

Mutual Aid as Protection

Trust and Help-Seeking Behaviour in Conflict-Affected Communities
in Lebanon

Massimo Maria Putti

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to obtaining the degree of Master of Arts in
Transnational Governance of the European University Institute

Florence, 16 May 2026

European University Institute

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Abstract

The 2023 armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah caused mass displacement and loss of life in Lebanon, creating new protection risks while compounding pre-existing ones. In the absence of accessible or trusted formal support, affected communities acted as first responders, protecting themselves and those within their reach through mutual aid. This thesis examines how community-based mutual aid contributes to protection outcomes, with particular attention to the role of trust in shaping help-seeking behaviour. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with practitioners and community leaders, it argues that mutual aid supports protection through relational infrastructure built before the crisis. Trust travels along relational chains, with intermediaries playing a central role in mediating help-seeking. While mutual aid enables rapid and dignified responses, it remains partial and network-bound. The findings contribute to debates on localisation by showing how protection is accessed beyond formal humanitarian systems through trusted relational mechanisms.

Table of contents

List of figures and tables	viii
List of abbreviations	ix
1. Introduction	1
2. Literature review	3
2.1 Protection.....	3
2.2 Mutual aid.....	4
2.3 Trust.....	5
2.4 Help-seeking.....	6
3. Conceptual framework.....	6
3.1 Protection.....	7
3.2 Mutual aid.....	7
3.3 Trust.....	8
3.4 Help-seeking.....	9
3.5 Mechanism and connection	10
4. Methodology	10
4.1 Research adaptation.....	10
4.2 Research design.....	11
4.3 Sample and data collection.....	11
4.4 Ethics and harm minimisation	12
4.5 Analysis	13
4.6 Positionality and limitations	14
5. Analysis	14
5.1 Mutual aid as pre-crisis relational infrastructure.....	15
5.1.1 Forms and functions	15
5.1.2 The pre-crisis relational foundation.....	16
5.2 Trust: levels, transmission, and the two distinctions	17
5.2.1 The collapse of institutional trust and its behavioural consequences	17
5.2.2 Networked trust transmission: the mechanism in practice	17
5.2.3 The two analytical distinctions in practice	18
5.3 Help-seeking: mediation, inhibition, and the limits of trust.....	19
5.3.1 Three forms in practice.....	19
5.3.2 Five layers of inhibition.....	20
5.3.3 Trust across inhibition layers.....	21
5.4 Protection outcomes: what the mechanism produces.....	21
5.4.1 The spectrum in practice.....	21

5.4.2 What mutual aid can and cannot do.....	22
6. Discussion and conclusion	23
6.1 Findings, contributions, and the research question	24
6.2 Limits, partiality, and structural conditions	24
6.3 Implications and directions	25
Bibliography	27
Appendices.....	39

List of figures and tables

Figure 1: Mechanism through which community-based mutual aid contributes to protection outcomes in Lebanon’s 2023–2025 conflict context.

Table 1: Sample overview

List of abbreviations

ACTED: Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development

ALNAP: Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance

CSO: Civil Society Organisation

DG ECHO: Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

EUI: European University Institute

GBV: Gender-Based Violence

GPC: Global Protection Cluster

IASC: Inter-Agency Standing Committee

INGO: International Non-Governmental Organisation

IOM: International Organisation for Migration

JMSNA: Joint Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment

LRP: Lebanon Response Plan

MEAL: Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning

MHPSS: Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

OCHA United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

WFP World Food Programme

1. Introduction

On 23 September 2024, when Israel escalated attacks on Lebanon, a community leader working with migrant women in Beirut took a taxi into high-risk areas. An acquaintance she passed in the street handed her pillows. A collective provided her with hygiene products. She arrived at a shelter, counted the people inside, and asked what they needed. Before leaving, the shelter coordinator told her there were others nearby. She went to those too. By the end of the day, she had identified eleven locations – some housing twenty people, others fifty – and had begun coordinating distributions across each of them. No emergency protocol had been activated. No institutional mandate had been issued. What had been activated was a network built over years of self-organising, relationships dense and trusted enough to extend within hours when needs were most urgent, and communities were abandoned.

This thesis examines how these responses become possible and how they contribute to the safety, dignity, and rights of conflict-affected communities. In late September 2024, after nearly a year of cross-border attacks, Israel launched a full-scale military offensive against Lebanon, marking the start of one of the most harrowing periods in the country's recent history. Over a million people were displaced, and approximately 4,000 were killed as a result of the armed conflict¹ (OCHA, 2025). The state, already hollowed out by years of economic collapse, political paralysis, and successive crises, was largely absent from the emergency response (Atallah et al., 2025; Diab & Skulte-Ouaiss, 2023). International humanitarian organisations, constrained by limited access, funding cuts, and the scale of the crisis, struggled to reach those most in need (Diab, 2025b, 2026a; Ismail, 2025). In the face of limited formal support, mutual aid groups led crisis response, protecting their communities through networks that had built relational infrastructure, trust, and solidarity long before the escalation.

The conflict added another layer to Lebanon's protracted crisis, itself shaped by overlapping shocks – from the Syrian refugee influx and the 2019 financial collapse to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion – forcing people to self-organise to confront them while preparing for more (Geha & Saadi, 2026). The notion of communities as their own first, last and often most effective responders is widely acknowledged (Berry & Reddy, 2010; Corbett et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022). Yet the mechanisms by which this happens – how informal networks produce protection, how trust affects help-seeking, and what protection looks like when formal systems are absent, inaccessible or distrusted – remain underexplored. Examining these mechanisms is what this thesis sets out to do.

At the heart of this study lies an interest in community-based mutual aid – the self-organised, voluntary practices through which persons and groups share resources, knowledge, and care in response to crises (Posada & Ahimbisibwe, 2025). Mutual aid is not new in Lebanon, nor is it politically neutral, operating in a context where welfare often follows sectarian lines, international aid is perceived as politically instrumental, and vulnerable groups are perpetually

¹ Throughout this thesis, references to the 2023 armed conflict follow common usage in describing it as an escalation between Israel and Hezbollah. However, it is important to recognise that the impacts of the conflict were not confined to Hezbollah but borne by Lebanon's broader population and were not reducible to a confrontation between two armed actors. The consequences examined in this thesis are those experienced by affected communities, not parties to the conflict.

marginalised (Turkmani, 2021; Cammett, 2014; Carpi, 2023; Diab, 2025b, 2026a, 2026b). Embedded in local networks and experiences, mutual aid is the first and often the only form of support for those within its reach (Humphrey et al., 2024; Chahine, 2025). Yet, the formal aid sector has long disregarded these responses and excluded mutual aid groups from decision-making and knowledge production (Yüksel, 2026; Kamal, 2023; Diab et al., 2024). The recent funding cliff, amid growing global needs, is exposing the limits of traditional humanitarian models and making the contributions of community-based actors harder to ignore (ALNAP, 2025; Chawla, 2025; Local2Global, 2024). Against this backdrop, this thesis explores mutual aid as a form of locally led response, examining how it works, whom it reaches, and whom it misses.

Specifically, this thesis addresses how protection is accessed and experienced when formal systems fail. Standard humanitarian frameworks tend to assume that affected persons will self-initiate contact with services, that protection is the responsibility of formal actors, and that outcomes can be measured solely through technical indicators. In Lebanon's multi-layered crisis context, these assumptions are questioned by both the existing literature and the accounts of participants that form the empirical foundation of this study. Guided by these reflections, the thesis asks: *how do community-based mutual aid groups contribute to protection outcomes, and what role does trust play in shaping help-seeking behaviour?*

The study is qualitative and exploratory, based on six semi-structured interviews conducted remotely between December 2025 and February 2026 with practitioners and community leaders from civil society organisations, feminist collectives, migrant-led groups, and international NGOs. The decision to focus on intermediaries involved in the provision and coordination of support, rather than primary recipients of assistance², was shaped by ethical considerations and expert consultation at the outset of the project. The communities concerned are often over-researched, and the March 2026 resumption of hostilities made further engagement with affected people ethically untenable.

The thesis engages with four bodies of literature – on humanitarian protection, mutual aid, trust, and help-seeking – that have largely developed in parallel without being brought into conversation. Protection literature shows the limits of formal frameworks and recognises the importance of community self-protection, but has under-analysed the mechanisms through which informal actors produce protection outcomes. Mutual aid studies document the centrality and scale of community responses during crises but pay less attention to the relational and trust-based conditions sustaining them. Trust research theorises institutional erosion of trust in fragile contexts but rarely treats trust as a networked phenomenon transmitted through relational chains. Help-seeking work identifies the dominance of informal pathways but has not fully recognised the hybrid, network-mediated nature of help-seeking in mutual aid ecosystems, nor clearly distinguished between trust in organisations and trust in the act of seeking help itself.

² The terms “providers” and “recipients” are used here for analytical clarity. Mutual aid practices often blur these distinctions, since the same person may both give and receive support. Anthropologically, reciprocity that involves mutual exchange is called “balanced,” while reciprocity that does not require immediate return is called “generalised” (Banerjee et al., 2025, p. 115; Calder & Tanhchareun, 2014).

