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THE MAGIC POTION OF AUSTERITY AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Narratives of political capture and inequality in the Middle East and North Africa

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Dominant narratives promoting economic growth at the expense of state institutions and basic social services have long underpinned a neoliberal model of spiralling debt and austerity in the MENA region. This exacerbates political capture and inequality and takes shape in an environment of media concentration and shrinking civic space. It is important for change movements to understand dominant narratives in order to challenge and shift them. With the right tools, civil society organizations, activists, influencers and alternative media can start changing the myths and beliefs which frame the socio-economic debate and predetermine which policy options are accepted as possible and legitimate, and which are not.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For decades, countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have incurred high debt and spiralling austerity. The price for ensuring state solvency towards foreign creditors has been severe austerity measures and regressive taxation, leaving the most vulnerable people to shoulder the financial burden and millions without access to basic services or social protection. The MENA region is the only region in the world where extreme poverty has increased during the past decade. This harsh reality has been met with poverty alleviation programmes, rather than universal social protection that is considered too costly.

The dominant narratives behind this neoliberal model of austerity and private sector growth come at the expense of a shrinking public sector. They are particularly advanced by IMF programmes in countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia. This model appears to reinforce existing power relations within countries, leading to further accumulation of power and resources in the hands of the few. The MENA region is one of the most unequal in the world, with 37 billionaires owning as much wealth as the poorest half of the adult population.¹

Dominant narratives are a prevailing discourse serving an ideology that favours one social group. Ideological frameworks allow elites to impact the political process and the narrative by ensuring ideas which legitimize a public policy that works in their favour are generally accepted. They set a storytelling framework – a ‘regime of truth’ – that determines what kind of discourse is accepted as true, and what kind of people or information sources are accepted as authority figures on that truth. Narratives are an instrument of power.

It is important not only to understand dominant narratives but to challenge and shift them. With the right tools, change movements can introduce new rules of truth legitimation into public discourse and the collective psyche. To start shifting the narrative, it is important to understand what dominant narratives are built with and how they are shaped.

THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE: LET THE PRIVATE SECTOR HANDLE IT

The dominant economic narrative in the MENA region promotes austerity and private investment as a driver of economic growth. It is based on simple messages that are easily relayed by mainstream media. Civil society organizations (CSOs) from across the region perceive this narrative as one that reduces class consciousness and blames underprivileged factions of society for economic crises. It praises individual endeavours with a focus on meritocracy, dismissing the role of structural inequalities and cultural capital, and it breeds feelings of fear and loss of hope.

This narrative relies on a set of arguments and beliefs which determine the frames of policy debate. It maintains that there is no alternative to austerity due to high debt-to-GDP ratios. It paints the state as inherently corrupt and bad at doing business, while promoting private-sector-led growth and job creation as the solution, coupled with poverty alleviation measures. It argues that the public deficit is caused by an oversized and corrupt public sector (moving public attention away from the true fiscal burden caused by debt servicing); that the size of debt does not matter, but what matters is the size of the economy; and that taxes on income and wealth will chase away investors, so it is better to impose taxes on consumption.

The IMF plays a significant role in shaping these dominant narratives, whether through its contribution to global economic thought or through its more specific lending conditions and policy advice to countries.

There has been a recent shift in the IMF's stance towards recognizing that neoliberal policies have contributed to a growing divide between rich and poor people. But this shift is yet to be operationalized in the work of the IMF at the country level, which remains to a large extent rooted in the classic neoliberal narrative.

A CAPTURED DISCOURSE: MEDIA CONCENTRATION AND CIVIC SPACE

Media ownership and advertising play a significant role in amplifying dominant narratives. There is a high concentration of media ownership and political affiliation in countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, and this reflects on the political and socio-economic content found in mainstream media.

Governments in the MENA region also use other tools of power to ensure that one discourse prevails in society, such as exercising political control over trade unions. This falls within a limited civic space environment, which in itself is an indicator of government dominance over public discourse in most countries of the region. The CIVICUS Monitor rates national civic space in Egypt as 'Closed' and in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia as 'Obstructed'.²

TIME IS UP! RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE

Within this context of shrinking civic space and elite dominance over mainstream media, CSOs, activists, influencers and alternative media strive to fill an important gap in public discourse and are constantly reflecting on how to influence a collective psyche shaped by decades of political capture. Working on narrative change means working on changing the prevailing truth regime, as well as people's values, myths and beliefs, and everyday thinking, which frame the socio-economic debate and predetermine which policy options are accepted as possible and legitimate, and which are not.

The first step in a narrative shift is to deconstruct the dominant narrative. This includes understanding the role it plays in political capture and unveiling the interest networks that benefit from it, analysing the media and discourse tools that are used to convey this narrative, and debunking the arguments advanced in its favour.

The second is to work on reclaiming the narrative by building a new discourse. A strong counter-narrative can be built when the work on narrative shift goes beyond the mere deconstruction of the dominant narrative to promoting a different discourse and different frame of thought. This consists of a long-term effort to change the culture and set the ground for a new mentality – a new social contract with a new perspective on socio-economic rights, as explained below.

- **Building a new discourse.** This means testing new frames and identifying clear new messages; building a new vocabulary (expressions, buzzwords) for a new narrative which speaks to the public imagination and creates a new field of possibilities in the collective psyche; harmonizing the general discourse among activists, movements and organizations; and identifying the main target audience and the main influencing voices to carry the message.
- **Challenging truth regimes and widening the realm of the possible.** This means finding a strong emotional hook that can help people internalize the new narrative – for instance, by linking macro-economic issues to how they manifest in people's daily lived experiences. This can be done through alliances with alternative media and journalists. It is also important to reduce fear of change and fear of the unknown, and create a strong, credible belief that change is possible.
- **Statistics.** It is essential to develop a common position on multi-dimensional, intersectional inequality indicators and statistical methodology and push for their adoption by decision makers.

The third step is to work on creating an enabling environment for structural, transformative change. This entails an effort to build true social counter-powers and create cracks in the system that will incrementally allow counter-narratives to reach the wider public and make a difference.

- ***Walk the talk: develop a field presence that matters***, by building strong grassroots efforts which not only carry out the message but also apply at a small scale the values of a fair and equitable socio-economic model.
- ***Building narratives across borders***. Work on shifting the narrative can benefit from regional and international networks, coalitions and campaigns that not only seek to mobilize international public opinion on issues of debt and austerity in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) countries, but go beyond this to find common narratives that unite people from the global South and North.

1 INTRODUCTION

For decades, countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have been incurring high levels of debt and spiralling into austerity. The price for ensuring state solvency towards foreign creditors has been severe austerity measures and regressive taxation, which has put the financial burden on the most vulnerable people in society while the rich have kept getting richer.³ These measures are meant to reduce the size of the public sector and boost private sector-led growth, which is said to guarantee job creation and benefit the rest of society.⁴ In the meantime, millions of people are left without access to basic services or social protection. The MENA region is indeed the only region where extreme poverty has increased in the past decade.⁵ This reality is met with poverty alleviation programmes, because universal social protection is said to be too costly.

This narrative comes with its fairy tales and horror stories, which create a favourable cultural environment for austerity policies to thrive in. On the one hand, we are given individual success stories to look up to, such as the ultra-rich politician whose charity foundation covers the school tuition of thousands of children across the country, or the self-made millionaire who studied abroad at a prestigious private school and became an investment banker in New York or Geneva. On the other hand, we would be faced with the threat of economic meltdown if progressive taxes were to be adopted, wages were to be increased, or subsidies were to be maintained. Dreams of faraway paradise and fears of perdition unknown are storytelling tools that serve the same dominant ideological narrative and the private interests of the ruling elite that promotes it at the expense of the public good.

Such narratives promoting a neoliberal model of austerity and private sector growth at the expense of a shrinking public sector are advanced in particular by International Monetary Fund (IMF) programmes in countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia. Oxfam has highlighted in previous reports the impact of austerity measures promoted by the IMF on poverty, social protection, and economic and gender inequalities.⁶ Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the precarity created by low levels of social spending, increased privatization of the health sector and high levels of out-of-pocket health expenditure.⁷ This model also appears to reinforce existing power relations within countries, leading to further accumulation of power and resources in the hands of the few, as evidenced by the level of wealth and income concentration in the region,⁸ and as further illustrated in the following sections of this paper.

Dominant narratives set the overarching theme – the storytelling rules – under which all stories are told. This storytelling framework is defined by people in power who control politics, finance, education and the media. They define a line of thought, often backed by an ideology, a set of values that determine which story angle is acceptable and which is not. Every society, every system comes with its own founding myth, and its own ‘regime of truth’ – that is, what kind of discourse is accepted as true, and what kind of people or information sources are accepted as authority figures on what is true⁹ – for narratives are indeed a chief instrument of power. And in order to understand narratives, we need to understand what kind of power configuration they serve. However, this ‘truth regime’ is not the absolute truth; it can be contested, and with the right tools, change movements can introduce new rules of truth legitimization into public discourse.

In this paper, we explore the role of narratives in affecting the public policies that govern our lives, with a focus on dominant narratives that prevail in the public discourse around debt and austerity in the MENA region. We contend that narratives are a main tool of political capture, which, in the MENA region, drives some of the highest inequality rates in the world.¹⁰ Change actors would benefit from analysing this power tool and the political economy behind it if they are to reshape public discourse towards a more equitable social contract. We conclude with recommendations for activists, be they from civil society organizations (CSOs) or grassroots movements, on what they can do to try and shift this prevailing truth narrative.

