

COVID-19 VACCINATION IN LEBANON

*Reception and perception of the
governmental vaccination plan*



A SIREN ANALYTICS REPORT
February 2021

BACKGROUND: ESCAPING THE EYE OF THE STORM

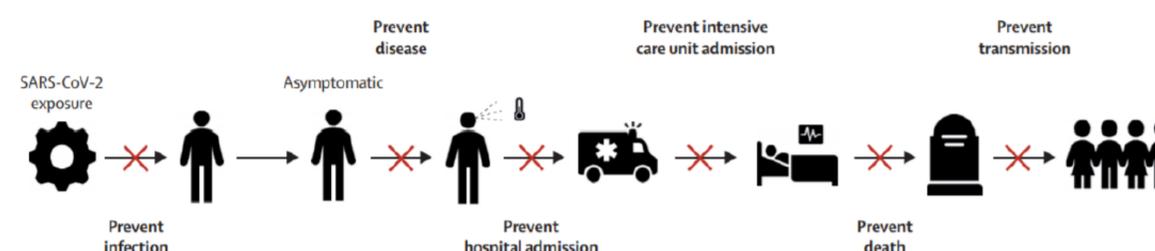
The current lockdown falls among the strictest taken by the Lebanese authorities in the recent period. Yet, as national authorities are counting on the coming vaccination campaign to flatten the curve and combat the pandemic, the battle is far from over and post-lockdown measures will be crucial to further prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

- The ongoing full lockdown has been relatively well received by the population despite the daunting task for authorities to monitor and enforce it on a large scale, and equally among regions. This overall acceptance was a direct result of the horrific scenes of saturated hospitals and a rising death toll of Covid-19 patients, following the decision to allow for holidays and new year reunions and celebrations.
- Despite the strict measures, daily infection and death rates continue to hover at a dangerously high level, with little visibility as to how the pandemic will evolve.
- On the other hand, and for the first time since the start of the pandemic, relevant ministries are taking data-driven measures and coordinating their actions, namely through the Inter-Ministerial/Municipal Platform for Analysis, Coordination and Tracking (IMPACT). As such, relevant authorities relied on this platform to set up the current and ongoing mobility permits procedure, in addition to the upcoming National Covid-19 Vaccination Plan, both based on a digitally-enhanced government approach.
- Recently, protests against the strict lockdown have picked up, as the growing economic burden has become unbearable to many vulnerable communities, not to mention the absence of socio-economic support and the promised yet pending aid programs.

THE NATIONAL VACCINATION PLAN: TEST OF TIME

On January 28, the National Covid-19 Vaccine Committee put forward a comprehensive vaccination plan, including all procedures from pre-registration to vaccination. Although the plan seems to cover all aspects and concerns, it is now put to the test, starting with the reception and the storing of the first batch of vaccines.

- The Committee announced its objective in administering the Covid-19 vaccine to 70% of the population in 2021-2022.
- Vaccination is not compulsory but is highly encouraged because, as more people become immune, the potential for controlling the pandemic increases. One of the committee's main responsibilities is to raise awareness by communicating the benefits of taking the vaccine.
- Vaccine is provided for free by the Ministry of Public Health, for all citizens regardless of nationality and residency status, including prisoners.
- Registered individuals will be selected based on a set of criteria, with priority given to medical staff, elderly, and those suffering from chronic diseases.
- A supervising committee will monitor the transparency of the vaccination process and distribution to ensure that the vaccine is fairly and orderly administered to those eligible and registered.
- National authorities have already reserved 2.1 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine divided over the next 4 quarters, with the first delivery of 28,080 doses due mid-February. Another 2.73 million vaccines were booked via the COVAX platform with no set delivery date. Finally, a 1.5 million order is under negotiation with AstraZeneca.



