1 Context, assessment and recommendations

This chapter provides an introductory analysis of the socio-political context in Lebanon as a backdrop to the report and its recommendations. It then introduces the OECD analytical framework on public communication and summarises the main findings and recommendations from all chapters.

Socio-political and policy context in Lebanon

In the autumn of 2019, a wave of dissent demonstrated the extent of Lebanese citizens' desire for more transparency, integrity, accountability and participation in their politics. The protesters, coming from different regions in Lebanon, demanded to do away with the country's sectarian system that is perceived to have institutionalised corruption and patronage. Significantly, protesters equally saw governance challenges as the root cause of poor economic performance and the onset of Lebanon's worst economic and financial crisis in recent memory.

The hardship of this crisis, combined with the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic on public health and economic activity, brought demonstrators back to the streets in the spring of 2020, as a new government led by former Prime Minister Hassan Diab grappled with the consequences of this dual crisis. The situation was only aggravated after August 2020 when a catastrophic explosion shook the capital, further exemplifying the impact of malfunctioning governance in the country.

Furthermore, the country, beset by one of the world's heaviest public debt burdens, defaulted for the first time on 9 March 2020 on its Eurobonds payments (Perry and Francis, 2020[1]). The Lebanese Pound collapsed in value on the black market from the official peg of 1 507 to the dollar, to over 9 500 to the dollar at a peak in June 2020. Alongside the currency fall, a steep increase in prices affecting food and essential goods has affected the livelihood of a large segment of the population and is driving an estimated half of them into poverty (Noueihed and Khraiche, 2020[2]).

Even before the Port of Beirut blast damaged hundreds of businesses and disrupted the tourism sector, Lebanon had already been struggling with a high unemployment rate. As of June 2020, it is estimated that a third of all private-sector jobs have been lost, and the total number of unemployed reached 30% of the total labour force (Reuters, 2020[3]).

The present economic and financial crisis cannot be understood without considering the political and governance context of the country. A legacy of political instability that has long eroded Lebanon's economic prospects has also weighed on responses to the escalating crisis and undermined citizens' trust in government. Only 19% of respondents to the Arab Barometer Survey in 2020 reported having a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in their government (Arab Barometer, 2020[4]).

Similarly, governance issues have affected the country's public finances, which have been strained by a "bloated public sector, debt-servicing costs and subsidisation", in addition to corruption and waste (Reuters, 2019[5]). For the past six years, Lebanon has scored at the bottom of the Corruption Perception Index, or 28 out of 100 where 0 indicates the worst corruption (Lebanese Transparency Association, 2019[6]).

While social tensions and popular unrest continue to boil over in recent months, this context highlights reform opportunities that can help set Lebanon on a path to exit the crisis by pursuing good governance and inclusive growth. A number of ministries including the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform (OMSAR) are already undertaking some of these efforts by setting in motion key open government, anti-corruption and digital initiatives (OECD, 2020[7]).

Public communication and media ecosystems can be used as additional levers to help manage the crisis in the short term, and be reformed to function as catalysts for a more open government and greater trust from citizens over the long term. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the key role of communicators and information providers in changing behaviours and saving lives.

The OECD framework on open government, public communication and media ecosystems

After a slight recovery since the lows of the global financial crisis, approximately 45% of citizens in OECD countries trust their governments today (OECD, 2019[8]). To mitigate diminishing levels of trust, OECD member and partner countries have been implementing a variety of open government reforms in the past decade. The OECD defines open government as "a culture of governance that promotes the principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation in support of democracy and inclusive growth" (OECD, 2016[9]).

Findings from the report *Open Government: The Global Context and the Way Forward* (OECD, 2016[9]) underline that such reforms are indeed improving policies and services by encouraging greater collaboration between public institutions, citizens, private sector actors, and civil society – thereby allowing better outcomes delivered at less cost. Such an agenda is also changing the relationship between institutions and citizens, rendering it more dynamic and mutually beneficial (OECD, 2016[9]).

