

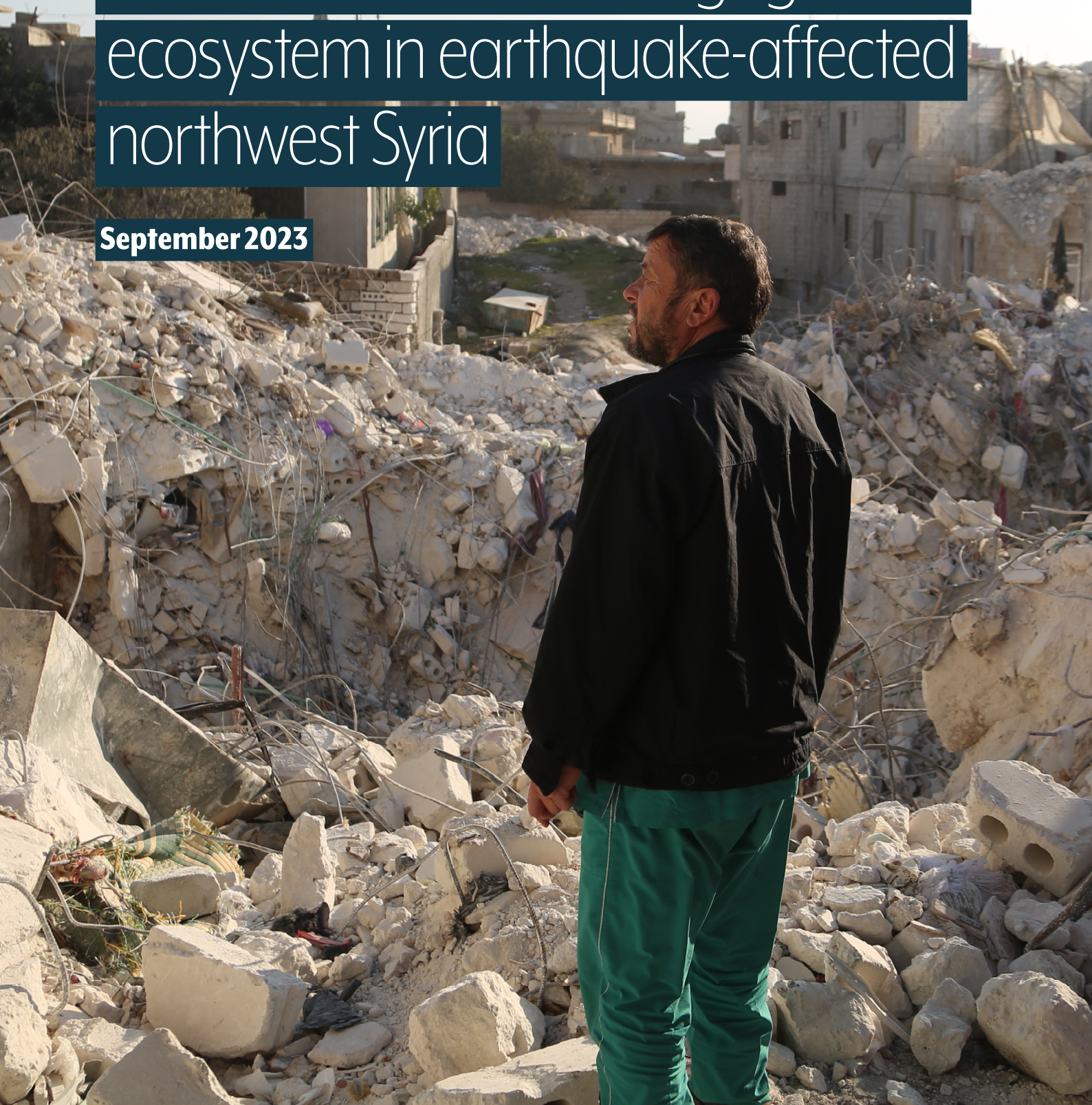


N E T W O R K

communicating with disaster-affected communities

An analysis of the communication and engagement ecosystem in earthquake-affected northwest Syria

September 2023



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Cover photo: A local anaesthetist looks at his destroyed home in Harim, Syria, where his wife and daughter were killed by the earthquake. Credit: OCHA/Bilal Al-hammoud

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List of acronyms

AAP	accountability to affected populations
AFAD	Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (Türkiye)
AFNS	Aid Fund for Northwest Syria
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
CBO	community-based organisation
CCEA	communication, community engagement and accountability
CCCM	camp coordination and camp management
CDAC	Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities
CFM	complaints and feedback mechanism
GI	group interview
GoS	Government of Syria
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
ICT	information and communication technologies
KII	key informant interview
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NWS	northwest Syria
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
WASH	water, sanitation and hygiene

Executive summary

In February 2023, catastrophic earthquakes struck Türkiye and northwest Syria (NWS), causing significant damage and impacting humanitarian aid and communication. This report presents findings from a study conducted between June and August 2023, aiming to understand the information flows and communication ecosystem in NWS. The findings are intended to facilitate informed, inclusive and accountable response and recovery planning to meet the needs of affected people.

Syrians of all demographics actively engage in information-sharing through social media, messaging platforms and face-to-face interactions. This remained consistent before and after the earthquakes, with face-to-face communication gaining increasing importance post-disaster. However, both gender and disability influence how people source and share information and the channels they use to do so. Generally, men tend to favour the social media platform Telegram, while women prefer face-to-face engagement, usually because access to technology privileges men in this context. People with disabilities, on the other hand, rely on diverse information sources – from social media and schools to rehabilitation centres and psychological support teams – depending on their specific disability and support networks.

Most Syrians who spoke with CDAC were satisfied with information-sharing channels during and in the aftermath of the earthquakes. They assessed their engagement with humanitarian response workers positively. However, communities expressed dissatisfaction with the considerable delays between communicating queries and concerns and receiving responses. They called for more two-way communication channels – engagement and interaction as opposed to passive reception of messages – especially concerning sensitive issues. Most people also said they did not know how to make a complaint following the earthquakes.