While acknowledging its limitations, this study argues that mutual aid contributes to protection outcomes primarily through the relational infrastructure built before the crisis – networks of solidarity that enable rapid activation, trusted connectors who mediate access to support, and the transmission of confidence in seeking help along relational chains. These outcomes span from material assistance and dignified shelter to informed agency, emotional support, and efforts to address structural conditions. Mutual aid is rapid, flexible, and effective, but also fragile and uneven. It reaches those connected to it, depends on limited resources and volunteer labour, and operates under conditions of insecurity that carry risks of exhaustion and burnout. It cannot, by its own logic, reach those outside its networks. Its limits are therefore as important as its effects; together, they expose gaps in what formal systems are expected to provide but often fail to deliver. As such, this thesis does not position mutual aid as a replacement for state and international responsibility. Instead, it calls for humanitarian actors to connect more meaningfully with community-based responses and support what already exists without undermining what makes it effective.

To explore all these themes, the thesis proceeds as follows. The literature review examines the four bodies of scholarship the study engages with and identifies the gaps the analysis seeks to address. Situated within a critical perspective, the analytical framework presents the working definitions and conceptual tools used in the analysis. The methodology outlines the research design, data collection, ethical approach, and the significant adaptation the project underwent following the March 2026 escalation. The analysis traces the mechanism in four stages: mutual aid as pre-crisis infrastructure, trust at multiple levels, help-seeking in different forms across layered barriers, and protection outcomes across a spectrum. The discussion and conclusion synthesise the findings, draw out their analytical and practical implications, and suggest directions for future research.

2. Literature review

The literature review is organised into four sections: humanitarian protection, mutual aid, trust, and help-seeking. Each engages with debates both outside and within Lebanon to show how these concepts have been applied and to reveal gaps in explaining the relational and trust-based dynamics through which protection is accessed and produced beyond formal systems.

2.1 Protection

Humanitarian protection is defined as “all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law” (IASC, 2016, p. 4). A protection risk arises when vulnerability and threat exceed the capacity to prevent, respond to, and recover from that threat (GPC, 2021, p. 7). While these models provide an institutional baseline, they rest on premises that are often questioned in conflict-affected settings.

Critical scholarship challenges the notion that protection is the exclusive responsibility of states or international actors. Gorur and Carstensen (2016) show that affected communities are often their own first, and sometimes only, line of protection. Highlighting the gap between policy and practice, Pantuliano and Svoboda (2016) argue for understanding protection as an outcome

– the actual reduction of risk – rather than as a set of activities performed by humanitarian actors. Slim (2015, p. 30) extends this critique by underscoring that protection includes more than physical safety and material assistance but also the preservation of dignity and integrity, dimensions often marginalised in formal frameworks. Kabeer (1994) adds that material rights, such as financial autonomy, are constitutive of protection because they enable people to resist exploitation and claim other rights.

In Lebanon, these limitations are pronounced. Cammett (2014) shows how, in the absence of a strong state, political and religious actors distribute welfare clientelistly, making access to protection structurally unequal. Carpi (2023) argues that crisis discourse drives humanitarian assistance in a deeply politicised way, reproducing social and moral divisions rather than just responding to need. Diab’s work (2025c, 2026a) on the 2023-2025 conflict illustrates that displacement is stratified along socioeconomic lines and that displacement-centric models of aid leave the protection needs of those who remain in place unaddressed, reinforcing pre-existing vulnerability gaps. Baumann and Moore (2023) further conceptualise vulnerability as infrastructural, not individual, produced by conditions that vary sharply across communities and populations within the same crisis.

While this literature makes clear the limits of formal protection frameworks and the agency of affected populations, it remains mostly descriptive in its analysis of how protection is produced in practice. In particular, the mechanisms by which community-based actors contribute to protection outcomes, and how people engage with these forms of informal support, remain insufficiently explored.

2.2 Mutual aid

Research across a variety of contexts shows community-based mutual aid is a primary source of support for people affected by conflict (Carstensen et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022). It is commonly defined as self-organised and voluntary support among people and groups during crises (Posada & Ahimbisibwe, 2025, p. 1). In Lebanon, Turkmani (2021) notes that such initiatives occupy a space between mutual aid and charity that is horizontal in principle but, in practice, shaped by social hierarchies and limited resources.

The literature confirms the centrality of mutual aid in Lebanon’s multi-crisis context, where government social protection is fragmented and exclusionary (Oxfam, 2026, p. 69). Humphrey et al. (2024) find that informal social protection³ plays a vital role during and after crises, often surpassing formal aid in supporting households. Qualitative studies show these practices predate recent crises and are rapidly activated when conditions deteriorate (Chahine, 2025; Zaman et al., 2025). The role of diaspora support from afar has also become increasingly analysed, complementing institutional funding during the 2024 escalation (Teffo et al., 2025; Shabaka, 2024).

³ “Informal social protection” is another term for “mutual aid,” typically used in humanitarian literature (e.g., Humphrey et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2022). Additional terms expressing the same concept include “community-based social support mechanisms,” “social solidarity,” and “grassroots and self-help groups” (e.g., Carter & Satti, 2025; Groupe URD, 2021).

Literature also examines the constraints and risks of these networks. Reliance on scarce resources and volunteer labour can limit their reach and cause exhaustion (Fast & Bennett, 2020; Kim et al., 2022). They may also reproduce existing social hierarchies, privileging those with stronger connections while excluding others (Cleaver, 2005; Barbelet et al., 2021; Skyer et al., 2025). Scholars also caution against framing mutual aid through resilience narratives, which often depoliticise structural failures by shifting responsibility onto affected communities (Zebian et al., 2025).

What the literature has not yet examined is the mechanism by which mutual aid achieves protection outcomes, specifically the conditions that enable people to access support and the role of trust in mediating that access. While effectiveness is often attributed to local embeddedness, flexibility, and legitimacy (Carter & Satti, 2025; Posada & Ahimbisibwe, 2025), the relational dynamics underpinning these factors remain underexplored.

2.3 Trust

Trust is central to how people navigate uncertainty and decide whom to turn to in conditions of vulnerability. Gambetta (2000, p. 216) conceptualises it as a subjective probability about others' likely behaviour when actions cannot be fully monitored. Luhmann (1979) distinguishes between personal trust, built through interpersonal experience, and system trust, directed toward institutions and often necessary rather than voluntary. Social capital approaches further emphasise the role of networks, norms, and trust in enabling coordination and cooperation, though they offer less insight into how trust operates under crisis settings (Putnam, 2000).

In such contexts, system trust tends to erode due to perceived institutional failure (Hall & Werner, 2022; Jayasinghe, 2011), while interpersonal trust outcomes vary: strengthening for some through wartime solidarity, declining for others (Hall & Werner, 2022; Thoresen et al., 2018).

In Lebanon, distrust in state and humanitarian actors is widespread (Arab Barometer, 2024, 2026). Institutional corruption has undermined recovery efforts (Saade et al., 2025), and humanitarian aid is perceived by many as unaccountable, *wasta*-based⁴, politicised, or unresponsive to local knowledge (Carpi, 2023; Carpi et al., 2025; Facon, 2023; Diab, 2025a, 2025b; Oxfam, 2026, p. 6). Perceived inequalities in aid distribution further fuel mistrust and inter-communal tension (Tschunkert, 2026; Carpi, 2014). These dynamics shape behaviour in important ways. Distrust discourages engagement with formal services, while interpersonal trust in community actors often determines whether and where people seek support (Arakelyan et al., 2021; Diab, 2025c, 2026b).

However, trust is still predominantly understood as a dyadic relationship between persons and institutions. Instead, how trust circulates through networks, or the distinction between trust in organisations and trust in the act of seeking help itself, has received far less attention.

⁴ “*Wasta*” is an Arabic word that roughly translates to “nepotism” or “clout.” It is a common practice and social norm in Lebanon. Here, it is used to describe aid perceived as influenced by social connections.

2.4 Help-seeking

Classical models frequently assume a self-initiating person who moves logically from problem recognition to formal assistance (Rickwood et al., 2005). Andersen's (1995) model similarly views help-seeking as a function of predisposing characteristics, enabling resources, and actual or perceived need, with social networks as one enabling factor among several. Both approaches assume affected people possess sufficient agency, information and network connectivity to initiate contact with services, but in conflict settings, that is often not the case.

Humanitarian research challenges this linearity, showing that informal pathways are often more prevalent. Palermo et al. (2014) find that survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) are far more likely to report to informal sources (36%) than formal ones (7%). While lack of information is a recurrent barrier (Woldearegay et al., 2025; Kawaguchi, 2020), access to information does not necessarily translate into help-seeking. Social norms, fear, financial costs, and distrust in institutions all act as barriers (Perrin et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2021). In conflict settings, affected people may also prioritise immediate survival over accessing services (Munezero & Manoukian, 2021). Strang et al. (2020) further show that trust shapes not only whether people seek help, but also through which relational pathways they do so.

