



The Türkiye–Syria earthquake response six months on

Lessons on communication, community engagement and accountability

August 2023

Six months since two devastating earthquakes and numerous aftershocks struck southern Türkiye and northwest Syria on 6 February 2023, the humanitarian situation remains dire. Millions of people are still in need of critical assistance and living in temporary shelters after being forced from their damaged or destroyed homes. The humanitarian context is complex: extreme heat, reduced cross-border access for aid into affected areas of northwest Syria and large pre-existing populations of internally displaced people and refugees continue to challenge the response.¹

In a crisis of this magnitude, access to critical information and continuous dialogue between communities and service providers can be a lifeline. Efforts to ensure that people's needs inform response planning will enable a more sustainable and resilient recovery process. This brief presents key lessons and recommendations to ensure robust communication, community engagement and accountability (CCEA) efforts to meet the needs of affected people in Türkiye and Syria.²

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- 1 For more information on the humanitarian situation, see: OCHA (2023) [North-west Syria: situation report](#), 21 July; OCHA (2023) [Humanitarian Transition Overview: Türkiye earthquake response](#), 15 August.
 - 2 This brief builds on a [previous edition](#) published by CDAC Network in February 2023. Lessons and recommendations are based on CDAC's project to map the information, communication and engagement ecosystem in Türkiye and northwest Syria, supported by the H2H Network, as well as CDAC member situation updates from ongoing responses. See also learnings from Haiti and Nepal earthquake responses: CDAC Network (2012) [Ann kite yo pale / let them speak: best practice and lessons learned in communication with disaster affected communities, Haiti 2010](#); CDAC Network (2016) [Are you listening now? Community perspectives on communication with communities during the Nepal earthquake](#); BBC Media Action (2017) [Nepal earthquake](#).

1 People still need actionable information to help access critical services and rebuild their lives

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, people needed focused, actionable information on how to stay safe and access shelter and relief. Six months since the disaster, information needs are now increasingly around accessing healthcare and education and where to go for assistance and other services.³ Ongoing concerns around disease outbreaks, protection and other risks indicate the need to integrate and prioritise information provision and communication across sectors.

People in affected areas want to hear information from sources they trust. Trusted people are often those who are known to the community, viewed as honest, have access to information and have a track record of working to the community's benefit. In Türkiye, it is important to understand the nuanced differences in preferences and trusted sources between affected Turkish citizens and affected Syrian refugees in Türkiye, who may have vastly different experiences and circumstances.⁴

Recommendations

- Leverage and amplify messaging from trusted sources and public information in relevant languages through various, accessible channels, including face-to-face communication.
- The most in-demand information needs to be readily accessible, easy to understand and continuously refreshed or repeated even if the information has not changed, as people seek reassurance on these topics.
- Mainstream CCEA approaches among diverse actors and identify information and communication needs across different sectors.

Resources

- [How-to guide on collective communication and community engagement in humanitarian action](#) – CDAC Network (*Arabic, English*)
- [Communication needs assessments](#) – CDAC Network (*English*)
- [Local media and community engagement in humanitarian settings](#) – Internews (*English*)
- [Topic-by-topic communication guides](#) for local media reporting on critical post-earthquake topics such as shelter, protection, psychosocial support, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) – BBC Media Action (*English*)
- [Lifeline production manual for journalists](#) – BBC Media Action (*Arabic, English*)
- [Guide for humanitarians on working with media](#) – BBC Media Action (*Arabic, English*)
- [Engaging with people affected by armed conflicts and other situations of violence](#) – International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (*English*)

3 Unpublished findings from CDAC Network's information, communication and engagement ecosystem analysis in Türkiye and northwest Syria.

4 Ibid.

2 Affected people still face physical barriers to accessing information

Immediately after the earthquake, damage to electrical and telecommunications infrastructure impeded information access for many. Unstable networks and connectivity issues continue to challenge information access, particularly for affected areas in northwest Syria.

Access issues are also gendered, with Syrian women reportedly challenged by their lack of access to mobile phones and reliance on male relatives for information. Women have noted that, in families with only one or two phones, the person leaving the home – usually male – will take the phone with them, leaving those at home without.⁵

An overreliance on telecommunications technology to provide information and engage in two-way communication with affected communities will undoubtedly leave some people behind. Restoring connectivity and ensuring people have access to communication devices is essential – while also prioritising other means for people to access information and stay connected.

Recommendations

- Prioritise measures to build, reestablish or maintain communications infrastructure and support affected people to connect with loved ones and service providers through different means.
- Consider the gender dimensions to information and mobile device access. Ensure communication and engagement strategies include the use of public and mass media and non-digital forms of public information.

Resources

- [Syria ICT profile](#) – Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) *(English)*
- [The Importance of mobile for refugees: a landscape of new services and approaches](#) – GSMA *(English)*

5 CDAC Network's unpublished ecosystem analysis.

3 Leverage understanding of two-way information flows with affected communities to tailor CCE activities

Understanding the full spectrum of channels that people use and trust can improve information flows and the effectiveness of the response. Responders in both Türkiye and Syria actively communicate with affected people using a variety of channels, including face-to-face communication, hotlines and social media channels, and have established diverse modalities of complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFMs).

