The interplay between the agency of civil society organizations and foreign aid

What does analyzing the agency of civil society organization in Lebanon reveal about the possibilities for transforming the hegemonic relationships within foreign aid?

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Abstract:

The flow of political aid into civil society organizations has sparked extensive debates and controversies surrounding the impact of foreign aid on the efficacy of said organization in receipt countries. These discussions explore foreign aid through theoretical and empirical lenses, investigating its implications on global, regional, and national levels of analysis. Consequently, fundamental notions of geopolitics, development, and normative considerations within the realm of International Relations (IR) have been called into question. By employing the theory of hegemony and the concept of agency, this paper aims to enhance our understanding of the interplay between the agency of civil society organizations and foreign aid. It addresses the question of What does analyzing the agency of civil society organizations in Lebanon reveals about the possibilities for transforming the hegemonic relationships within foreign aid? The examination of Robert Cox’s contextualization of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony in IR, combined with James C. Scott’s observation of peasant resistance in ruler Malaysia, lays the foundation for this study. This study calls attention to the often-overlooked ability of civil society organizations to not only challenge but reshape the prevailing hegemonic dynamics of foreign aid. More importantly, this study instigates a nuanced exploration of agency, resistance, and the transformative capacity of CSOs derived from local perspectives and the subculture and values of the civil society in Lebanon.

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1. Introduction

The topic of foreign aid within the field of International Relations encompasses geopolitical interests, global development, and normative considerations. Analyzing this topic provides an important insight into the complex interactions and international cooperation among states, making it highly relevant to the field. Foreign aid can be extended in different forms, including humanitarian aid in response to emergencies, military aid in the form of training and equipment provision, and development aid that addresses long-term socio-economic issues (Carapico, 2014: 14). However, it is primarily the latter form of aid that funds political projects through conventional multilateral agencies or INGOs with a particular focus on engaging civil society organizations1 (CSOs) in recipient countries (Ibid). Such projects promote ideas associated with the West as it is predominantly where donor agencies are located (Ibid, 21). The political dimension of aid motivates an inquiry into CSOs’ awareness of the political implications and their ability to reach well-informed decisions on whether to recirculate or repurpose ideas promoted by donors, which is ultimately a question of agency. Therefore, this research aims to understand the interplay between CSOs and foreign aid.

1.1. Research problem and question:

The interest in understanding the relationship between International Organization2 (IOs) and CSOs in the context of foreign aid has prompted discussions on fostering fair partnerships and local engagement among IOs. For instance, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) advocates for an approach of localization, emphasizing the importance of fair partnership with local actors, namely CSOs (OECD, 2017). Similarly, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) promotes collaborative and participatory approaches to their work (UNDP, n.d.).

Conversely, existing literature exploring the IO-CSO relationship using the framework of foreign aid often presents a different narrative. It portrays IOs as reflecting the interests of Western states and using foreign aid to co-opt and assimilate local actors, such as CSOs, in to further those interests (Hyeon-Jae, 2017; Myers, 2015; Hearn, 2000; Paragi, 2021; Hébert & Mathieu, 2014; Nay, 2014 ). This narrative stems from a hegemonic understanding of the relationship between aid

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1 In this research Civil Society Organization (CSO) refers to formal organizations, informal groups and individuals engage in civil society.
2 In this research International Organization (IO) refers to both multilateral agencies and International Non-Governmental Organization.
providers and CSOs by assuming the passivity of aid recipients in their engagement with foreign aid. However, such a narrative falls short of providing a comprehensive understanding of the relationship, particularly at a local level. Therefore, for the aim of understanding the interplay between CSOs agency and foreign aid, this research problem adopts the following objectives:

- Indicating the agency of CSOs in relation to the empirical case of Lebanon by examining their level of awareness and control within the relationship with foreign aid
- Exploring what acts do CSOs take to assert and maintain their agency and their significance in potentially transforming the prevailing hegemonic structure.

In order to achieve such objectives, the research question leading this paper is: *What does analyzing the agency of CSOs in Lebanon reveal about the possibility of transforming the hegemonic relationship with foreign aid?*

### 1.2. Lebanon as a case study:

Focusing on a single case thoroughly examines relevant variables in the research question (Halperin and Heath, 2022:214). A good single case study is internally valid for demonstrating an exciting aspect of the case itself and externally valid when highlighting wider academic implications (Ibid). Lebanon's unique political system, vibrant civil society, and comparative value make it an interesting case study.

Lebanon’s unique sectarian political system includes Hezbollah, an Iranian-funded Islamic group, and a designated terrorist organization by the US government (United States Department of State, n.d.). In the absence of any coercive methods to challenge Hezbollah’s power as its part of the government, Western countries utilize foreign aid and its liberal peace project to threaten the authority and legitimacy of Hezbollah (Zahar, 2012). However, this only led to greater division in Lebanese society and greater scrutiny of the legitimacy of CSOs funded by foreign aid (Ibid).

Nonetheless, on October 19th, 2019, tens of thousands of Lebanese people took to the streets in national-wide anti-government protests. Notably, CSOs were at the forefront of such collective action playing a critical role as organizers discussing visions for reconciliation in their gatherings with protesters to solidify the aim of building a unified post-conflict nation (Vértes, 2021). The success of such actions is beyond the scope of this research; however, these actions exemplify the fact that CSOs in Lebanon are far from being passive agents once observed at a
national or local level of analysis. Quite the opposite, their engagement in the October 19th protests signals their activeness in their socio-political sphere as actors with agency.

While Lebanon may be considered as an exceptional case due to its distinct political system and, therefore, of limited comparative value. This research will illustrate that the dynamics of CSOs' work in Lebanon offer valuable insights applicable to other contexts where political participation is limited and competing orders of authority dominate the political sphere.

1.3. Research structure:
This research is divided into six chapters: an introduction, followed by a literature review aiming to situate the research question in the wider theoretical debates in IR, identify the relevance of the research aim from a regional level, and finally, explore the significance of the case study of Lebanon on both a regional and theoretical level. The third chapter presents the theoretical framework in which an agency is defined in relation to the context of this research question and the objectives outlined. The fourth chapter introduces interpretivism as research philosophy and semi-structured interview as the method to collect qualitative data and justify those choices. The fifth chapter outlines the results of the interviews and discusses them in relation to the theoretical framework and relevant literature. The sixth and final chapter presents the main findings of this research and concludes by answering the research question and presenting the relevance of this research to the field of IR.
2. Literature review

The literature review seeks to address the research question by examining various IR literature approaches regarding the analysis of foreign aid, particularly in relation to hegemony and agency. The objective is to position the research within the border theoretical debate. Secondly, the review explores existing literature that focuses on mapping the connection between foreign aid and CSO in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, aiming to evaluate the applicability of the chosen approach on a regional level. Thirdly, reviewing literature that explores the relationship between CSOs and foreign aid, aiming to establish the relevance of analyzing CSOs in Lebanon within both the regional and theoretical context, thus highlighting its significance in the field of IR.

Overall, the literature review examines how relevant studies have been conducted, what are their main findings and how their limitation and insights can help to guide the design of the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this research.

2.1. Hegemony, agency, and foreign aid: understanding the relationship

Literature focusing on foreign aid varies in how the phenomena is analyzed, particularly in relation to hegemony and agency. One approach analyzes foreign aid as a part of multilateralism, placing multilateral institutions at the heart of the analysis (Cox, 1981; 1983; 1992).

Robert Cox, a prominent Gramscian scholar, presents Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as “a structure of values and understandings about the nature of the order that permeates a whole society, in this case, a world society composed of states and non-state corporate entities” (1992: 179). The primary contribution of Cox to the field of International Relations is his re-contextualization of the theory of hegemony by relating it to the phenomena of multilateralism. He examines multilateral institutions as a mechanism, amongst many, of a greater force seeking to institutionalize and then regulate the world order placing the hegemonic power at its center (Cox, 1992: 163). His investigation of the role of international organizations as an expression of hegemony gives Cox relevance in the field of IR.

By adopting the historical dialectic approach, Cox understands power as emerging from a social process where three forces interact: material, idea, and institution (1992, 130). Such an approach enables Cox’s argument that once a state or an actor dominates all three forces, then hegemony is established (Cox, 1992). Moreover, Cox argues that hegemony is acquired only when
a set of values and understandings is stable and unquestioned by most actors in the world order thus becoming the “intersubjective meanings that constitute the order itself” (1992, 179).

For instance, Cox (1981) argues that IO’s role is to homogenize the elite from peripheral countries, legitimize the ideologies of dominant entities, and absorb any counter-hegemonic ideas (Cox, 1981). All these functions are fundamentally connected to these IOs’ ability to normalize their role by presenting themselves as part of the greater good, promoting adjustments as necessary responses to the needs of the general system and not to the will of dominant countries, and extending aid (Cox, 1981: 145). Therefore, foreign aid is understood as a tool of IOs acting as essential mechanisms for legitimizing and accepting certain social practices in the peripheral countries, a necessary process for establishing the hegemony of dominant states (1992, 179). Yet, Cox falls short of examining whether these social practices and ideologies are indeed accepted or resisted at a national or local level in said peripheral countries.