Effective public communication is a central pillar of an open government agenda. Indeed, it is "effective" when it is oriented towards advancing the above principles, and serving as a tool to improve policy making and service design and delivery. Understood as any communication activity or initiative led by public institutions for the public good,[1] it allows for better engagement with citizens and their increased trust in government. It entails responding to people's concerns in a more informed manner and enhancing their access to public information. Without it, citizens and the media lack essential means to hold their governments to account.

The role of public communication has taken on heightened importance in light of the fast-paced evolutions in media ecosystems[2] at the global, national and local levels. These have changed how people consume and share information, and have affected who and what sources of news the public trusts. Additionally, audiences across the world are more fragmented and diverse than before, bringing both opportunities and challenges for government efforts to reach out to them (WPP, 2017[10]).

Despite the strong interlinkages between communication and open government principles, few countries fully recognise or exploit this relationship. Results of the OECD Survey on the Organisation and Functions of the Centre of Government (CoG) show that fewer than 10% of respondents list promoting transparency or encouraging stakeholder participation as one of the key objectives of their communication strategy (Figure 1.1).

Moreover, OECD data suggests that "(m)ost governments still view social media as an additional tool to broadcast traditional communication messages" and only a few try to genuinely leverage these new platforms for more advanced purposes, such as making public policy processes more inclusive or transforming public services delivery (OECD, 2015[11]).

A review of countries' Open Government Partnership (OGP) Action Plans – in which governments define commitments to foster transparency, accountability and inclusion – highlights this missed opportunity, with only about 2% of commitments in those plans being linked to media and communication.[3]

Figure 1.1. Main objectives of CoG's communication strategies
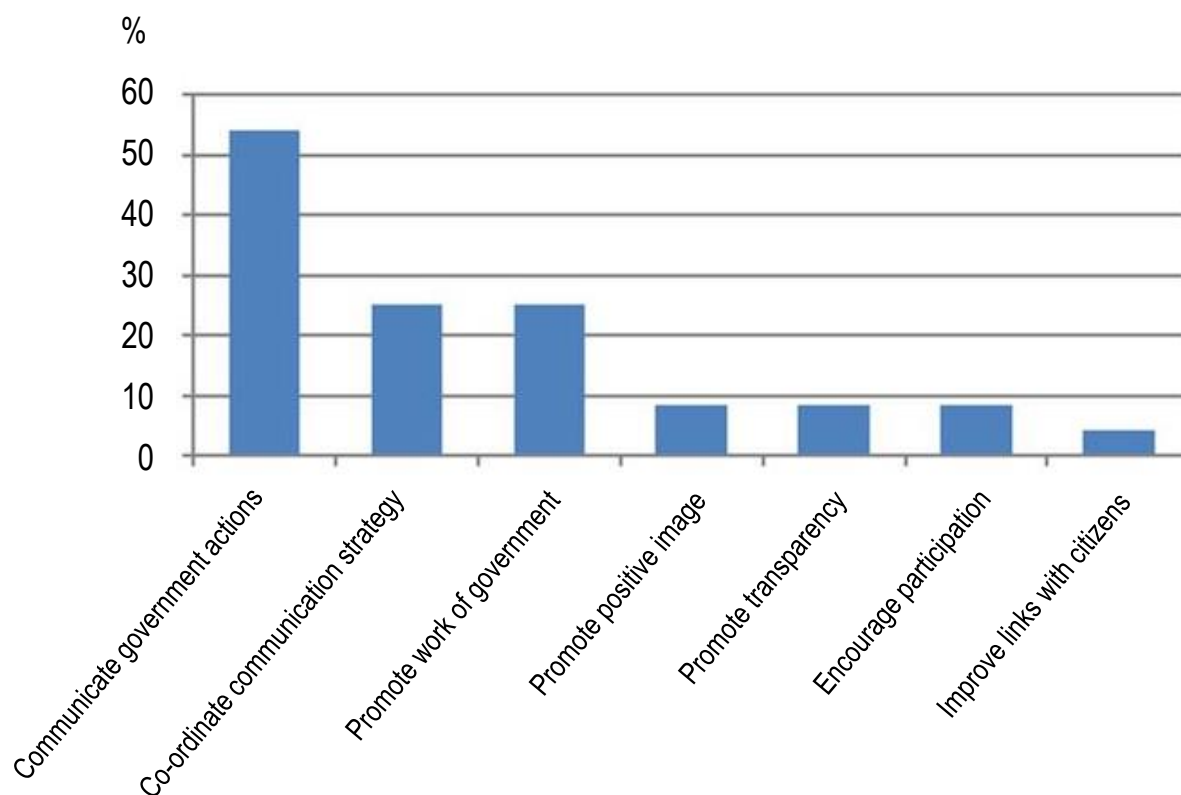
Source: OECD (2017), Survey on the Organisation and Functions of the Centre of Government.