PRE-REGISTRATION PLATFORM: DIGITAL TOUCH

With IMPACT's successful management of the lockdown mobility permits procedure, a growing number of policymakers are now convinced that data-based strategies and cross-ministerial collaboration are crucial to alleviate the pandemic spread.

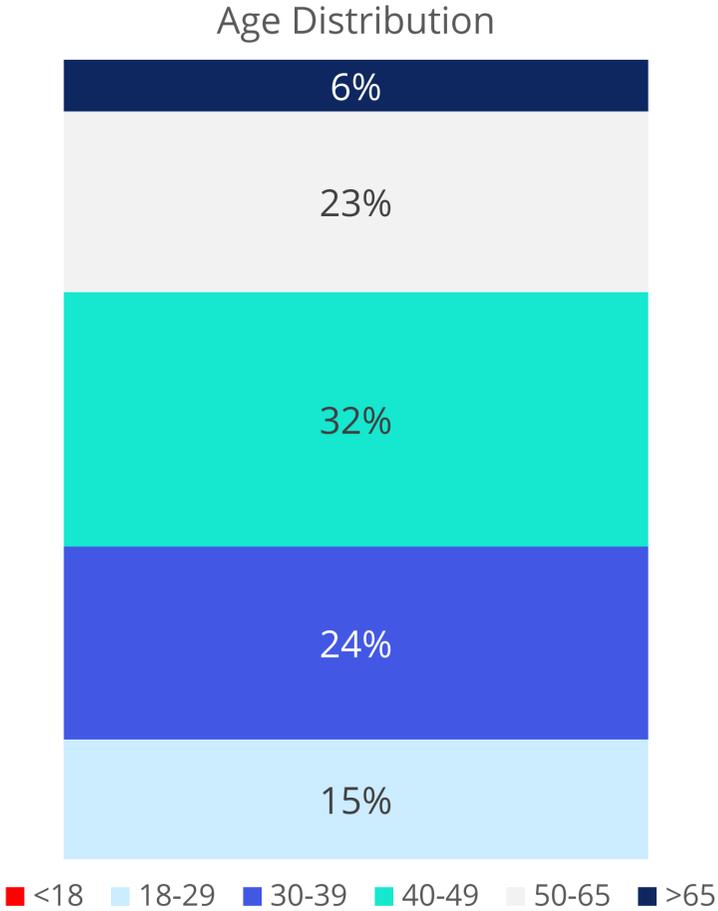
- On January 28, the vaccination pre-registration form was launched by the National Covid-19 Vaccine Committee and the Ministry of Public Health on the IMPACT platform, ahead of the first batch of upcoming Covid-19 vaccines.
- Pre-registration is available online to all individuals who would like to take part in the vaccination plan. In case they are unable to access the online platform, they can register by phone through the hotline 1787.
- Pre-registration does not grant automatic access to vaccine shots, as the vaccination plan follows a priority-based mechanism that will process the digital requests.
- Workers from the medical sector will be registered on the platform by their respective institutions and unions.
- Six days into the launching of the online system, the platform has recorded over 197,500 requests.

The screenshot shows the pre-registration form interface. At the top, there is a green header with the text 'استمارة التسجيل لأخذ اللقاح المضاد لفيروس كورونا (كوفيد-19)' and 'Covid-19 Vaccine pre-registration form' next to a logo of a hand holding a tree. Below the header is the IMPACT logo. The main content area contains the instruction: 'الرجاء تحديد الفئة التي تنتمي إليها من بين الفئات المدرجة في القائمة أدناه' and 'Please select to which category you belong among the ones listed below'. There are two buttons: 'فئات أخرى' (Other) and 'عامل في القطاع الصحي' (Healthcare worker). Each button has a green arrow pointing left.

METHODOLOGY: SURVEYING CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS & CONCERNS

A few days ahead of the announcement of the national vaccination plan and the launching of IMPACT's vaccine pre-registration platform, a perception survey was conducted to assess citizens' position regarding Covid-19 vaccination and the government's performance in setting up the upcoming implementation phases.