In Lebanon, contextual evidence reflects a similar situation. A study by Noubani et al. (2020) shows that social connectedness and trust are primary determinants of health-seeking behaviours. Survey data indicate that over 75% of respondents did not know how to contact international aid organisations, while 44% relied on personal networks as their primary source of information (Mercy Corps, 2023). Stigma and cultural norms further interact with structural barriers, leading people to manage issues privately (El Khoury-Malhame et al., 2025) or seek support from religious actors (Al Laham et al., 2020; Barada et al., 2021).

Help-seeking in contexts of crisis is neither fully self-initiated nor externally driven but co-produced through relational networks. Existing frameworks only partially capture this network-mediated character, nor do they capture the role of trust in enabling acceptance of support. How these processes operate in practice, and their implications for protection outcomes, are also not examined enough.

3. Conceptual framework

The concepts used in this thesis are not politically neutral analytical tools but are situated within a critical humanitarian perspective that takes seriously the power relations embedded in humanitarian systems (Barnett, 2011; Belloni, 2007; Fassin, 2011). Three orientations inform this positioning. Critical humanitarianism – as developed by Carpi (2023) and Kamal (2023) – questions the assumption that international actors are neutral providers of protection and highlights how the humanitarian “egosity” may reproduce the structural problems it seeks to resolve. Decolonial approaches challenge the historical power dynamics embedded in the sector, including the dismissal of local knowledge and the marginalisation of community-led responses (Roepstorff & Maitra, 2025; Vitantonio, 2024; Mihlar, 2024). Drawing on feminist ethics of care (Fisher & Tronto, 1990), Caron (2024) shows how relational, non-transactional practices of support and hosting in displacement contexts are enacted as a form of care that

sustains mutual aid and builds solidarity. These orientations situate the conceptual framework on the premise that the mechanisms examined are shaped by and operate within structures of power, abandonment, and exclusion that this analysis keeps in view throughout.

3.1 Protection

Since the early 2000s, protection risk analysis has been widely adopted as a framework for humanitarian decision-making (DG ECHO, 2016, p. 9). Following this approach, a protection risk arises when the threats and vulnerabilities faced by affected people exceed the capacity to prevent, respond to, and recover from them (GPC, 2021). The interrelatedness of these factors is often expressed through the following non-mathematical equation:

$$Risk = \frac{Threat \times Vulnerability}{Capacity}$$

While useful, the apparent neutrality of this formulation risks obscuring structural realities that instead require critical assessment. Threats do not emerge naturally but are produced by specific actors and systems; vulnerability is structural rather than individual, shaped by intersecting forms of discrimination; and capacity is unequally distributed in ways that mirror the same power hierarchies that produce threats in the first place.

Humanitarian discourse also often frames protection narrowly as physical safety (Howman, 2025). Drawing on critical scholarship (Slim, 2015; Mosel & Holloway, 2019; Kabeer, 1994), this thesis understands protection outcomes more broadly to include dignity, economic security, and the capacity to make meaningful choices. Less visible outcomes, such as being found, being heard, being empowered, and having basic needs met with cultural sensitivity, also constitute real protection for marginalised communities, even when formal measurement cannot capture them (Carpi et al., 2025; Corbett et al., 2021).

For this study, a protection outcome is understood as any meaningful change that reduces a person's exposure to risk, preserves their dignity, expands their capacity to make informed choices, or addresses the structural conditions that produce vulnerability.

3.2 Mutual aid

Mutual aid has always existed, rooted in the human imperative to show up for one another. According to Spade (2020, p. 7), “people have worked together to survive for all of human history.” While the concept has its origins in anarchism (Kropotkin, 1902), today it is commonly used by the humanitarian community to describe the self-organised, voluntary support through which people help one another during crises (Posada & Ahimbisibwe, 2025, p. 1; Banerjee et al., 2025). Mutual aid operates within pre-existing relationships and networks and may develop into more structured forms.

Mutual aid is often framed as an act of solidarity rather than charity and, for some actors, as a form of political assertion (D'Arcy, 2023). Diab et al. (2024, p. 8) show how refugee-led

organisations in Lebanon understand their very existence as a challenge to top-down humanitarian approaches, while Chahine (2025), drawing on Scott's (1990) concept of *infrapolitics*, illuminates how such practices constitute subtle, often invisible forms of resistance. More broadly, mutual aid in this context responds to structural neglect, including state abandonment, the *kafala* system⁵, and the marginalisation of locally led actors within formal humanitarianism.

At the same time, not all mutual aid in this study is politically conscious; rather, it originates from necessity and a sense of shared obligation rather than explicit ideology (Turkmani, 2021; Skyer et al., 2025). What is consistent across this spectrum is the pre-crisis relational foundation. Its effectiveness in a crisis is enabled by networks of trust built before the crisis and reinforced during the crisis.

Mutual aid is therefore understood here as self-organised, non-transactional practices through which people share resources, knowledge, and care in response to shared conditions of risk. It operates through relational networks, ranging from unreflective solidarity to explicit political action and is enabled in crisis by trust and relational infrastructure built beforehand.

3.3 Trust

This thesis draws on Luhmann's (1979) distinction between personal trust, built through interpersonal experience, and system trust, directed toward social institutions. While developed in a different context, this distinction remains useful for understanding how institutional trust breaks down when formal systems fail to provide protection. In settings like Lebanon, characterised by institutional neglect and exclusion, trust in formal systems is often contested or withdrawn, leaving interpersonal and network-based trust as the primary means through which people navigate risks (Honein-AbouHaidar et al., 2019; Noubani et al., 2020). Gambetta's (2000, p. 216) framing of trust as a subjective probability under uncertainty captures the calculated dimension of these decisions where reliability cannot be assumed.

Three levels at which trust operates are identified here. Interpersonal trust – grounded in direct interaction, shared experience, and non-transactional relation – is the entry point for everything else. Network-based trust – the transmission of confidence along relational chains – enables people to rely on actors they have not directly encountered, based on the experience of others. Institutional trust in state and international humanitarian actors is structurally low in Lebanon, eroded by corruption, sectarian bias in welfare distribution, and the political instrumentalisation of aid (Alijla, 2017; Carpi, 2023; Cammett, 2014; Tschunkert, 2026).

⁵ The *kafala*, or sponsorship system, is a restrictive and exploitative legal framework for migrant workers in Lebanon, as well as several other Arab countries. It gives private citizens and companies control over migrant workers' immigration, employment, residency, and personal status in the country. This traps migrants into highly abusive conditions, amounting in many cases, to human trafficking, modern-day slavery, and forced labour, with no prospect of redress (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Amnesty International, 2022; Migrant Workers' Action, 2022).

Two analytical distinctions further inform the analysis. First, as recognised in the social capital literature, trust functions both as a precondition for mutual aid and as an outcome reinforced through its practice (Li & Yu, 2025; Hall & Werner, 2022). Second, trust in an organisation and trust in the act of seeking help are distinct because a person may fully trust an actor yet still not come forward, due to stigma, perceived risk, or other barriers (ICRC, 2022; Arakelyan et al., 2021; El Khatib et al., 2023; El Khoury-Malhame et al., 2024).

Trust is thus understood in this study as accumulated relational confidence – operating at interpersonal, network, and institutional levels – that enables affected people to approach, disclose to, and rely on others in conditions of vulnerability. It is built through interpersonal relationships and transmitted through pre-existing social networks, and functions as a precondition for and an outcome of mutual aid.

3.4 Help-seeking

Traditional models conceptualise help-seeking as a linear process through which people move toward formal assistance (Rickwood et al., 2005). This thesis complicates that premise by drawing on evidence suggesting that informal pathways are more prevalent (Palermo et al., 2014), that networks largely mediate access to information (Mercy Corps, 2023), and that trust often shapes which sources of help are used (Strang et al., 2020; Noubani et al., 2020).

Three forms of help-seeking are identified in Lebanon from the interviews. Active help-seeking involves persons initiating contact. Mediated help-seeking occurs when a trusted intermediary facilitates access. Passive help-seeking refers to situations where individuals do not initiate contact but accept or refuse support when approached. These forms can coexist and are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but in the context examined, some are more common than others.

Multiple overlapping barriers prevent people from seeking help (Atoui et al., 2025; Noubani et al., 2021; El Masri et al., 2024; Kerbage et al., 2020), including normative (shame, stigma, the social meaning of disclosure); material (economic calculation, competing survival priorities); risk-based barriers (fear that seeking help produces more harm); structural (perceived futility of formal channels); and network-based barriers (being outside the relational infrastructure through which help-seeking becomes possible). Trust can address barriers related to norms and structures, but has a limited effect on material and risk-based ones, and cannot prevent network-based barriers for those already disconnected from all relational infrastructure, for whom protection depends not on help-seeking but on outreach.