It is important to note that influence does not equate with trust; the relationship between them is complex and context-specific. Trust in information varies by crisis type and the source's reputation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, health workers and local civil society were highly trusted. Post-earthquakes, trusted sources included the Syria Civil Defence (White Helmets), AFAD, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with positive track records and local leaders. Trusted sources of information were different during the pandemic compared with the earthquakes, as these crises required distinct expertise and established experience in the communities. It must be stressed, however, that trust is always influenced by track record in the community, technical expertise, community engagement and dedication to community well-being. The individuals and organisations with these characteristics change along with the context and the requirements for responding to it.

Given the documented preference for and reliance on mobile technology, it is tempting to prioritise digital channels in humanitarian response communication strategies. However, weak internet connectivity, lack of electricity and transportation obstacles were significant challenges in NWS before the earthquakes, the impacts of which exacerbated the infrastructural damages resulting from more than a decade of war. Furthermore, an over-reliance on mobile technology risks excluding socioeconomically marginalised groups from information access. Thus, while mobile technology is a valuable tool in humanitarian response and has untapped potential to serve as a feedback mechanism, it must be paired with additional, alternative communication and information dissemination channels to assure that the most vulnerable can access life-saving information and assistance.

Effective communication and engagement are essential pillars of humanitarian response and accountability. By delving into community communication dynamics, preferences and challenges in NWS, this report provides responders with the evidence needed to adapt and expand their communication, community engagement and accountability (CCEA) efforts. Ensuring accessible and transparent information dissemination empowers communities and reinforces trust, promoting community-driven recovery and thus improving humanitarian outcomes for everyone.

Key findings

General takeaways

- The earthquakes in NWS occurred in the context of multiple concurrent crises. For many of those affected, the disaster was the latest in a series of events that have disrupted their lives, displaced them and further exacerbated difficult conditions.
- Communication, information and engagement occur in a sensitive and highly politicised environment. Media and government are viewed with a healthy amount of scepticism. Media, including digital sources, is generally not considered trustworthy sources of information. This has not changed since the earthquake.
- Different people leverage different channels to access different types of information, necessitating multiple CCEA approaches. Social media (Telegram and WhatsApp) and face-to-face communication remain the predominantly preferred channels. Trust in information varies based on crisis type and the reputation of the source.

Preferred channels and sources of information

- Preferred channels largely remained the same following the earthquakes, with face-to-face communication becoming more popular for certain information. Gender dynamics affect how people receive, use and share information.
- Syrians receive information from diverse sources. Messaging platforms, especially Telegram and WhatsApp, are dominant. Within these, parent and neighbourhood groups are formed to share information and serve as channels to inform the wider community about current events and humanitarian assistance. Other sources of information include local authorities, first responders, humanitarians and community awareness sessions.
- A lack of organised mechanisms for information dissemination in communities was a barrier to information for some.

Access to information

- Over-reliance on mobile technology excludes vulnerable groups such as women, children, older people, people with disabilities, people with limited literacy and economically marginalised people.
- Weak internet connectivity, lack of electricity and transportation challenges were all identified as barriers to accessing information, especially for women and girls.
- Sociocultural norms pose a challenge to effective CCEA. Gender norms influence how humanitarians collecting and sharing information engage with women, especially as most field workers are men, given the difficulties around women working in the field and the requirement for a *mahram* (male guardian).

Trust, influence and reliability

- Trust in information sources varies based on the type of crisis and the source's reputation within the community. Trust is influenced by an individual or organisation's track record in the community, technical knowledge, active engagement and dedication to the community's well-being.
- Social media sentiment analysis highlighted concerns around corruption in the aid system and distrust in the motives of aid agencies.
- Humanitarian organisations often rely on local committees and community leaders to gather feedback from affected communities. The quality and consistency of such feedback is dependent on the level of trust between communities and those collecting information. Trust in community leaders varies based on their track record in the community.

Communication in the humanitarian response

- Dissatisfaction with CCEA tended to lie with two-way communication rather than information-sharing and dissemination. People were not able to share feedback, did not trust communication channels for sensitive feedback, and were not aware of responses to their issues.
- Actors involved in humanitarian response collaborate with social mobilisers, community health workers and religious leaders, utilising hotlines and direct messaging. They also adopt community-based approaches, such as hiring staff from affected communities, employing focal points on the ground, organising face-to-face meetings and utilising social media for engagement – especially Syrian NGOs. Local leaders, volunteers and community organisations are valued partners.
- While some actors in the humanitarian response conduct messaging in multiple languages, the affected population's language preferences are complex and difficult to navigate and integrate into programming, particularly with regard to the differential language preferences for written versus oral communication. There is a significant lack of data on language use and preferences in the affected area – it is crucial that humanitarian actors fill this gap by collecting, monitoring and making this data available.

Communication and engagement ecosystems of people with disabilities

- People with disabilities tend to be more disconnected socially and rely on family members, social media, rehabilitation centres, psychological support teams and schools for information.
- Preferred communication methods for people with disabilities depend on the type and severity of disability. People with disabilities actively share information via social media and face-to-face communication.
- The main barriers to information access for people with disabilities are inappropriate physical environments, lack of trained specialists, absence of assistive devices and challenges related to navigating smartphones and social media.
- People with disabilities are often delayed in receiving information and struggle to access timely and relevant information, leading them to rely on family members.

Introduction

The two earthquakes that struck Türkiye on 6 February 2023 also caused significant damage in northwest Syria (NWS), killing more than 4,500 people and injuring more than 8,700. At least 148 communities were affected in Idleb and Aleppo, or an estimated 1.5 million people (DEEP et al., 2023; OCHA, 2023). The catastrophic impact of these earthquakes magnified the complex, overlapping crises Syria already faced as a result of the social and economic impacts of the civil war that erupted in 2011, the regional economic crises and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the aftermath of a disaster, affected populations need to know how to access relief services, understand targeting criteria for humanitarian assistance and have mechanisms to hold aid workers accountable. Information and communication in languages and formats accessible to affected communities are critical to ensuring that those affected by crisis are at the centre of humanitarian action. Accurate and accessible information allows people to make the best decisions for themselves and their communities and allows them to stay safe (CDAC Network, 2023). Effective communication and complaint and feedback mechanisms (CFMs) also hold actors involved in humanitarian response accountable to the populations they serve (CDAC Network, 2014).