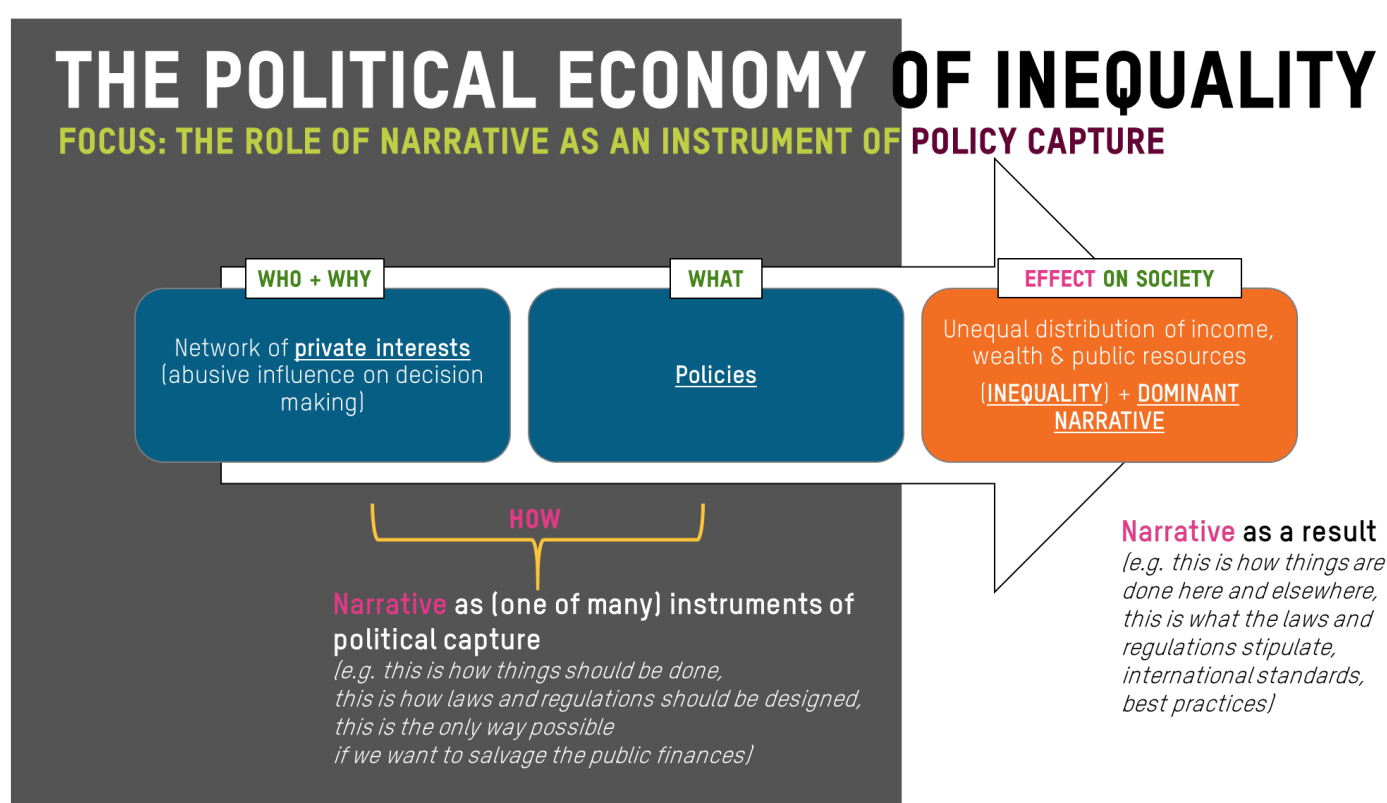
2 NARRATIVES AND POLITICAL CAPTURE: WHY STORIES MATTER

‘The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.’

Anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko¹¹

The underlying mechanism we propose to analyse is as follows: a dominant narrative sustains a certain socio-economic model (policies), which, in turn, sustains a certain political economy (favouring a network of private interests, extractive elites, political capture at the expense of the public good), hence creating inequalities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The political economy of inequality



Source: Figure by the author, based on the capture analysis process proposed in: H. Cortés Saenz and D. Itriago. (2018). *The Capture Phenomenon*.

Oxfam has defined political capture as ‘the exercise of abusive influence by one or more extractive elite(s) – to favour their interests and priorities to the detriment of the general good – over the public policy cycle and state agencies (or others of a regional or international scope), with potential effects on inequality (economic, political or social) and on democracy’s correct functioning’.¹² Political capture by its nature leads to inequality, since it favours the control of a country’s main resources by a small ruling elite – often a network of political actors, cultural actors and capital-holders¹³ – who exchange favours in order to preserve mutual interests at the expense of poor and middle class people.

Political capture weakens state institutions and further weakens people’s trust in those institutions, creating a self-nourishing cycle of capture. Low trust decreases the demand for public services, gearing people towards a higher reliance on the private sector or on philanthropic organizations for the provision

of basic services such as health and education. This, in turn, further weakens state institutions, reinforces capture by the elite that controls private service provision, and increases inequality. This 'public goods trap'¹⁴ feeds into the dominant neoliberal narrative calling for austerity, public sector downsizing and private sector growth, favouring extractive elites.

Dominant narratives are a prevailing discourse, be it in the media or among private circles, which serves an ideology favouring one social group. Ideological frameworks allow elites to 'alter the political process and the prevailing narrative through the internalization of ideas and concepts that serve (...) to legitimize a public policy',¹⁵ which works in their favour. For instance, a long-held public discourse delegitimizing state institutions and raising the profile of private education in various MENA countries has been used to turn private education into the default option in the national psyche,¹⁶ allowing for policy incentives such as tax exemptions or subsidized tuition for private schools,¹⁷ to the detriment of the public sector.

Narratives are both an instrument and a result of political capture. They are an instrument of power that helps establish a certain worldview and reduce popular resistance to elite dominance by ensuring that the majority adopt the narrative serving the interests of the minority in power. Narratives and the inequalities they underpin become infused in people's minds through different cultural products such as 'systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of everyday life'.¹⁸ This leads individuals and the collective to unconsciously accept social hierarchies and inequalities¹⁹ and to willingly submit to an unjust social order without any need for coercion.²⁰ Dominant ideological narratives then become a result of economic and political dominance as well, and in turn help perpetuate hegemonic structures. Once a certain power structure is established, the ruling elite can exercise a quasi-monopoly on mainstream discourse, by controlling knowledge production, civic space, media rhetoric and education.²¹ It should also be noted that mainstream narratives often serve to numb the collective psyche and produce a general feeling of hopelessness that prevents people from contesting hegemonic structures.

Oxfam has identified five elements that show the relationship between political capture and mainstream ideological narratives in different societies: (1) an economic policy that does not differ among parties and is based on neoliberal ideology; (2) a fixed homogeneous discourse among the main political groups with regard to core questions; (3) a media rhetoric that follows the same editorial line across all channels when it comes to core or sensitive issues such as anti-government protests; (4) the funding of knowledge creation and the lack of public funding for universities and education; and (5) the creation of narratives on specific topics such as gender equality or migration that can be used by governments and other actors on a rhetorical level to maintain a specific status quo that denies rights for the majority and grants privileges to the few.²²

We speak of dominant narratives not only to understand them, but also to challenge and shift them. As noted earlier, dominant narratives produce a 'regime of truth' that frames people's mindsets and determines which stories and which political and economic propositions they accept as legitimate. However, since this 'truth regime' is not the absolute truth, it can be contested, and with the right tools, change movements can introduce new rules of truth legitimation into public discourse and the collective psyche. Indeed, discourse can be both an instrument of power and an instrument of resistance.²³ In order to develop a powerful contestation discourse, a counter-narrative, it is important to understand what dominant narratives consist of and how they are shaped.

3 BEYOND BUDGETS: SHAPING THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THE REGION

THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGION'S NEOLIBERAL MODEL: WINNERS AND LOSERS

Countries across the MENA region have entered a vicious circle of high indebtedness and austerity, with no vision for fair development and economic recovery.²⁴ This debt and austerity trap was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with public debt in Egypt,²⁵ Tunisia²⁶ and Jordan²⁷ reaching around 90% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020. In the meantime, Lebanon grapples with an unprecedented financial crisis, with a public debt burden now estimated to be almost twice the size of its economy.²⁸ Tunisia,²⁹ Morocco,³⁰ Egypt and Jordan³¹ have adopted IMF-led structural adjustment programmes since the 1980s. This has been followed more recently by renewed engagement of the IMF in the region within the framework of the G8 Deauville Partnership (launched in 2011) to support 'Arab Countries in Transition' after the Arab Spring,³² thereby adopting a neoliberal model focused on reducing the size of the public sector and seeking private-sector-led growth.³³ The model includes a series of austerity policies that have reduced investment in public education and health services,³⁴ resulting in a gradual deterioration of their quality, to the benefit of private hospitals, schools and universities.³⁵ These measures are in addition to reducing the public wage bill and lifting oil and food subsidies.³⁶ They were also accompanied by trade liberalization, which opened local markets to fierce foreign competition,³⁷ a large wave of privatizations, and a series of private sector incentives such as more flexible labour policies, including easy lay-off procedures, restrictions on freedom of association and weak social security coverage.³⁸ All of this came with a shift in fiscal policies towards consumption tax, a highly regressive income tax, and tax incentives for private businesses.³⁹ Contrary to Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan, Lebanon has never entered a programme with the IMF, and the neoliberal model and austerity measures adopted there for decades were not imposed by the IMF and did not include, for instance, the lifting of subsidies until very recently.⁴⁰

MENA countries have become rentier economies.⁴¹ The banking sectors in Tunisia⁴² and Jordan⁴³ favour a sluggish, non-productive economy: in Tunisia, banks hold a weak loan portfolio and fail to channel resources to the private sector, while Jordanian banks are slowly following the risky Lebanese model by increasingly lending to the state. More than 50% of Jordan's public debt is internal,⁴⁴ with a fixed exchange rate favouring credit-fuelled private consumption,⁴⁵ reliance on imports and a trade deficit.⁴⁶ This is in addition to low taxes on capital accumulation and real estate revenues, which is also the case in Egypt.⁴⁷

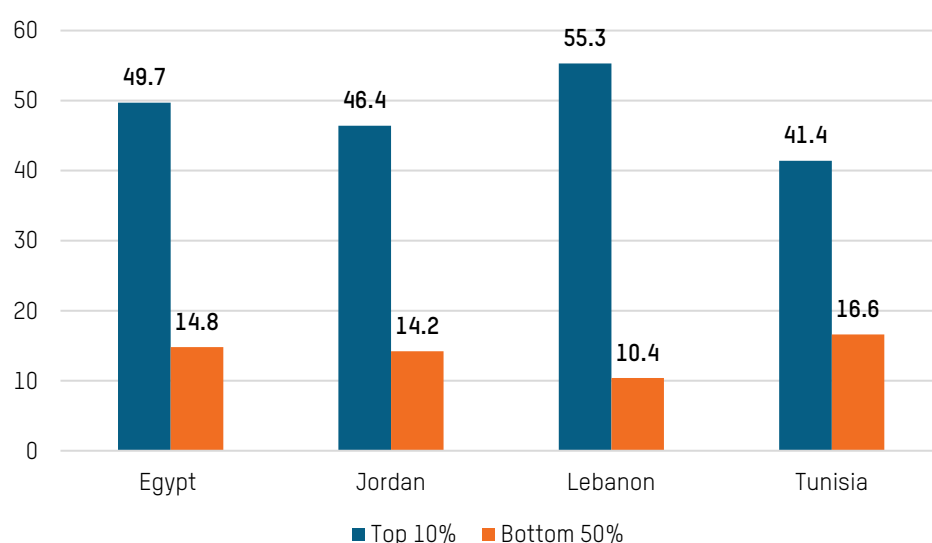
The prevailing model is built around political capture, in a strong alliance between money and power. One of the main illustrations of this phenomenon can be found in the composition of national parliaments. For instance, Egypt's parliamentary commissions are headed mostly by big entrepreneurs elected in 2016.⁴⁸ Similarly, 25% of the Lebanese Parliament elected in 2018 is made up of wealthy entrepreneurs, which is far from representative of the make-up of Lebanese society.⁴⁹ In Tunisia, political parties seem to be financed in large part by wealthy businesspeople,⁵⁰ which leads to policy choices highly influenced by private interest groups at the expense of the public good.⁵¹ Another illustration is bank ownership: in Lebanon, the major shareholders of 18 of the major 20 banks are linked to political elites, and 43% of the sector's assets 'could be attributed to political control'.⁵² State capture⁵³ by private interests has been established by empirical evidence in several countries of the region; it was found to negatively impact job creation and provide privileges in land access, public contracts, taxation and subsidies to politically connected businesses.⁵⁴

Here, we present some of the main features of inequality driven by political capture and the politics of austerity in the MENA region.