However, affected people do not always know how to communicate with humanitarian actors: according to the 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview for Syria, only 15% of households across Syria were aware of CFMs.⁶ Communities also perceive some channels like social media that are often used by responders to be a one-way source of information, rather than a channel to interact with those providing assistance.⁷

Recommendations

- Maintain up-to-date understanding of the information, communication and engagement ecosystem and people's preferred, trusted and used channels.
- Continue to inform people of their right to provide feedback and the various offline and online methods to do so.
- Use social platforms to interact with affected people. Amplify key, in-demand information, foster feedback and dialogue and build trust by responding to public comments.
- Don't underestimate the importance of word of mouth and face-to-face interactions when designing communication and engagement strategies.

Resources

- [Information ecosystem assessments](#) – Internews (*English; assessments in various languages*)
- [Community engagement and accountability \(CEA\) toolkit](#): Questions to integrate into assessments (tool 13) – International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) (*English*)
- [Menu of AAP-related questions for multi-sector needs assessments](#) – Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) AAP and Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Task Team and REACH (*English*)

6 OCHA (2022) [Syrian Arab Republic: 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview](#), December.

7 CDAC Network's unpublished ecosystem analysis.

4 Link CCEA efforts with local systems and existing coordination structures

Longer-term recovery requires continuous, active linking of CCEA efforts with existing local systems, the government response and international coordination structures. In past years, there has been momentum in cross-border operations between Gaziantep and northern Syria to strengthen participation of local and national NGO networks in humanitarian decision-making, with the Peer-2-Peer project in Gaziantep pushing efforts to strengthen collective accountability to affected people (AAP) and ensure NGO participation in cluster coordination.⁸ These efforts should be supported, maintained and intensified.

At the international coordination level, it will be critical to maintain a close eye on changes to CCE/AAP coordination and priorities, which will be impacted by the resolution of the cross-border aid operation to Northwest Syria and the transition of the Humanitarian Coordination System in Türkiye in August 2023.⁹

Recommendations

- Continue to bolster collaboration between local/national and international coordination mechanisms to strengthen information-sharing, amplify common messages and promote coherence in CCEA efforts.
- Continue to promote participation of local and national actors in international CCEA coordination and interagency fora and identify synergies between existing international approaches and central and local government initiatives to strengthen partnerships.

Resources

- [Learnings from Peer-2-Peer project in Gaziantep](#) – Peer-2-Peer/IASC (English)
- [Accountability to affected people: assessing NGO engagement with the Collective AAP Framework: case study on Gaziantep and north-west Syria](#) – LSE/ International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) (English)

8 Peer-2-Peer Support (n.d.) [Gaziantep – localisation](#).

9 Read more: OCHA (2023) [Humanitarian Transition Overview: Türkiye earthquake response](#).

5 Rumours can be a matter of life or death – develop collective means to monitor and counter them with accurate information

Misinformation, disinformation and rumours spread quickly during a crisis. Within hours of the earthquake, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) found conspiracy theories circulating rapidly among affected communities in Türkiye, particularly on social media channels. With the current response context affected by the volatile political and social atmosphere, people's access to reliable information from trusted sources may have reduced even further.¹⁰

Rumours can create undue suffering, raise false expectations and provoke unsafe behaviour. It is vital that responders continue to prioritise monitoring rumours in multiple languages and maintain a continuous cycle of listening to identify rumours, verifying facts and providing accurate and accessible information.

Recommendations

- Refer to analyses of communication channels and sources, and be prepared to monitor rumours in multiple languages.
- Ensure a cycle of listening and conversation to identify rumours; verify and triangulate facts; and engage with communities to share verified information. Building on existing and trusted relationships is key.
- Work with other agencies. A collective approach will save time and resources while reducing information burden on communities

Resources

- [Rumour has it: a practice guide to working with rumours](#) – CDAC Network (*Arabic, English*)
- [Managing misinformation in a humanitarian context](#) – Internews (*English*)

¹⁰ Read more: CDAC Network (2023) [Connecting communities: navigating information gaps and community trust in post-earthquake Türkiye](#), 19 April.

6 Elevate language needs of disproportionately disadvantaged groups

While communication is increasingly available in Arabic and Turkish, there has been less emphasis on information in marginalised languages. Information in Kurdish, particularly the Kurmanji dialect, is still lacking. Some native Kurdish speakers may struggle to read or write Kurdish, or to speak Turkish or Arabic fluently. Both affected areas have poor operational data on what languages are spoken and where. Responders should include language and communication preferences within needs assessments to better understand how information provision, community engagement and feedback mechanisms should be effectively scaled in ways that are accessible to all.