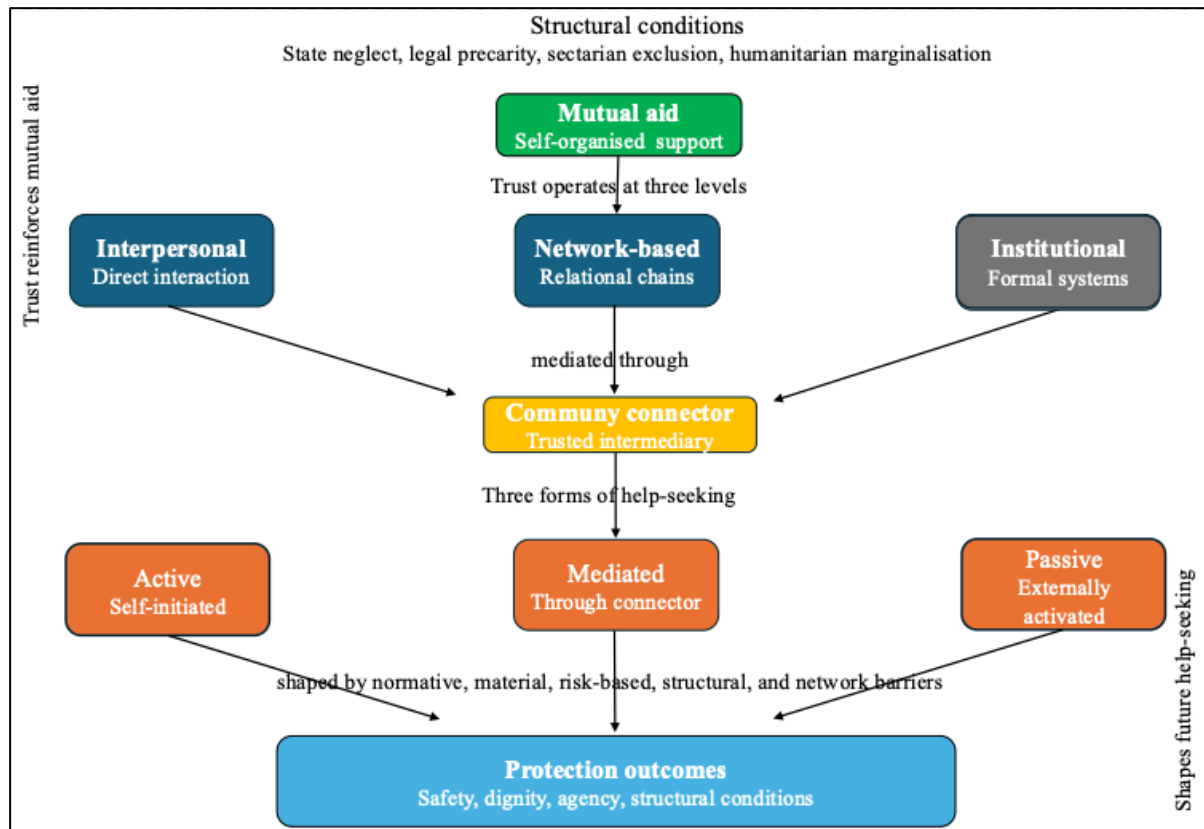
Help-seeking is understood here as the process – active, mediated, or passive – through which affected persons access support, shaped by multiple barriers and primarily mediated through trusted networks and intermediaries rather than formal systems.

3.5 Mechanism and connection

The four concepts outlined above are closely linked. Mutual aid builds and sustains the relational infrastructure through which trust is generated and transmitted. Trust shapes whether and how affected persons seek help by reducing specific barriers and enabling connection through relational chains. Help-seeking determines whether affected persons access the support that mutual aid networks offer, thereby contributing to protection outcomes.

Far from being linear, this mechanism has many nuances: trust constitutes both a precondition and an outcome of mutual aid; help-seeking outcomes shape the relational networks through which future help-seeking becomes imaginable; and the entire mechanism operates within and often directly against the structural conditions – state abandonment, legal precarity, sectarian exclusion, humanitarian marginalisation – that make it necessary in the first place. An attempt to capture these relationships is presented in the figure below.

Figure 1: Mechanism through which mutual aid contributes to protection outcomes



4. Methodology

4.1 Research adaptation

Field conditions can change, requiring research designs to adapt accordingly. This project began in December 2025 and underwent significant revision after hostilities resumed between Israel and Hezbollah in early March 2026. Initially, the research design envisaged a most-

similar systems comparison between the Akkar and El Nabatieh governorates, using semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis to examine variation in protection outcomes across two contexts that are similar in background conditions but potentially differ in the functioning of mutual aid networks.

However, in light of the rapid deterioration in security conditions, the comparative design was abandoned on ethical grounds, prioritising participant well-being over research continuity. At the time of writing, just weeks into the escalation, Israel's attacks on Lebanon had caused mass displacement, widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, and significant loss of life. Some prospective interviewees had been forced from their homes, while others were actively engaged in crisis response, providing the same forms of support they had offered during the 2023–2025 conflict. In this context, conducting interviews risked placing an additional burden on participants, interrupting vital work, and forcing them to choose between contributing to this research, assisting others, or attending to their own safety and well-being.

Reflections on fieldwork in volatile and conflict-affected settings emphasise that rapidly changing conditions can alter the ethical implications of data collection. As highlighted in *Stories From the Field*, researchers must remain attentive to how “things change” and reassess whether participation could cause harm, however unintentionally (Krause & Szekely, 2020, p. 286). When I contacted participants to check on their safety, their accounts made clear the depth of fear, uncertainty, and loss they were experiencing. Proceeding with the original research plan would therefore have been incompatible with the duty of care owed to them. Following consultation with my supervisor in early March 2026, the project was adapted into an exploratory qualitative study focusing on data already collected through remote interviews conducted before the escalation.

4.2 Research design

This thesis adopts an exploratory qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews to trace the mechanisms through which community-based mutual aid contributes to protection outcomes, focusing on how trust shapes help-seeking. It is mechanism-oriented, based on a small sample, and aims to generate analytical insight rather than empirical generalisation.

The shift from a comparative to an exploratory design does not alter the research question but addresses it through mechanism tracing (Falleti & Lynch, 2009), looking at how mutual aid, trust, and help-seeking interact to produce protection outcomes, rather than through cross-case comparison. The study employs abductive reasoning (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), bringing established concepts such as protection outcomes, mutual aid, trust, and help-seeking behaviour to the data while allowing them to be reshaped through analysis.

4.3 Sample and data collection

Primary empirical data were derived from six semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 20–60 minutes each, conducted remotely between December 2025 and February

2026. Participants were identified through purposive sampling. Initial contacts were established through web-based research and outreach via e-mail and social media, with one participant reached through a personal connection. Participants were selected to capture a range of actors, including civil society organisations, feminist collectives, migrant-led groups, and international humanitarian organisations. This diversity was intended to reflect the ecosystem of community-led responses in Lebanon. A brief overview of the sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample overview

Interviewee	Organisation type	Thematic focus
A	National civil society organisation	Gender, protection
B	Feminist collective	Human rights, emergency relief
C	National civil society organisation	Gender equality, protection
D	International civil society organisation	Migrant rights
E	Community-based organisation	Migrant support, emergency relief
F	International non-governmental organisation	Accountability, localisation

Interviews were conducted in English, French, and Italian, with verbal or written consent obtained according to participants' preferences. A preliminary consultation with two humanitarian experts conducted in late 2025 informed key methodological choices. It supported the decision to focus on practitioners and community leaders rather than primary recipients of assistance to avoid contributing to research fatigue in over-researched communities. It also underscored that practitioners in Lebanon are themselves directly affected by the crises they navigate. Their knowledge is therefore both expert and experiential, a dual status that informs the interpretation and ethical approach outlined below.

4.4 Ethics and harm minimisation

Interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical principles prioritising participants' safety, dignity, and emotional well-being. An information sheet outlining the study, including confidentiality measures and data protection practices, was shared with each participant before the interview, together with a consent form (see Appendix B). Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Interview questions were shared in advance to build trust, reduce uncertainty and support participant comfort. These were developed by me with expert input and designed to yield a grounded understanding of the mechanism through which mutual aid contributes to protection outcomes. The format (written, video, audio, or phone) of the conversation was left to participants' preference.

Confidentiality measures included the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage in line with the *EUI Guide on Good Data Protection Practice in Research*. Trauma-sensitive approaches were adopted to minimise potential harm (Alessi & Kahn, 2023; Diab, 2025d; Fast et al., 2025; Habib, 2019). Recognising participants as both practitioners and affected persons, the interview

process remained attentive to the risk of vicarious trauma and emotional burden (Obeid, 2026; Elbezri, 2017). Participants were reminded of their right to pause, skip questions, or withdraw at any time. When distress arose, interviews were paused, and participants were presented with the option to discontinue; follow-up support was offered through personal check-ins as appropriate. At the end of each interview, participants were also invited to share feedback, suggestions on representation, and reading recommendations – an approach that proved fruitful, yielding important orientations that shaped subsequent analytical reflection.