1. HIGH INCOME INEQUALITY

According to the World Inequality Database, the share of national income going to the top 10% of the population reached 46.4% in Jordan in 2019, while the share of income going to the bottom 50% was 14.2%. Similarly, the share of income accruing to the top 10% of the population in Egypt reached 49.7%, while the share of income going to the bottom 50% amounted to just 14.8%. In Tunisia, the top 10% received 41.4% of national income while the bottom 50% were left with 16.6%. In Lebanon, the top 10% received 55.3% of national income while the bottom 50% received 10.4% (see Figure 2).⁵⁵

Figure 2: Share of national income in MENA countries (%)



Source: World Inequality Database 2019.

2. WEALTH INEQUALITY

The MENA region is one of the most unequal in the world, with 37 billionaires owning as much wealth as the poorest half of the adult population.⁵⁶ Oxfam has pointed out that 'if Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco had implemented net wealth taxes of just 2% from 2010, this would have generated a total of around \$42bn, more than all IMF lending to Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia between 2012 and 2019'.⁵⁷

3. LACK OF DATA

Countries in the region do not provide access to regular and high-quality household survey and income tax data, which makes it harder for researchers to provide estimates on inequality.⁵⁸ This hinders public debate and leaves room for inaccurate estimates that support misleading dominant narratives, such as the Gini coefficient for Egypt, which has incongruously ranked it as one of the countries with the lowest levels of inequality in the world.⁵⁹

4. LOW SOCIAL SPENDING

Social spending in the MENA region is not aimed at universal social protection, but rather at cash transfers, targeted social assistance, earnings-related social insurance schemes, and food and fuel subsidies, which is not the right approach to reducing inequalities. Less than 40% of MENA populations

are covered by formal social protection systems, with high levels of informal labour.⁶⁰ No more than 40% of the people living in poverty in the region are covered by social safety nets.⁶¹ The region is also characterized by low levels of public expenditure on education and health, while private expenditure on health is relatively large, which indicates limited access to health services for the poorest and most vulnerable people in society. This was emphasized recently by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated inequalities and led to an increased need for health expenditure, often supported by IMF emergency financing operations.⁶²

5. POVERTY, UNEMPLOYMENT AND INFORMAL LABOUR

The region is characterized by high unemployment rates, especially among women and youth,⁶³ and high levels of informality (with the share of employment in the informal economy in total non-agricultural employment reaching around 40% in Tunisia, 50% in Egypt and Lebanon, and 70% in Morocco).⁶⁴ This is in contexts with low wages and a high cost of living. According to official statistics from 2018, around two-thirds of the working population in Jordan (66.1%) earned 500 dinars (USD \$705) or less per month.⁶⁵ This situation has worsened since the pandemic, given the high cost of living and the latest measures taken by government in response to the pandemic, which led to around a 30% decrease in private sector wages and added to widespread job losses in both the formal and informal sectors.⁶⁶

6. THE MOST VULNERABLE BEAR THE COST OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY MEASURES

This is the case throughout the region, from the de facto 'haircut'⁶⁷ on all depositors in Lebanon and the rampant currency devaluation that stripped people of their purchasing power, to the removal of subsidies in Jordan from 1989 to date, which drastically increased living costs and was compensated for by cash assistance programmes targeting the most vulnerable people.⁶⁸

7. UNEVEN SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT

The region is characterized by a widespread phenomenon of urban gentrification and geographic disparities, which provide some of the most noticeable illustrations of the inequality that exists. The contrast between the working-class neighbourhoods of East Amman and the chic neighbourhoods of West Amman is one such example. Such disparities have led to cultural and socio-economic distortions that reflect the impact of dominant narratives on society and the urban fabric.⁶⁹ In Lebanon, economic disparities between the capital and peripheral regions, such as the notoriously deprived city of Tripoli,⁷⁰ reflect a historical development bias towards the centre.⁷¹ Poverty and inequality are found to be higher outside the capital, especially in the north, and in dense suburban pockets.⁷² In Tunisia, in spite of new policies for regional development, geographic disparities are still widening in terms of education, health, poverty, infrastructure and employment, between inland rural areas and the more developed coastal areas where economic power and opportunities are concentrated.⁷³

DOMINANT DISCOURSE

In April 2021, Oxfam organized a regional convening on inequalities in MENA in the form of a three-day workshop with 26 CSOs.⁷⁴ Participants discussed and dissected dominant narratives on inequality in the region, and identified three main sources behind them: (1) the ruling class through state apparatuses; (2) international financial institutions (IFIs); and (3) private capital owners who benefit from neoliberal policies. Participants also shed light on the main elements and characteristics of this narrative. It revolves around promoting austerity and private investment as a driver of economic growth. These are simple messages, easily relayed by mainstream media and the wider public. They are also successfully perpetuated because they are relayed by trusted sources such as political parties in power, religious

figures and non-government organizations. This narrative reduces class consciousness, widens the gap between the middle and working classes, and puts the blame on underprivileged factions of society – especially refugees and migrants – who are deemed responsible for economic crises. It also praises individual endeavour, with a focus on meritocracy, and blames individuals for their failures, while dismissing the role of structural inequalities and cultural capital. It considers socio-economic rights to be secondary, and rights-based demands an extra burden on top of existing crises. It breeds feelings of fear, frustration and guilt, and prevents people from imagining different scenarios. The economy is falsely deemed an area of expertise reserved for technocrats and separate from daily concerns, which then adds to the state evading its responsibilities. Finally, the narrative promotes success stories of neoliberal policies as proof that such policies can help prevent a deepening of these crises.⁷⁵

Drawing on the conclusions of this regional convening, and on interviews⁷⁶ conducted with experts, activists and journalists from Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, in this section we highlight the main assumptions, arguments and beliefs promoted by these narratives, which largely determine the frames of policy debate, by defining what can be perceived as acceptable, realistic or possible to achieve.

1. **‘Rescue’** is a powerful word used to justify debt and austerity policies. It plays on fear, and the threat of worse crises. The public is told repeatedly that rescue governments and rescue programmes based on austerity will save the country from crisis and avoid worse scenarios. This argument of ‘rescue’, ‘recovery’ or ‘restart’ is increasingly used in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also implies, to a large extent, that the original order of things ought to be restored, hence dismissing the substantial inequalities that predated the crises.
2. There is **no alternative to austerity due to high debt-to-GDP ratios**, which do not allow for increased spending on social services or subsidies for basic goods. This is a narrative of ‘never-ending crisis’ that reinforces the debt and austerity trap.
3. This narrative promotes **successful economic growth and development policies, trickle-down economics and poverty alleviation**, thereby dismissing basic socio-economic rights and pushing public awareness away from inequalities. First, there is a focus on economic growth as a main development indicator. Second, there is a philanthropic approach to poverty, be it from political and business figures who promote charitable action through personal or political party foundations, or state programmes that rely on social safety nets, such as cash assistance, instead of universal social protection. Third, there is a trickle-down approach, which favours private sector growth as the key to job creation and income-generation for the entire population. In Egypt, this narrative has further relied on a misleading Gini coefficient, which paints it as one of the most equal countries in the world. The reality is that household surveys are not enough to measure inequality; they fail to capture top incomes, and they need to be combined with other data such as data on income tax (which is often not available) or data on housing prices to give a realistic picture.⁷⁷
4. The public deficit is allegedly caused by an **oversized, corrupt and inefficient public sector**; public wages and social insurance schemes are deemed too costly. This simplistic idea plays on people’s discontent with failing public services and disregards the possibility of structural public sector reforms. It thus allows the ruling elite to move public attention away from the true fiscal burden caused by debt servicing. It also reinforces the ‘public goods trap’,⁷⁸ whereby low provision of public goods leads to reduced demand for such goods and vice versa. According to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, the MENA region is perceived as highly corrupt, with an average score of 39/100.⁷⁹
5. **The state is painted as inherently corrupt and bad at doing business**, so the only viable solution is to achieve growth through the private sector. **This argument is used to justify fiscal incentives to the private sector as well as widespread privatization** of public companies. Private interest groups in Morocco or Lebanon⁸⁰ ‘often call for keeping political power away from economy and finance, and to give a chance to private investors’.⁸¹ This kind of discourse focuses on good governance and rationalized public spending, keeping attention away from the need for economic policies and fiscal reforms that reduce structural inequalities. The negative image of the state in popular culture equates the public with the private, and promotes a fascination with private success and a rejection of the public domain. It should be noted, however, that historically, there is no proof that the state is, by

nature, a failure;⁸² nor does privatization guarantee profitability, especially in low- and middle-income countries, which often lack the proper regulatory frameworks to ensure its success.⁸³

6. When it comes to **public debt and taxation**, the dominant narrative is that in order to maintain growth, the **size of debt does not matter – what matters is the size of the economy**. In this narrative, taxes on income and wealth will chase away investors, so it is better to impose taxes on consumption. This was the approach in the late 1990s and early 2000s when Lebanon started incurring debt in foreign currency.⁸⁴ In Tunisia, people project themselves into the argument that fiscal pressure is unsustainable (purchasing power is going down and taxes are going up), but this argument ends up being used only to justify tax reductions for businesses and wealthy people.
7. **Economic problems and solutions are often politicized and rely on external factors.** In Lebanon and Jordan, for instance, the dominant narrative relies on the idea of financial support and rescue packages from friendly foreign powers. This was indeed the case for decades in Lebanon, where the ruling elite kept receiving a financial support lifeline from international donor conferences, which fostered continued political capture in the country;⁸⁵ and in Jordan, where the promise of aid to come led to clientelist overspending and capture of public resources.⁸⁶ This colonial mindset is also used to blame those same economic problems on geopolitical factors, which are painted as an obstacle to political consensus and economic reforms.

Box 1 explores the dominant narrative in Lebanon. It illustrates some of the arguments and beliefs within the framework of a dominant narrative, which was ingrained in the public imagination and allowed for decades of political capture and inequality, more recently leading to a historic financial meltdown.

Box 1: The myth of the Lebanese miracle⁸⁷

Lebanon's economy, which relies on imports for most of its consumption, has run out of foreign currency to sustain its basic needs. Today, 82% of the population suffer from multidimensional poverty,⁸⁸ paying the price for political capture on an unprecedented scale. They face an out-of-control combination of devaluation and inflation, added to a shortage of fuel, electricity, drugs and medical supplies.⁸⁹

This is the end of the Lebanese miracle, one of the founding myths of the Lebanese socio-economic model. According to the popular myth, a Belgian expert visited Lebanon in its early days and found that 'invisibles' (the tertiary, or service sector) constituted most of the country's income. He allegedly said, 'I don't know what makes the economy work but it's doing very well and I wouldn't advise you to touch it'.⁹⁰ This is at the core of the invisible hand model promoted by Michel Chiha, a politician and banker, and one of the founders of the dominant Lebanese ideology, which became undisputed in the public discourse. Chiha's main contention was that Lebanon is a small country with no natural resources allowing it to develop its real economy, so the only option is the free market and limited state intervention.

The Lebanese economic model has been shaped since independence (1943) by a ruling bourgeoisie of merchants and bankers. It is based on services, with a focus on the banking sector as a main pillar, supported early on by banking secrecy and free movement of capital. It is driven by consumption and not production, which explains why it relies on foreign capital influx and migration as a source of remittances. This model was supported by two main narratives that became ingrained in the national psyche: first, Lebanese people are merchants by nature; and second, they are highly successful as a diaspora.