When explaining how IOs engage with counter-hegemonic ideas, Cox argues for three different scenarios of resistance that differ in context and intensity: war of movement, passive revolution, and historic bloc (Cox, 1983; 1992). In all these scenarios, civil society plays an important role in developing and maintaining collective images that bind together the subordinate class into a shared identity (Ibid: 168). Applying it to IOs, Cox argues that organized resistance as a historic bloc would not emerge in the space created by the IOs, nor taking over such institutions would lead to any actual change, as these institutions are fundamentally connected to the national hegemonic classes of the core counties (Cox, 1983; 173). Consequently, Cox insists that any change would need to be based on social relations at a national level (Ibid).

Empirical literature, adopting Cox’s approach in analyzing IOs, is primarily concerned with the realm of ideas and the ways in which they are constructed and assimilated by IOs (Bøås & McNeill, 2004; Nay, 2014). The literature has adapted the interpretative paradigm in its discourse analysis method to examine how power and ideas intertwine in multilateral institutions such as the IMF, UNDP, and OECD (Ibid). For instance, Bøås & McNeill (2004) argue that the practices of said IOs are fundamentally connected to the socially constructed ideas as products of the interactions among states. In turn, those ideas are ultimately linked to the material disparities among states as the existence of these institutions depends on the states’ material resources (Bøås & McNeill, 2004). By analyzing the discourse in speeches, statements, and reports of IOs, findings indicate that the same asymmetrical power that exists between core and periphery states is reflected
in the principles and practices of such institutions, as they depend mostly on the resources given by the core countries.

Similarly, Nay (2014) examines how the OECD constructs policies based on hegemonic powers' interests and how it disseminates said policies. By referencing Cox’s (1983) concept of Passive revolution, Nay argues that IOs using foreign aid engage in the process of assimilation in which they absorb the counter-hegemonic ideas emerging in the periphery countries and represent them in a manner consistent with the hegemonic doctrine (2014: 215).

An opposing perspective to Cox’s analysis of foreign aid is offered by Hattori (2001), who, rather than exploring foreign aid as a tool, examines the conditions allowing for the existence of foreign aid and the nature of foreign aid that proves its utility for hegemonic powers (Hattori, 2001; 2003; Paragi, 2016a). Hattori’s perspective is unique to that of Cox in two main aspects. First, it applies the paradigm of critical realism and its methodology of retroduction (Hattori, 2001: 634-654), and second, it is greatly influenced by Marcel Mauss’s idea of the gift3 (Ibid). Based on such a framework, Hattori (2001) understands foreign aid as an unreciprocated gift due to the material hierarchy between aid-giving and aid-receiving states. Moreover, to Hattori, accepting foreign aid legitimizes and eventually naturalizes the existing hierarchy of the world order (2001). The basis of Hattori’s argument is the assumption that accepting the gift turns the weak into the grateful (2003: 156). His nuanced approach to foreign aid presented an opportunity for other authors to adopt a bottom-up approach and a challenge to explore the relevance of Hattori’s perspective at a local and national level. This eventually drew focus on the agency of local actors in aid-receiving countries, namely CSOs (e.g., Paragi, 2016a; 2017; 2021; Baran, 2022; McLennan et al., 2022).

Furthermore, those authors, testing Hattori’s approach, argue that aid could be understood as unreciprocated only in financial terms (Paragi, 2016a). Relating to the interpretivist paradigm, Paragi (2016a) conducted interviews with Palestinian CSO activists better to understand foreign aid and agency from their perspective. Criticizing Hattori, she argues that examining power from a minority perspective can reveal a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between

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3 Marcel Mauss, a widely-recognized anthropologist, presents the idea of a gift as a form of exchange between social groups in which one actor or a group of actors gives a necessity to another actor without expecting anything in return (Mauss, 1966). Mauss presents a political dimension to the idea by claiming that a gift is not simply an act of generosity but instead it comes with a particular interest (Mauss, 1966: 71). He elaborates that gifts be seen as a means to establish a hierarchy, of in which the giver demonstrates their superiority asserting oneself as magister, and the recipient, facing no expectation to repay or return the favor, is deemed subordinate becoming a minister (Mauss, 1966: 75).
donors and recipients (Paragi 2016). Paragi adds that CSOs consciously exploit their struggle by presenting themselves as helpless to gain more aid (Ibid). Such action validates the virtuous nature of foreign aid, which is essential to its existence; without it, aid providers do not fulfill their role in naturalizing hegemony (Paragi, 2016a; 2021). In this case, foreign aid is not an unreciprocated gift if acts of reciprocity are understood in a nonmaterial sense (Ibid, 108). Such an argument brings the debate back to Cox's (1981) framework and the idea of passive revolution, where CSOs' attempts to assert their agency are limited within the hegemonic structure established by IOs.

Therefore, the concept of hegemony, foreign aid, and agency as acts of resistance are all explored and intertwined in IR literature. Cox’s (1981; 1983; 1992) analysis of foreign aid within the framework of multilateralism suggests a possibility for CSOs to practice their agency either as a war of movement, passive revolution, or historic bloc. A possibility that is messing from different frameworks such as the one presented by Hattori (2001; 2003), where foreign aid is limited to its material component.

2.2. Hegemony or? Mapping the Relationship of Aid and CSOs in MENA

From a regional level of analysis, previous literature shows that the cultural distinctiveness of the MENA region hinders foreign aid from establishing complete hegemony (Paragi, 2016b; Hinnebusch, 2015). As explained by Hinnebusch, in the Middle East region, “no (legitimized) hegemonic order has been established, rival norms will be promoted by rival agents in their power struggles, with the likely outcome hybridity” (2015: 399). This can be attributed to the region's resistance to competing hegemonic powers greatly exemplified by the Arab Spring uprisings in of 2010-2011 (Paragi, 2016b; Hinnebusch, 2015; Carapico, 2014). Consequently, foreign aid becomes a political issue, by default, due to the region's political complexities (Carapico, 2014; Pragi, 2016a).

Furthermore, the primary goal of foreign aid in the region is to protect Western interests in preventing migration, thus maintaining European stability and ensuring Israeli security (Paragi, 2016a; Hinnebusch, 2015; Carapico, 2014). Between these political interests and normative conflicts of hegemony are CSOs which have been gaining literary attention following the onset of the Arab Spring and its revolutionary opposition to authoritarian regimes and foreign expansionism (Carapico, 2014). For this reason, literature concerned with this topic shifted its focus on the agency of CSOs in the region and the influence of foreign aid, particularly Western aid, endured by said organizations (Carapico, 2014; Paragi, 2016b; 2014; Habib et al., 2021; Sayed
Metcalfe, 2017; Sika, 2021). Such literature aims to analyze the role of CSOs in the political sphere and examine whether or not, by receiving foreign aid, CSOs disseminate hegemonic knowledge (Carapico, 2014: 163).

Carapico (2014) studies a vast amount of official documents related to democracy promotion in the MENA region, grouping them into what she calls an “overview project catalog”. His catalog brings forth two contributions: first, mapping out the modes of domination IOs utilize in achieving normative civil hegemony, and second, showcasing how IOs, such as the UNDP, aim to establish a knowledge society in the Arab world aligning with neo-liberal epistemological and professional practices (Carapico, 2014: 197). Her catalog further aligns Carapico’s research with Cox’s perspective on IOs and foreign aid as mechanisms of hegemony.

In arguing for these points, Carapico presented the process of “NGO-ization” (2014: 165) of social causes and street-level movements. To the author, NGOization is understood as the process in which conditions subjugate aid-seeking activists, aiming at furthering their objectives to mimic specified categories and methodologies of knowledge production detached from national or local contexts (Carapico 2014: 167; Habib et al., 2021: 616). Carapico (2014) argues that these tactics are part of the modes of domination utilized by IOs in denationalizing civil activism for the purpose of crippling any grassroots collective actions of resistance that may undermine their interests (193).

Other authors argue that the types of organizations ignored or excluded by Western foreign aid are grassroots, younger organizations unable to meet the complex requirements, and any organization with religious affiliation (Habib et al., 202; Sayed & Metcalfe, 2017). However, given the predominantly religious character of the region’s society, the exclusion of the latter has affected the legitimacy of other CSOs that are funded by and associated with Western foreign aid (Paragi, 2016b). This exclusion amplifies the existing anti-western sentiment in the region owed to the war on Iraq and the Western state’s support of authoritarian regimes in Egypt and other states (Ibid, 210-214). Such sentiment leads to the rejection of the legitimacy of Western IOs or any associated groups, therefore undermining the work of CSOs funded by those IOs (Ibid).

This sentiment toward Western countries establishes Paragi’s (2016b) argument that the problem with foreign aid is that it is foreign, mainly of Western origin. Therefore, accepting aid from an origin known to be complicit in the struggles of the local population ultimately undermines the legitimacy of CSOs, thus posing a challenge to their agency (Paragi, 2016n: 214). Nevertheless,
in the absence of other sources of funding, civil society groups are forced to seek foreign support (Ibid). While the lack of funding options is indeed an issue, it is not necessarily the case that the IOs in question have been successful in fulfilling their function as mechanisms of hegemony (Carapico, 2014; Sika, 2021; Habib et al., 2021; Sayed & Metcalfe, 2017). Carapico (2014) concludes that despite the dispute between national and transnational attempts to manage the civil society in MENA, neither was able to impose their regimes, let alone establish hegemony, evident by the onset of the Arabic Spring. Others have pointed out various collective mobilizations of youth groups preceding the Arabic Spring, showcasing the high level of civil and political participation in the MENA region (Sika, 2021).