The areas hardest hit by the earthquakes were some of the most affected by conflict and marked by inadequate access. The damage from the earthquakes exacerbated already dire socioeconomic conditions, and further limited access to essential services, including information. As a result of ongoing complex crises, many people affected by the earthquakes and living in NWS have also experienced protracted and multiple displacements.

NWS is divided into four distinct zones of control, each governed by different entities:

1. **Idleb** is under control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and their governing wing, the Syrian Salvation Government. HTS previously had ties to al Qaeda and has evolved as a highly conservative force. People in Idleb generally maintain a critical stance towards both HTS and the Government of Syria (GoS).
2. **Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch areas** are under control of the Syrian National Army and their governing wing, the Syrian Interim Government.
3. **Aleppo** is under the control the Syrian Arab Army and the GoS. People living here do not all support the GoS, but rather have found ways to live and survive.
4. **Tal Rifaat/Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyh neighbourhoods in Aleppo** are under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces and their governing wing, the Self Administration of Northeast Syria.

In response to the earthquakes which compounded Syria's complex crisis and the subsequent humanitarian response, CDAC Network was commissioned to produce analysis mapping the

communication and engagement ecosystem in earthquake-affected areas to support effective accountability to affected populations (AAP) in ongoing and planned response programming, and to bring together critical analysis on language, media, culture, access and preferences.¹

In the case of NWS – which is marked by more than a decade of mutually reinforcing crises – timely, relevant and transparent information production and dissemination during an emergency is key to developing trust and credibility with affected communities. Effective communication strategies are crucial for humanitarians to deliver aid that is responsive to communities’ needs. In the wake of the earthquakes in NWS, effective CCEA continues to be especially challenging due to gaps in understanding of minority languages, delays in access, slow logistics, coordination issues, the politicisation of the context, high levels of existing negative sentiment and distrust around the international aid response as well as misinformation and the compounding nature of this crisis on pre-existing crises. Understanding the complexity of this context is imperative to designing and implementing effective response measures; this report aims to improve that understanding and thus contribute to increasingly impactful current and future humanitarian efforts.

Analysis methodology

This report is one of two produced by CDAC concerning the impact of the earthquakes in Türkiye and NWS. Both reports make use of existing literature and qualitative primary data to explore the dimensions of information supply and demand in terms of communication and community engagement, access, preference, usability and need.

In total, for both reports, more than 85 documents were reviewed and 56 consultations were held with 139 individuals. For NWS, 47 documents were reviewed (including general documents on CCEA and documents relevant to both Syria and Türkiye); 10 group interviews (GIs) were held with 53 community members, including humanitarian field officers and humanitarian responders from the affected communities (see Table 1); 14 key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with people involved in humanitarian response; five KIIs were held with media actors targeting or active in NWS; and one KII was undertaken with a representative from an organisation for people with disabilities.

Data collection was conducted with communities across Syria in Afrin, al-Bab, al-Dana, Atmeh Camp, Azaz, Harem, Idlib, Jindires, Ma'arat Misrin and Salqin; and in Gaziantep and Hatay in Türkiye. All individual and group interviews were conducted in a language the participants were comfortable speaking, whether English or Arabic. Interviews were conducted by three researchers: two from affected areas in NWS residing currently in Türkiye, and one foreign researcher working remotely. Data was collected between 6 June 2023 and 31 July 2023.

¹ This study draws on elements of the information ecosystem assessment approach of Internews, a CDAC Network member. According to Internews, an information ecosystem is the ‘complex organisation of dynamic and social relationships through which information moves and transforms and flows. [Information ecosystems] are complex adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers’ (Internews, 2015).

Table 1 **Group interview participants (n=53)**

Participant group	Location	Gender	# of participants
Syrian women	al-Bab, Harem, Idlib, Jindires, Salqin	Female	11
Women in leadership roles (Syrian refugees in Türkiye and Syrians in NWS)	Syria: Afrin, Azaz, Ma'arat Misrin Türkiye: Gaziantep, Hatay	Female	4
Syrian men	Afrin, al-Bab, Harem, Jindires, Ma'arat Misrin, Salqin	Male	15
Syrian youth	Afrin, Azaz, Idlib, Jindires	Male	11
Syrian youth	Afrin, al-Bab, al-Dana, Idlib, Salqin	Female	6
Humanitarian Field Officers	al-Dana, Atmeh Camp, Azaz, Idlib	Male	6

This study was a collaborative effort, supported by the AAP Task Force for Northwest Syria. Three collaborative sessions were held with the AAP Task Force during the study: one joint mapping session to identify what has already been done on AAP/CCEA; one joint feedback session reviewing the primary data collection tools; and one validation session on the preliminary findings before drafting this report. Insecurity Insight monitored discussions of the aid response on social media² and provided insights for this report. CLEAR Global conducted secondary data review and analysis on language and communication preferences.

Limitations: This report makes limited use of quantitative data as access to existing quantitative datasets was restricted. During the research period, the UN Security Council failed to reauthorise the cross-border mechanism. As a result, humanitarians in Türkiye and NWS were extremely overstretched, complicating the data collection process for this study. While the study includes local and national organisations involved in humanitarian response, it does not include volunteers or civil society organisations whose CCEA structures are likely much more localised. This perspective is thus missing from the report. The research on people with disabilities is limited as only one KII was conducted. Where possible, this is supplemented by existing literature, which admittedly offers sparse insights into the specific information needs and preferences of people with disabilities. This topic warrants further investigation.

2 Social media sentiment analysis tries to understand how the aid sector is perceived among social media users. It involves 'listening' to conversations about aid programmes as they are discussed in social media posts or comments on mainstream newspaper articles. Social media monitoring classifies views and opinions by negative or positive sentiment towards the aid sector. It uses qualitative ethnographic approaches to understand the expressed opinions. Social media monitoring has similar objectives to a focus group analysis, but it is limited to 'listening' and cannot ask questions. For more, see: Insecurity Insight (2023a).