Recommendations

- Include CLEAR Global's [standard questions on language and communication preferences](#) in needs assessments. Disaggregate other data by language to see where language marginalisation might be causing gaps in access to services.
- Plan for communication in Turkish, Arabic and Kurdish (Kurmanji) at a minimum. Pay special attention to ensure marginalised-language speakers have equal access.
- Regularly communicate which services will be available when and how people can access them, in relevant languages and without using jargon or technical terms.

Resources

- [Türkiye–Syria earthquake emergency language support](#) – CLEAR Global (*English; Arabic, Kurmanji and Turkish available as downloads*)
- [Türkiye–Syria multilingual toolkit](#) – CLEAR Global (*English; Arabic, Kurmanji and Turkish available as downloads*)
- [Türkiye and Syria earthquake: rapid overview of language issues](#) – CLEAR Global (*English*)
- [Language-related questions for new and ongoing surveys](#) – CLEAR Global (*English; Arabic, Kurmanji and Turkish available as downloads*)

7 Cash assistance requires specialised communication and community engagement strategies to increase impact and resilience

Türkiye has the world's largest humanitarian cash assistance programme: the European Union (EU)-funded Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), run by the Turkish Red Crescent and IFRC. Under the 2023 Humanitarian Transition Overview for Türkiye, multi-purpose cash assistance remains a priority need and sector priority. Continued investment in communication and community engagement around cash assistance programmes is vital to increase their impact and reach. For example, feedback on cash grants by UNICEF after the 2015 Nepal earthquake indicated that affected people would not have known about the programme if information had not been broadcast on the radio.¹¹ Promoting and socialising cash-based programmes through affected people's preferred channels in Türkiye and Syria will be essential, including providing detailed and accurate information on duration of programmes, eligibility, application and activation processes.¹²

The mass reach and use of digital technology in cash distributions can provide excellent opportunities for information-sharing, not only on the programme itself but also on other available services, key messages and feedback mechanisms.

Recommendations

- Collaborate with cash colleagues and coordination structures to ensure CCEA is integrated and prioritised. This includes implementing strong CFMs using multiple channels and preferred languages, transparent and tailored communication, and consideration of safeguarding concerns and participatory approaches.
- Ensure that a mechanism is in place to receive questions and complaints and to report any irregularities. This mechanism should be linked to any other feedback mechanism that has been put in place.
- Ensure constant monitoring of any possible scams or misinformation that may be circulating about the cash programme, and continually distribute messages reinforcing that the registration process and participation in the programme is free of charge.

Resources

- [Emergency Social Safety Net \(ESSN\) – IFRC \(English\)](#)
- [Cash and CEA – IFRC \(English\)](#)
- [Türkiye cross-border: Cash Working Group – Northwest Syria \(NWS\) \(English\)](#)

11 UNICEF (2016) [Nepal earthquake 2015: UNICEF Nepal C4D response](#).

12 Learnings from the Citizen Damage Compensation Programme, launched during the 2010 flood response in Pakistan by the Government of Pakistan in partnership with USAID, DFID and World Bank. See: IOM (2015) [Communicating with communities: a case study and guide from Pakistan and elsewhere](#).

8 Pay special attention to information and communication needs of marginalised groups in CCEA strategies

Millions of people in the affected areas in both Türkiye and Syria were already refugees or internally displaced and dealing with challenging circumstances prior to the earthquake. Many remain displaced in temporary accommodation and shelters, and struggle to access services and assistance. Communication and engagement strategies must consider their diverse needs, as well as tensions with host communities.

Women and girls, who may be at increased risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, need tailored information and safe and accessible channels to raise concerns. In both countries, some women and girls are less literate and will struggle to engage with written information.

Older people, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ communities and communities in remote and rural areas also face specific communication and engagement needs.

Recommendations

- Collect gender- and diversity-disaggregated data and use this to ensure there are active efforts to reach women and diverse community groups
- Ensure information and feedback mechanisms are available and accessible in relevant languages and formats.
- Ensure people can report sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment concerns in preferred languages and through preferred, trusted channels, and be understood.

Resources

- [Inter-agency PSEA messages](#) – IASC (*Arabic, English, Turkish*)
- [PSEA glossary](#) – CLEAR Global (*Arabic, English, Turkish, three Kurdish dialects*)
- [Rules on sexual conduct for humanitarian workers](#) – CLEAR Global (*Arabic (MSA), English, Kurdish Kurmanji (Badini), Turkish*)
- [No excuse for abuse: PSEA training](#) – InterAction (*Arabic, English, Kurmanji, Turkish*)



CDAC is a network of more than 35 of the largest humanitarian, media development and social innovation actors – including UN agencies, RCRC, NGOs, media and communications actors – working together to shift the dial on humanitarian and development decision-making – moving from global to local.

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Cover photo: Women supported by a cash-for-work project in Sarmada, northwest Syria searching for personal belongings such as ID cards and photos lost under the rubble left by the earthquake.
Credit: OCHA/Mohanad Zayat