Therefore, existing literature mapping the relationship between IOs and CSOs in the MENA region suggests that IOs employ foreign aid to establish hegemony. However, the extent of success of those attempts in establishing hegemony in the region is questioned. Additionally, literature has shown that though the agency of civil society in the MENA area is challenged by foreign aid, it continues to persist.

2.3. Possible resistance? Lebanon, foreign aid, and CSOs
Foreign aid have played a crucial role in Lebanon during the country's two distinct historical phases. The first phase started with the end of the 1990 Lebanese civil war, during which foreign aid acted as the main provider of essential services for the country's reconstruction (Haddad, 2017). During this phase, foreign aid, allowing local CSOs to fill the void created by the ineffective and incapacitated government (Ibid), became a significant actor in Lebanese society as it was “masking the role of the state” (Ibid: 1752). Subsequently, following the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah conflict coupled with the establishment of Hezbollah as a political party, Western powers, such as the US, EU, and UK, contributed millions of dollars in foreign aid for the supposed goal of tackling extremism (Haddad & Itani, 2016: 2). During this time, Western goals shifted from reconstruction and the provision of essential services to the promotion of the ‘universal’ values of democracy and political participation (Hadid, 2013; Nagel & Staeheli, 2015). Such a relationship with foreign aid sparked literary interest in the case study of Lebanon as it exemplifies the region’s hybridity of political systems emerging from the absence of a clear hegemonic order (Hinnebusch, 2015: 399).

Similar to Carapico (2014), Nagel & Staeheli hold a perception of Lebanese CSOs as instruments of foreign donors complicit in establishing a Western neo-liberal order (2015: 226). Additionally, the process of NGO-ization as explained by Caparico, is echoed in literature
analyzing the civil society in Lebanon. For instance, Nagel & Staeheli (2015) equate the process of institutionalization and professionalization of local CSOs with the gentrification of civil society. Based on their interpretivist approach to interviews with various CSO and NGO directors, Nagel & Staeheli explain that NGOs in Lebanon actively implement an internationalized, Western-formulated, liberal-democratic discourse in addressing sectarian dysfunction (2015: 238). Yet, promoting such discourse can result in excluding local practices and identities, thus creating a depoliticized civil society detached from the complexities of local political life (Ibid: 228). The same issue is identified across literature on the influence of foreign aid on Lebanese CSOs (Haddad & Itani, 2016; Haddad, 2017; Birkholz et al., 2018).

That is to say, the literature observing the impact of foreign aid on Lebanese CSOs aligns with the previously reviewed literature about foreign aid's influence on the entire region. Additionally, this Lebanon-focused literature, examining the efforts of foreign aid agencies to disseminate knowledge through CSOs for the purpose of establishing hegemony, aligns with the findings of the first theme in this literature review. However, adopting a bottom-up approach to studying the Lebanese CSO's role in foreign aid has also revealed aspects of CSOs agency, primarily their awareness of the role of foreign aid as a mechanism of hegemony (Haddad & Itani, 2016; Birkholz et al., 2018). This aspect of agency is illustrated in the argument that despite CSOs generally complying with the principles of Western liberal-democratic discourse, they are also cognizant of their limitations and often question the actual impact of their work in creating significant change (Nagel & Staeheli, 2015: 242).

Despite facing restrictions imposed by the geopolitical agendas of donors, the common point proposed by the reviewed literature is that CSOs strive to find methods to increase their effectiveness, an important aspect of their work that indicates agency (Haddad & Itani, 2016; Nagel & Staeheli, 2015; Birkholz et al., 2018). Therefore, proving that CSOs' questioning and thus unacceptance of the circumstances imposed by foreign aid, the reviewed literature renounces the conception of CSOs as passive agents and instruments of foreign donors.

2.4. Conclusion

The literature review provides an overview of the different theoretical and empirical perspectives on the concepts of hegemony and agency within the relationship between foreign aid and CSOs in recipient countries, particularly in Lebanon. Additionally, the review offers insights guiding the
research design of this paper and illustrates a gap in the existing literature which this research aims to address.

The literature review fulfills the first objective of this research, showcasing the agency of CSOs within their relations with foreign aid providers, by highlighting the awareness among civil society activists of the political dimension and implications of foreign aid. Reviewing said literature positioned this research within Cox's understanding of hegemony and foreign aid, allowing the exploration of agency and the possibility of transformation. Additionally, it offers an inspiration for adapting sufficient methods such as conducting interviews and an interpretivist approach to forming a well-rounded nuanced understanding of the topic at hand.

Finally, an observable gap in the literature is the absence of an examination of whether or not CSOs’ awareness of the hegemonic relationship with foreign aid prompts any real action. Therefore, this research contributes to the existing literature by addressing the identified gap and exploring the kinds of acts taken by CSOs to assert and maintain their agency and significant role in transforming the prevailing hegemonic structure. To do so, the following section redefines agency and broadens its scope to encompass various types of acts carried out by CSOs.

3. Theoretical framework

The following chapter is divided into three sections: The first section draws on Johnson's (2003) arguments to develop a more inclusive definition of the acts signaling agency as everyday acts of resistance. Secondly, inspired by Hattori's (2001) and Paragi's (2016) multidisciplinary approach, this research borrows from the discipline of anthropology, namely James C. Scott's book “Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance,” explores which acts of resistance CSOs take to assert and maintain their agency. To ensure this research’s contribution to the field of IR, the third section draws on Cox's (1981; 1983; 1992) contexts of possible transformation: war of movement, passive revolution, and the historic bloc for the purpose of analyzing whether or not CSOs’ acts of resistance open up the possibility for transformation. Finally, based on the three sections, this paper defines agency as everyday acts of resistance pursuing coordination and aiming for transformation.

3.1. Hegemony, Agency, and foreign aid: understanding agency

The definition of agency, presented by this research thus far, is a person's ability to make independent decisions regarding their actions and life circumstances based on reason and thus
exercise greater control over their lives (Gallagher, 2000; Lowe, 2009). In contrast, hegemony, as argued in the literature review, aims to limit subordinates’ agency using consensual methods as it “frames thought and thereby circumscribes action” (Cox, 1992:180). Therefore, defining agency within the context of hegemony is not as simple as the two concepts are antagonists to each other. Nevertheless, literature from subaltern studies provides insights into the definition of agency.

Johnson (2003) argues that the approach of hegemony does not encompass all possible forms of resistance. He argues that understanding agency as the everyday acts of resistance provides a comprehensive image of resistance (Johnson, 2003). This is not to mistake agency as synonymous to resistance; instead, he argues that, unlike agency, the resistance of the subalterns is understood as coordinated revolutionary acts of resistance (Ibid: 116). In his analysis of the relationship between slaves and slaveholders, Johnson explains that slaves’ everyday individual acts of resistance negating the authority of slaveholders indicate their exercise of agency (Johnson, 2003: 117). Moreover, once these acts of resistance become collective and coordinated, they become an attack on the system of slavery (Ibid).

Applying Johnson's (2003) conception of agency as everyday acts of resistance to the analysis of CSOs in Lebanon widens the possibility of investigating their agency within the realm of foreign aid. His conception narrows down the research from investigating collective, organized resistance, absent in Lebanon, to investigating their everyday acts of resistance. However, Johnson (2003) does not comprehensively operationalize his understanding of agency. Therefore, the next section aims to outline the specific actions and provide indicators of everyday acts of resistance, constituting agency, in the empirical case of the Lebanese CSOs.

3.2. Hegemony or?: outlining CSOs agency as everyday acts of resistance

The application of the concept of hegemony in the field of IR, as presented by Cox (1981; 1983; 1992), is primarily concerned with global level of analysis and only observes resistance at a national level. Because such an application does not exhaust all possibilities of resistance, it is important to understand agency as everyday acts of resistance to conduct a more comprehensive test of the extent to which hegemony prevails. However, to empirically investigate the relevance of such understanding, this research lines the everyday acts of resistance by drawing on James C. Scott's (1985) observations of the relationship between Malaysian peasants and farmers.
Similarly to the argument above, Scott argues that the theory of hegemony does not encompass all the explanatory space of social action (1985: 43). He explains that parties of hegemonic relationships do not deduce their identities solely from the mode of production as “[a] peasant experiences increasing land rents, stingy landlords” and is unable to “experience the capitalist pyramid of finance” (Scott, 1985: 44). This argument grounds the analysis of agency in an empirical sense as it suggests that everyday acts of resistance, embodying agency, are found in the empirical ‘real’ experiences of actors. Scott (1985) presents various acts of resistance some of which are relevant to this paper, such as reciprocal manipulation, argument as resistance, symbolic compliance, and social space. Thus, the following section will conceptualize those acts, relate them to the context of CSOs in Lebanon, and conduct a process of operationalization involving the formulation of guiding-questions that help identify empirical examples of said acts.