Findings

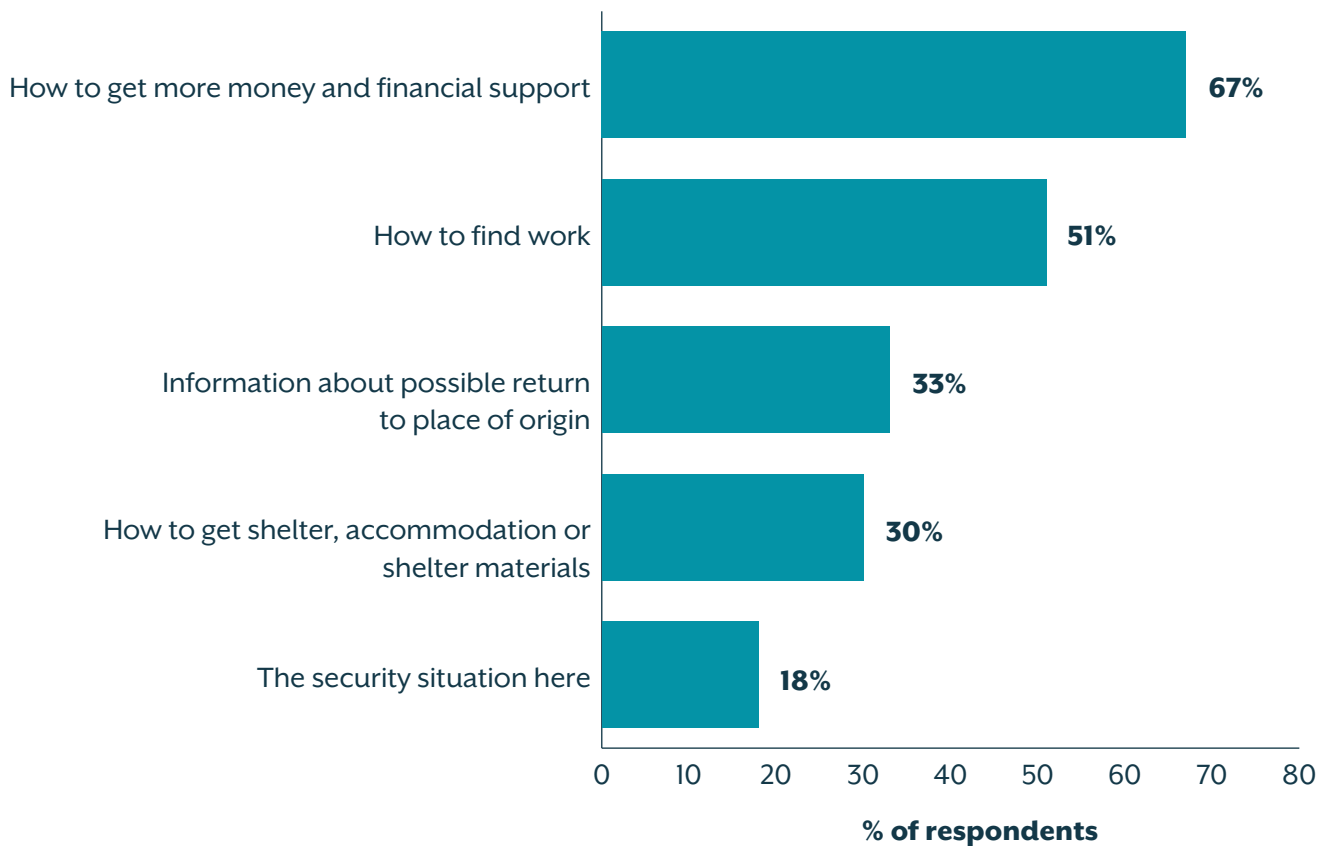
An overview of the CCEA and media landscape is imperative to understanding how CCEA can be improved in this context. This study aims to propose pathways for improved engagement by analysing communication and information flows. In this vein, it first considers the information needs of affected communities, then examines their preferred channels and sources of information; challenges of access; and lastly, determinants of trust in information sources. The discussion then turns to communication in the humanitarian response, concluding with a case study of CCEA for people with disabilities, an often underrepresented demographic in response programming.

Information needs

Immediately after the earthquakes, people needed information about shelter, food and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services, as well as information about healthcare, education and where to go for assistance (CDAC Network, 2023; World Vision, 2023). People also needed general risk communication and community engagement messaging to prevent the outbreak of epidemics (AFNS, 2023). Women and girls especially needed tailored information and safe and accessible channels to raise concerns about sensitive issues like sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (CDAC Network, 2023).

Information needs reflect immediate priorities and concerns. Syrians' information needs in the direct aftermath of the earthquakes were related to the disaster, survival and safety. Given the complexity of the existing crises compounded by the earthquakes, Syrians' information needs are not static: they are significant and constantly evolving in reaction to the mercurial context. In 2020, for example, the most sought-after subjects of information concerned politics, security and basic needs (food, water and shelter). By 2023, information needs shifted and prioritised local news, health, education, basic services and economics (FPU, 2023).

Regarding humanitarian information, according to the 2023 Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) (survey conducted in 2022), 76% of households in Idleb and 61% of households in Aleppo reported having sufficient information about assistance (OCHA, 2022). However, vulnerable groups are less likely to have adequate access to information, including people with disabilities and female-headed households (ibid.). People also reportedly needed information on how to provide complaints and feedback (ibid.). Thus, information needs differ according not only to context but also to personal or group characteristics.

Figure 1 **Most commonly reported information gaps**

Source; data from Humanitarian situation overview of Syria, 2023.

The communication and engagement landscape

Media

A cursory view of the media landscape in NWS reveals a variety of institutions and outlets from which people can source information. As of November 2019, there were 162 active media institutions and outlets covering Syria, 107 of which were operating within the country, and only four of which were operating from armed opposition regions in NWS (SCM, 2020). All four of these institutions are privately owned. Other opposition-led media outlets broadcast in NWS but operate from elsewhere, such as Orient News and Enab Baladi.