Beyond harm minimisation, the research was informed by a commitment to reciprocity and accountability. Advocacy-oriented research in crisis settings emphasises that knowledge production carries a responsibility to contribute, however modestly, to the causes and communities it engages (Pittaway et al., 2010; Diab, 2025d). For me, this meant treating the research as an opportunity to amplify the work of the organisations involved. A small fundraising event in support of one participating organisation's emergency response was held to raise awareness of the conflict in Lebanon. Two academic interventions were prepared in consultation with organisations represented in the research, ensuring their work reached a broader audience on their own terms. These actions do not substitute for structural change, nor do they resolve the asymmetries inherent in research relationships. But they reflect an attempt to honour the spirit in which some participants engaged with this project. As one interlocutor said at the close of our conversation: "If it can make a difference in this world or bring about change somewhere, I'll always be happy to get involved." That generosity is not something I can fully reciprocate, but it sets a standard worth trying to meet.

Following decolonial methodological approaches (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021), interviews were approached as dialogical encounters in which participants were recognised as knowledge producers rather than passive subjects, with their insights shaping the analysis. This approach aimed to reduce extractive dynamics while centring participants' perspectives.

4.5 Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis. Themes were developed inductively through iterative reading, with attention paid to patterns, tensions, and convergence across different participants and organisational contexts. The analysis proceeded in two stages, with constant back-and-forth between them. An initial identification of broad thematic clusters, followed by a second stage in which these clusters were refined in relation to the literature. This process helped clarify conceptual definitions and identify where the data confirmed, complicated, or challenged existing frameworks, in line with the abductive approach outlined above. Throughout the process, analysis was conducted manually via iterative reading and annotation, which helped engage with the data and track interpretive decisions made.

4.6 Positionality and limitations

My positionality as a white Italian male student with no direct experience of the conflict required continued reflexivity about the assumptions and power relations shaping knowledge production (Sultana, 2007; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). Following Haraway (1988), I understand my positionality not as neutral and objective but as situated and partial, shaping what is visible, what is asked, and how responses are interpreted. At the same time, rather than a fixed outsider position, I adopt the notion of a space between insider and outsider (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). I shared enough with some respondents – analytically, linguistically, and in terms of political orientation – to enable genuine exchange. But I remained distant enough from the lived realities at the centre of the research that my access to them is always mediated and partial. To address these dynamics, continuous reflexive strategies, including note-taking, self-interrogation, and involving others in the reflection process, were adopted during fieldwork and analysis.

Several interviews addressed sensitive topics, including gender-based violence and exploitation, raising additional considerations in conversations between a male researcher and female respondents. Drawing on feminist research ethics (Oakley, 1981; Fonow & Cook, 1991), I recognise that these dynamics shape what is disclosed and interpret such accounts with humility about what may remain unsaid.

All interviews were conducted remotely and across three languages. Lack of proficiency in Arabic and the limits of remote communication likely affected nuance and depth due to reduced non-verbal cues, disrupted rapport, and translation gaps (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hanna, 2012). As a relatively inexperienced interviewer, I am aware that some lines of questioning may have been insufficiently probing. The escalation of hostilities in March 2026 prevented follow-up interviews, limiting opportunities for clarification and deeper engagement. These constraints inform a degree of analytical caution throughout, avoiding strong claims based on single accounts while being transparent when the evidence is thin.

The most significant limitation is that this study examines affected populations' help-seeking behaviours through the accounts of civil society practitioners and community leaders rather than through the direct voices of those primarily seeking support. While this was an ethically grounded decision, it carries epistemic consequences. Participants are themselves positioned actors with their own perspectives and blind spots. The sample is small and largely Beirut-based, with rural and geographically dispersed contexts represented indirectly. The full picture of community aid's contribution to protection is considerably broader than what this analysis can demonstrate. The partial picture presented here reflects the limits of the sample, not the limits of what mutual aid achieved. The claims made in this thesis are therefore bounded accordingly. The ethical and contextual considerations that shaped this study's design – prioritising the safety of communities and avoiding research fatigue – point toward the kind of groundwork that makes future research with those primarily seeking support both possible and meaningful.

5. Analysis

Drawing on interviewees' accounts (see Appendix A), this analysis traces the mechanisms through which community-based mutual aid contributed to the safety, dignity, and rights of people affected by the 2023–2025 conflict in Lebanon. Proceeding in four stages – mutual aid, trust, help-seeking, and protection outcomes – it examines how empirical accounts illuminate the mechanisms described in the analytical framework and where they extend or complicate existing literature.

5.1 Mutual aid as pre-crisis relational infrastructure

5.1.1 Forms and functions

Mutual aid is organic and flexible; it relies on trust and draws on local knowledge and resources to meet needs left by formal systems. Sustained community members and the diaspora, the mutual aid groups in this study organised community kitchens and informal shelters, shared resources, provided legal assistance, referrals, and emotional support. While these practices vary in their level of formalisation and political articulation, they are characterised by a horizontal, non-transactional logic and are rooted in a spirit of collective care and responsibility.

Although mutual aid is an ancient and widespread practice in Lebanon, the term itself is not always used (Turkmani, 2021). The Arabic word *tadamon* (solidarity) is far more common, and several respondents described their actions in terms of a communal obligation rather than an explicit ideology. The political dimension of mutual aid is therefore not always articulated but often embedded in practices and motivations.

At one end of the spectrum, Interviewee C's response during the escalation carried no explicit ideological framing. When asked what motivated her to help neighbours – distributing provisions, compiling lists of those who had stayed, coordinating with a family member to track displaced people – she stated: “It simply felt like the only thing to do.” Rooted in proximity and shared experience, these acts reflect what Carpi et al. (2025) describe as an “ethics of spontaneity.” They are informal, relational, and discrete, contrasting with more visible yet often less responsive forms of “hegemonic aid,” where success is measured through technical coherence rather than through the conveyance of empathy and solidarity in the act of providing support (ibid., p. 5; Carpi & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020). Her account also illustrates the reciprocal dimension of this support: “I also received help from the community itself – local, not international.”

At the other end, Interviewee B explicitly framed their work as “political solidarity.” Their response was activated through networks built over past crises through feminist organising and collaboration, allowing rapid mobilisation when the conflict escalated. Interviewees D and E occupied a middle ground. Interviewee E described her organisation as built “by the community, for the community,” through years of door-to-door organising against the *kafala* system. Interviewee D described the boundary between organisation and community as “genuinely blurry,” with trust built through years of shared activism rather than formal roles.

Whether framed as a necessity or a political commitment, these actions respond to unmet needs created by systemic gaps. Rather than assuming that all actors understand their work as political, the data suggests that mutual aid acquires political significance through its function – operating where formal systems fail and, in doing so, exposing those failures.

5.1.2 The pre-crisis relational foundation

At the onset of the crisis, while formal systems were slow to respond to the needs of affected populations, community groups were among the first to mobilise assistance, operating through networks built over years of mutual support (Diab, 2026b; ACTED, 2024). A consistent finding across interviews is that the speed and reach of crisis response were closely linked to the depth of these networks. Those who responded most rapidly did so not because of organisational features, but because of relationships built over time.

Interviewee B described how, despite being in the middle of a research project when the conflict escalated, distributions began within hours: “We drew on the disposable products we had in storage and began distributing overnight through the mutual aid networks I mentioned. Some of those groups were already in contact with schools that were being opened as emergency shelters, so the first boxes went out immediately.” This speed was made possible not by emergency planning, but by relationships formed through years of shared advocacy and collaboration.

Similarly, Interviewee E’s organisation had spent years building connections through door-to-door engagement, community activities, and sustained presence. When the crisis began, this relational infrastructure enabled immediate action. Needs were mapped across shelters through chains of contact, each connection leading to the next.

Interviewee D reinforced this from the perspective of capacity building, noting that migrant-led groups had developed the autonomy to coordinate their own responses through years of prior organising: “During the war we saw something very clearly – after years of this work, many of the migrant-led groups are now self-reliant and self-sufficient.”

These initiatives play a key role in alleviating suffering but remain insufficient in the face of the scale of need. As Interviewee B noted, their response was “like applying a bandage to a gaping wound.” This is not simply a question of modesty. It reflects a clear awareness of the limits of these responses. While essential, they remain partial; they reach only those connected to existing networks, depend on finite resources, and require sustained effort in already exhausted contexts.

In a country where resilience is popularly framed as a “national trait,” this also reflects a rejection of narratives, reproduced in national and international media, that romanticise what is, in reality, an “exhausting and involuntary condition,” said Interviewee B. As Zebian et al. (2025) argue, such narratives obscure structural responsibility by shifting attention away from failing systems and toward the perceived endurance of affected populations.

These accounts demonstrate that pre-crisis relational infrastructure is a primary enabling condition of mutual aid. While much literature focuses on crisis response, the data here suggest that what precedes an emergency is equally significant, particularly in contexts like Lebanon, where recurring shocks build and reinforce trust over time.