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<tr>
<th>Research theme</th>
<th>Theoretical element</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Acts of resistance</td>
<td>Reciprocal manipulation</td>
<td>• What considerations CSOs take while formulating their agenda, goals, or objectives, and for what ends?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Argument as resistance</td>
<td>• What is the CSO’s perception of donors? • How would CSOs describe their relationship with donors?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Symbolic compliance</td>
<td>• What do CSOs do to ensure the effectiveness of your work and their access to funding? • What tactics do they use to assert or maintain their agency without risking a funding opportunity?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The social space</td>
<td>• At what level of your work do you feel the most independent/autonomous? • What does this contribute to the effectiveness of your work?</td>
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</table>

*Figure 1: operationalization of everyday acts of resistance*
3.2.1. Reciprocal manipulation

On a similar note to that of Cox (1981; 1983; 1992), Scott argues that the powerful engage in the process of euphemization of economic domination to ensure the appropriation of ideas and methods that maintain the system (1985: 307). Scott finds that farmers handcraft social authority by providing services, such as gifts, loans, and charities acting as “symbols of euphemization” (1985: 308). However, he does not perceive the function of these symbolic services as simply a disguise for symbolic domination or appropriation (Scott, 1985: 309). Instead, he argues that symbolic services such as monetary gifts serve a function for both the strong and the weak in a process that he calls “reciprocal manipulation” (ibid). Scott argues that a peasant, with the aim to acquire such gifts, appeals to the farmer’s self-interested description of their actions by using deferential language to request their "help" and "assistance" (Ibid). He argues that such exchange shows how the peasant contributes to the symbolic legitimacy of the farmer’s principles while achieving their own objectives.

Relating such a concept to the CSOs in Lebanon, this research examines if the CSOs, in their attempt to access foreign aid, strategically appeal to the IO’s language or requirements through the formulation of their agenda, goals, and objectives. Therefore, to indicate the act of reciprocal manipulation in the relationship between CSOs and IOs in Lebanon, this paper seeks to identify the consideration CSOs take when formulating their agenda, goals, and objectives and ends for which they do so.

3.2.2. Argument as resistance

Scott (1985) understands argument in a linguistic manner, through the use of humor, nicknames, and metaphors, and a practical one, through boycotting social meetings (1985: 234-240). By recognizing that arguments are based on the subordinate’s worldview formed by their daily experience with the farmers, Scott relates arguments to resistance (1985: 234). Therefore, these arguments serve as a symbolic barrier to a latent discourse that would legitimize the practices of the dominant (Ibid). He adds that while the discourse advanced by the farmers lacks any moral relevance to the peasant, the latter’s act of argument ensures the continuity of its irrelevance (Scott, 1985: 234-336). Another aspect of this act is “character assassination” (Ibid: 236). Scott argues that given the peasant awareness of the attention farmers give to their status, they are able to utilize the act of argument to attach a certain set of values to this status (Ibid).
Hence, farmers who adhere to the values are given the status they seek; conversely, those who disregard them do not, thus, become the target of “character assassination” (Ibid).

Relating such a concept to the CSOs in Lebanon, this research examines their perception of donors and whether such perception prompts any action like boycotting donor meetings or even funding. Additionally, indicating arguments as humor, nicknames, or metaphors requires examination of the language used by CSOs to describe their perception or relationship with donors well as the situation in general. Therefore to indicate the act of argument as resistance, this paper poses the questions of: what is the CSO's perception of donors, and how would they describe their relationship?

3.2.3. Routine compliance
Based on observation of the peasant compliance with the expectations and ideas of the farmers’ political party, Scott finds that most peasants engage in the act of “symbolic compliance” (1985: 278). He argues that symbolic compliance is when peasants’ express compliance to the farmers’ party only because they hold significant monetary power and there are rewards for those who conform to their expectations (Scott, 1985: 280). However, the peasants do not perceive these ideas as legitimate; yet, they only express disapproval and contempt for them privately, without risking being identified and losing the rewards (Ibid, 282). However, Scott also finds that many continue to refuse those rewards of compliance and resist more openly (1985: 282-283). The more public resistance is, the clearer the expression of the peasants’ determination to reject cultural marginalization becomes (Ibid). Nevertheless, Scott argues that those practices differ in significance, but both undermine those in power, as they assert a certain level of agency (Scott, 1985: 282).

Relating such a concept to the CSOs in Lebanon, routine compliance is evident in the third literature review section, which concludes that Lebanese CSOs often face pressures to comply with the priorities and agenda of foreign aid agencies, which hold significant power and resources. And the rewards of compliance can be substantial, including access to funding, but it also entails sacrificing the autonomy and agency of the CSO. Therefore, this research examines the tactics used by CSOs to maintain some level of agency without risking funding opportunities. Moreover, to indicate the act of routine compliance, this paper poses the question of What do CSOs do to ensure the effectiveness of their work and their access to funding? And more specifically, what tactics do they use to assert or maintain their agency without risking a funding opportunity?
3.2.4. **The social space**

Similarly, to Cox's (1981; 1992) argument, Scott defines hegemony as a unique form of oppression as it engages in both coercive and *consensual* practices for its establishment and maintenance (1985: 327). Yet, Scott elaborates that because of consensual practices, hegemony as a form of oppression continues to leave its’ subordinates with considerable autonomy in their social lives or, as he calls it, a “social space” (1985: 327). He adds that the social space is where subordinates construct their own practices and ideas that are not entirely influenced by the dominant (Ibid). Scott emphasizes that despite the narrowness of the social space, it is still essential for developing symbolic resistance as the absence of a dominant’s definitions and performances is critical for the dissemination of such resistance (ibid: 328).

Relating such a concept to the CSOs in Lebanon, this research examines social space as the sphere where CSOs enjoy the most agency. While the concept of social space does not refer to specific acts, it is still critical for this analysis because, as Scott (1985) concluded, it is the space where resistance can emerge. Additionally, the concept helps in determining the level in the relationship with donors in which CSOs involve their own practices, and, secondly, the meaning they attach to this level. Therefore, to indicate the concept of social space, this paper poses the question: at what level of CSOs’ work do they feel the most independent/autonomous? And what does this contribute to the effectiveness of CSOs' work?

3.3. **Possible transformation: understanding the contexts.**

In order to determine if the everyday acts of resistance outlined previously do reveal a possibility of transforming the CSOs’ relationship with foreign aid. The aim of these actions needs to be understood in terms of their transformative tendencies. To do so, this research draws on Cox's (1983; 1992) arguments about the context in which transformative tendencies are present.

However, it is noteworthy that examining the agency of CSOs and their relationship with foreign aid is not to claim that such a relationship represents the struggle to transform hegemony in its most general and abstract form. Instead, as Cox argues, studying the relationships within foreign aid is studying an expression of hegemony (1981: 136). Thus, studying the possible transformation of CSOs' relationship with foreign aid is studying only the transformation of that specific expression of hegemony.

Cox (1983; 1992) argues for three different contexts in which transformative tendencies exist: War of movement, passive revolution, and Historic bloc. The following section aims to
define these contexts in order to determine whether CSOs, in their everyday forms of resistance, aim to reach a possible transformation in their relationship with foreign aid. Each segment firstly defines the context based on Cox's (1983; 1992) arguments, secondly argues for expressions of these contexts in the relationship with foreign aid, and thirdly operationalizes them by formulating guiding questions to indicate such contexts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research theme</th>
<th>Theoretical element</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Contexts of transformation</td>
<td>● War of movement</td>
<td>● What limits the CSO's coordination with each other?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● what change would CSOs like to see in their work/ their relationship with foreign aid?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Passive revolution</td>
<td></td>
<td>● What meaning does CSO give to their agency?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Historic bloc</td>
<td></td>
<td>● Code: Within &amp; Without</td>
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</table>

Figure 2: operationalization of transformation

3.3.1. War of movement

Cox defines the context of the war of movement as the struggle of civil society to organize and unite itself before engaging in an assault on the state or the established hegemony (Cox 1983: 165). He justifies his definition of the war of movement by arguing that IOs actively fragment the subordinate groups with various ideas to prevent them from coordinating and representing their own efforts that might oppose the interest of the elites or winning a “war of movement” (Cox, 1992: 178). With that being said, Cox explains that to reach any transformation in a hegemonic relationship, acts of resistance need to pursue coordination, meaning engaging in a war of movement (Ibid). Thus, the war of movement is fundamentally connected to the passive revolution and historic bloc perceived as results of successful or unsuccessful coordination of the subordinate (Cox, 1983)
Relating the war of movement to the CSOs in Lebanon, this research firstly examines if the CSOs do believe that further coordination of their everyday acts can help in evolving their actions from asserting agency to possible transformation, hence engaging in a war of movement. Secondly, if they undergo IOs’ attempts of fragmenting any possible cohesion among them. To indicate the former aspect, this research poses the question of: what change would CSOs like to see in their work/ their relationship with foreign aid? To indicate the latter aspect, this research poses the question of what limits the CSOs’ coordination with each other.

### 3.3.2. Passive revolution and Historic bloc

Taking into consideration that a passive revolution and a historic bloc are understood as outcomes of the war of movement, the following sections define both contexts, then operationalize them by developing questions to indicate which or if any outcome prevails in case that CSOs do engage in a war of movement.