Most residents in NWS do not trust official sources from their areas' respective governments. However, they will still consult information shared by their respective governments, if only to keep abreast of messaging and official political positioning. Because the political and information landscapes are fragmented, distrust of official narratives is pervasive across all four zones of governance. Understanding the complexities of information dynamics within and across zones – including how people receive and share information and their channel preferences – is vital for actors involved in humanitarian response.

The use of digital tools far outstrips the use of traditional formats. According to the Syria Audience Research Study in 2023, 60% of their survey's respondents said they use social media platforms more than three times a day to access news. More than 74% said they trusted news they receive on social media from friends and

family more than traditional formats. This is in contrast to the ‘medium’ level of trust in various sources of information in general (FPU, 2023). Media actors who CDAC spoke with are well aware of the popularity of digital tools and all leverage social media and messaging applications to share information and to engage with their audiences. The most popular platforms included WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as their individual websites.

Preferred channels for sourcing and sharing information

Syrians across all demographics actively share and discuss news and information with one another, primarily via social media and messaging applications and face-to-face interactions (FPU, 2023). According to Syrians from affected communities who spoke with CDAC – men, women and youth, and Syrian humanitarian staff – these were preferred channels of information before the earthquake and remain so in its aftermath.

WhatsApp and Telegram were cited as the most effective channels of communication because of their accessibility and because they are well established. However, access to these platforms, and thus preferences for their usage, is highly gendered. A participant in a group interview with women humanitarians explained:

Not all people can use Telegram because not all people can buy phone numbers. Some people prefer WhatsApp because it is easier to get a foreign number. So, news targeting women specifically should be sent over WhatsApp, but if the news is for the whole community, it can be shared by Telegram.

Figure 2 Communication channels used by people in northwest Syria

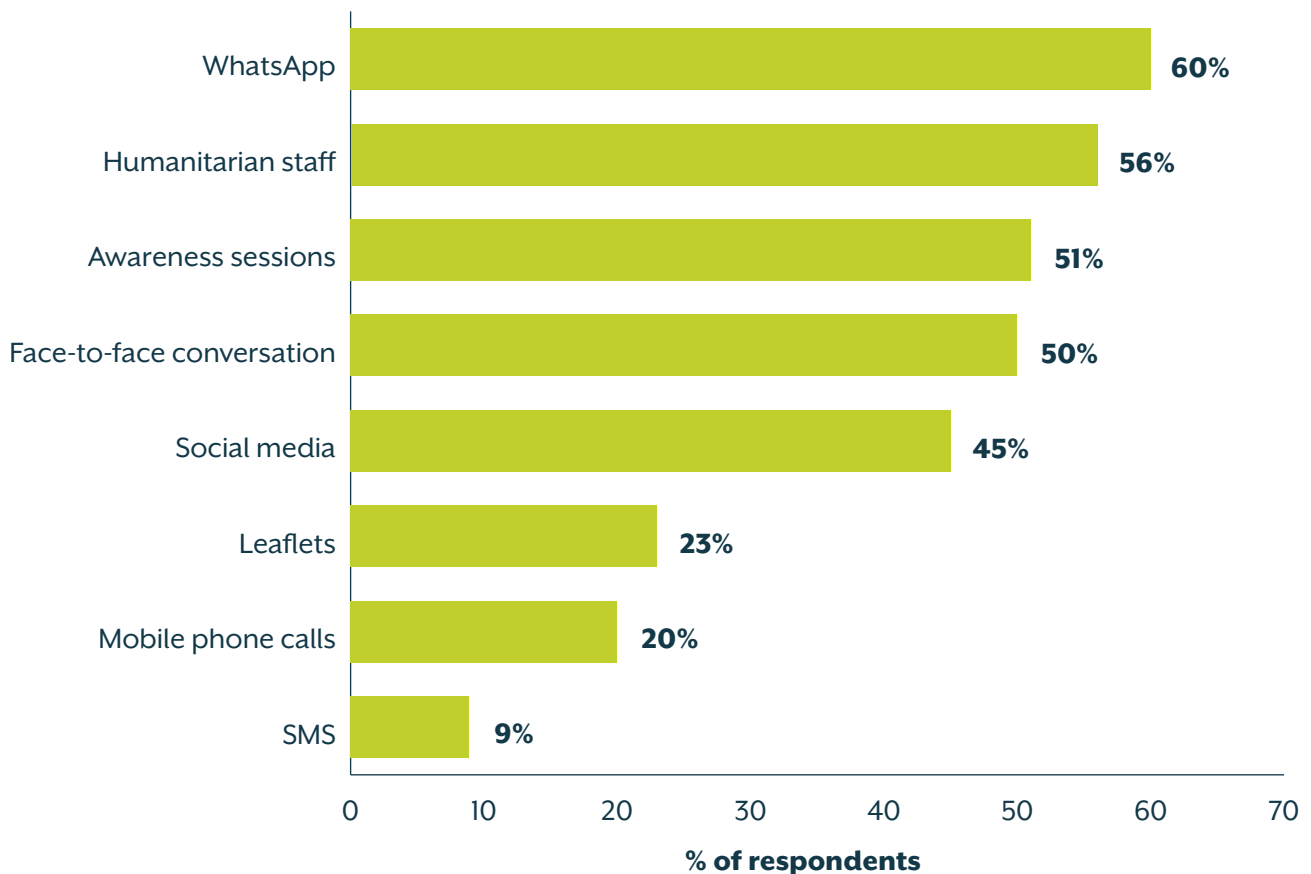


Because the acquisition of a local number is difficult and expensive, men are more likely to use the platform than women, who turn to WhatsApp. The gendered preference for these platforms impacts how humanitarian response actors should leverage each. Furthermore, it clarifies why women are more likely than men to favour face-to-face communication. Those who have access to them prefer phones, but women's access to phones is limited (KII; OCHA, 2022; Protection Cluster, 2023; World Vision, 2023).