The mainstream narrative includes a misconception that before the civil war (1975–1990), Lebanon had its golden days of prosperity and was ‘the Switzerland of the Middle East’. This is a deceptive image. Since its creation, Lebanon has been ruled by a political bourgeoisie (or oligarchy⁹¹) of merchants and bankers based in Beirut, surrounded by a wide ‘misery belt’.⁹² A study conducted in the 1960s showed that the richest 4% of the population owned one-third of national income, while 50% had less than 18%. A more recent study covering the period 2005 to 2014 found that ‘the top 1 and 10 percent of the adult population received almost 25 and 55 percent of national income on average, placing Lebanon among the countries with the highest levels of income inequality in the world’.⁹³ In 2020, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) found that 10% of adults in Lebanon owned 70% of personal wealth.⁹⁴

Another myth that has been exposed is that of the fixed Lira rate, which was used in addition to high interest rates to attract foreign capital to Lebanese banks. After the war, the idea was to finance reconstruction through debt and foreign capital influx, which was mainly used to finance a rentier economy and wealth accumulation in the hands of the few, all the while installing a vicious circle of reliance on foreign capital without any investment in a productive economy. A fictional middle class was created and sustained by the fixed currency rate and credit for consumption. ‘*People were drugged with an illusory purchasing power thanks to the overvalued Lira*’, according to economic journalist Sahar Al-Attar, ‘*and wealthy people made crazy money thanks to this system, money that ended up fleeing the country when the crisis hit*’. The system of political capture in Lebanon has been supported for the past 30 years by the international community, with repeated financial rescue conferences in the absence of any real reforms. Over the past decade, geopolitical developments have led to a halt in the influx of foreign capital and support, which in turn has led to the collapse of the system.

IMF DISCOURSE

The IMF plays a significant role in shaping these dominant narratives, whether through its contribution to global economic thought or through its more specific lending conditions and policy advice to countries. Oxfam has previously highlighted the recent shift in the IMF’s stance that there are necessary trade-offs when it comes to economic growth towards recognizing that neoliberal policies have contributed to a growing divide between rich and poor people. Recently it has issued multiple pieces⁹⁵ of research that challenge the dominant economic narrative and link it to inequality. However, Oxfam has also found that the IMF is yet to operationalize such a position, even in its surveillance work (policy advice) which was supposed to be the first step. Based on an analysis of 15 pilots aiming to introduce inequality into the IMF’s Article IV bilateral surveillance, Oxfam found that:

- They included no assessment of the impact of prescribed policies and macro-economic targets on redistribution;
- They did not fully explore alternatives to rapid fiscal and monetary tightening to minimize their impact on poverty and inequality; and
- Their focus remained on mitigating harm done by structural reforms and compensating losers (the most vulnerable groups in society) rather than rethinking the reform approach.⁹⁶

This assessment has yet to be updated, but we expect that this last point, in particular, is unlikely to have changed. The continued focus on fiscal consolidation, coupled with attempts to target mitigation efforts at the poorest populations, lends further legitimacy to the dominant narrative.

Similarly, in an analysis⁹⁷ of IMF loans to Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia, Oxfam found that the austerity measures they promoted contributed to a decrease in social spending and an increase in poverty, with particularly negative impacts on women. While the IMF has made efforts to recognize gender inequality, its policies and programmes are yet to structurally address gender concerns. For instance, the IMF narrative around women’s participation in the labour market, with a focus on private sector development,

fails to address structural determinants of unemployment among women, such as the lack of decent work conditions, low salaries, limited access to safe, reliable and affordable public transportation, unsafe work environments, and the lack of productive job opportunities that match women's educational attainments. At the same time, the IMF promotes a downsizing of the public sector, a sector which provides more favourable working conditions for women. By contrast, the IMF has promoted the goal of increasing spending on public nurseries in Egypt, which is a good example of addressing structural barriers.

A more recent analysis by Oxfam has found that 85% of financial support packages negotiated between the IMF and 85 national governments in response to the COVID-19 crisis encourage, and in some cases condition assistance on, austerity measures (fiscal consolidation) during the recovery period.⁹⁸ Countries with such plans from the MENA region are Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Yemen. Box 2 includes an illustration of this approach from the IMF rapid financing report for Egypt.

Box 2: The IMF financial support package to Egypt in response to the COVID-19 crisis (2020)

Below are excerpts from the IMF staff report⁹⁹ in the context of its COVID-19 financial support package to Egypt, highlighting (with underline) the classic jargon indicative of the neoliberal narrative:

- *Social support for the poor and vulnerable has been expanded, with the coverage of the targeted conditional cash transfer programs Takaful and Karama scaled up to reach additional (...) families.*
- *Support measures must be timely, targeted, transparent, and temporary, focusing on the immediate health spending needs and protecting the most vulnerable. Once recovery is underway, the temporary policies should be reversed, with fiscal policy resuming a primary surplus target of 2 percent of GDP and downward trajectory of public debt.*
- ***The authorities should also soon resume** efforts to broaden structural reforms to support private sector development to achieve strong and inclusive medium-term growth and job creation.*
- *The authorities have indicated their commitment to resuming fiscal consolidation as the crisis abates, which is projected to put public debt on a downward trajectory.*

The shift in the IMF discourse on inequality is encouraging, but is yet to be fully operationalized in practice, and its work at the country level remains to a large extent rooted in the classic neoliberal narrative. In advancing this narrative through its operations, the IMF contributes to legitimizing and reinforcing existing power structures and inequalities globally and within the countries where it operates. Most interviewees for this study noted that national authorities see IMF programmes as an opportunity to push for policies that favour elite interests, and thus often have more neoliberal tendencies than the IMF.¹⁰⁰ Hence the need to further build on the recent shift in IMF discourse in order to support reforms that address structural inequalities in countries of intervention.

It should be noted, however, that in pushing for a neoliberal agenda, the IMF acts in line with its original mandate. The IMF was founded in 1944 to 'avoid repeating the competitive currency devaluations that contributed to the Great Depression of the 1930s. The IMF's primary mission is to ensure the stability of the international monetary system.'¹⁰¹ As a lender of last resort, the IMF takes up the role of enhancing the credibility of countries that rely on private foreign creditors.¹⁰² The ideology of the IMF, influenced by new classical economics and the Washington Consensus,¹⁰³ may evolve over time with the evolution of the institution, but so far this has been found to be a 'fragmented' change, with several paradigm shifts happening at different speeds, at different moments in time.¹⁰⁴

The IMF system also remains a highly unequal one, with imbalances in voting power favouring the global North, which help explain why it has been able to push for neoliberal structural adjustment programmes in low- and middle-income countries since the 1980s.¹⁰⁵ These loans have often ended up lining the pockets of private creditors¹⁰⁶ at the expense of generations of citizens and taxpayers in the global South, who are paying the price for both local and international political capture and inequality. There have been several calls to democratize the World Bank and the IMF.¹⁰⁷ Joseph Stiglitz highlighted, in addition to the issue of voting, the fact that governments are represented at the IMF by finance ministers

and central bankers, who are neither representative of nor accountable to groups with different interests affected by IMF policies within each country. 'We have traced many of the IMF's failings back to the fact that the organization sees the world through the lens of the financial community, putting its interests and ideology above those of others' notes Stiglitz, calling for a broader representation of national interests at the IMF.¹⁰⁸

4 CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE: THE POWER TOOLBOX

The dominant narrative is amplified by mainstream media, which is the main channel for the prevailing discourse. This appears not only through the type of discourse they relay, but also through the political economy of the media industry, from media regulations to media ownership and advertisement. Governments in the MENA region also use other power tools to ensure that one discourse prevails in society, such as exercising political control over trade unions or directing the work of statistical agencies in order to issue results that serve the dominant narrative. This happens within an environment of limited civic space, which in itself is an indicator of government dominance over public discourse in most countries of the region. The CIVICUS Monitor¹⁰⁹ rates national civic space in Egypt as ‘closed’ and in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia as ‘obstructed’. According to the latest Freedom House Global Freedom Scores (see Table 1),¹¹⁰ Egypt and Jordan (for instance) are considered ‘not free’, with respective scores of 18 and 34 out of 100. Morocco and Lebanon are considered ‘partly free’, with respective scores of 47 and 43. And finally, Tunisia is considered ‘free’, with a score of 71. When it comes to Internet Freedom Scores, Egypt scores 26 out of 100 (‘not free’) and the other four countries score ‘partly free’, with Jordan at 47, Lebanon 51, Morocco 53, and Tunisia 63.

Table 1: Freedom scores by country

	Global freedom scores	Internet freedom scores
<i>Egypt</i>	Not free	Not free
<i>Jordan</i>	Not free	Partly free
<i>Lebanon</i>	Partly free	Partly free
<i>Morocco</i>	Partly free	Partly free
<i>Tunisia</i>	Free	Partly Free

Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021*.

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MEDIA: OWNERSHIP, FUNDING AND REGULATION

The issue of media concentration in the hands of the elite is not specific to the MENA region. According to a recent study on media concentration and ownership around the world, ‘governments and public institutions own about one third of the world’s major media organizations, including telecom. Large institutional financial firms own another third. And major individual and family ownership covers the remaining third.’¹¹¹

The Media Ownership Monitor¹¹² (MOM), launched by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), has examined the media ownership and regulation landscape of 16 countries around the world, including Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. The project invites readers to reflect on why media ownership matters: ‘Mass media influences how facts are viewed and debated in a society, contributing to crafting its public opinion. (...) How can people evaluate the reliability of information, if they don’t know who provides it? How can journalists work properly, if they don’t know who controls the company they work for?’

MOM found a high concentration of media ownership and political affiliation. Lebanon has the highest rate of political affiliation among the 16 countries examined, with 29 outlets out of 37 (78.4%) owned by the

state, political parties or individual politicians. These account for the entirety of TV viewership (with TV remaining by far the number one source of information),¹¹³ and for 93.5% of print readership, among others. The most popular media outlets in Lebanon are concentrated in the hands of eight families with political interests.¹¹⁴ While Tunisia witnessed a significant diversification of the media landscape after the revolution (2010–11), six out of the 10 TV stations analysed by MOM have a direct or indirect link with a political party or politician, with TV being the form of media with the highest audience rates.¹¹⁵ Box 3 shows how such affiliations may lead to the dominance of the most influential political parties over political airtime. In Morocco, despite efforts at diversification, the media sector remains in large part under the control of the elite.¹¹⁶ In Egypt, the most popular national media outlets across all sectors were found to be concentrated in the hands of the state and ‘a few wealthy owners loyal to the regime and with close ties to the former president Hosni Mubarak’.¹¹⁷ Although online media appear to be more diverse than traditional outlets, the most popular platforms are digital versions of existing media outlets connected to influential political and business figures.¹¹⁸

Box 3: Who dominates Tunisian airtime?