Cox (1983) argues that failing a war of movement can result in a passive revolution (1983: 165-166). He elaborates that a passive revolution is actualized when the counter-hegemonic ideas and practices that emerged from peripheral countries and were carried in the war of movement get assimilated into the hegemonic doctrine (Ibid). Cox argues that IOs, as mechanisms of hegemony, engage in such a process by absorbing transformative ideas formulated by civil society and limiting them their implementation to the IOs’ structures, or IOs reshapes those ideas and present them in a manner consistent with the hegemonic doctrine (Ibid).

Cox argues that when a war of movement is successful, meaning a united front has been established, it leads to a historic bloc capable of confronting the established order (1983: 167-173).
However, such an outcome will only emerge if the established order has exhausted its full potential (Cox, 1983: 172). Cox relates the concept to IOs by arguing that the formulation of a historic bloc would not emerge in the spaces created by said IOs (Ibid; 173). Nor does taking over such institutions lead to any actual change (Ibid). That is because these institutions are fundamentally connected to the national hegemonic classes of the core countries (Ibid). Therefore, Cox argues that any change would need to be based on social relations at a national level (Ibid).

Relating these arguments to the CSOs in Lebanon, this research first examines whether CSOs attach transformative meanings and ideas to their agency as everyday acts of resistance. Secondly, based on Cox's (1983) arguments, if those ideas only transform the dynamics of the relationship with foreign aid, then they are deemed as a passive revolution. On the other hand, if the ideas attached to CSOs agency are concerned with a transformation allowing them to abandon their relationship with foreign aid, then they indicate a historic bloc. To determine the first point, this research poses the question of: what meaning does CSO give to their agency? To determine the second point of whether such acts engage in a passive revolution or a historic bloc, this research develops the codes of: within or without. Within indicates a transformation within the relationship, thus a passive revolution. Without indicating a transformation without a relationship with foreign aid, indicating the possibility of a historic bloc.

3.4. Defining agency

To guide the answer to the research question: What does analyzing the agency of civil society organizations in Lebanon reveal about the possibilities for transforming the hegemonic relationships within foreign aid? the previous section developed a theoretical framework to analyze both the independent variable of the question being an agency of civil society organization in Lebanon and the dependent variable possibilities for transforming the hegemonic relationships within foreign aid. To define the independent variable, this section argued that agency can be understood as everyday acts of resistance. To operationalize such understanding, this section outlined four concepts of everyday forms of resistance: Reciprocal Manipulation, Argument as Resistance, Symbolic Compliance, and The Social Space drawing a connection to a case study of CSOs in Lebanon. Finally, to define the dependent variable, this section outlined three different contexts of transformation: War of movement, Passive Revolution, and Historic Bloc. Clarifying that the latter two are outcomes of the war of movement as in the pursuit of coordination and are
used to interpret the significance of meanings attached to such acts and a whether it warns passive revolution or historic bloc.

Such framework entails that for the analysis of the agency of CSOs in Lebanon to reveal any possibility of transformation, understanding agency involves locating everyday acts of resistance, ensure their pursuit of coordination, and determine whether or not they aim for transformation. Therefore, this paper defines agency as an everyday act of resistance pursuing coordination and aiming for transformation. The operationalization of this definition is illustrated in figures (1) & (2).

4. Methodological framework

4.1. Research philosophy

To further analyze the concept of agency as an everyday act of resistance pursuing coordination and aiming for transformation. This study adopts the interpretivist epistemological stance. An epistemology of Interpretivism views the social world as subjectively created and socially constructed based on our interpretations of it (Haplerin & Heath, 2020: 5-30). Thus, the primary aim of the research is not to explain and predict social phenomena but to understand human behavior by interpreting the meanings, beliefs, and ideas that give people reasons for acting (Ibid: 47). Ontologically, interpretivists use a hermeneutical approach: which accepts that human behavior is the result of the meanings and intentions actors employ (Ibid: 48).

However, one limitation to interpretivism philosophy is that it does not anticipate transformation (Haplerin & Heath, 2020: 30). Therefore, as part of delimitation, this paper draws on the critical theory strand of interpretivism (ibid), by adding a dialectic approach to the interpretations. Such an approach aims to understand and anticipate alternatives to the prevailing order by examining the normative choices taken by actors that actualize such alternatives (Cox, 1992: 180). Overall, interpretivist philosophy with the dialectic approach of critical theory forms an appropriate framework for this research as it firstly facilitates understanding the meaning CSOs give to their relationship with foreign aid. Secondly defining what acts are prompted by such meanings. And finally, interpreting the intentions of such acts and what they reveal about the possibility of transformation.
4.2. **Semi-structured interviews**

This research will use semi-structured interviews to collect primary data and test the relevance of the concept of agency to the relationship of CSOs with IOs and its overall impact on the hegemony of foreign aid. Semi-structured interviews typically involve a limited number of interviews where the interviewer utilizes a combination of structured and unstructured questions to gather information and delve deeper into the interviewee's experiences (Hapleim & Heath, 2020: 313). Hence generating more reliable data (Ibid).

Therefore, using interviews as a method for data collection is well-justified in this research design, as it aligns with the study's epistemological and ontological stances. It allows for the collection of rich, detailed data directly from the actors involved, which can be used to gain insight into their interpretations and perspectives of the social world, in this case, the hegemony of foreign aid. Additionally, how their perspectives motivate their actions of asserting agency and how they interpret these actions. The forms of interviews chosen for this research are online interviews. The decision is motivated by online interviews being a useful technique for collecting sensitive data and minimizing interview bias (Halperin & Heath, 2020: 311).

4.3. **Sampling and participants**

This study recruited 3 different interviewees holding different positions in CSOs that operate in various parts of Lebanon and two interviewees who do not associate with any specific CSOs and work all across Lebanon. Moreover, considering this paper focuses on the political dimension of foreign aid, all five participants recruited engage with political objectives rather than humanitarian ones. Consequently, they receive political aid, which aims to deliver ideas and norms rather than emergency relief (Carapico, 2003: 14), making the category of participants appropriate for the purpose of this research.

This study employed snowball sampling to recruit the participants. Snowballing means the use of one interviewee's recommendation to recruit the other (May, 2001: 145). Yet, these recommendations were not always based on the personal relationship among the interviewees; in certain cases, it was related to a person's reputation.

4.4. **Data**

4.4.1. **Data collection**

This research collects data by constructing a list of questions along with supplementary queries to investigate various aspects of the interviewee's responses, in other words creating an interview
The interview guide is developed in relation to the theoretical themes and their operationalization, as illustrated in figures (1) & (2). However, additional questions were added to develop profiles of the interviewees and to clarify further points.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Possible probes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Personal background</td>
<td>● What is your current occupation?</td>
<td>● Did you have any previous experience before?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● What motivated you to work in this field?</td>
<td>● How did you become involved with civil society organizations in Lebanon?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Acts of resistance</td>
<td>● How would you describe your relationship with the donor?</td>
<td>● What considerations CSOs take while formulating their agenda?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● What are your perceptions of your role and the role of donors?</td>
<td>● What limits your independence and agency?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● What do you do to ensure the effectiveness of your work?</td>
<td>● Does it conflict with your access to funding?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● At what level of your work do you feel the most independent/autonomous?</td>
<td>● What are the reasons for such feelings? What limits it, and what strengthens it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● What tactics do you use to assert or maintain your agency?</td>
<td>● Do those tactics put funding opportunities at risk? And how?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Contexts of transformation</td>
<td>● What change would you like to see?</td>
<td>● What action do you take to achieve it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Is the change possible? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>● Does an example exist?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Interview guide

However, it is essential to note that in semi-structured interviewees, different questions might be formulated depending on the flow of the conversation and the points presented by the interviewers (Hapleirn & Heath, 2020: 315). Therefore the interview guide is used as a checklist to ensure that relevant points have been discussed (Ibid)
4.4.2. Data reduction

Data reduction aims to identify redundancies in the data and retain only the most intriguing and significant statements related to a particular issue. Due to the limited time of this research, the interviews are not transcribed word to word: firstly, technical parts that are deemed irrelevant such as a detailed explanation of projects or activities, are not transcribed. Secondly, segments that could indicate the participant’s identity are also not transcribed. Those transcripts are reviewed and analyzed based on the similarities and differences in answers and the thematic connection to figures (1) & (2). In the data reduction process, interviewees’ profiles were formulated (see Appendix) with codes to refer to each interviewee.

While during the analysis of the transcripts, the results were studied in relation to figures (1) & (2), the results were not codified. Coding is understood as dissecting interview material and categorizing the data into different groups based on their relevant variables (Hapleirn & Heath, 2020: 353). However, in an interview context, extracting fragments of an interview can risk removing them from the context in which they were formulated, obstructing the narrative flow of what was being said (Ibid: 330). Therefore the transcripts are studied as a whole not to undermine the analysis.

5. Analysis

The following section presents the results of the interviews, followed by a discussion that triangulates certain findings with existing literature, and finally, a conclusion as an answer to the research question of *What does analyzing the agency of civil society organizations in Lebanon reveals about the possibilities for transforming the hegemonic relationships within foreign aid?*

5.1. Results

5.1.1. Understanding the relationship

The interviewees spoke about their experiences with foreign aid as consisting of “projects” and individual “donors” rather than a homogeneous whole or a united force. They distinguished between different types of aid, conditional and flexible or large and small, and the types of relationships, personal/informal and formal. The nature of each of those relationships varies in kind, similar to the roles played by each participating party. For instance, it is expressed that large funding often comes with a “big agenda” (AC1, 2023) that is rigid. When the CSOs are unequipped to manage such donations, their project is likely to become an extension of the donor’s agenda as
“their work may end up focusing on matters that are not of priority to the community members” (PL, 2023).