Communication on Telegram and WhatsApp often occurs through multiple community groups, ranging from neighbourhood groups and parents of students to channels dedicated to sharing specific news or information about humanitarian aid delivery. Those who spoke with CDAC stressed that the most accessible format for receiving information via these channels was video.

When information was deemed sensitive or potentially threatening to physical security, face-to-face communication and direct phone calls were the preferred channels (KII; OCHA, 2022; Protection Cluster, 2023; World Vision, 2023). Several Syrian women conveyed that sharing information face-to-face became more important following the earthquake. However, women lacked the time to gather collectively and, due to cultural norms, could not effectively leverage in-person communication with community leaders, imams or camp managers. This remained the purview of their husbands, on whom they became more reliant for information after the earthquake. A woman in Jindires said, 'I turn to my husband for information because he can talk directly with the camp manager'.

Figure 3 Preferred communication channels, northwest Syria



Source: Rapid protection assessment dashboard, 2023.

Information sources and verification mechanisms

Different demographics seek different information from different sources for a range of reasons. However, social media groups or local face-to-face interactions were more likely to be used to share updates on aid distribution following the earthquakes. Other sources of information included local councils, local authorities or camp managers, humanitarians and volunteers, community awareness sessions and, for a minority, local or international media and media activists. These remained important sources of information even after the earthquakes, with additional emphasis on the Syria Civil Defence (White Helmets), humanitarians, camp managers, local councils and volunteer teams. Volunteer-based committees and community-based organisations (CBOs) can also be a source of information, as can friends, communities and respected peers.

Amid the chaos and confusion that marked the earthquakes, affected populations sought information from all available channels. However, the sheer amount of information circulated was cited as a barrier to accessing quality information. Syrians who spoke with CDAC discussed the lack of organised mechanisms for information dissemination as a hindrance to staying informed. The usual mechanisms of triangulation and observation used to verify information were overloaded: the sheer amount of incoming information, coupled with electricity and internet outages, made it very difficult to employ social media, messaging groups or websites to verify information. During this period, people relied heavily on those they trusted – whether camp managers, local council representatives or family members – to discern fake news from fact. Despite the chaotic context, people did their best to ensure that what they shared was fact. A participant in a group interview with Syrian men explained:

When I receive information, I share it within the circle or with friends and relatives after checking if it is from an unusual source. If it is from a used or trusted source, I do not need to check.

Access to information: infrastructure, language, literacy and sociocultural norms

The array of languages spoken in NWS, differences in people's oral and written comprehension of these languages, and varying literacy rates influence access to information. The most widely spoken languages in NWS are Levantine Arabic and Kurdish (Kurmanji). Kurds constitute the largest minority group in Syria, at about 10% of the country's population. While not all Kurdish speakers are bilingual, some are literate in Arabic. Kurmanji is primarily written using the Latin alphabet. Some marginalised language speakers might prefer spoken information in their primary language but written information in Arabic (CLEAR Global, 2023). A woman humanitarian, during an interview, illustrated the challenges of this context:

There are a lot of people who cannot read, so they cannot read written information [shared with them]. There are also women who don't have phones, so they have to ask their husbands or the camp manager, the camp manager's wife, or a woman with electricity who can read. We need to use more voice notes.

Women, older people and children in the earthquake-affected areas tend to have lower literacy rates. There is also a lack of data on the number of users of Levantine Arabic sign language and other minority languages in the affected areas (CLEAR Global, 2023). All actors involved in humanitarian response who spoke with CDAC conduct messaging in Arabic, and a little more than half also conduct activities in Kurdish. Only two also conduct messaging in Turkish. The complexity of language preferences may be difficult to navigate and integrate into programming without the added nuances of differential language preferences for written versus oral communication.

Considering the context, it is unsurprising that a significant challenge in humanitarian programming and research (including assessments) is language. This is aggravated by inconsistent availability of translation services. Working closely with local partners and actors involved in humanitarian response is essential. While local involvement is sometimes seen as another ‘box-ticking’ exercise as opposed to a meaningful effort at inclusion (LSE, 2022), it could play a significant role in addressing this challenge.

In addition, humanitarian actors working in the response do not consistently collect, monitor or make available data on the languages of people in need. This information gap is particularly acute due to the lack of other sources of data and information on language use in Syria in general and the affected areas in particular. Without this critical data, the response lacks a proper understanding of the complexities of language use and preferences of affected populations, and how language presents barriers to accessing information and communication mechanisms. Humanitarian actors cannot therefore design appropriate communication strategies to reach marginalised groups.

Sociocultural dynamics, particularly in terms of culturally appropriate interaction with women, are also a barrier to information access. One actor involved in humanitarian response noted that most of their social mobilisers are men, but men cannot enter homes and must remain outside the house to speak with women. However, women social mobilisers require a *mahram* to travel, so their organisation is looking into the possibility of hiring couples to work together.

Humanitarians also noted that they lack information about local media and local communication initiatives, as well as the prevalence of traditional media formats such as radio. One suggestion was for communities to share a calendar of events with humanitarians so responders can use community events as a dissemination platform. While innovative, this approach may likewise be complicated by sociocultural norms which may impede women’s attendance.

Language, literacy and sociocultural challenges are exacerbated by damaged information and communication technologies (ICTs) infrastructure, particularly considering the reliance on social media to source and share information. Mobile phone and internet coverage varies across NWS. People living near the northern border rely on Turkish internet service providers or expensive satellite connections, and internet access is frequently shut down by authorities, especially during military operations. The use of Turkish internet lines has expanded into the Aleppo countryside, but has been prohibited by authorities in Kurdish-held areas since April 2019 (EJC, 2023).

Weak internet, lack of electricity and lack of transport are key barriers for everyone. Women noted that they had fewer opportunities than men to gather and share information, stemming from a lack of access to mobile phones. Women in Jindires also explained that, in families where there are only one or two phones, the person leaving the home (usually male) will take the phone with them, leaving those at home without. An overreliance on telecommunications technology guarantees that some people will be left behind.

Trust, influence, reliability, and the media’s struggle for credibility

Most people that CDAC spoke to said they got their information from sources they trusted. While these sources differed by type of crisis or information need, they generally included religious leaders, community leaders and local councils, health workers, local NGOs and implementing partners, and CBOs and volunteers.