A 2017 study by the Tunisian independent authority for audio-visual communication (HAICA) shows that the government and major political parties take up most of the political airtime on TV and radio. Government officials are given 32% of airtime, while parties in Parliament take up 56%. This leaves CSOs and smaller parties with around 10% of airtime.¹¹⁹ Amine Bouzaiene notes that ‘*the same experts and journalistic figures keep appearing in the media and are generally neoliberals who are considered as authorities on the economy. The debate is made very technical, so people cannot keep up. Neoliberal ideas (such as the fact that fiscal pressure on small business is causing unemployment) are hammered all day. They enter popular consciousness.*’¹²⁰ Some independent media outlets such as Nawaat ou Inkyfada, in addition to a number of cooperative radio stations (especially outside of the capital), have managed to produce alternative content covering living conditions such as water scarcity in the regions, and issues of corruption or parliamentary performance.¹²¹

The high concentration of audiences in the four countries shows the lack of effective regulatory safeguards against media control and concentration of media ownership, especially in Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco. It also highlights the absence of data on the financial revenues of media companies, which risks favouring media concentration and hinders the plurality and diversity of the media scene. Although Tunisian law includes specific provisions on media concentration, prohibiting (for example) the combining of political responsibility and ownership of an audio-visual media outlet, there is no transparency when it comes to media funding. This has led to concerns about the unknown sources of funding of some media outlets that manage to survive with a strikingly small share of the advertising market.¹²² Added to this is an economic context that raises questions about the capacity of media outlets to rely solely on advertising income.¹²³ Similarly, Morocco lacks transparency when it comes to the distribution of state subsidies and advertising or private advertising among media outlets.¹²⁴ In Egypt, there is also limited transparency and access to information on audience data, company registry and financial information.¹²⁵ Box 4 explores the sources of advertising income for Lebanese TV companies and their link with the economic model and its prevailing narrative.

Box 4: The Lebanese miracle, promoted by the banking sector

When it comes to media financing, interviews with Lebanese economic journalists paint a similar picture.¹²⁶ The local advertising market does not support the existence of nine TV stations. After facing a small market with a lack of credible data on viewership, foreign advertisers finally started to withdraw from Lebanon in 2015–2016.¹²⁷ Lebanese TV companies generally seem to rely on sources of funding that resemble the structure of the Lebanese economy: on the one hand foreign investment, and on the other, the local advertising market for commerce (especially the car industry), banking and real estate – that is, sectors that benefit from the Lebanese rentier economic model. These sources of financing come with their own conditionalities, whether strictly political or socio-economic by nature. It is no surprise, therefore, that the media would keep praising these three sectors as a point of national pride – that is, what was lodged until recently in the collective psyche as the ‘Lebanese miracle’ (see Box 1).¹²⁸ For instance, Lebanese banks are still putting out ads and sponsoring talk shows, despite the country’s enormous financial crisis, which is imposing *de facto* capital controls on their clients. This points to a strong will among the powerful elites to keep the narrative on their side.

CIVIC SPACE AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE EXAMPLE OF JORDAN

Recent studies have shown that youth in the MENA region are increasingly using social media to access information.¹²⁹ According to the Arab Youth Survey,¹³⁰ 61% of MENA youth reported using social media as their main source of news in 2021. National authorities are aware of the disruptive potential of this media and, in countries such as Egypt and Jordan, have resorted to cybercrime laws to restrict and criminalize free speech.¹³¹

In Jordan, which is experiencing shrinking civic space¹³² and where there is substantial political control over the media, there is little room for public debate, and alternative voices have limited capacity to develop counter-narratives and to present political and socio-economic alternatives to the public. However, as Jordan has the highest internet penetration rate in the region,¹³³ social media platforms have become the go-to place for voicing opinions and social demands.¹³⁴ In February 2018, as Jordanians took to the streets to protest against the lifting of bread subsidies and a tax increase on 164 commodities, demonstrations evolved into daily livestream debates on Facebook, in the absence of local media coverage.¹³⁵ The main campaigns for social demands are also now on social media.¹³⁶ One of the biggest examples is the wave of online solidarity with the teachers’ movement¹³⁷ after the General Prosecutor ordered a shutdown of their syndicate and the police arrested 13 of its board members in July 2020.¹³⁸

The authorities in Jordan have dealt with the social media phenomenon in different ways. A soft approach consists of letting people decompress by expressing their opinions in the virtual sphere, as long as they do not organize themselves offline. Personalities who get arrested for their online views are usually those who are active on the ground or have a large following on social media – that is, those who are considered to have a real influence with their discourse.¹³⁹ A harder-line approach has consisted of resorting to the law on electronic crimes, which allows the authorities to arrest a person under investigation, and has become a means to enforce self-censure.¹⁴⁰

Since the 2018 protests in Jordan,¹⁴¹ the authorities have started blocking online live-streaming services during demonstrations, as verified by the Open Observatory of Network Interference.¹⁴² This has been coupled with measures allowing further restriction of freedoms under the emergency law of 17 March 2020 and the activation of Defence Law No. 13 of 1992 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴³ Such measures were taken in 2021, when protests broke out in reaction to curfew measures and to the death of COVID-19 patients for lack of oxygen in the Salt public hospital,¹⁴⁴ as well as in 2020 during the teachers’ union protests.¹⁴⁵

CIVIC SPACE AND TRADE UNIONS: LEBANON, MOROCCO, TUNISIA

Labour movements constitute a major counter-power to the ruling elite and are key to reducing inequalities.¹⁴⁶ They are central to building a counter-narrative to the neoliberal discourse. *'A job is a right, you pack of thieves'* was a slogan chanted by Tunisian workers long before the 2011 uprising,¹⁴⁷ and labour movements played a crucial role in the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and later Sudan.¹⁴⁸ Conscious of the power of unions to shape the narrative and foster structural socio-economic change, political leaders across the MENA region resort to the same toolbox of policies and tactics to dismantle this potent counter-power. The International Trade Union Confederation (IUTC) Global Rights Index 2021¹⁴⁹ classifies MENA as the worst region in the world for working people, with systematic violations of labour rights. This includes the exclusion of workers from labour protections, the dismantling of independent unions, and the prosecution and sentencing of workers participating in strikes.

In Lebanon, the economic model has limited the size of productive sectors as well as the activity rate of the working-age population. The small size of enterprises has limited workers' capacity to organize. Migrant and informal labour, which account for 40% of the labour force, are also unorganized. Unfavourable regulations that restrict the right to organize and to strike add to these limitations.¹⁵⁰ The Lebanese trade union GCWL (General Confederation of Workers in Lebanon) includes 400 trade unions that represent only 6% of the labour force. It faces issues of undemocratic structural organization that leaves room for political control. A flagrant example of how this affects the public narrative is the 2011 wage hike, when the GCWL rejected the substantial minimum wage increase proposed by the progressive Minister of Labour, Charbel Nahas, and chose to side with the demands of the business associations supported by the Prime Minister, Najib Mikati.¹⁵¹

Much like Lebanon, Morocco has 'low union density', with workers' confederations representing a very limited proportion of total workers. This can be explained by the proliferation of unions, each with a different party allegiance. A number of seats in the upper chamber of Parliament are reserved for trade union representatives, which has led political parties to create new trade unions in order to obtain more parliamentary seats.¹⁵² The union base is also weak due to widespread informal labour,¹⁵³ with more than half of wage earners working in the informal sector.¹⁵⁴ This gap in representation is filled by grassroots movements and coordination committees,¹⁵⁵ such as the National Coordination Committee for Contracted Teachers, who are not represented by the traditional teachers' unions. They have resorted to strikes and protests to voice their demands because of the government's refusal to negotiate with them.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, although freedom of association is guaranteed by the Constitution, workers can face dismissal for participating in strike actions, and Article 288 of the Penal Code penalizes workers and unions involved in non-authorized strikes.¹⁵⁷

Tunisia presents an exceptional case of a strong workers' union in the MENA region, the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union). With a large base of unionized workers, UGTT constitutes an effective counter-power. It was an historical actor in the decolonization process and played a decisive role in the 2011 revolution. It was also part of the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 for its vital role in the success of the national dialogue process and political transition after the revolution.¹⁵⁸ More recently, UGTT played a key role in blocking a wave of widespread privatizations¹⁵⁹ and remains one of the main interlocutors of government in negotiations around economic policies and austerity measures.¹⁶⁰ Although criticized for its links to the establishment from independence to date, the UGTT has managed to maintain 'a relatively high level of financial, political, and organizational autonomy',¹⁶¹ and continues to play the role of democratic watchdog. It has, for example, warned against the threat to democracy and violation of the Constitution after President Saïed's power grab,¹⁶² and has proposed a roadmap for political transition,¹⁶³ including the formation of a small and homogeneous rescue government with a specific mission to tackle the urgent financial and socio-economic needs of the country.¹⁶⁴

5 COUNTER-NARRATIVES: HOW GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS ARE SEEKING TO BUILD A NEW DISCOURSE

‘Emancipatory politics always consists in making seem possible precisely that which, from within the situation, is declared to be impossible.’

Alain Badiou¹⁶⁵

In a region in want of democracy, political alternation and civic space, civil society and independent media strive to fill an important gap in public discourse and are constantly reflecting on how to influence a collective psyche shaped by decades of political capture. Their first challenge is to build a nuanced message that remains accessible to the public, all the while creating hope in an alternative social model. Their second challenge is to get this message through, despite shrinking civic space and limited access to mainstream media.

We now explore the difficulties of proposing a new discourse that challenges dominant narratives which are often deeply rooted in the collective psyche, and highlight the experience of a number of journalists and CSOs who are trying to bring about an alternative economic narrative in the MENA region. These illustrations are not meant to be exhaustive, but they can help us develop a deeper understanding of the obstacles and opportunities around how this nascent counter-narrative can build momentum.

ELEVATING PUBLIC DEBATE: REASON VERSUS EMOTION

Civil society activists are aware of the cultural and psychological components of the prevailing narrative, which not only supports a system of high inequalities, but is in turn promoted by this system and its institutions, including schools and universities, academia and mainstream media. The dominant worldview is accompanied by such a strong and asserted power imbalance that most people seem to have lost all hope for change, and all faith in the possibility of achieving change. From the experience of many civil society actors across the MENA region, we have learned that people fear the unknown, often seek to secure their interests or minimal safety within the existing system, and need a strong alternative project they can trust. It is not enough to debunk the dominant discourse and denounce the system and its beneficiaries; there is also a need to provide an alternative that people can adopt and believe in.

According to Amy Ekdawi, co-director of the Arab Watch Coalition, there seems to be a predominant demagogic approach to public debate in the MENA region, which is fostered by the lack of civic space, political control over the media, and more generally a culture and education system that do not breed nuance or critical thinking.¹⁶⁶ The public is not used to nuanced political and socio-economic debates that produce alternatives; they are used to a populist discourse that only aims to criticize. Those who seek to nuance the debate by proposing evidence-based policy alternatives face a big challenge because they go against the general trend and have no strong interest groups behind their demands. At the same time, technical discourse is often used by elites to exclude people from the debate, and actors seeking to

shift the narrative need to beware of falling into this trap, ensuring that their discourse is both accessible and inclusive.

In Egypt, our interviewees said that there seemed to be a widespread culture of gratitude towards the state: *'People didn't know they had rights. They thought the state is kind enough to provide them with development services.'*¹⁶⁷ This perception is exacerbated by the fact that 70% of the population live in poverty,¹⁶⁸ with limited access to education, and that the middle class is a minority that is fading away and seeing its income progressively lose value. During the revolution, activists worked on changing that idea and adopting a rights-based discourse,¹⁶⁹ but since then, Egypt has suffered a major setback to freedom of speech, and this has affected the capacity of grassroots movements to keep pushing for a new discourse.