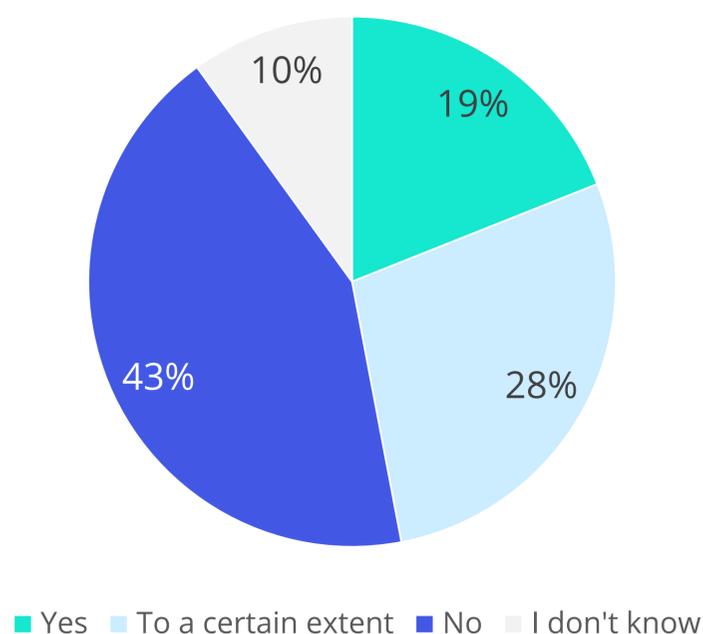
- An anonymous phone survey was conducted by an independent call center, reaching an initial sample of 457 individuals.
- The survey included 27 questions covering citizens' knowledge about the Covid-19 vaccines, the national vaccination plan and the registration mechanism.
- Calls took place between January 26 and January 28, 2021, right before the National Covid-19 committee's press conference. Therefore, respondents' answers were based on individual perceptions before any implementation phase was carried out.
- The overall response rate was 72% with 327 respondents agreeing to take part to the phone survey.
- The majority of respondents (32%) were within the [40-49 years] age group.



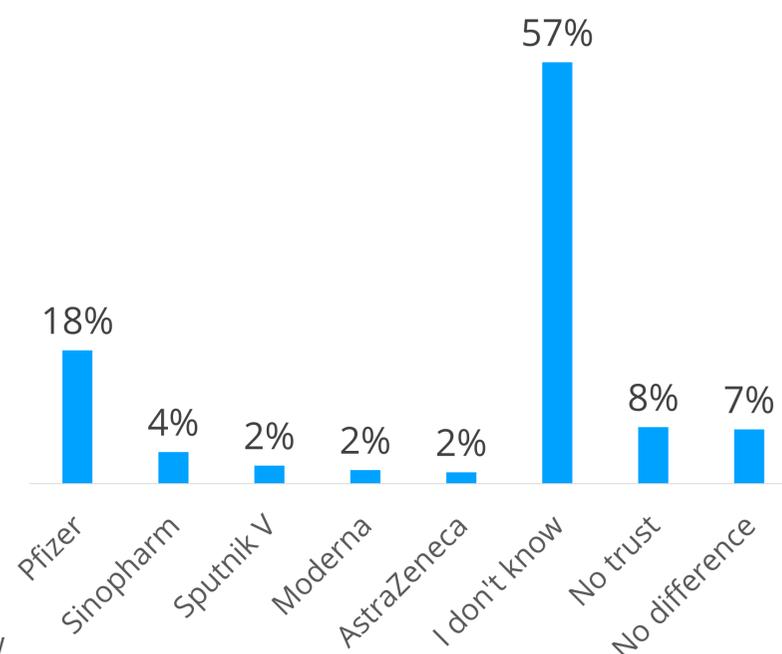
THE VACCINE: THE ULTIMATE RESORT DESPITE UNCERTAINTY

The survey showed a level of uncertainty on whether the vaccine could lead to ending the pandemic, while also pointing to a knowledge gap on vaccine-related information. Respondents expressed some distrust in vaccines, mainly fearing its potential side effects. Thus, public opinion seems evenly divided between those for the vaccine and those against.