Perceived *trusted and reliable* sources also include individuals considered knowledgeable and respected in a specific field, such as scientists, midwives, teachers, doctors, health workers and NGO staff – those with

proven expertise to assist in a crisis. Notably, trusted sources of information during the COVID-19 pandemic were not the same as those solicited during the earthquakes. They are called upon depending on the alignment of their capacities with the requirements to effectively respond to the crisis at hand. Such trusted sources of information can and do communicate via social media, using dedicated WhatsApp groups for parents or Telegram channels to disseminate information about humanitarian assistance.

On social media, some groups expressed explicit distrust in UN agencies, fearing too close a relationship between the UN and the regime in Damascus. Some social media users even suggested that UN institutions posed a risk to their personal safety (Insecurity Insight, 2023c; see Box 1). Many users also expressed concerns about corrupt practices in some aid agencies and the belief that people in need would not receive aid that was intended for them. Many communities on social media did not trust the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, perceiving them to be too closely tied to the government in Damascus and believing that officials misused their positions for personal gain (Insecurity Insight, 2023b). No concrete allegations were shared on social media, and it remains unclear what experiences or information has shaped these strongly negative sentiments.

Influence is often assumed to be a component of trust. Indeed, Syrians from the affected communities who spoke with CDAC named many different categories of people who are considered *influential and trusted* as relied-upon sources of information. One such entity is the Syria Civil Defence, or White Helmets, who were almost unanimously named as a trusted source, especially during disasters. Trust in the White Helmets is largely attributed to their active engagement and dedication to the communities in which they work. Other trusted actors named by community members in the wake of the earthquake included AFAD for communities near the Turkish border and NGOs working in their communities with a long history and positive track record. These actors were noted as being trustworthy as well as influential.

Men were more likely than women to cite community leaders as an influential and trusted source. Other sources less often mentioned as trusted include civil society, humanitarians and religious leaders. Heads of tribes or big families were mentioned only by Syrian humanitarians and not by members of the affected communities. Relying on them as interlocutors or communication focal points may thus undercut the humanitarian response; if community members do not trust the source of information, they will be reluctant to act upon it.

People who are trusted are generally people who are known to the community and viewed as honest. Syrians from the affected communities also trust eyewitnesses and people affected by crisis. This extends to activists and social media influencers. However, it is worth noting that some participants who spoke with CDAC expressed scepticism about social media influencers.

While influence and trust are often linked, not all influential sources are trusted. In one group interview, men noted that the military force controlling the region they live in is influential, but it is not trusted. The mixed assessment of sources detailed above reflects the same dissonance between influence and trust, at times gauged differently by different demographics. The complexities of the relationship between influence and trust must be considered in humanitarian response programming.

Media actors in NWS present an acute example of the interplay between influence and trust. Only a minority of Syrian youth who spoke with CDAC identified media agencies – local and international – as trusted sources of information. Politics and the politicisation of media impact perceptions of its trustworthiness. As well as being influential, media itself is influenced by and dependent on politicians. According to the Syria

Audience Research Study, being able to identify media partnership with political associations negatively influences trust in media (higher association leads to lower trust), with TV news least favoured because it is largely controlled by the government and thus viewed as inherently biased (FPU, 2023).

Box 1

Navigating community trust: the case of negative online perceptions of the aid response in northwest Syria

In a landscape where social media wields significant influence, negative online perceptions can lead to the erosion of trust in humanitarian efforts. Social media monitoring in the aftermath of the earthquakes revealed comments and allegations of corruption within the aid response. While no concrete instances of corruption were discussed, social media users expressed scepticism about aid distribution, fearing its diversion by those in control. In April and May 2023, a series of posts were published on X accusing a UN employee and the UN itself of collaborating with the Syrian regime and handing over Syrian refugees. The tweets were widely circulated and actively engaged with by communities, sparking outrage and deepening existing distrust in the UN. The following messages circulating online exemplify these negative perceptions and rumours:

I wonder if the poor Syrian citizen would get something from [the aid]. Of course, certainly not. God takes revenge on every person who steals the poor citizen's morsel.

Aid goes to Damascus and is taken by charity organisations who [then] sell it.

Most United Nations employees working on Syria are related to the Syrian regime and those who are independent would never get the job.

Negative online perceptions of the earthquake response highlight the fragility of trust in humanitarian efforts, underscoring the need for transparent communication strategies that provide facts, alleviate long-standing suspicions and safeguard the integrity of aid distribution.

First, aid agencies must adopt robust anti-corruption measures to preserve trust. Acknowledging that perceptions may stem from long-held beliefs rather than current events, agencies must communicate changes in aid allocation with sensitivity to possible misinterpretations. Second, social media influencers wield significant power in shaping perceptions: they can reinforce existing suspicions and deepen distrust, particularly within communities that already harbour such sentiments. A targeted approach to engaging influencers and disseminating accurate information is imperative. Finally, addressing preconceived notions unrelated to specific emergencies is critical. Humanitarian communications must proactively address distrust, emphasising neutrality and commitment to humanitarian principles. By understanding and navigating these complex dynamics, aid agencies can pave the way for more effective, transparent and impactful humanitarian responses.

For more, see: Insecurity Insight (2023a; b; c).

Media actors struggle to overcome this reputation and establish credibility with their audiences. All media who CDAC spoke with emphasised their independence from Syrian governments and reluctance to engage formally with government actors. One media organisation said it had formal partnerships with trusted Syrian NGOs, while others noted they engage with NGOs but do not have formal partnerships. Most engagement focuses on obtaining accurate information from humanitarians to be able to provide fact-based coverage on a crisis. After the earthquakes, some media actors worked closely with NGOs to serve as community-oriented channels for information, while others established new partnerships with local councils, trade unions and Syrian civil society organisations. Some media actors said they faced occasional challenges in working with humanitarians, including lack of cooperation and delays in response to questions from media. In this manner, media actors sought to establish their independence and trustworthiness through collaboration with organisations already trusted by communities.