In Lebanon, it is only when disaster struck that more people started to listen to the counter-narrative. The new public salary scale adopted in 2017 was accused of causing the financial crisis. A minority of economists, journalists and activists kept repeating that the facts show there is a structural crisis in the economy, expressed by a deficit in the balance of payments, and that the public deficit is mainly due to high levels of debt servicing, and not to the size of the public sector. They also warned against dangerous measures taken by Central Bank, especially the 'financial engineerings' of 2016,¹⁷⁰ which cost the Lebanese Central Bank no less than \$14bn¹⁷¹ in an attempt to uplift the balance sheets of Lebanese banks, and which was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.¹⁷² But this counter-discourse was all too technical and hard to believe in because it challenged a long-held myth ingrained in the collective psyche. People only started to pay attention to this counter-narrative, relying on numbers and facts, when the financial collapse became a reality and turned their lives upside down.¹⁷³

During Oxfam's regional convening on inequalities, CSO representatives from across the region agreed on the need to promote an alternative narrative. Box 5 lists the characteristics of this alternative narrative that were discussed and agreed upon.

Box 5: Characteristics of an alternative narrative proposed by CSOs in the MENA region

- Adopting a simple, clearer and less technical narrative or discourse.
- Adopting a rights-based approach: reinforcing citizenship and approaching the economic model as a policy choice, and not as a fated technical reality.
- Reformulating the problematic and focusing on accountability: there is wealth but it is not distributed fairly; linking the problem to its historical development; linking policies with their impact on living conditions; holding decision makers accountable for policy failures; and highlighting the responsibility of wealthy individuals, companies and international institutions.
- Channelling anger and promoting readiness to act (instead of distance or indifference) and hope (instead of hopelessness and powerlessness), encouraging people to act and participate in building an alternative, and building groups and alliances to face their fears.
- Proposing an alternative: highlighting solutions and alternatives; giving examples of successful alternatives from history.
- Target audience: the middle and working classes (rich people are not a priority audience), reached through youth, alternative media, civic spaces, grassroots movements and existing social structures, and mainstream media.

BUILDING A NEW CULTURE: CIVIL SOCIETY VOICES FROM NORTH AFRICA

In Tunisia, counter-narratives are mainly proposed by civil society actors rather than opposition parties, but they are still not able to compete with the dominant narrative of the ruling elite when it comes to

media presence and organized capacity. Alternative voices find their place on social media, online independent media such as [Nawaat](#) and [Inkyfada](#), and a number of local radios operating outside the capital.¹⁷⁴ The organization [Al Bawsala](#) monitors different public institutions with a focus on fiscal policies. Through the [Marsad Budget](#) project, it advocates for transparency and inclusiveness in the budgetary process and works to promote an economic narrative based on solidarity and social justice, proposing an alternative model of budgetary policies based on socio-economic rights. Al Bawsala does not seek to present law proposals and push for their adoption; its main approach is to work over the long term by seeking to influence public debate and the prevailing discourse, so as to change the dominant culture, steering it away from the increasingly strong focus on individualism and competition.¹⁷⁵ Oxfam has recently partnered with Al Bawsala and other organizations in Tunisia to work on a joint campaign for social and fiscal justice.

In Morocco, civil society groups struggle to access mainstream media and influence public debate; they rely mainly on social media and alternative online media. [ATTAC](#) is a Moroccan organization that tackles issues of inequality and is a member of the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt ([CADTM](#)). It seeks to showcase the nefarious effects of neoliberal policies, with a focus on raising awareness, organizing protests and proposing an alternative development model. Its general position is to boycott IFIs, and it has established a group of trade unions and CSOs who reject austerity policies and seek to monitor and audit national debt to identify who benefits from it. *'In ATTAC we believe that the alternative will not come from Egypt or Lebanon or Tunisia or Morocco alone. We believe in a regional alternative because our problems are one and our alternative project should be one.'*¹⁷⁶

The North African Network for Food Sovereignty ([Siyada](#)) is a network that tackles the problems of small-scale food producers. It is trying to work on a new narrative for the region, built around food sovereignty: *'Our aim is to be the voice of small food producers and to promote the narrative of emancipation, freeing ourselves from multinational companies who trade food, seeds, and destroy the environment. We work on issues of protecting native seeds, protecting produce and ecofeminism.'*¹⁷⁷

Table 2 presents our main findings related to the obstacles, opportunities and communication tools used by these civil society actors who seek to influence public debate and propose an alternative socio-economic narrative.

Table 2: Alternative narratives – obstacles, opportunities and communication tools

Obstacles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elite control of mainstream media, with limited access to civil society, even in Tunisia where media access and civic space are notably more favourable. • Limited capacity: civil society activists and workers remain a minority group. The same few activists are often working on many cases; they are overloaded. • Developing bottom-up alternatives takes time – it is a long-term endeavour. • Limited political education and awareness, and general fear among people of counter-narratives that are often perceived as nihilist. • Scepticism and defeatism: many people, including social movements, are often afraid to venture onto political ground, and believe there is no solution. They are afraid to ask for structural change and prefer to stick to narrow social demands.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the shortcomings of the neoliberal model and paved the way for a potential shift in narratives, which can be further built upon. • The need and potential for collective action and cooperation among local, regional and international networks of CSOs and trade unions. (Example of regional cooperation: experiences of debt monitoring in Latin America.) • In Tunisia, counter-narratives benefit from a context of considerable freedom of speech, access to alternative online media, and a strong

	<p>presence on social media.¹⁷⁸ There are also some opportunities to appear on mainstream media, especially after issuing positions or reports, and talk show hosts provide a space to relay the message without necessarily framing the discussion from a neoliberal perspective. This alternative discourse is generally well-received by public opinion, even if there remain people who cannot accept ideas outside of the dominant discourse.</p>
Communication approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term cultural approach to influencing public narratives by raising public awareness on socio-economic issues and neoliberal policies. • Seeking to change the narrative by presenting socio-economic alternatives that people can believe in. • Working with people at the grassroots level.
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relying on evidence-based research to highlight the failures of neoliberal policies and propose alternatives (such as this study on small loans for households). • Translating publications that include a critical analysis of neoliberal policies (such as this book on World Bank dominance). • Analysing public debt.¹⁷⁹
Communications products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Producing communications materials that make technical subjects more accessible to the public, e.g. using videos, retro-gaming, interactive visuals. • Illustrating and humanizing budget numbers so that people can relate to their meaning and their magnitude. • Considering the possibility of resorting to public shaming of politicians involved in political capture (this is a recent effort). • Movies and documentaries¹⁸⁰ showcasing (for instance) the impact of neoliberal policies on the climate and socio-economic conditions. • Statements and position papers, such as this statement by Siyada on the crisis of 'capitalistic exploitation of people and nature' in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes a call for action through organized activism.
Campaigns and outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training journalists to draw them to a new way of thinking and a new perspective on policy issues. • Advocacy campaigns such as the recent campaign by Al Bawsala entitled Covid kills, but austerity does more so. • Awareness-raising activities in universities and municipal observatories on fiscal justice. • Conferences and webinars (such as this conference on debt violence and its impact on populations). • Organizing protest movements against neoliberal austerity policies (supporting the people who have been harmed by these policies to organize).

STANDING UP TO THE MYTH: LEBANESE ECONOMIC JOURNALISTS

There are some notable experiences of journalists and publications that have embarked on a mission to denounce the myth of the Lebanese miracle and the political economy behind it. They have encountered public opinion that does not want to hear a counter-narrative and has been subdued by the general discourse promoted by the mainstream media owned and financed by the political and economic elite. As

for decision makers, they cast the blame on each other, hiding behind the pretext of the confessional system.¹⁸¹

Journalists have faced varying levels of direct or indirect pressure to refrain from expressing certain opinions or to withhold from publishing key studies or facts that expose the system. When denouncing dangerous monetary policies such as the fixed Lira rate, or warning of the unsustainability of the Lebanese economic model, economic experts and journalists were accused of 'being communists' or promoting a discourse that served a hidden political agenda seeking to undermine public confidence in the Lebanese economy.¹⁸² They were also told they had a responsibility as journalists not to undermine trust in the Lebanese financial system, especially in the last two to three years leading up to the financial collapse.¹⁸³

Recently, there seems to be more readiness among certain categories of people to listen to a discourse outside of the ideological box, and to accept criticism of banks, debt or consumption. Mohammad Zbeeb notes that this started around 2011 when Lebanese society was divided between populist and non-populist discourse, and when refugees were depicted as the cause of the crisis: *'We debunked this claim, and took it as an opportunity to denounce the system. This means some social groups were starting to feel the effects of the crisis.'*¹⁸⁴ Jad Ghosn notes that people's interest in a new economic discourse seemed to increase between 2015 and 2018, when economic stagnation also increased his viewership, giving as an example the success of his [report](#) on the history of Lebanese indebtedness in foreign currency: *'The crisis helped me to deconstruct narratives and common beliefs. We saw the biggest growth in interest as of October 2019, when the crisis of these narratives and those who carried them was exacerbated.'*¹⁸⁵

The experience of *Al Akhbar* newspaper's economic issue is a notable one, because it provided the public with key data with which to debunk the dominant narrative, and produced content that was relayed by activists and protest groups who adopted the new socio-economic narrative it proposed. Zbeeb founded the economic issue in 2018 when the financial collapse was imminent. *'The aim was to document this collapse, warn the public and put effort to clarify this subject to people who were interested. What drew me to this experience is working on this narrative. We wanted to propose a different kind of economic journalism, with a scientific characteristic, that clarifies the reasons and consequences of the collapse, with the hope of changing the priorities of the ruling powers or to push towards the creation of a political movement with a structural economic reform project.'*¹⁸⁶

Jad Ghosn highlights that one of the main obstacles to treating socio-economic issues in-depth on TV is the short report format: *'TV in general is a media which trivializes complex issues, the concern being to keep the news brief and simple. However, narratives have to do with memory and words carry a lot of meaning, emotions, connotations, that are very hard to deconstruct and deal with from a critical perspective in a short report format.'* Ghosn introduced aesthetic elements (music, sound, text, graphics) to support his message and worked on the storyline of his reports. He gradually acquired airtime to give an analytical perspective on the news and started to introduce longer reports (around five minutes) and resorted to archives to tell stories with their historical background. Ghosn has even launched his own [YouTube channel](#), where he provides lengthier political and socio-economic analysis and invites on guests who help debunk the dominant narrative.

6 RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE: HOW TO SHIFT PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL INEQUALITY

'Work to change the narrative... is about shifting consciousness and values over the long term. It is not just about finding the right messaging but is fundamentally about the "battle of big ideas".'

Oxfam Inequality Toolkit, 2019

The ruling class in the MENA region has built a socio-economic model that serves the private interests of a small network of extractive elites from political and business circles, and has also intentionally promoted a public narrative that supports this model. Policies centred around debt and austerity, which lead to high levels of poverty and inequality across the region, have been supported by a media apparatus controlled by governments, politicians and private interests who benefit from the system. This control over mainstream media through ownership and financing – but also through a regulatory framework that favours media concentration in the hands of the few and restricts freedom of expression – has shaped the culture in a way that prevents people from gaining awareness of political capture and reduces political resistance.

However, alternatives do exist, and civil society actors across the region are trying to raise their voices to demand economic justice and propose alternative ways to achieve it. Working on narrative change means working on changing the prevailing 'truth regime', as well as people's values, myths and beliefs, and 'everyday thinking'.¹⁸⁷ These frame the socio-economic debate and predetermine which policy options are accepted as possible and legitimate, and which are not.