In terms of conditional aid, there seemed to be different understandings of conditionality, two of which were recurring themes in the discussions. It appeared that one way of looking at conditionality was more critical as, to some, conditions attached to certain forms of aid dictate funding inseparable from the ideas it represents. In fact, two directors expressed their refusal to accept any aid directly from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). To them, USAID stands as an extension of imperialism, and the stealth of resources deeming it incompatible with their work as one director stated: “we have a policy never to accept any funding from USAID. Because we have a clear position on imperialism and the stealth of countries' resources.” (DR1, 2023).

The second, more common, understanding of conditionality defines it as the complex administrative requirements demanded by donors as necessary conditions for the initiation or the continuity of funding. Such conditionality is closely related to larger funding and formal relationships with donors, which seems to be less favorable for CSOs as it constrains both their agency and their work’s effectiveness. It is added that such conditions mold the nature of the donor-CSO relationship into a contractual exchange rather than a partnership: “You find some very restrictive partnerships, very rigid. They engage with these partners [CSOs] as implementing partners with no decision-making… It's just like they're contracting these organizations to go and do their work on the ground for them” (AC1, 2023).

On the other hand, all the interviewees perceive flexibility of funding in terms of minimal administrative requirements allowing them to adapt their activities according to the ceaselessly changing context. They prefer and actively search for flexible funding as it allows them to develop projects that align with their work, in turn increasing its effectiveness “There are feminist organizations that provide flexible grants and leave us the choice of when to implement projects and when to send reports, and what to spend on, and they prioritize our operational expenses” (DR2, 2023). Additionally, the two directors of CSOs emphasized that flexible funding has preserved a sense of mutual respect in the relationships with donors, thus granting them more agency and valuing the work that they do “In those instances, we don’t only get to enjoy a sense of independence and agency, we appreciate those relations because we feel respected. It reminds us of the significance of this work” (DR2, 2023).
On a similar note, another interviewee explained that they do not interact directly with funders and big donors. They perceive their relationship with funding as one of a personal character involving the employee of IOs with whom they directly communicate. They also express that donor-recipient relationships of such nature are not always formal, allowing ties of friendship and comradery to blossom “We had good experiences with donors because certain individuals have firm values and principles.” (DR2, 2023) while another one added, “for me, they [IOs] are not those big institutions, they are the people I skype with, or that come and spend time at the center. Sometimes they can grow on you and vice versa. They can become a true believer in our cause like a comrade” (PL, 2023).

However, the consensus among all interviewees was that their selectivity in receiving aid had decreased their opportunities leaving them with limited resources, especially since flexible aid is not as common “There are fewer opportunities and fewer resources. That is because unconditional funding is rare and negative competition in this field is rather common” (DR2, 2023). In agreement, another interviewee stated, “there are very few funders that would be OK with supporting your project without a concrete log frame and clear proposal and extremely detailed activities.” (PL, 2023).

despite that, when the interviewees were asked how the conditional type of aid influenced their work, all of them disagreed with the phrasing of the question. In their opinion, aid does not influence them as much as it pressures them, as one activist puts it: “I wouldn’t use the word ‘influence’ it is a big word for funding, it’s more of an element of pressure than anything. So much pressure strains organizations and forces them into doing work they don’t necessarily want to do” (AC2, 2023). Ascribing such a meaning to the relationship between foreign aid and CSOs highlights the agreed-upon notion of domination as fundamental grounds of those ties established by forced funding or material resources.

Therefore, the agreed-upon perspective of the relationship rejects the notion of hegemony as established through influence and the legitimization of certain ideologies. In fact, the interviewees expressed their cognizance of the imposed dynamics of those relationships as the basis on which their method of conduct is chosen. Such conduct of work, as shown earlier, translates into either avoidance in the sense of selectivity or compliance.

5.1.2. Acts of resistance

There is a clear sense of awareness among all the interviewees of the critical role they play in the
relationship with foreign aid and how their position can be utilized in asserting their agency and even if to achieve immediate gains only “whether big or small, they [IOs], they need us. They need us for so many interests they have in their minds which we offer them, so if we’re offering them those things, let’s do it on our own terms” (AC2, 2023). Such a perspective of their role entails that their agency exists at the implementation level, which is where most acts of resistance occur. However, not all the previously listed acts of resistance were present in the interviewee’s answers, some prevailed more than others, and some different forms emerged.

5.1.2.1. **Reciprocal manipulation**

The presence of reciprocal manipulation was vague as most CSOs noted that they do not present themselves in any certain way for the purpose of attracting funds, as that might complicate their relationship with the communities for whom they work. One director states while discussing a publicity opportunity that could have led to funding, “I had to choose my priorities: publicity or my people? I chose my people” (DR2, 2023). Similarly, another director expressed while discussing their refusal to give any visibility to their donors to not undermine the integrity of their work from the perspective of the communities, “we asserted that we do not give them [donors] visibility, - because if the people saw the logos of a donor, it will effect in one way or another the way they accept and receive the information we present” (DR1, 2023).

While none of the interviewees suggested that they engage in such tactics, one activist mentioned that certain organizations present broader missions allowing them to mold their goals to fit any funding “whatever opportunity comes, they can fabricate it to be part of their goal” (AC2, 2023). The activist did also admit that these organizations accumulate more funding “The big organizations that get more funding are the ones that have more vague and empty goals” (AC2, 2023).

5.1.2.2. **Symbolic compliance and filtration**?

A common approach emerged among the four interviewees when discussing their tactics for ensuring effectiveness and maintaining agency while preserving opportunities. Referred to as filtration during an interview and explained as “filtering out what works, what doesn’t” (AC1, 2023). The process is explained as the instances when “aware organizations that work with big international funders towards serving their goals, but they execute projects in their own ways which simultaneously aim at making actual change” (PL, 2023). This demonstrates that some CSOs manage to align themselves with donor interests to secure funding while simultaneously
developing strategies that ensure the effectiveness of their work during implementation.

when discussing controversial ideas imposed by donors, one director noted, “I know which aspect to expand on and which to touch on briefly” (DR2, 2023), thus engaging in the process of filtration by presenting concepts from angles that “won’t shock them [participants] and discourage them from attending” (DR2, 2023) hence tailoring discussions to be more relevant and “suitable to the audience” (DR2, 2023). Though funding is sometimes allocated for topics like gender equality, by refraining from using terminology like Al-Abaway4, meaning patriarchy, the director was able to “ develop ways to reach participants that help them trust you and build your work slowly” (DR2, 2023).

Therefore, according to the interviewees, when they get funding with an imposed agenda, they display compliance while maintaining the effectiveness and relevance of their work by filtering these ideas, making them more digestible. Additionally, the implementation level of their relationship with foreign aid is where CSOs enjoy the most agency, as noted strongly by a director: “I know what needs to be done, and I am the one that can determine the priorities on the ground” (DR2, 2023).

5.1.2.3. Argument as resistance

Given that this research defines an argument as resistance in terms of gossip, nicknames, and jokes. Finding examples of such in the interviews’ transcripts proved to be a difficult process, as the conversations were still limited in interview format, and certain interviews were more reserved. It quickly became apparent that applying different methods, such as observation, could have generated more comprehensive results. Yet, in certain interviews, with the progression of the conversation, the interviewees either became frustrated or relaxed, then resorted to the informal language of nicknames or metaphors.

Examples of arguments as resistance emerged primarily from interviewees’ direct experiences with projects or individuals. For instance, one director sarcastically questioned the need for capacity development assistance, stating, “brother, what is capacity development!? While we have been working for 10 years, I think we have enough capacity to give them, and not the opposite” (DR1, 2023). This director's language reflects the lack of moral justification and the

4 The accurate translation “Al-Abawaya” or “الأبوية” would be Paternalism. Similarly to the Latin origin of Pater, the origin of the word in Arabic is “Al Ab” or “الأب” meaning father. This might contribute to the fact that interviewee pointed out that specific word.
disrespect inherent in the donor discourse. Another director expressed frustration with sponsored training, explaining, “I feel immense anger during those trainings that attend. There are two blondes\(^5\) typing on their laptop; I don’t know if they speak Arabic, I don’t know if they understand me, they don’t introduce themselves, they don’t sit with us at the lunch table” (DR2, 2023) Using nicknames to describe the interaction or the lack thereof with employees of an IOs demonstrates their frustration with the perceived lack of respect or legitimacy of those IOs. Resulting in choosing to boycott such meetings.

Another interesting tendency among the interviewees is the use of metaphors, or humor to express their emotions regarding their relationships with foreign aid. For example, one activist describes the pressure exerted by international organizations on CSOs as "suffocating" (AC2, 2023) their work. They further connect this to the idea of hegemony, saying, "from one side, they [IOs] pressure the government, from another civil work exists but lacks strength and quality… So, so its chill\(^6\), they have very chill hegemony [laughter]" (ACT2, 2023). Similarly, when discussing the intense criticism directed at CSOs without considering their challenging background, they state, “We are not trained as organizations to have our own strategies and ways to achieve our own interests. - We have been birthed from the womb of conflicts and wars and not from serenity.” (AC2, 2023). Here, the interviewee employs strong language to highlight the severity of the situation and express a sense of grief.