5.2 Trust: levels, transmission, and the two distinctions

5.2.1 The collapse of institutional trust and its behavioural consequences

State and international actors are widely distrusted in Lebanon (Arab Barometer, 2024, 2026; Alijla, 2017). This erosion of institutional trust forms the backdrop against which mutual aid operates, and makes interpersonal and network-based trust a central means through which people navigate risk and access support.

Interviewee F explained how perceptions of international aid as biased toward a certain group, combined with ineffective accountability mechanisms, have led to deep scepticism and, in some cases, refusal of aid. “International organisations only give money to Syrians,” he was frequently told in conversations with host communities and local municipalities. Formal systems intended to build trust, such as feedback channels, often become tick-box exercises that fail to ensure meaningful engagement or follow-up, producing “generic, standardised replies that create more frustration than trust.”

Extending this critique, Interviewee B described large INGOs as “big machines” whose reporting requirements and criteria are “designed for their own institutional purposes, not ours,” creating administrative burdens that slow responses. Their preference for more flexible, value-aligned feminist funds reflects not only a practical choice but also a repositioning of trust toward actors perceived as more principled and responsive.

At the same time, relationships with formal actors are not reducible to distrust only. Interviewee E described this ambivalence clearly: “The IOM, the WFP – without them, we could not have done what we did.” Yet she also underlined what these organisations cannot replicate – the human presence, cultural knowledge, and the ability to “feel the thorn that is under the shoe.” This relational dimension helps explain why people turn to certain actors over others.

Trust, or lack thereof, in state and humanitarian organisations shapes not only how support is delivered, but how it is perceived and accessed. Rather than a simple replacement of institutional trust, the data reveals a layered dynamic in which personal and network-based trust become central precisely where institutional trust has broken down.

5.2.2 Networked trust transmission: the mechanism in practice

Focusing on how trust circulates, the accounts in this study point to a mechanism of networked transmission, in which trust travels along relational chains rather than being built solely through direct interaction between individuals and organisations.

As Interviewee B reflected, “trust is not given – it is built through networks. Some of the people who reached out to us during the war had seen our work before or heard about us through friends. It is a chain of renewed trust.” Trust extends through a sequence of relationships, with each link conferring credibility on the next.

Interviewee E’s description of the first day reflects a similar mechanism at a spatial level, where each shelter visit pointed to the next, with trust produced not by the organisation’s institutional profile but by those who directed her there. Interviewee D’s account of community leaders as first points of contact illustrates that people rely on known intermediaries who can refer them to different forms of support. These figures act as nodes through which trust is mediated and directed.

This extends existing literature by showing that trust is not only relational but also networked and directional. It follows specific pathways, and its reach depends on the connectivity of those pathways. As Interviewee B noted, those “completely disconnected from these networks” remain difficult to reach, not due to a lack of willingness, but because the relational chains through which trust travels do not extend to them.

5.2.3 The two analytical distinctions in practice

Trust as precondition and outcome

Participants’ accounts illustrate a bidirectional relationship between trust and mutual aid. On the one hand, trust acts as a precondition; in fact, the responses described by Interviewees B, D, and E were possible because networks already carried trust that could be activated quickly. On the other hand, trust is also an outcome of mutual aid practices and shared experiences during the crisis.

Interviewee E shared how four years of community engagement before the conflict built the trust infrastructure that enabled the crisis response. Regular, non-transactional acts of care, even in small forms such as phone calls, create relational effects that strengthen networks over time.

Trust in an organisation versus trust in the act of seeking help

Interviews highlight a distinction between trust in an actor and trust in the act of seeking help itself. Interviewee A explained that survivors of GBV in collective shelters may trust a care worker or organisation, yet still hesitate to come forward due to stigma: “The dominant social norm is that what happens between a woman and her husband is considered private and sensitive; it should not be exposed, least of all in a public, shared space.”

Similarly, Interviewee C described how, in order to navigate social barriers, she approached sensitive issues indirectly: “Speaking about inheritance is considered shameful in our society.” To address this, she used economic empowerment initiatives as an entry point to engage women. This distinction matters because it shows that building trust in actors alone is not

sufficient. It also requires addressing the social risks, norms, and perceptions associated with seeking support.

5.3 Help-seeking: mediation, inhibition, and the limits of trust

5.3.1 Three forms in practice

The data in this study do not support a sequential model of help-seeking as the main way affected populations access support in Lebanon's crisis context. Instead, the dominant pattern is mediated or passive help-seeking, in which support reaches people through relational networks and trusted connectors rather than through self-initiated contact with formal services. Active help-seeking exists, but it is not dominant and depends on enabling conditions that are often not available to the most marginalised.

The community leader, as a key first-line support mechanism, emerges repeatedly across interviews and humanitarian reports in Lebanon (UN Women, 2024, p. 6; JMSNA, 2025, p. 59). As Interviewee D explains: "Usually, the first point of contact is their community leader (...) people know that if they need medical help, they can contact this person, who will refer them." This describes mediated help-seeking as the primary infrastructure through which marginalised populations navigate support. Leaders play a critical role in circulating information, identifying needs, and connecting people to actors with whom they may have no direct relationship.

Interviewee E's account of passive help-seeking is particularly significant for understanding situations of extreme marginalisation. Migrant domestic workers were among the most excluded from formal support during the conflict. When employers fled, many workers were left behind, often without passports and with no access to shelter (Edwards & Sousa, 2024; Al Riachi & Diab, 2025). For them, active – and often mediated – help-seeking was not possible; outreach was the only available support. Interviewee E described going into the streets to distribute essential items, including food, mattresses, and clothing. Beyond addressing immediate material needs, this outreach also connected affected people to broader networks of support, including them in community-based needs assessment lists. This helped reduce isolation and enabled access to future assistance, as people could reach out to these networks if needed. In this sense, collective support provided not only immediate relief but also a form of relational protection.

This pattern extends beyond the migrant context. Interviewee B describes other people who remain invisible even to informal networks: "Someone displaced in one area might find a group (...) while someone two kilometres away has access to nothing." This distance is not logistical but relational. The person two kilometres away is outside the network and cannot access support because the infrastructure through which information and trust travel does not reach them.

5.3.2 Five layers of inhibition

The literature shows that barriers to help-seeking are multiple and overlapping (Byrow et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2020). The data examined in this study point to five prevailing forms of inhibition: normative, material, risk-based, structural, and network-based.

Normative inhibition, consistent with research across Arab populations, is among the most prominent (El Khatib et al., 2023). Interviewee A explains: “What happens between a woman and her husband is considered private (...) it should not be exposed.” In collective shelters, where privacy is absent, this barrier is even stronger. Interviewee C adds the dimension of shame: “Speaking about inheritance is considered shameful.” In both cases, the barrier lies not in lack of knowledge or trust, but in the social meaning of disclosure.

Material inhibition is described by Interviewee A, reconstructing a GBV survivor’s reasoning for not seeking support: “If I leave the house now, I have no qualifications to find employment (...) I will endure the abuse so that my children are at least fed.” Help-seeking here is shaped by economic calculation and care obligations. The decision reflects a prioritisation of children’s survival in conditions of severe constraint, where the material risks of seeking support may outweigh its perceived benefits, regardless of trust in the service provider. In conflict settings, this is further compounded by the prioritisation of immediate survival over accessing services. As Interviewee A notes, “for many survivors, seeking GBV support is simply not a priority.” Similarly, Interviewee C observed that during the conflict, “many prioritised physical safety over legal or economic claims, even when these claims were critical to their long-term protection.”

Risk-based inhibition is also particularly salient in contexts of conflict and legal precarity. As Interviewee A notes, “filing a court order may itself increase a woman’s risk: a partner with deeply patriarchal views who discovers she has filed may respond with escalated violence.” For people on the move, Interviewee F highlights the potential of exploitation and deportation. In such cases, seeking help can increase risks rather than reduce them (Oxfam, 2026, p. 6).

Structural inhibition, the perceived futility of formal systems, emerged in several interviews. Interviewee B describes informal referral networks emerging precisely because formal services are experienced as unreliable or inaccessible. Interviewee F’s account of delays linked to political and sectarian dynamics further illustrates how these barriers are embedded in the system itself. In this sense, the same conditions that undermine institutional trust also shape the perception that formal services may not deliver meaningful support.

Network-based inhibition operates prior to all others. It applies to people who are entirely outside the relational infrastructure through which support circulates. Unlike other barriers, it is not a matter of difficulty in accessing services, but the absence of any pathway through which access could occur.

5.3.3 Trust across inhibition layers

The accounts show that trust matters for help-seeking, but its effects are uneven and bounded across different forms of inhibition. Trust can help address normative inhibition. As discussed earlier, Interviewee C did not overcome barriers around inheritance simply by building trust, but by reframing the issue through economic empowerment. She also described using participatory theatre and community plays to facilitate discussion on sensitive family issues. In this context, the barrier lies less in trust toward the actor than in the social meaning attached to the act itself.