Below we propose a systemic approach that change actors – from grassroots movements, to CSOs, activists and influencers – can adopt to deconstruct the dominant narrative and promote a viable counter-narrative, based on three pillars: (1) how to analyse narratives from a political capture perspective; (2) how to build a new discourse that can be well received by ordinary people; and (3) how to create an enabling environment for counter-narratives and structural change.

DECONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE: HOW TO ANALYSE DISCOURSE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF POLITICAL CAPTURE

The first step in a narrative shift is to deconstruct the dominant narrative. This includes understanding the role it plays in political capture and unveiling the interest networks that benefit from it, analysing the media and discourse tools that are used to convey this narrative, and debunking the arguments advanced in its favour.

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NARRATIVES

A key to understanding dominant narratives is to understand the political economy behind them and clarify their links to political capture. This is especially true in the MENA region, which suffers from some of the highest levels of inequality in the world. It is important to determine who benefits from neoliberal

policies based on debt and austerity, and how. This is important not only for activists to be able to debunk the dominant narrative, but also to understand the power structures they are facing and to build their strategy accordingly. Oxfam has developed useful tools for political economy analysis ([How Politics and Economics Intersect: A simple guide to conducting political economy and context analysis](#)) and the analysis of power in relation to dominant narratives ([The Capture Phenomenon: Unmasking Power – Guidelines For the Analysis of Public Policy Capture and its Effect on Inequality](#)), which provides guidelines for conducting case studies on political capture and unmasking extractive elite networks.

FRAME AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The neoliberal narrative comes with its own vocabulary – its semantic field that needs to be well-understood and deconstructed by actors of change. This can add to a deeper sociological approach using frame analysis¹⁸⁸ to examine how different media deliver the news and select facts based on a specific worldview. The website [Policy Power Tools](#) provides a series of methodology papers on how to analyse public discourse and put it into the right political and ideological context. Such tools can serve as the basis for developing and disseminating further tools and case studies illustrating this approach. These analyses should also include an intersectional angle, which highlights links between neoliberal and patriarchal discourse, with a clear understanding of why these are one and the same. This can be accompanied by an analysis of the format and the messengers. The person who delivers the message is as important as the message itself; talk shows across the MENA region can present a striking example of gender imbalance when it comes to the categories of personalities invited and considered to be authorities on politics and socio-economics. As seen in Tunisia, CSOs can organize training and seminars for journalists in order to introduce a more critical reading of the dominant discourse and a better understanding of the logic and semantics of the counter-narrative.

FACTS VS FICTION: A SET OF ARGUMENTS TO DEBUNK THE MYTH

This report has identified key myths and arguments used as pillars of the dominant narrative, as well as the main arguments used to counter them based on either facts and data or by proposing alternative explanations of facts and data. This can be used as a starting point for civil society actors to develop their own ‘debunking toolkit’ tailored to each country. This toolkit can serve both as a tool to develop public messaging and as a tool to train activists and journalists to develop a better understanding of socio-economic issues in relation to political capture and inequality.

RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE: HOW TO BUILD A NEW DISCOURSE

One reaches a strong counter-narrative when the work on narrative shift goes past the mere deconstruction of the dominant narrative and arrives at the level of promotion of a different discourse, a different frame of thought. As experience shows, this consists of a long-term effort to change the culture and set the ground for a new mentality, a new social contract with a new perspective on socio-economic rights.

EXPLORING HOW CSOS ADD VALUE TO THE CONVERSATION AROUND ALTERNATIVES

Many CSOs across the region have come to the conclusion that a viable alternative discourse should be built on a viable socio-economic alternative that people can adopt and believe in. Many are also working on presenting alternative solutions to the austerity approach. This is a formidable task, which merits an in-depth debate among civil society actors in each country and more generally at the regional level. The

reason is that the natural role of civil society, be it grassroots movements, CSOs or others, revolves around voicing socio-economic demands, and the natural role of political parties is to propose alternative models, programmes or solutions. However, in the presence of a true crisis of civic space and political participation across the region, civil society actors are called to fill a major gap, and this comes both with its opportunities and challenges. It merits an effort to discuss and find answers to the following questions: is it the role of CSOs to provide an alternative? If yes, what kind of alternative? This could mean specific economic solutions, reform proposals, socio-economic programmes, economic visions, general guidelines of what is acceptable and what is not, etc. Also, do CSOs have enough access to information and the internal capacity to develop an alternative? What is the role of CSOs, what distinguishes them from other social actors such as grassroots movements, trade unions, political parties or academia, and how can different change actors complement each other? It is important to have a clear understanding of the role and function of CSOs in effecting social and narrative change, in the process of developing an alternative discourse.

BUILDING A NEW DISCOURSE

[Oxfam's Inequality Toolkit](#) proposes the following 'tips' for teams interested in narrative change work:

1. Research and test new frames that can help transform public understanding about inequality.
2. Become a catalyst organization and coordinate a narrative change strategy around inequality with others.
3. Recruit the best messengers and stay 'on message'.

CSOs in the MENA region have identified the need to introduce a simple discourse that can be well-received, well-understood and carried forward by ordinary people. There is a need to define clear new messages, a new perspective in approaching each topic, and describe every fact. This includes building a new semantic field, a new vocabulary (expressions, buzzwords) for a new narrative which speaks to the public imagination and creates a new field of possibilities in the collective psyche. The experience of gender mainstreaming discourse and the lessons learned from it can be beneficial here. It would be advisable to test the proposed frames and messages with different groups and categories of people, to see how they are received and interpreted, and adjust them accordingly.

There is also a need to harmonize the general discourse among different activists, movements and organizations working towards the same narrative shift. The strength of dominant narratives is that they rely on a simple message repeated by all. Similarly, narrative change work requires a concerted effort in order to build one simple message that is repeated by all – that is, all involved CSOs and their partners for social change, from online activists, to economists, journalists, union leaders, youth movements and others. Different networks and coalitions working on different policy issues can find a common frame that supports their narrative shift. **'The more people telling a similar story well, the more powerful that story is likely to be.'**¹⁸⁹

Finally, it is important to identify the main target audience for these messages and the main influencing voices that are considered to be legitimate to deliver it. It is true that part of changing the narrative is seeking to change the mentality that gives authority to certain patriarchal or power figures, but there can be parallel work done on promoting new faces and authority figures on the one hand, and delivering the message through existing mainstream influencers on the other. Such work can benefit substantially from outreach to journalists and proposing training, seminars, fellowships or roundtable discussions to raise their knowledge and awareness of the new narrative.

CHALLENGING TRUTH REGIMES AND WIDENING THE REALM OF THE POSSIBLE

Another key element is to find a strong emotional hook that could help people internalize the new narrative – for instance, by linking macro-economic issues to their illustrations in people's daily lived

experiences. This can be done through alliances with alternative media and journalists willing to tell the personal stories and show the different faces of inequality. It is also important to reduce fear of change and fear of the unknown, and create a strong, credible belief that change is possible. The domino effect of the Tunisian uprisings is one example that illustrates how people are willing to adopt a new narrative when they see hope for change. Another illustration is the widespread youth mobilization on climate change around a narrative of urgency and existential threat, coupled with the rights of future generations.¹⁹⁰ Oxfam has put together an anthology of perspectives from activists working on narrative shifts in different regions, which can provide inspiration (*Narrative Power and Collective Action*, [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)).

WORKING ON LONG-TERM CULTURAL CHANGE

The idea is to work on long-term cultural change, to lay the groundwork for future momentum for a transformative shift to occur. This relies on efforts around education, awareness-raising, work with young generations on civic, political and socio-economic education, and striving to build a new cultural feel (the dream, the emotional hook, the *zeitgeist* of the future). This shifts the focus of the communication and influencing approach from *ad hoc* policy issues to ‘narrative leverage points’¹⁹¹ that challenge dominant beliefs and their ‘truth regime’.

STATISTICS

Civil society could benefit from developing a common position on multi-dimensional, intersectional inequality indicators and statistical methodology that constitutes the new norm and shifts the focus from poverty-focused measurements. The work of Thomas Piketty and his team on the [World Inequality Database](#) and Oxfam’s [Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index](#) and [Multidimensional Inequality Framework and Toolkit](#) provide a substantial starting point. This work can be supported by perception surveys and studies that bring to the surface qualitative aspects that are not captured by traditional indicators (such as this [Oxfam study on multidimensional inequalities in Mexico City](#)), and by advocacy work to push for these new perspectives and measures to be adopted by national statistics agencies and policy making spaces, as a first step towards broadening the scope of the debate. It is essential to target such advocacy work not only at national policy makers, but also at international organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF. This work could benefit from the potential support of international organizations with a social mandate such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

RECLAIMING POWER: CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE

In order to have a higher chance of success, we should bear in mind that counter-narratives require a friendly civic space and media environment that allow for a new discourse to be heard. It is crucial to denounce the ‘power toolbox’ used by elites to maintain their control of the public discourse, and to seek to shift the real balance of power. Activists could benefit from a deeper understanding of the political economy and regulatory frameworks that govern their field of expression, and include them in their general messaging, by shedding light on the legal and regulatory frameworks for media ownership, media financing and electoral financing.¹⁹² They could also benefit from understanding the legal and regulatory frameworks on freedom of speech (publication laws, electronic publication laws and criminal codes), freedom of assembly and labour rights (ratification of relevant ILO conventions, protection of union workers, the right to form unions, the right to strike).

Moreover, people will only adopt a narrative if it reaches them, and if it is presented to them by people who inspire a certain level of trust and authority. The latter comes from a long-term effort to build true

social counter-powers and creating cracks in the system that will incrementally allow counter-narratives to reach the wider public and make a difference.

WALK THE TALK: DEVELOP A FIELD PRESENCE THAT MATTERS

Bringing about structural change includes building a strong grassroots movement that not only carries out the message but also applies on a small scale the values of a fair and equitable socio-economic model. Such an approach can benefit from the experience of cooperatives, ecofeminist movements and food sovereignty movements, and holds the potential to strengthen the network and linkages with social demands movements and trade unions. It is also a strong tool for local outreach and communication, which feeds into the long-term work on changing the dominant neoliberal culture and shifting towards systems of economic justice and solidarity.

It is also important to ensure that alternative positions and narratives developed on economic reforms include a labour rights angle: what type of economic model weakens or strengthens labour movements (for instance, weakening productive sectors weakens trade unions, which in turn tips the balance of power in the favour of capital holders). This is in addition to working with trade unions and supporting them to organize, mobilize and develop their public discourse. The recent rise of alternative grassroots trade union movements representing informal workers (domestic workers, migrant workers and others), and alternative unions claiming independence from the political establishment and emerging from the national uprising movements, provides an illustration of the potential narrative shift that such movements can carry.

BUILDING NARRATIVES ACROSS BORDERS

Work on shifting the narrative can benefit from regional and international networks, coalitions and campaigns, not only seeking to mobilize international public opinion on issues of debt and austerity in low- and middle-income countries, but going beyond this to find common narratives that unite people from the global South and North. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a good illustration of common issues related (for instance) to public health spending, fair taxation and civic space, which are found across the world. The shift in the IMF discourse towards a greater focus on economic and gender inequality, and its commitment to calling for inclusive and transparent national policy processes, also presents opportunities for regional and international movements to seize and cautiously build upon..