To this end, the OECD included a provision in its *Recommendation of the Council on Open Government* (hereafter "the *Recommendation*") emphasising the role of communication as a key pillar for promoting open government (Provision 6). The goal of this provision is to ensure that communication is used not just to disseminate information to the public, but also as a strategic tool to support policy implementation and service delivery, as well as to enhance transparency and participation.

This government function is core to several others of the provisions in the Recommendation. Provision 7 underlines the importance of communicating public sector data and information and making it easily available to stakeholders in a clear, complete, timely and reliable manner. Provision 8 calls for public participation opportunities that allow for vulnerable, underrepresented, or marginalised groups in society to participate. Targeted communications are necessary to achieve this and to provide feedback on the outcomes of any instance in which citizens are consulted. Finally, as part of Provision 10 on the concept of an open state, the *Recommendation* recognises the role of other non-governmental actors, including that of media, to support relevant initiatives (OECD, 2017[12]).

> **Box 1.1. Provisions relating to communication in the OECD Recommendation on Open Government**
>
> Provision 6: "Actively communicate on open government strategies and initiatives, as well as on their outputs, outcomes and impacts, in order to ensure that they are well-known within and outside government, to favour their uptake, as well as to stimulate stakeholder buy-in".
>
> Provision 7: "Proactively make available clear, complete, timely, reliable and relevant public sector data and information that is free of cost, available in an open and non-proprietary machine-readable format, easy to find, understand, use and reuse, and disseminated through a multi-channel approach, to be prioritised in consultation with stakeholders".
>
> Provision 8: "Grant all stakeholders equal and fair opportunities to be informed and consulted and actively engage them in all phases of the policy-cycle and service design and delivery. This should be done with adequate time and at minimal cost, while avoiding duplication to minimise consultation fatigue. Further, specific efforts should be dedicated to reaching out to the most relevant, vulnerable, underrepresented, or marginalised groups in society, while avoiding undue influence and policy capture".
>
> Provision 10: "While recognising the roles, prerogatives, and overall independence of all concerned parties and according to their existing legal and institutional frameworks, explore the potential of moving from the concept of open government toward that of open state".
>
> Source: OECD (2017[12]), *Recommendation of the Council on Open Government*, OECD, Paris, www.oecd.org/gov/Recommendation-Open-Government-Approved-Council-141217.pdf.

To help operationalise the relevant provisions in the Recommendation, the OECD developed an analytical framework built on three pillars of effective public communications that serve as policy catalysts to bring about a set of desired medium- and long-term outcomes, all-the-while building on and reinforcing open government principles. These pillars (Figure 1.2) are:

1. The institutional and governance prerequisites for effective public communication. These include legal and administrative structures as well as human and financial resources that support integrated, strategic, and co-ordinated communication activities across the public sector.
2. Core competencies, when applied well, can evolve communications from an information dissemination tool to a lever of stakeholder participation, policy implementation (e.g. behavioural change), and improved policy and service design.
3. The relationships between public communicators, the media, and phenomena such as citizen journalism, and how they can serve to strengthen transparency and accountability. This also includes an understanding of how changes in media ecosystems have affected governments' ability to communicate and engage with citizens, including on issues such as disinformation or hate speech for example.