5.1.2.4. Social space

The social space is where CSOs enjoy the most agency; as seen through the results it such space exists at the implementation level. However, the clearest indicator of this concept is the value CSOs place in their communities. They refer to beneficiaries as "my people" or "my community." They measure the value of their work by community acceptance rather than scale additionally, they express that CSOs “have become part of society rather than an external force working with society members” (PL, 2023). Their notion of collectiveness showcases their work's value lies in their ability to maintain their genuineness.

Additionally, one director pointed out that she feels the most agency when she engages in collective acts of political resistance like protests or “Herak,” such as the one on the 17th of

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\(^5\) Blondes or “شقر” in Arabic is a sarcastic way to describe foreign people from Western and white backgrounds

\(^6\) The translation chill is based on the context of which the word “رواق” or “ruaq” was said. Other possible but similar translations: relaxed, cool, easygoing.
October 2019: “I forgot all about the projects, donors, and everything. And that’s it, we were doing political work on the ground. I feel the most agency at the movements that we create” (DR1,2023). This illustrates the intersectionality between the feeling of complete agency and collective political work.

5.1.3. **Contexts of transformation:**

When the participants were asked about what type of change they would like to see in the foreign aid ecosystem, all the responses indicated that the interviewees saw change coming from them rather than donors. Additionally, their responses suggest that they view their work as a step toward transforming the relationship. Those responses are outlined in reference to the theoretical elements provided in the figure 2.

5.1.3.1. **War of movement:**

Most interviewees recognize the power of coordination and solidarity, and they are actively taking steps in that direction. When discussing the challenging administrative requirements of aid, one interviewee shared an example of solidarity among CSOs “newer CSOs are yet to be registered in Lebanon and therefore find legal coverage from other and older ones. This is an example of solidarity” (PL, 2023) explaining that by providing legal coverage, these smaller groups can access more funding opportunities without going through the complicated process of registering.

Another example of coordinating is when multiple CSOs in southern Lebanon formed a network to advocate for a shift in priorities by the UN and other international organizations operating in the area “We invited the UN organizations and funders and told them that our priorities and needs as a city, are never your priority - we’re a city with a mountain of trash that explodes twice a week, and the cases of cancer so Let’s find a solution” (AC2, 2023). The activist then said that this meeting was successful and while the issue is not completely solved but “at least there is no trash mountain anymore, there’s no more radiation.” (AC2, 2023).

These examples demonstrate that CSOs are aware that coordination can allow them to exert more power over the donors and challenge their interests. However, other interviewees also mentioned that there had been an increase in funding towards ideas of individuality masked under entrepreneurship and personal development, as one activist added:

There has been a wave of individualism since the 2000s, promoting the individual-entrepreneurship and the greater you are alone, the greater the money you make. There is something from the capitalist work that taught people not to care about others; with others,
you will have too little, but alone, you will have more. And I think this has ruined the civil
movement. (AC2, 2023).
This shows that donors recognize the power of coordination and collectiveness within civil society,
which is why they attempt to divide it. However, this phenomenon itself demonstrates the
significant impact of collective action within civil society organizations. Donors’ efforts to
undermine this unity indicate its effectiveness and influence.

5.1.3.2. Passive revolution or suppression?
Despite such efforts, there was a consensus among interviewees that those examples are unique
and that larger organizations have been assimilated by the hegemony of foreign aid as one director
notes:

There are big feminist organizations that have adopted the ideologies of the West and
therefore who receive large funding - they promote ideas that our society is not ready to
deal with resulting in a repulsion effect, it makes our connection with people less possible and
more difficult” (DR2, 2023)
Explaining how the spaces in which they can coordinate becomes limited once other CSOs
assimilated themselves with the hegemony of foreign aid.

Another perspective is that foreign aid inherently undermines the work of CSOs by donors
impose a quantitative approach on the work of these organizations, focusing on specific
deliverables “in the sector [civil work], there's a lot of value given to very quick impact, big
numbers” (AC1, 2023), while neglecting other crucial logistical costs. This approach shifts the
attention of CSOs from fighting for their cause to solely ensuring sustainability “Instead of
concerning myself with advocating for my target communities and cause, I am concerned with
salaries, rent, and longevity” (AC2, 2023). Describing the situation as a game:

From my knowledge of the people I work with … I don’t think there is one person who
lacks understanding of the game… The system doesn’t want them to make true change,
nor does the world of funding - The game is unbelievable; we are required to develop from
one side and fail from another. (AC2, 2023)
Such perception is rather absolute deeming foreign aid an impossible game hindering any attempt
for genuine change.

Both perspectives highlight CSOs’ commitment to creating genuine change and leading
positive transformations in their communities. however, they are challenged by the domination of
foreign aid rather than its hegemony. Therefore, in this case, the ideas and efforts of CSOs are not assimilated or domesticated, as Cox (1983) argued. Rather they are suppressed, as the notion of grief is as has been shown in the results.

5.1.3.3. A pursuit of transformation and not a Historic bloc
Based on the arguments presented above a historic bloc as a united front aiming to transform the relationship with foreign aid is not present. However, the interviewees did demonstrate a pursuit of transformation. Firstly by emphasizing the importance of coordination in order to transform the relationship, “Not individually should we always fight the battle. Unified zealous work has greater outcomes than those of individual efforts.” (AC2, 2023). Similarly, a director notes, “just like they always coordinate and develop their agendas together. We need to do invest more in that. And that has been my dream for years” (DR, 2023).

Secondly, by presenting a possible solution involving the national private sector, “There has to be an effort to expand our realm of knowledge and relations, to extend a network to the private sector on a local level” (AC2, 2023) arguing that such efforts would allow the CSOs work to lead transformation. Finally, all the interviewees believe that their day-to-day actions are part of a transformative movement “ ‘I believe that small, simple, slow changes that accumulate will blossom into something great and beautiful. There’s no way it won’t fruit’” (AC, 2023)

5.2. Discussion
The results derived from the interviews demonstrated clear evidence that CSOs in Lebanon are actively engaging with the political realities in which they operate. Despite the effects of foreign aid paralyzing their work with imposed complex administrative requirements or the promotion of irrelevant topics, as argued by Carapico (2014). CSOs remain connected to the broader political struggle by employing strategies in their everyday acts that maintain this relationship. Such findings also support the argument that CSOs exert significant agency at the local or implementation level (Birkholz et al., 2018). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that CSOs primarily seek to avoid conditional aid at the international level rather than attempting to make reforms. In situations where conditional foreign aid is the only option, they maneuver its’ condition to ensure their agency and the advancement of the interests serving their cause. These everyday acts of resistance and critical scrutiny of foreign aid align with Nagel and Staegel's (2015) argument that CSOs cannot be perceived as passive entities merely extending the agenda of external donors.
5.2.1. Hegemony, agency, and foreign aid

The interviewees demonstrated two primary contexts in which they exercise agency and resist the hegemonic relations with IOs. Firstly, they engage in the form of passive revolution by maneuvering within the limits of foreign aid systems and utilizing tactics such as filtration, avoidance, gossip, and symbolic compliance. Secondly, they explore alternative sources or engage in open resistance, including street mobilization outside the established system. The latter context reflects the concern that the NGOization of grassroots movements may lead to dependency on foreign aid, thus, detaching individuals from the broader political struggle (Carapico, 2014: 165-167). Therefore, CSOs emphasize that change must come from outside the realm of foreign aid, aligning with aspects of the concert of the historic bloc (Cox, 1992).

The results confirm the perception that a power dynamic with foreign aid characterizes the relationship between CSOs and IOs as a tool for domination serving the interest of the latter (Birkholz et al., 2018). Yet the nuance of this perception is in counting for the wider political relationship between involving the whole region and the countries providing the aid. For instance, the USAID is specifically mentioned as an example, highlighting the problematic foreign aspect of foreign aid (Paragi, 2016b: 214). Nevertheless, CSOs generally view flexible foreign aid more positively for having minimal impact on their legitimacy or agency, yet it is rare. The results also validated the argument that in exceptional cases, individuals within IOs can help overcome the foreign nature of aid by demonstrating genuine solidarity (Birkholz et al., 2018: 183).

The implied notion of mutual dependency between CSOs in Lebanon and IOs is evident in the fundamental role of CSOs in implementing foreign aid projects (Birkholz et al., 2018: 185). However, the relationship remains one of domination, where the agency is mostly exercised discreetly and masked by compliance, as it is rare for CSOs to openly employ their role to achieve specific ends. Additionally, the argument that CSOs’ involvement in project implementation demonstrates agency (Birkholz et al., 2018) is overly simplistic. As the results have shown, the perception of agency among CSOs depends on the quality and effectiveness of their work. Consequently, CSOs assert their agency based on how they execute their role as appointed by the community and whether it serves the interests of local communities or those of the donors.