Trust also helps mitigate structural inhibition by making services appear more accessible and worthwhile. Interviewee A described how community-based networks trained to “spread information about GBV services, including helpline numbers” during the conflict made support more reachable through “trusted, everyday relationships.” In this case, trust is transferred relationally with confidence in a person extending to the service they recommend.

However, trust has a limited effect on material inhibition. Economic constraints remain decisive, regardless of relational confidence. This challenges the tendency in some humanitarian frameworks to treat trust-building as a panacea for overcoming barriers to help-seeking, and points to the need for interventions that also address material conditions. Similarly, trust cannot be expected to resolve risk-based inhibition when the risk lies in the consequences of seeking help. Having confidence in an organisation does not remove the danger posed by legal systems, abusive partners, or broader structural conditions of insecurity.

Finally, trust cannot address network-based inhibition. Where no relational infrastructure exists, trust cannot circulate. As Interviewee B notes most explicitly, decentralised networks are both the most effective available mechanism and one that can reproduce exclusions beyond their reach. The person two kilometres away with no access is not a failure of trust, but a limitation of coverage, and this is a different problem requiring a different response.

5.4 Protection outcomes: what the mechanism produces

5.4.1 The spectrum in practice

The protection outcomes documented in this study do not map neatly onto the standard humanitarian risk formula (GPC, 2021). While the formula treats protection outcomes as measurable reductions in identifiable threats, the data show a more distributed and sometimes less visible set of outcomes. These range from safety with dignity to informed agency and shifts in structural conditions, and are often most meaningful where they are least measurable.

At the level of physical safety, the findings align with standard frameworks. Interviewee A describes emergency shelter as an immediate protection outcome: “She now has a physical space, a transitional environment between the violence she has been living with and the future she is beginning to decide for herself.” Similarly, culturally appropriate food was provided where standard aid packages were unusable, and Interviewee B ensured that menstrual products

– often excluded from emergency responses – reached migrant women, disabled women, and women and girls in remote areas. Interviewee E also describes emergency assistance to women left without shelter, including hosting and people taking others in, enacted as protection practices rooted in care and solidarity (Caron, 2024). These material and relational interventions are essential because, as Interviewee D noted, they are about “dignity in a crisis.”

However, the data also reveal outcomes that the formula cannot capture. Being found, heard, and acknowledged is a form of protection for those whose conditions cannot be immediately changed but whose relational isolation can be reduced. As Carpi et al. (2025, p. 4) argue, this dimension of humanitarian action is often overlooked in “hegemonic” frameworks. For the most marginalised populations, mutual aid is often the most humanly effective and culturally responsive form of support achievable in crisis, yet one that formal monitoring systems struggle to capture (ibid.).

Interviewee A provides the clearest account of agency as a protective outcome. For a woman survivor of GBV who has left a shelter, “a successful outcome may still be achieved if she has understood her options, knows she can return, and recognises that a support system exists for her.” Here, protection lies not only in physical safety but in the expansion of informed choice. This aligns with dignity-centred approaches to protection (Slim, 2015; Mosel & Holloway, 2019), where agency is respected: “it is her decision, even when the case worker’s professional judgement may differ,” Interviewee A said.

Structural protection outcomes are visible in longer-term transformations. Interviewee C describes shifts in inheritance practices before the escalation, where women “have begun to inherit” more and more, even if not without resistance. As she further explains, securing inheritance and economic rights often translates directly into improved protection, by “reducing dependency on abusive relatives and enabling safer living arrangements.” This points to economic security as a key dimension of protection, underpinning both safety and the ability to assert other rights.

Beyond personal cases, protection also emerges at the collective level. Interviewee D describes migrant-led groups as developing forms of self-sufficiency and collective organisation, whose capacity to coordinate independently represents a form of community-based protection. These outcomes extend beyond immediate response to the gradual strengthening of locally embedded protective infrastructures.

5.4.2 What mutual aid can and cannot do

The mechanism analysed in this study works and, in many cases, provides life-saving support: from organising community kitchens and informal shelter to resource-sharing, legal assistance, referrals, and emotional support, while ensuring no one is left behind. Amid abandonment and injustice, these practices create systems of care that address immediate needs and foster hope. Yet, they also operate unevenly and under constraint.

Mutual aid relies on relational networks, and they determine its reach. Where connections exist, responses are rapid, trusted, and culturally attuned in ways formal actors struggle to replicate. But these same networks also define their limits. As Interviewee B described, someone displaced in one area might receive support, while someone just a few kilometres away might receive none. Mutual aid cannot easily reach those outside the relationships through which it operates.

These initiatives are not without their own challenges. Across interviews, funding was described as limited, inflexible, and often misaligned with how these groups actually work, constraining results. International partnerships often entail substantial administrative requirements, including costly reporting and compliance, which divert time and energy from the response itself. As one participant put it, groups often find themselves “overworking to fit their criteria (...) when all you want is for support to reach people.” At the same time, humanitarian actors continue to design responses for these groups rather than with them, overlooking the community knowledge and contextual expertise that make their responses effective in the first place. Although examples of better practices exist – where support is tailored through dialogue and administrative burdens are reduced – these represent the exception rather than the norm, according to Interviewee D.

Many mutual aid groups also described relying heavily on diaspora funding and volunteer labour. While this is what enables rapid mobilisation and autonomy, it also makes these efforts fragile and discontinuous. Delivering responses across multiple locations daily, often under conditions of severe insecurity, carries risks of exhaustion and burnout for those involved in these efforts.

For these reasons, mutual aid should not be romanticised as a substitute for international solidarity or state responsibility. What it provides is speed, proximity, cultural knowledge, and trust – elements formal actors cannot easily reproduce and that are critical to whether support is experienced as meaningful. As one participant reflected, what these initiatives were doing during the war was “applying a bandage to a gaping wound.” Recognising both the potential and the limits of mutual aid is essential to understanding what it can realistically achieve, and what must still be addressed beyond it.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that community-based mutual aid played a meaningful role in ensuring the safety, dignity, and rights of people affected by the 2023 conflict in Lebanon. When formal systems failed, were absent, or were distrusted, these networks became the primary infrastructure for support. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, this thesis traces a non-linear mechanism in which mutual aid builds pre-crisis relational infrastructure; trust travels through relational chains; help-seeking is primarily mediated or passively received; and protection outcomes are distributed across a spectrum from physical safety to dignity and informed agency. At the same time, the analysis suggests that this mechanism is partial and network-bound, and that its limits are as important as its effects.

6.1 Findings, contributions, and the research question

The research asked how mutual aid contributes to protection outcomes and what role trust plays in shaping help-seeking behaviour. The analysis suggests that mutual aid contributes by building and activating the relational infrastructure through which affected people access support that formal systems do not provide. Trust is the condition that enables this infrastructure to function and to reduce normative and structural barriers to seeking help, but it cannot reach those entirely outside these networks. Help-seeking is primarily mediated through trusted intermediaries rather than self-initiated toward formal services. For the most marginalised, it is sometimes not help-seeking at all, but the acceptance or refusal of support offered. Protection outcomes include material support, legal assistance, referrals, and information-sharing alongside less visible but equally meaningful outcomes such as being found, being heard, understanding one's options, and gaining the relational confidence to act, particularly where physical safety cannot be readily secured.

Building on these findings, this study makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, the data suggest that trust in Lebanon's multi-layered crisis context flows along relational chains instead of being built bilaterally between persons and organisations. And that locally embedded intermediaries, which remain under-examined in trust literature, are the key node through which transmission occurs. Second, the analysis makes visible a distinction not clearly developed in the help-seeking literature, namely that trust in an organisation and trust in the act of seeking help are distinct. A person may trust an actor and still not come forward because the barrier lies in the social meaning of the act itself. This distinction carries practical implications for how inhibition is understood and addressed. Third, the findings support an understanding of protection outcomes that extends beyond physical safety to include dignity, informed agency, and reduced relational isolation. These are all dimensions that standard humanitarian frameworks and monitoring tools do not adequately capture.

6.2 Limits, partiality, and structural conditions

The mechanism analysed in the study carries limitations that warrant mention. Because mutual aid functions through networks, those without relational connections are less reachable; as a result, the same crisis can produce different protection environments depending not only on geography but also on the reach of these networks. The two kilometres between a person who received support and one who did not was not simply a logistical gap, but a relational one. Participants described efforts to mitigate these limits by working in a decentralised way through trusted focal points embedded within communities. But they also acknowledged that reaching everyone was not possible.

The geographic concentration of mutual aid infrastructure documented in this study thus reflects a form of inequality that community-based actors actively seek to address but cannot fully overcome. While mutual aid plays a critical role in meeting urgent needs with dignity, responsibility for response at scale does not lie with these actors. What these actors offer – relational presence, cultural attunement, and trust – formal actors cannot easily manufacture,

but it cannot substitute for the responsibilities that states, institutional aid actors, and those responsible for the armed violence itself have yet to meet.