Figure 1.2. Public communication and media for a more open government: The OECD framework
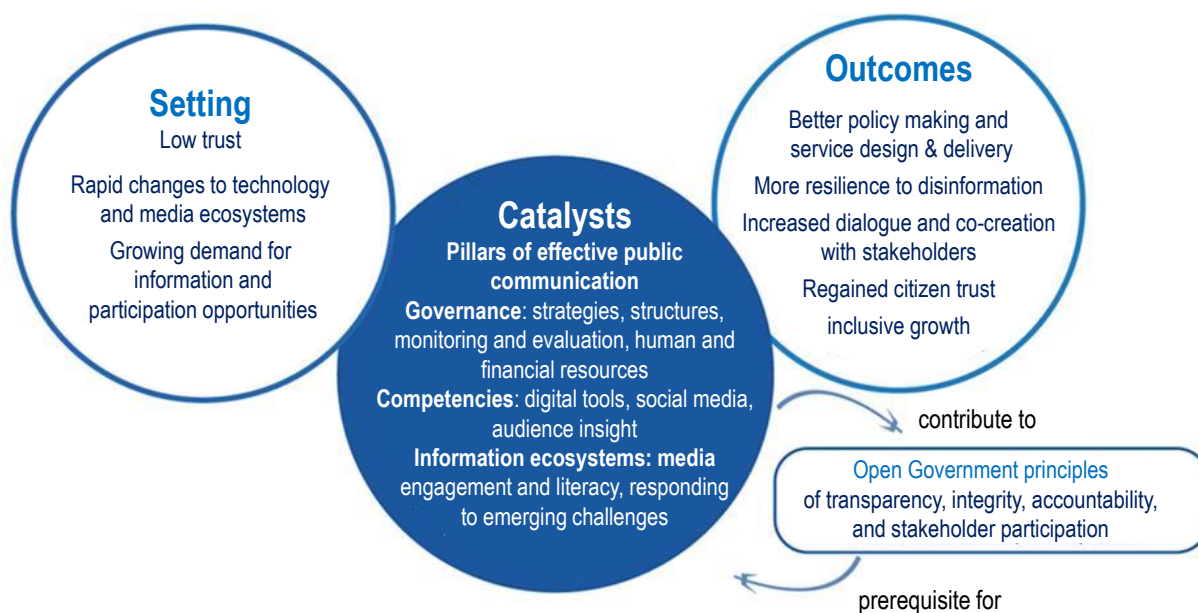
Source: Author's elaboration.

The role of public communication and media ecosystems for a more open government

Public communication can both be leveraged to make governments more transparent, accountable and participative, and can act as a promotion tool to support the introduction of open government reforms both internally and externally and thus support the provisions of the *Recommendation* (OECD, 2017[12]). Media and information ecosystems can also play a very important role in this context.

Transparency. A growing body of theoretical and empirical studies supports the proposition that public communication and a strong media ecosystem can support improved transparency, including vital information on public policies and performance. A strong media ecosystem, on its own, can improve the quality of information that citizens have access to. However, governments themselves are agents in this ecosystem and can increase transparency about their actions by communicating with them directly and through the media.

Public communication, as supported by the proper strategies, plans, policies, co-ordination structures, and resources, can also amplify the transparency outcomes of open government policies. For instance, it can promote the contents of proactive disclosures under Access to Information (ATI) laws, and raise awareness of how and what information can be requested through this process. Likewise, institutions can use Open Government Data to support their communication and promote its use by journalists and other stakeholders.

On their part, the media and civil society, can be primary interlocutors with this type of communications, and become key consumers of such open government policies by filing ATI requests and analysing Open Data and publicising the related information to contribute to and engage in the policy discourse.

Integrity. The media has a key role in exposing corruption and reinforcing integrity values by highlighting its damaging impact on society. It can also amplify the work of civil society and the voices of whistleblowers, and can be a platform to support and exert pressure for the introduction of integrity and anti-corruption reforms. It has a great opportunity to oversee the implementation, monitoring, and reporting on the effectiveness of existing integrity and anticorruption measures. As such, reporting on the de facto

implementation of existing legislation can provide a critical means to ensure improved integrity, reduced corruption, and more robust rule of law.

Similarly, public communication can ensure the implementation and application of critical integrity policies both internally, through practices that support integrity measures, and externally, by promoting a stronger culture of integrity to the private sector and civil society.

Accountability. Academic literature suggests that the media has a significant role in supporting principal-agent accountability relationships between public entities and stakeholders. By reducing information asymmetries, the media provides citizens (as principals) with the necessary visibility to reward or sanction public and elected officials (their agents).