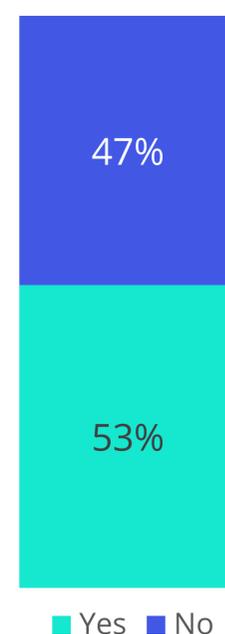
Do you believe the vaccine will terminate the pandemic?



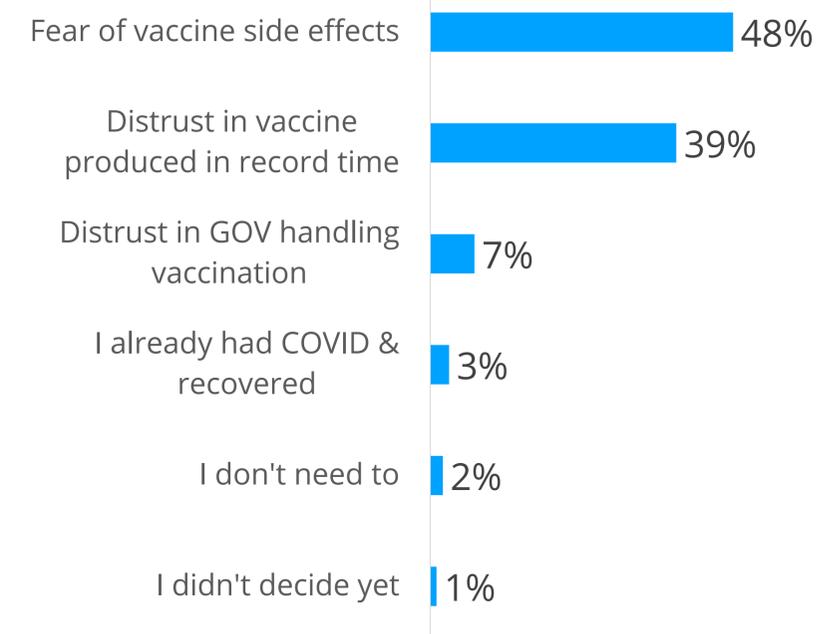
Do you have any vaccine preference?



Will you take the vaccine in Lebanon?



If not, why? [155 responses]

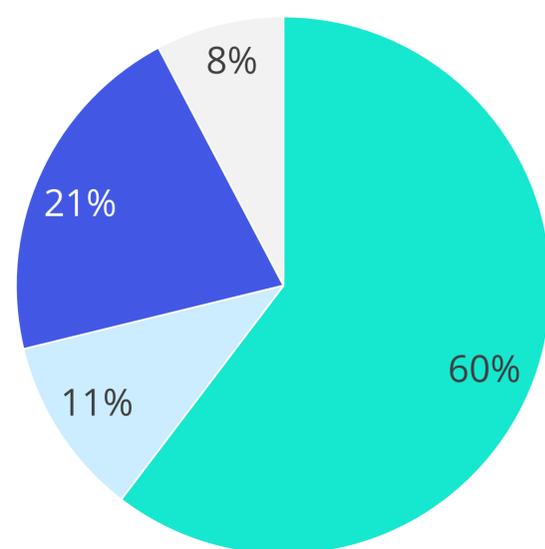


- Respondents have shown little optimism as to the pandemic path ahead, as only 19% of respondents believe that the vaccine could put an end to it, while only 53% have stated readiness to take the vaccine once available in Lebanon. The survey showed how a majority of respondents (57%) lacked information to settle on a vaccine preference, with a minor preference appearing for the Pfizer batch (18%).
- Those rejecting vaccine inoculation are mostly concerned by the potential -and unknown- side effects (48%), in addition to another 39% of respondents distrusting the record time during which the vaccines were produced.