The organisations examined operated in contexts where formal systems are largely absent or distrusted. Whether participants understood it as political solidarity or as a necessary action, their work addressed gaps in protection that state and international humanitarian actors were unable or unwilling to fill. The filling of these gaps is not neutral and framing it as a symbol of resilience risks depoliticising the structural conditions these efforts expose. As one participant noted: “Instead of asking which systems are failing people, which structures are producing these conditions, it focuses attention on how impressive people are for enduring them.”

The findings do not support a uniform understanding of mutual aid as resistance. Instead, they reveal a spectrum ranging from spontaneous solidarity to explicitly political assertion. What unites these practices is not their ideological framing, but the conditions from which they emerge. Frameworks that treat mutual aid as a form of protective capacity, without accounting for the structural conditions that make it necessary, risk offering only a partial picture of its function, its motivations, and its limits.

6.3 Implications and directions

Several implications for humanitarian policy and practice emerge from this study’s findings. Standard protection frameworks and associated monitoring tools tend to undercount outcomes for the most marginalised, because they are calibrated for populations that are visible within formal systems and fit the categories through which assistance is typically organised. As a consequence, forms of protection produced by community-based actors continue to be under-recognised and under-supported.

At the same time, the data analysed suggest that trust-building in humanitarian contexts requires greater precision. Strengthening confidence in organisations does not necessarily reduce the social and material costs associated with seeking help. Conflating these processes risks interventions that address institutional trust while leaving the structural barriers unchanged.

The analysis also underscores the importance of investing in relational infrastructure before crises occur. The effectiveness of mutual aid observed in this study was not improvised but built over time through sustained social ties, local knowledge, and embedded forms of organisation. Supporting these capacities requires approaches that recognise and build upon existing community-based systems without undermining what makes them effective. Participants’ accounts of limited power-sharing, burdensome administrative requirements, and the marginalisation of local knowledge illustrate not technical shortcomings but political constraints rooted in institutional incentives to retain control rather than redistribute it.

More broadly, the thesis argues for a decentring of traditional aid. Rather than asking how mutual aid can be integrated into formal systems, it raises the question of how those systems

should adapt to support what already exists. In doing so, the thesis aligns with scholarship urging meaningful engagement with community-based actors as central to crisis response (Barbelet et al., 2021; Carstensen & Sebit, 2023; Posada & Ahimbisibwe, 2025).

The communities examined in this study were not filling gaps as an expression of resilience. They were doing what the systems around them had failed to do. Understanding these dynamics more precisely – through the perspectives of those navigating them directly, in the places this study could not reach, and under conditions that make that engagement safe and reciprocal – is the work this thesis points toward.

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Tool: ResearchRabbit (accessed Dec 2025–Apr 2026)

Use: Used a number of known articles to find related academic sources.

Reason: Literature Review and Sourcing

My Modifications: I selected, read, and evaluated all sources myself; the tool only provided suggestions and links.

Tool: ChatGPT-5.5 (OpenAI, accessed Jan–May 2026)

Use: Helped improve language, rephrase sentences, and clarify structure based on my own text.

Reason: Language Improvement.

My Modifications: All outputs were reviewed and rewritten; no AI-generated text was used without substantial editing.

Tool: Claude (Anthropic, accessed Jan–Apr 2026)

Use 1: Helped identify relevant literature and organise themes for the literature review.

Reason 1: Literature Review and Sourcing.

My Modifications 1: All sources were independently verified and selected; the final synthesis is my own.

Use 2: Discussed theoretical frameworks and how they could relate to the thesis argument.

Reason 2: Researching Ideas and Topics

My Modifications 2: All sources were independently read and verified; all analysis and interpretation are my own.

Use 3: Generated a visual diagram (Figure 1) based on a conceptual structure I developed.

Reason 3: Data Visualisation

My modification 3: The concept, labels, and meaning were fully my own; the final version of the figure was manually revised and reproduced.

Tool: Grammarly (Grammarly Inc., accessed Apr–May 2026)

Use: Corrected grammar, spelling, and clarity in final drafts.

Reason: Language Improvement.

My Modifications: Suggestions were used selectively; all content remains my own.

Tool: DeepL (DeepL SE, accessed Jan–May 2026)

Use: Translated selected sources and interview materials.

Reason: Language Improvement.

My Modifications: All translations were checked and adjusted for accuracy.

Appendices

Appendix A: Anonymised participant details

Interviewee	Organisation Type	Thematic Focus	Role
A	National civil society organisation	Gender, protection	Programme-level
B	Feminist collective	Human rights, emergency relief	Core member
C	National civil society organisation	Gender equality, protection	Senior staff
D	International civil society organisation	Migrant rights	Programme-level
E	Community-based organisation	Migrant support, emergency relief	Community leadership
F	International NGO	Accountability, localisation	Technical role

Appendix B: Information sheet and consent form⁶

Information sheet
<i>Mutual Aid as Protection: Trust and Help-Seeking Behaviour in Conflict-Affected Communities in Lebanon</i> Master's student: Massimo Maria Putti Affiliation: School of Transnational Governance, European University Institute (EUI), Florence, Italy Contact details: (removed for submission) Dear Participant, My name is Massimo Maria Putti, and I am a master's student at the School of Transnational Governance of the European University Institute (EUI), located in Florence, Italy. This information sheet provides details about the research project, its objectives, and what your participation would involve. Objectives of the Study As part of my master's thesis, I am conducting qualitative research on community-based mutual aid in Lebanon during the 2023 Israel–Lebanon war. Specifically, I am interested in understanding how mutual aid operates within communities and how trust influences people's decision to seek help during times of crisis. The research involves engaging with

⁶ The information sheet and consent form here are in English, but participants also received them in French and Arabic. For space reasons, these documents were not included in the appendix.

individuals working in civil society organisations, faith-based and refugee-led organisations, as well as members of collectives, community kitchens, and other self-organised groups.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to decide whether or not to take part, and you may withdraw from the study at any time, without providing a reason and without any negative consequences. If you choose to withdraw, any data collected from you up to that point will be deleted, unless you explicitly consent to its continued use.

What Participation Involves

If you agree to participate, your involvement will consist of a research interview conducted remotely at a mutually agreed time. The interview is expected to last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. You may choose not to answer any question and may stop the interview at any time. With your consent, the interview may be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. If you do not wish to be recorded, the interview can proceed without audio recording, or you may choose not to participate.

Confidentiality

All information collected during the study will be treated as confidential. Your identity will be protected, and any information that could directly or indirectly identify you will be removed from the data. Research findings will be presented in an anonymised form, ensuring that participants cannot be identified. Access to the data will be strictly limited to the research team, consisting of the researcher and their academic thesis supervisor.

Data Processing and Use of Information

The data collected in this study will be used exclusively for the purposes of this research. All personal and sensitive data will be handled in accordance with the European University Institute's Data Protection Policy. Where audio recordings are made, they will be transcribed by the researcher and pseudonymised. All identifying and sensitive information will be removed from the transcripts. Audio recordings will be permanently deleted immediately after transcription. Any handwritten notes taken during the interview will be digitised as soon as possible and securely stored in a password-protected cloud storage system managed by the European University Institute (EUI OneDrive). The original handwritten notes will be destroyed following digitisation. Direct quotations from interviews may be used in academic outputs. Where possible, you may be contacted in advance to ensure that you feel accurately represented and comfortable with the inclusion of such material. You have the right to request access to your personal data, to ask for corrections, or to request deletion of your data at any time. Requests or questions regarding data processing can be addressed to the researcher using the contact details above.

Questions or Concerns

If you have any questions about the study, your participation, or the handling of your data, you are welcome to contact the researcher using the details provided above.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Consent form

I agree to participate in the research project *Mutual Aid as Protection: Trust and Help-Seeking Behaviour in Conflict-Affected Communities in Lebanon*, conducted by Massimo Maria Putti from the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy.

1. I have received sufficient information about this research project, and I understand my role in it. The purpose of my participation in this project and the future processing of my personal data has been explained to me in a clear and understandable manner.
2. My participation in this project is completely voluntary.
3. Participation involves being interviewed by Massimo Maria Putti from the European University Institute. The interview will last between 30-60 minutes and will be held remotely at a mutually agreed time. The interview might
4. With my consent, I allow the audio recording of the interview while Massimo takes written notes. In case I do not want the interview and dialogue to be audio-recorded, I am entitled to not be recorded, or to withdraw from participation.
5. I have the right not to answer questions or withdraw from any part of the research. I have the right to withdraw from the interview or research at any point, without giving a reason and without negative consequences.
6. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name or function in any outputs using information obtained from this research interview and that my identity as a participant in this study remains secure and protected by confidentiality.
7. I understand that all personal data will be processed in full compliance with the EUI's Data Protection Policy.
8. I have obtained a copy of this consent form co-signed by the interviewer (Massimo Maria Putti).

Signature of the participant:

Date:

Signature of the researcher:

Date:

For further information, please contact: *Massimo Maria Putti* at (removed for submission)