Alongside a strong media ecosystem, public communication can reinforce accountability mechanisms, processes, and institutions. By simply disseminating publicly records of the government's actions, decisions, and statements to citizens, this function offers a track record for the media to scrutinise and against which citizens can hold officials accountable. By communicating proactively, institutions can also develop a constructive narrative on accountability that notes, for example, the constraints they operate under and justifies their performance to stakeholders.

Stakeholder participation. As noted in the literature, a key role of the media, just as for public communication, is to frame issues in a salient manner for public audiences to increase their interest and engagement with important policy issues. As the common intermediaries between institutions on one hand, and citizens, media and civil society on the other, communicators are central to the participation of these stakeholders in the policy cycle.

By establishing a dialogue with citizens, whether through the new opportunities for interaction awarded by digital and social media or through more traditional face-to-face meetings and events, governments can allow for individuals to voice views and react to content in a way that can inform policy and improve services.

The communication function similarly relies on public feedback gathered via opinion polls, sentiment analysis of public channels, and other audience insights. As such, this "listening" activity can translate into a form of participation when it serves to shape responses and informs policy and service design and delivery.

Main findings and recommendations

The OECD work on the present report is guided by the above analytical framework and grounded in the good practices prevalent across OECD member and partner countries. This review relies on insights gathered from a survey of Lebanese officials overseeing communications across eight institutions in the government. Its findings were informed by a fact-finding mission conducted on 27-29 September 2019 which included discussions between stakeholders in Lebanon,[4] the OECD Secretariat, and peers from OECD governments with relevant expertise, as well as through desk research. An additional meeting of the network of communicators who responded to the survey on 2 July 2020 provided further qualitative insights. The report and its recommendations were validated through reviews by OECD and Lebanese peers.

The sections below offer an overview of the main findings of the report and a summary of the recommendations proposed to the Lebanese government against each of the challenges identified.

Findings relating to public communication governance and structures

In line with its progress on open government reforms, Lebanon is showing political will to address the challenges facing public communication. Even before the demonstrations of autumn 2019 and spring-summer 2020 added urgency to this issue, stakeholder accounts from an OECD fact-finding mission revealed an emerging drive to develop new capabilities, including a whole-of-government strategy.

As will be discussed in Chapter 2, public communication in Lebanon suffers from a relative lack of consolidated structures and dedicated, qualified professionals, and from the prevalence of a politically-driven approach. These challenges, combined with a still-nascent system of intra-governmental co-ordination in this area, result in a fragmented ad-hoc dissemination of information to citizens and the media.

For the most part, this function in Lebanon remains considerably politicised and linked to the individuals in charge rather than to the institutions. The distinction between public and political communication is often unclear and top-level officials are generally reluctant to delegate these responsibilities beyond close political advisors. OECD interviews show that the prevalent practice is precisely for ministers and other high-ranking officials to bring in advisors and personal attachés to conduct communications on their behalf.

Conversely, several ministries seem to lack dedicated personnel that are part of the civil service. Dedicated units or directorates do not seem to exist in current ministries' organigrams. Out of seven surveyed ministries,[5] only two claim to have such an entity in place. This role is limited to single communication officers in four out of the seven.

Better institutionalising this function within Lebanon's government would address multiple problems that affect it. Yet such institutionalisation requires both an acknowledgement by top decision makers that it is a tool to improve policies and services, and the creation of dedicated structures that govern its development and implementation.

Lebanon would benefit from undertaking reforms to formally designate specific communication roles across its ministries. In the short term, ensuring that a civil servant is assigned to this function in each ministry can help lay the groundwork for the longer-term development of dedicated units. Such administrative reforms also have the wider potential to empower communicators by clearly defining their mandate.

As part of efforts on institutionalisation, developing whole-of-government co-ordination mechanisms would help the government speak with one voice. OECD interviews underlined the limited formalised tools that exist for co-ordinating across government. There appears to be little consistency in the channels, types, and frequency of the information provided. Additionally, some ministries may not communicate sufficiently, and that often depends on the preferences of the Minister in charge at the time. This situation owes in part to the absence of a formal co-ordinating entity.

