom of speech) or obstruct it?
- In your opinion, what can be done to safeguard rights and freedoms? Are you aware of any organizations or civil society movements that advocate for this?
- Is there anything you would like to add?