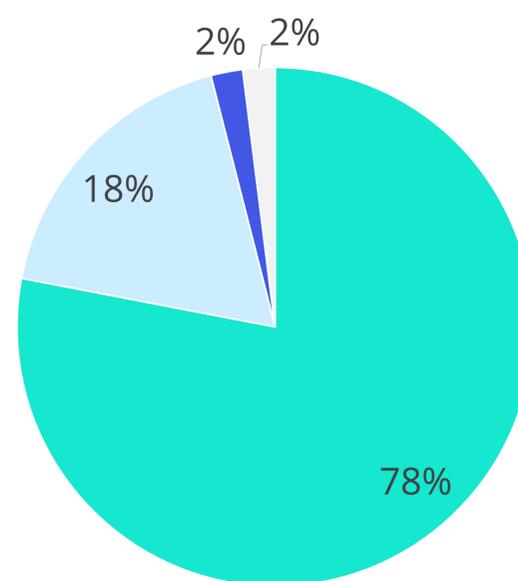
VACCINATION PLAN: EXPECTING INCLUSIVENESS DESPITE CAUTION

The survey showed high expectations as to the National Vaccination Plan, including those opposing the vaccine. Respondents wish for an inclusive approach on access to vaccines, while agreeing on prioritizing certain categories of the population in the initial implementation phases.

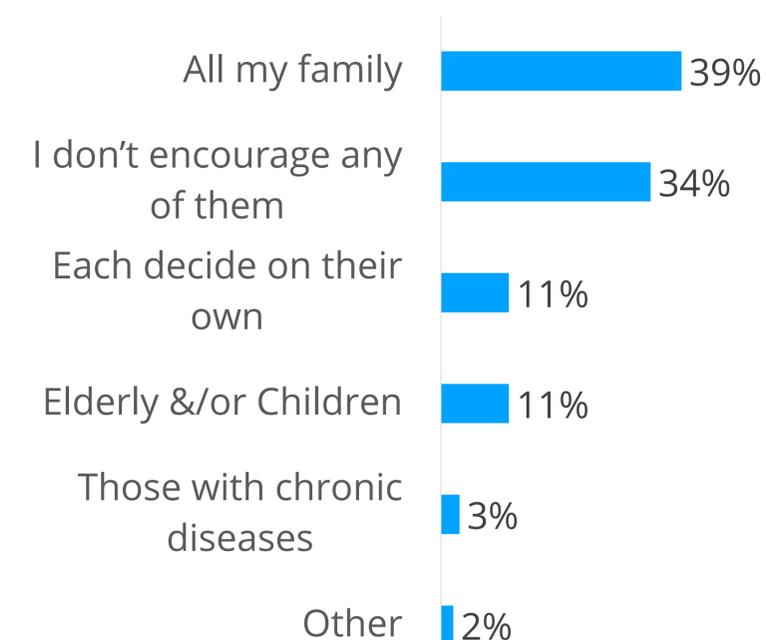
Do you find the vaccination plan fair in prioritizing some groups?



Who do you think should be eligible to take the vaccine?



Which family members do you encourage to take the vaccine?