ANNEX 1: METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This paper aims to build a general framework and explore potential areas for further in-depth research on the subject of inequality narratives in the MENA region. It takes as its focus five MENA countries where Oxfam has active country programmes and CSO partnerships: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. The study builds on Oxfam's existing conceptual framework on political capture analysis and on three main qualitative research methods to gather illustrations on the country case studies:

1. Exploring the results of a regional convening on inequalities among MENA CSOs, which included an in-depth debate around dominant narratives on debt and austerity;
2. In-depth interviews; and
3. Desk review.

In April 2021, Oxfam organized a regional convening on inequalities in MENA in the form of a three-day online workshop among 26 participants from organizations working at national (Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia) regional and global levels, in addition to Oxfam staff. One of the main objectives defined and explored by participants in the workshop was to identify a set of core issues related to economic inequality at national and regional level, and discuss and identify dominant narratives and their manifestation and channels of dissemination in the region. They identified and analysed key elements of these narratives and worked on imagining an alternative to dominant narratives both nationally and regionally. The convening followed an experiential and participatory approach. Various tools were used to enhance online engagement of participants via Zoom: breakout rooms based on a mixed method of geographical and random distribution of participants, and online collaboration tools such as Google Slides, Miro (an interactive board service) and MentiMeter (an online polling service).

Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted during the months of July and August 2021 with specialized journalists, experts and civil society activists working on socio-economic issues in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia (Annex 3 – Interview list). The aim was to explore in detail their perspectives on the economic model in their respective countries; the political economy behind it; the mechanisms of political capture; the dominant narratives promoting this model, including widespread myths and beliefs based on neoliberal ideology; the role of the media in promoting dominant narratives, the role of the IMF in promoting this model and its narratives, and their personal experience when it comes to building a counter-discourse and working towards shifting the narrative. The interview approach and questions (Annex 2: Interview questions) were designed based on an initial desk review and the results of the regional convening, as well as Oxfam's framework and guidelines on political capture analysis ([The Capture Phenomenon: Unmasking Power – Guidelines for the Analysis of Public Policy Capture and its Effect on Inequality](#)), which include sections related to dominant narratives and ideologies.

The desk review was conducted in two phases. The inception phase explored literature on the subject of dominant narratives, debt and austerity, political capture mechanisms and specific country contexts. The second phase, which came after the interviews, included more in-depth research on media content, IMF and World Bank country reports, and specific aspects of the economic models and dominant narratives that were highlighted during the interviews.

ANNEX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Intro (interviewer)

- Introducing interviewer and organization to the respondent
- Providing an overview of the study, information on data use and confidentiality
- Offering the respondent an opportunity to ask questions about the study or the interview process.

Personal

- Question around respondent's academic and/or professional background and country/ies of focus

QUESTIONS (SEMI-STRUCTURED)

1. Economic model

- a. How would you describe/summarize the economic model in your country?
- b. What are the austerity policies that were adopted? And over what period of time?
- c. Who benefits from this model? (political economy, networks of interests)
- d. How does this model impact certain categories of people/inequality?

2. Dominant Narratives

a. Arguments/beliefs/myths

- i. What are the narratives or public discourse used to promote this model? And the arguments used to support this model and these policies?
- ii. What is the dominant narrative on inequality? What are the common beliefs?
- iii. What are the most prominent inequalities according to media outlets? What aspects of the policy debate are silenced or non-addressed?
- iv. Are media saying inequalities are actually increasing or decreasing? Or is the whole media debate shifting towards poverty reduction, instead of inequalities?
- v. Who are the most prominent population groups either impacted by inequality or responsible for it, according to media?
- vi. What are the causes attributed to inequalities (drivers consistently mentioned as intimately linked to inequalities)?
- vii. Is there any issue consistently framed as solution to the debate of inequalities?

a. Who influences the debate?

- i. What is the role of mainstream media? What about social media?
- ii. What can you say about media ownership and financing (political economy)?
- iii. Who are the real influencers of the debate? What are the voices taken as 'reference' of the common sense by mainstream regional and/or selected country media? In contrast, what voices are left out of the debate?

b. IMF role and political economy

- i. What is the role of the international community, and IFIs in promoting the dominant narrative?
- ii. What are the reasons behind IMF's approach to austerity?

3. Counter-narratives

- a. Personal experience in newspaper, TV or NGO: How did you go about introducing new narratives?
- b. What approach/tools did you use to introduce counter-narratives: storytelling of counter-examples, data, infographics, investigative journalism? And which do you think people most respond to? Emotional / legalistic / moralistic?
 - i. Any proposed program/article to analyse?
 - ii. Real life examples/characters around inequality: what is the best illustration of inequality in your opinion, or first example that comes to mind?
 - iii. Final thoughts?

ANNEX 3: INTERVIEW LIST

List of socio-economic journalists and activists interviewed from five selected Arab countries (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia)

Name	Country	Profile	Date
<i>Mohammad Zbeeb</i>	Lebanon	Journalist specializing in socio-economic issues. Former member of the editorial board and head of economic and social section of <i>Al-Akhbar</i> newspaper in Lebanon, and editor in chief of its Capital issue (2007–2019).	14 July 2021
<i>Ali Aznague</i>	Morocco	Member of ATTAC Morocco, Coordinator of Siyada (North African Network for Food Sovereignty), Member of CADTM (Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt).	16 July 2021
<i>Shereen Talaat</i>	Egypt, Morocco, Arab region	Film-maker and documentary producer on socio-economic, cultural and human rights. Co-director, Arab Watch Coalition .	16 July 2021
<i>Amy Ekdawi</i>	Egypt, Arab region	Civil society activist for the last 40 years, with a focus on advocacy targeting international financial institutions since 2007. Co-director, Arab Watch Coalition .	16 July 2021
<i>Ahmad Awad</i>	Jordan	Principal researcher and director of the Phenix Center for Economic Studies , which monitors socio-economic policies and analyses them from the perspective of socio-economic rights and sustainable development.	18 July 2021
<i>Jad Ghosn</i>	Lebanon	Journalist and podcaster specializing in socio-economic issues.	19 July 2021
<i>Sahar Al-Attar</i>	Lebanon	Journalist specializing in socio-economic issues. Former editor of <i>Commerce du Levant</i> economic magazine.	20 July 2021
<i>Amine Bouzaïene</i>	Tunisia	Director of the Marsad Budget project, one of the four permanent projects of Al Bawsala .	23 July 2021
<i>Wael Al Khatib</i>	Jordan	Amman-based sociocultural anthropologist studying political development in Jordan.	30 July 2021
<i>Salma Hussein</i>	Egypt	Regional research manager, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Specializes in macro-economics in Egypt and MENA, with a focus on budget, inequality, poverty and subsidies.	14 August 2021
<i>Amr Adly</i>	Egypt	Assistant professor in the department of political science at The American University in Cairo. Author of <i>Cleft capitalism: the social origins of failed market-making in Egypt</i> (Stanford University Press, 2020).	17 August 2021
<i>Reem Al Masri</i>	Jordan	Journalist at Ziber online magazine. Specializes in crosscutting issues of technology and politics, in internet law, electronic crimes, and publishing laws and infrastructure. Technology advisor at Febrayer Network, a consortium independent Arab media organizations.	19 August 2021

NOTES

- 1 ESCWA. (2020). *A Solidarity Tax to Address the Impact of COVID-19 on Poverty in the Arab Region*. https://archive.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/20-00187_covid-19-policy-brief-en.pdf
- 2 CIVICUS Monitor. (2021). *National Civic Space Ratings: 42 rated as Open, 40 rating as Narrowed, 46 rated as Obstructed, 45 rated as Repressed & 23 rated as Closed*.
- 3 N. Abdo and S. Almasri. (2020). *For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity in the Middle East and North Africa: Towards a Fair and Inclusive Recovery to Fight Inequality*. Oxford: Oxfam International. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/for-a-decade-of-hope-not-austerity-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-towards-621041/>. DOI: 10.21201/2020.6355.
- 4 This refers to the dominant neoliberal narrative promoted by political and economic elites in the MENA region, which we explore in more depth throughout this report.
- 5 World Bank estimates show a constant rise in extreme poverty in the MENA region between 2013 and 2020: R. Andres Castaneda Aguilar, T. Fujs, C. Lakner, D. Gerszon Mahler, M. Cong Nguyen, M. Schoch and M. Viveros. (2021, March 16). *March 2021 Global Poverty Update*. Washington DC: World Bank. Retrieved 18 October 2021, from: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/march-2021-global-poverty-update-world-bank>
- 6 N. Abdo and S. Almasri. (2020). *For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity*; N. Abdo. (2019). *The Gendered Impact of IMF Policies in MENA: The Case of Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia*. Oxford: Oxfam International. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-gendered-impact-of-imf-policies-in-mena-the-case-of-egypt-jordan-and-tunisi-620878/>. DOI: 10.21201/2019.5143.; N. Tamale. (2021). *Adding Fuel to Fire: How IMF Demands for Austerity Will Drive Up Inequality Worldwide*. Oxford: Oxfam International. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/adding-fuel-to-fire-how-imf-demands-for-austerity-will-drive-up-inequality-worl-621210/>. DOI: 10.21201/2021.7864.
- 7 N. Abdo and S. Almasri. (2020). *For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity*.
- 8 According to a 2020 study by Oxfam, the MENA region is ‘the worst in the world in terms of inequality and the distribution of income and wealth’. In addition, austerity measures could have been prevented: ‘If Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Morocco had implemented net wealth taxes of just 2% from 2010, this would have generated a total of around \$42bn, more than all IMF lending to Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia between 2012 and 2019’. N. Abdo and S. Almasri. (2020). *For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity*.
- 9 C. Gordon (ed.). (1980). *Michel Foucault. Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- 10 N. Abdo and S. Almasri. (2020). *For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity*. (Based on the World Inequality Database. Middle East. <https://wid.world/country/middle-east/>)
- 11 S. Biko. (1978). *I write what I like. Selected Writings*. University of Chicago Press. <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/I/bo3632310.html>
- 12 H. Cortés Saenz and D. Itriago. (2018). *The Capture Phenomenon: Unmasking Power – Guidelines for the Analysis of Public Policy Capture and its Effect on Inequality*. Oxfam Intermón. Retrieved 18 October 2021, from https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/426027/Oxfam-Website/oi-informes/Capture_Methodology_2018-en.pdf
- 13 Oxfam has classified elites by four categories of power resource: elites that control material resources (land, energy, arms, properties, factories, goods, services); elites that control financial resources (bankers, investors, the very wealthy, representatives of IFIS); elites that control the most important institutions (public decision makers in political, legal and economic institutions); and elites that control prevailing ideas (media owners, university professors, consultancy firms, religious leaders, intellectuals). H. Cortés Saenz and D. Itriago. (2018). *The Capture Phenomenon*.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was written by Diana Kallas. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Cristina Rovira Izquierdo, Nabil Abdo, Hernan Cortes Saenz, Nadia Daar, Manal Wardé, Anna Chernova, Noha El-Mikawy, Yara Shawky, Seifeddine Bentili, Kathryn O'Neill and Helen Bunting in its production.

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78748-829-8 in November 2021.

DOI: 10.21201/2021.8298

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

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