The frustration exhibited by the interviewees with complex administrative requirements, rigid frameworks, shifting priorities influenced by trends, and irrelevant ideas and terminology imposed by donors uncovers an excessively bureaucratic system characterized by individualistic
and self-interested actors (Birkholz., 2018). Moreover, the manner in which the interviewees presented their work, values, and objectives in comparison to those of IOs reveals an apparent contradiction and conflict between the two models of civil work. On the one hand, the IOs’ model adopts a business-oriented approach, focusing on quotas, contracts, interests, agendas, and numerical measurements, operating from an individualistic mindset. On the other, the CSOs model is community-centric, stemming from a sense of passion, belonging, freedom, collectivism, and zealous motives guided by a communal revolutionary mindset. These conflicting models exemplify the broader conflict between the hegemony of capitalistic ideals and practices and the regional opposition (Paragi, 2016b; Hinnebusch, 2015; Carapico, 2014).

5.2.2. Hegemony or agency as everyday acts of resistance?
The everyday acts of resistance carried out by CSOs in Lebanon align with Scott’s challenge of hegemony as a “symbolic alignment of elite and subordinate class” (1985: 40). The assumption that CSOs unquestionably accept the models and ideas put forth by IOs is rejected, as IOs fail to employ foreign aid for legitimizing hegemony and instead utilize it for domination. Furthermore, the communal nature of CSOs’ action demonstrates through the connection with their community as a motive for resistance. This calls for a deeper appreciation of these experiences, as they highlight both the obstacles and the possibility for collective resistance (Scott, 1985: 43).

The results demonstrated that the acts performed by CSOs could be seen as an assertion of agency rather than direct collective resistance, as they are carried out on a daily basis (Johnson, 2003) within the confines of the established space of foreign aid. For example, the act of argument as resistance, though its impact on changing donors’ behavior may be unclear, shapes a specific view of donor practices during meetings or training sessions. The sarcasm and usage of nicknames reflect the contemptuous view toward foreign aid, motivating CSOs to boycott such gatherings. Therefore, these actions demonstrate agency by expressing awareness and disapproval of the asymmetrical relationship (Scott, 1985: 272). Such use of sarcasm or nicknames is highlighted in other studies, such as Carapico’s observation of the term “mustagandarun” (2014: 114), the seekers of gender, a pun used by an Egyptian activist to describe feminists working in foreign international agencies (Ibid). Another significant use of sarcasm is to convey grief and frustration with the state quo. Whether these acts represent collective grief or individual expressions, the use of sarcasm, nicknames, and metaphors to convey frustration with how the interviewees presented their work, values, and objectives to express grief, in turn, creates the potential for collective
resistance or “class formation” (Ibid).

The act of symbolic compliance affirms the CSOs’ refusal to undermine the communities in which they operate and adopt a working framework that separates them from the collective. However, it also showcases the fact that CSOs are still constrained to operate within the foreign aid system due to the absence of alternative resource channels. Both these ideas confirm the failure of foreign aid in legitimizing hegemony. While the previously mentioned tactic of filtration exemplifies the civil society’s recognition of the irrelevance of ideas promoted by IOs, it acts as a limiting factor or the expansion of those CSOs. Such tactics also demonstrate CSOs' refusal to accept the top-down definition of their work solely as project implementation. Thus, the rejection of such a definition demonstrates the resistance to marginalization by asserting agency through everyday acts of resistance, a process necessary for further resistance (Scott, 1985:240).

Moreover, the results showcase that CSOs exhibit a degree of compliance by fulfilling donors’ requests and thus maintaining access to funding opportunities and resources only available through foreign aid. Nonetheless, CSOs signal agency by refusing to completely assimilate their work to agendas and complex frameworks attached to foreign aid, in a process referred to as “NGOization” (Carapico 2014: 165; Habib et al., 2021: 616). That is because, as Scott argues, the inability to assimilate “subordinates” stems from the weakness of the socialization mechanism as NGOization, but more importantly, from the strength of “subordinates” and their everyday resistance (1985:320). Finally, the respect and attentiveness demonstrated by the interviewees towards their communities reflect the perception that these communities constitute the social space where they act and speak freely, thus becoming agents of their own.

5.2.3. Possibility for transformation

The findings, derived from discussions with the interviewees, exhibit their everyday acts of resistance as a significant step towards transforming the hegemonic relationship with foreign aid. This understanding aligns with Cox’s (1983) concept of “war of movement” as they recognize the power of coordination and solidarity in their struggle against the hegemonic practices of foreign aid.

Moreover, the interviewees also acknowledged the challenges they faced in their coordination efforts. They describe the relationship with foreign aid as a “game” where IOs undermine their efforts for coordination and collectiveness within civil society by promoting individualist ideas. This fragmentation prevents the potential coordination and representation of
ideas opposing donors’ interests or achieving a successful “war of movement” (Cox, 1992; 178). Additionally, many organizations have assimilated themselves with the hegemonic structure of foreign aid, thus, limiting the space for coordination aiming at challenging the dominant system and ultimately resulting in a state of passive revolution (Cox, 1983: 173).

Moreover, following Cox's logic, one can argue that the absence of a united front aiming to transform the relationship with foreign aid indicates the absence of a historic bloc (1983). Nonetheless, this absence of a historic bloc does not deem the everyday actions of CSOs as merely a passive revolution. On the contrary, those actions declare active resistance resembling a war of movement. As revealed by the results, the absence of a historical bloc is not a consequence of the assimilation or domestication of CSOs, as argued by Cox; rather, it is the consequence of dominance and suppression established through foreign aid, one of the countless tools of hegemony (1983: 173).

Notably, the interviewees expressed an alternative narrative to their relationship with foreign aid. They eagerly expressed their desire for an organized national movement echoing the events of October 19th. This is evident in their advocacy for strengthening relations with the national private sector to reduce or even abandon their dependence on hegemonic foreign aid, reflecting Cox's idea that fundamental change must be established through social relations at the national level (1983: 173).

6. Conclusion

With the aim of understanding the interplay between CSOs’ agency and foreign aid by answering the research question of What does analyzing the agency of CSO’s in Lebanon reveal about the possibility of transforming the hegemonic relationship with foreign aid? This paper concludes the following.

Firstly, analyzing the agency of CSOs in Lebanon has provided insights into their lived experiences and aspirations; these insights illustrated an image in which CSOs are actively challenging the narratives seeking to paint them as passive. That, in addition to recognizing the personal experiences of civil society activists and their unique relationship with foreign aid, reveals that characterizing it as solely hegemonic is misleading. That is because CSOs are in constant motion to not only navigate the complex landscape of foreign aid but resist its impact on their work with the local community.
Secondly, analyzing agency as everyday acts of resistance demonstrated that the resistance in which CSOs engage is grounded in practicality as they strive for tangible improvements in their work. The transformation they seek is less related to ideological abstractions and more aimed toward genuine, practical, and felt change.

Thirdly, exploring Cox's approach to the analysis of foreign aid as an expression of hegemony, combined with Scott's work in outlining and defining subordinate’s everyday acts of resistance, uncovered the importance of understanding the interplay between foreign aid’s aim in naturalizing Western dominant values and the local subculture of CSOs. Moreover, showcasing that the extent to which the perceptions and actions of CSOs align with or deviate from the values of foreign aid plays a crucial role in determining the potential for transformation. Such potential is exemplified in the competing models represented by the IOs and CSOs. The CSOs’ communal and revolutionary model confirms that an alternative narrative to that perpetuated by foreign aid exists, revealing a possibility for transforming the relationship.

That is to say, this paper answers the research question by demonstrating that conceptualizing agency as everyday acts of resistance highlights the significance of recognizing the subculture and values of CSOs in relation to foreign aid. That in turn offers a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities for transforming the hegemonic relationship with foreign aid.

6.1. IR relevance
Adopting a bottom-up approach and focusing on the local level, this analysis contributes to the field of IR by shedding light on how hegemony and agency operate and are contested from the perspective of local actors. It illustrates the importance of everyday acts of resistance as transformative practices, highlighting the contexts in which such acts are formulated. Overall, analyzing CSOs’ agency with the aim of understanding the interplay between CSOs agency and foreign aid has revised the field understanding of power dynamics, hegemonic relationships, and the potential for challenging dominant structures in the realm of foreign aid.

Additionally, the definition of agency as an everyday act of resistance pursuing coordination and aiming for transformation opens the door for future research to explore the intersectionality of CSOs' agency, resistance, and transformative potential of hegemonic relationships with foreign aid with emphasis on local perspectives.
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8. **Appendix: Interviewees profile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positions</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>Support small-level and larger-level CSOs by providing traineeships to create a more equitable space with a gender approach.</td>
<td>AC1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>Support small-level CSOs by providing consultations and traineeship about logistical issues and funding with the aim to upscale their work. Started working in 2011</td>
<td>AC2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Works in a feminist collective with a focus on representation in media in relation to marginalized groups and women. Worked as a director since 2013</td>
<td>DR1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Worked in an organization in the Mount Lebanon. Work with social cohesion and human rights issues with both men and women. Engage in relief activities. Worked as a director since 2016</td>
<td>DR2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project leader</td>
<td>Works In a feminist CSOs in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. The project was about building the capacities of Syrian refugees and Lebanese women to improve their social and economic status</td>
<td>PL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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