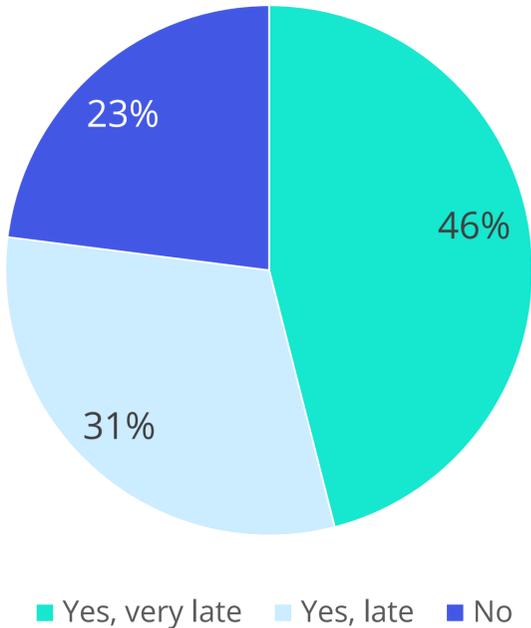
■ Yes ■ To a certain extent ■ No ■ I don't know ■ Lebanese residents only ■ Lebanese first then others ■ No answer

- As noted earlier, 47% of respondents are not ready to take the vaccine. That said, 60% found the vaccination plan to be fair in prioritizing certain groups over others, based on criteria related to Covid-19 exposure and health conditions.
- Furthermore, the survey also highlighted the rejection of any discriminatory approach as to vaccine access, as 78% expect everyone to get their inoculation, in an apparent rebuttal to the latest political calls in restricting vaccination only to Lebanese nationals.
- When asked whether they will encourage their family members to take the vaccine, only 39% stated they would do so (mostly from those willing to take the vaccine), whereas 34% expressed otherwise. Elderly and children are encouraged by only 11% of the sample.

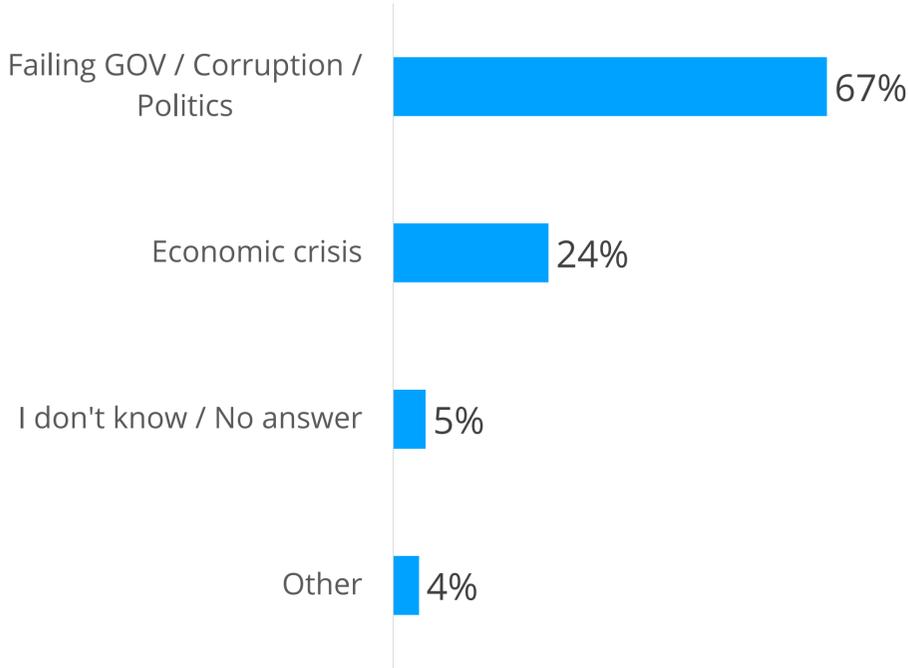
NATIONAL VACCINATION PLAN: PUBLIC SYSTEMIC DISTRUST

The National Covid-19 Vaccination Plan published on January 28 covered all aspects and stages of the vaccination strategy, from citizens' pre-registration to the monitoring of side effects after the 2nd dose. Yet, respondents remained rather pessimistic and doubtful that the plan will be acted upon without the usual patterns of clientelism and corruption.