OMSAR has recently begun efforts to establish an inter-ministerial committee in charge of communication, and led on the establishment of an informal network of communicators from across the government, with support from the OECD. An eventual committee would help accelerate the development and monitoring of reforms, facilitate high-level endorsement, and allow for the exchange of good practices.

Ultimately, a central communication office could be established in order to set a whole-of-government approach. This office should be responsible for ensuring that strategies and objectives across all units are well aligned with the government's policy priorities, as well as with open government principles.

The above solutions are likely to take substantial time to implement. In the short term, evaluation could be conducted on current and upcoming communication initiatives implemented by public entities against desired outcome metrics. This could provide proof of the return on investment, and therefore, demonstrate the value and importance of this function.

Findings relating to the use of core public communication competencies

Chapter 3 of the present report illustrates that a majority of Lebanese ministries lack dedicated staff with professional capabilities to conduct strategic communication. Moreover, the tools, resources, and institutional knowledge to implement activities such as gathering audience insights, conducting public interest campaigns, or managing crisis situations, are underdeveloped across a majority of ministries.

Based on survey responses and on qualitative interviews, there seem to be few established practices of strategy-development and planning, or monitoring and audience insights. The absence of these practices means that the communication that takes place is likely one-way dissemination of information, rather than a more strategic approach that would allow, for instance, a form of dialogue. Similarly, and while good practices exist, there is an untapped potential for greater use of digital channels, whereas more traditional uses of media relations and campaigns are relatively prevalent.

The limited application of core competencies is directly related to a skills and resources shortage, besides the missing strategy and vision that guide their introduction. Currently, both politically appointed and, where present, institutional communicators often lack adequate skills and training to conduct activities strategically and at scale. For instance, press officers seem to be seldom trained to manage the institutions' digital presence and plan their communications alongside media relations, nor may they have the capacity to do so, according to interviews conducted by the OECD.

Addressing this skills shortfall in the short term will require an investment in capacity-building at two levels. The first would consist of specialised trainings for dedicated civil servants and political appointees, with a focus on digital communication skills and the use of data for audience insights and evaluation, highlighted as priorities in survey answers. Secondly, basic trainings can be conducted by sector professionals to help establish baseline skills across government functions, particularly where dedicated staff is missing, to ensure minimum communication needs can be met. Once it is formed, capacity-building could be led by the proposed inter-ministerial committee, who can also establish a set of internal goals to prioritise relevant competencies across all public entities.

In the short term, Lebanese ministries could also focus on developing written strategies to begin transitioning away from an ad-hoc approach to communication. These could set concrete, time-bound objectives centred around each institution's policy priorities and serve as a blueprint to plan detailed initiatives. This step will then guide the smart application of competencies for defined objectives and according to priorities. Lastly, to ensure their effectiveness, strategies should be based on audience insights and monitoring and be evaluated against pre-defined impact metrics.

Dedicated guidelines can help address various areas where public officials need guidance, and consolidate good practices. The existing network of public communicators, or the proposed inter-ministerial committee to be formed, could develop government-wide guidelines, covering aspects of digital and internal communication, campaigns, and media relations. These guidelines can also ensure practices and processes are aligned across all institutions, as well as define clear roles for public communicators.

On internal communication, the ATI Law's Implementation Decree of August 2020 offers an opportunity to develop an internal campaign, led by OMSAR and co-ordinated with the network of public communicators, to inform institutions on their respective obligations, and promote uptake of its provisions among civil servants in an effort to instil a culture of transparency.

Findings relating to the contribution of public communication and media ecosystems for Lebanon's open government agenda

When conducted strategically, communication is a key enabler of open government principles, as is articulated in Chapter 4. As such, it should form an important part of any open government agenda. In Lebanon, efforts to reform the public sector to make it more open and bring it closer to citizens have picked

up in recent years, notably with landmark anti-corruption and ATI legislation. Going forward, there are important ambitions to integrate these efforts in a comprehensive open government strategy or plan, illustrated in the OECD *Open Government Scan of Lebanon* (OECD, 2020[7]).