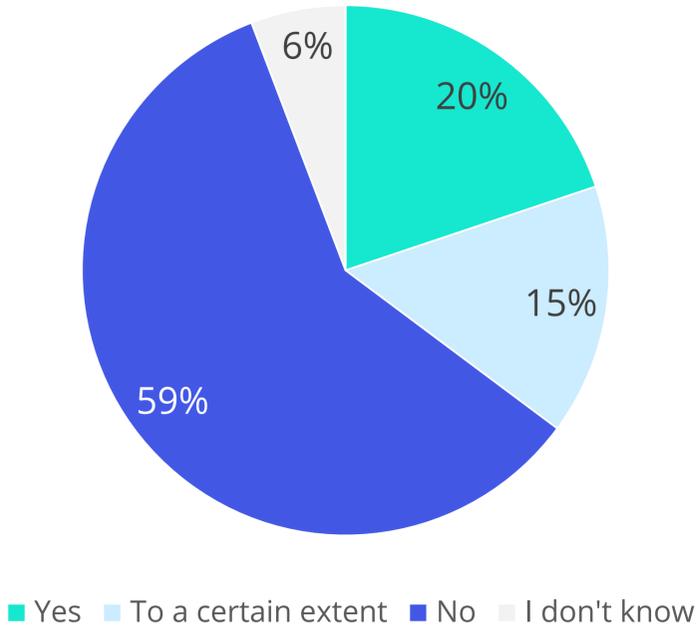
Do you think Lebanon was late in securing the vaccine?



What is the main cause of the delay?
[253 responses]



Do you trust the GOV in handling the vaccination program?



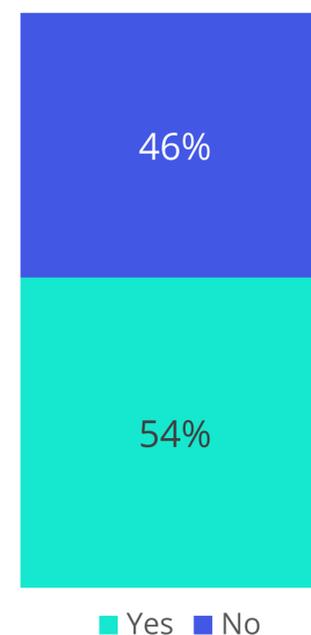
- 77% of respondents believe Lebanon was “late” / “very late” in securing the vaccine, as 67% were set on blaming a failing government and political corruption, and 24% determining the economic crisis was at cause.
- The financial crash endured by the Lebanese State did not prevent the authorities from eventually booking vaccine batches, but the road was made a bit longer before securing a World Bank loan for this purpose.
- Pessimism was expressed as to the capacity of national authorities to properly steer the vaccination program, with 59% of respondents not trusting the government in doing so. Although it has been officially confirmed that free vaccines will cover nearly 70% of the population, 34% of respondents stated they would be ready to buy it at their own expense.