Given the limited structures in place in Lebanon, leveraging public communication to advance transparency, integrity, accountability and participation will depend first and foremost on implementing some of the above recommendations on institutionalisation. Including this function as a pillar of an eventual national open government strategy could provide an important opportunity to press for its reform.

In the meantime, public communicators can begin to integrate objectives linked to openness in their work with support from OMSAR, whether via guidelines or the sharing of expertise. In developing strategies and campaigns, they could keep front of mind how these can serve broader open government goals.

For instance, ministries can ensure that the information that is made public is comprehensive, easily accessible on the appropriate channels, and that it is up to date. Another practice to support transparency would be encouraging proactive disclosures as called for in the ATI Law in their communications. The efforts of communicators could also offer an opportunity for participation in itself, whereby citizens are able to react and interact with government content on platforms that permit it.

Conversely, OMSAR, as a primary entity steering initiatives in this space, has a significant opportunity to leverage communication to raise awareness and advocate for open government reforms, both internally and externally. To do so, it could develop a dedicated strategy covering the full policy cycle, that entails public engagement campaigns, and crucially internal ones that aim to inform and build positive attitudes among the civil service. In the near term, OMSAR could develop such a campaign on the ongoing implementation of the ATI Law.

Finally, the media has a key role to play for a more open and accountable government in Lebanon. Yet, interviews conducted by the OECD show that journalists often have difficulties obtaining quality and timely information from the government for their reporting. Recent reports of restrictions to freedoms of the press and of expression are also a source of concern and an impediment to the media's watchdog role (Maharat Foundation, 2019[13]; Human Rigths Watch, 2019[14]).

Although Lebanon has a greatly diverse media sector, the quality of journalism suffers from a politicised system (El Richani, 2014[15]). Several outlets are indeed affiliated with a particular political party or coalition through their ownership. Besides amounting to a measure of bias, this also hinders transparent reporting and the holding to account of public institutions (Deutsche Welle Akademie, 2019[16]). It can additionally exacerbate the loss of trust among the public.

To this end, pursuing reforms to the media regulatory framework would be a welcome step and could help emphasise the role of digital and traditional media to expand public debate and support a more diverse ecosystem that is increasingly digital. Importantly, new rules can also serve to guide the government's response to mis- and dis- information. In parallel, the government can work to ensure that public service media are maintained as reliable sources of information, by overseeing that they operate independently and providing adequate funding.

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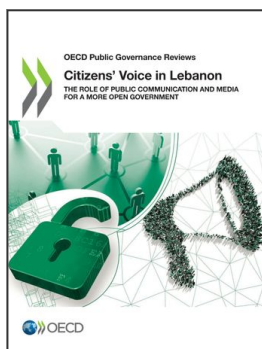http://www.govtpracticewpp.com/~/media/wppgov/leadersreport/2019/wpp_leaders_report_citizen_engagement.pdf?v=1.

Notes

¹ Public communication is distinct from political communication, which is linked to individual political figures and parties, the political debate or to elections. It is instead understood as a public service in itself. Its scope ranges from the provision of information of public value (for instance on changes in policy affecting citizens), to the two-way interaction between public institutions and citizens, to the support of policy implementation and service delivery.

² Media and information ecosystems is understood as the combination of communication, media and internet governance structures (i.e. institutional, legal, policy and regulatory frameworks) as well as principal actors (i.e. governments, traditional and social media companies and citizen journalists) that affect how the public receives and shares news and information via media platforms, government sources and social media platforms.

³ Author's own research.

⁴ Stakeholders met during the peer review mission include: representatives from the media (Executive magazine, L'Orient Le Jour, Daily Star, An-Nahar, the National News Agency, the Lebanese Press Syndicate, the Lebanese Editors Syndicate); representatives from civil society organisations (May Chidiac Foundation, Gherbal Initiative, Lebanese Transparency Association, Nahnoo, Maharat Foundation, Samir Kassir Foundation); OMSAR; the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (PCM); the Institute of Finance; the Ministry of Information; the Ministry of Telecommunication; the Ministry of Public Health; the Ministry of Labour; the Ministry of Social Affairs; the Ministry of Interior; the Ministry of EnergyMs Paula Yaacoubian MP.

⁵ The question did not apply to the PCM.