PRE-REGISTRATION: PRELIMINARY CONFUSION

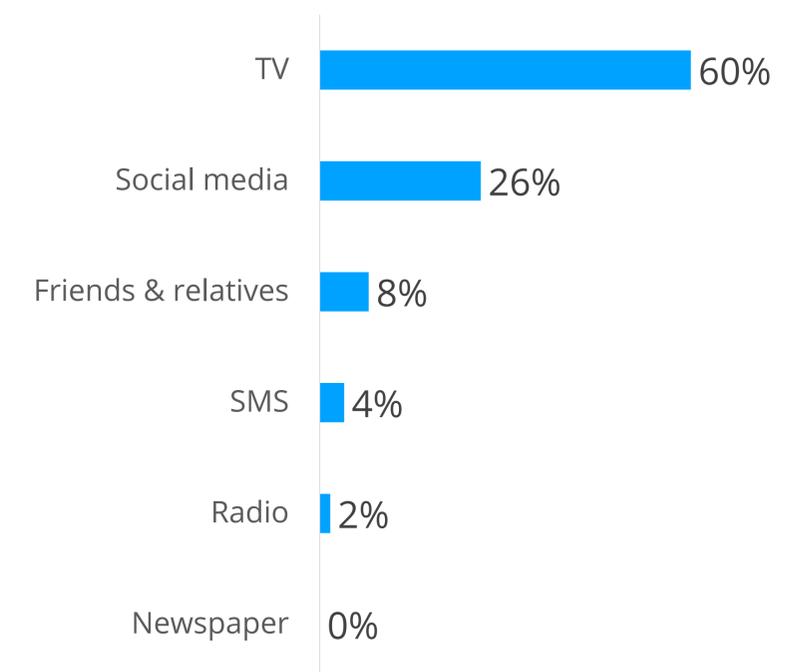
Prior to the National Vaccination Committee's conference on January 28, different private and public sources claimed to manage a vaccine pre-registration platform, thereby causing confusion among citizens. Before the official platform – managed by IMPACT – was presented and explained during the press conference, respondents were strongly divided between resorting to it or not registering at all.

- Up until the time of publishing the official vaccination plan, 54% of respondents had heard of a registration platform, with 26% assuming the Ministry of Public Health would be involved in managing it and 24% not knowing.
- The majority of respondents had heard of the digital platform the first time on TV (60%) or through social media (26%).
- The National Committee's press conference announced that the official platform would be managed by IMPACT through the following portal: <https://covax.moph.gov.lb>
- It was also announced that IMPACT would manage and administer the upcoming phases of the vaccination plan, such as registration, scheduling appointments, and follow-ups.

Have you heard of a platform for vaccine registration?



Where did you hear about it the first time?



RECOMMENDATIONS: BUILDING TRUST & INVOLVING LOCAL AUTHORITIES

With the health sector struggling and anti-lockdown protests rising, the Lebanese state could face a deadly Covid-19 spike unless it meticulously enforces the nationwide vaccination plan. Yet, swift actions should be taken simultaneously, starting with a strong awareness campaign to ground vaccine acceptance.

- **Raise** awareness and encourage citizens to take the vaccine. Almost half of the population is still not convinced of the importance of taking the Covid-19 vaccine. If only a small segment of the population is vaccinated, the country will not be able to overcome the pandemic spread, and the economic and health situation will be spiraling further down.
- **Persuade** all individuals interested in taking the vaccine to pre-register on the vaccine platform, even if they do not belong to priority segments, through the dissemination of clear registration guidelines. SMS, radio, and social media campaigns could have a big impact in this regard.
- **Target** direct communication to vulnerable and high-risk groups (age, comorbidity) via SMS through the IMPACT platform.
- **Involve** local authorities and municipalities in the early stages of the vaccination plan, starting with the pre-registration. According to the announced plan, 56 centers will be distributed across the country, each expected to receive 400 patients a day. Without local coordination, set targets could be missed.
- **Maintain** the highest level of transparency while implementing the National Vaccination Plan, by regularly communicating briefings, progress reports, and statistics.
- **Develop** transparency around the existing systems and processes and communicate openly about the auditing mechanisms put in place by ministries (MoPH), oversight agencies (Central Inspection), and international organizations.
- **Communicate** about the processes and key performance indicators in relation to the current system's pioneering management and supervision approach in order to earn trust.
- **Coordinate** with concerned stakeholders (WHO, UNHCR, UNRWA) vaccine roll out among refugees, low-income migrant workers, internally displaced persons, populations affected by humanitarian emergencies, and the most vulnerable communities who might lack basic information on vaccine inoculation.
- **Start** planning for a nationwide post-vaccination satisfaction survey to be launched in parallel to the rollout. This could help address citizens' fears and doubts and bridge the knowledge gap on vaccine-related information.



For more information about IMPACT, please visit:
<https://impact.gov.lb>