Communication in the humanitarian response

The humanitarian response leveraged pre-existing communication channels and expanded them, at times demonstrating innovation and creativity. At the same time, inadequate attention was given to CFMs, undermining responsiveness to community needs and concerns. This discrepancy aids in explaining the divergent assessments of affected communities and humanitarian actors concerning communication in the response.

Complaints and feedback mechanisms

It is worth noting that immediately after the earthquake, 20% of people interviewed in the Rapid Protection Assessment said they did not know how to make a complaint, and 15% said they did not trust the available complaint mechanisms because, when they tried to make a complaint, they either could not reach anyone or their issue was not resolved (Protection Sector, 2023).

Many humanitarians in Syria have come to rely on local committees working with community leaders as a way of collecting feedback from affected communities. Partnering with local committees and NGOs builds on existing community structures, but the quality and consistency of feedback depends on pre-existing trust between the communities and those collecting information – in this case, local committees and community leaders (LSE, 2022). From consultations with affected communities, CDAC has found that whether or not a local or community leader is trusted is highly dependent on the leader's track record within the community. Humanitarians need to be more aware of local dynamics before relying on local councils, camp managers and other local authorities for information collection and dissemination. Local NGOs are also important in the data collection process, coordinating with local committees and bridging the gap between affected communities and international actors, but the efficacy of their involvement is also predicated on pre-existing relationships and trust. A woman humanitarian recounted:

When I asked women about their preferred complaint and feedback mechanisms and the best way to complain, they said 'someone like you' – face to face. WhatsApp and Telegram don't allow for privacy for complaints. They're good to share information, but not to receive it.

Perspectives of affected people and communities

Many Syrians from the affected communities who spoke with CDAC said they are somewhat satisfied with the communication channels that exist. In one interview with women, participants said that they are unsatisfied with current mechanisms for communication with humanitarians and that it would be better if there were institutions or groups who specialised solely in providing accurate information. This dissatisfaction was echoed by humanitarians from the affected communities who also said that hotlines are often not answered or are not helpful, and that people want more active monitoring of and working with local councils.

Some men from the affected communities said that communication with humanitarian responders relies primarily on personal relationships, and the communication then happens via WhatsApp. Others said that communities do not know how to communicate with aid actors and also that official social media accounts are used for one-way communication to communities, instead of receiving information from them.

People noted the need to tailor communication, for example when it is sensitive. In these cases, Telegram channels and WhatsApp groups do not offer privacy for feedback or complaints about sensitive issues, and phone calls or face-to-face interaction are preferred. Other ways of communicating with humanitarians included visiting local offices, calling hotlines and face-to-face interactions with humanitarians on the ground.

Some respondents, however, said the issue is not communication but the fact that response to affected communities is slow and weak. They noted that hotlines are slow or hard to read and many said they do not know of any alternatives to the existing systems. People in affected communities seem poorly informed of communication mechanisms, and those who managed to engage with them found them ineffective and unidirectional. People struggled to convey feedback and when their concerns *were* addressed, it was with significant delays. Furthermore, existing CFMs do not always provide avenues for securely disclosing sensitive information, negatively affecting already vulnerable groups like women and girls. The inattention to the specific needs of people with disabilities should also be noted.

Perspectives of humanitarian actors

Humanitarian actors who spoke with CDAC were mostly aware of the importance of social media, especially WhatsApp and Telegram, among affected communities. Some noted that, while social media is a preferred channel for receiving information, it is also rife with mis- and disinformation. Most humanitarians spoke of efforts to diversify CCEA mechanisms. For international responders, mechanisms included working with social mobilisers, community health workers, religious leaders, hotlines and direct messaging. Syrian NGOs described more community-based engagement mechanisms, including hiring staff from communities, dedicated focal points on the ground, general meetings and other ways of engaging face-to-face and via social media. Despite the effort to employ a range of CCEA strategies, it is uncertain whether dynamics of trust and influence were taken into account in programming

Only some humanitarian actors who were interviewed perceived limitations to the overall response. All actors involved in humanitarian response who spoke with CDAC said they do not engage with media for messaging. Some noted engagement with media for fundraising but not to engage directly with communities, while others noted that populations do not seek information from media so partnership would not necessarily be effective. Although the media was not regularly cited as a trusted source, partnerships between humanitarian and media actors could enhance the dissemination of humanitarian information and trust could be built if information is followed by results.

In the aftermath of the earthquakes, humanitarian actors stated that they leveraged and ramped up existing communication mechanisms and disseminated information via community dialogue sessions, posters and flyers, edutainment sessions and door-to-door visits (Klls; UNICEF, 2023a). The AAP Task Force expanded to include a broader group of organisations with an AAP focal point, becoming a community of practice. Some local organisations established staff committees in different locations to verify information and follow up with local councils, others expanded face-to-face communication initiatives, launched new communication initiatives and convened community discussions or carried out social media listening to gather information (UNICEF, 2023b). Working with local leaders, volunteers and community organisations was identified by Syrian NGOs as a best practice.

Case study: communication and engagement ecosystems of people with disabilities

Even before the earthquakes, more than a quarter of the population of NWS had a disability (Protection Cluster, 2021). Most people in Syria over the age of 56 have a disability, which is important concerning the intersection of gender, age and disability in humanitarian crises (ibid.). People with disabilities face challenges accessing information in general and especially during crisis (OCHA, 2022; Protection Cluster, 2023). This section looks at communication flows as well as barriers to communication and engagement faced by people with disabilities in NWS.

Communication flows

How people with disabilities receive information depends on the type and severity of their disability. For example, people with intellectual, learning or psychosocial impairments generally receive information from specialists or caregivers, with the delivery method adapted to their level of perception. People with motor impairments may rely more on social media, rehabilitation centres and family members, while people with hearing or visual impairments will rely on different communication formats such as sign language or audio descriptions.

People with disabilities are not just passive recipients of information: they share information via social media and face-to-face. Like the general population, during emergencies, people with disabilities become more reliant on people they trust, and information-sharing becomes more focused and specific.

Barriers to communication and engagement

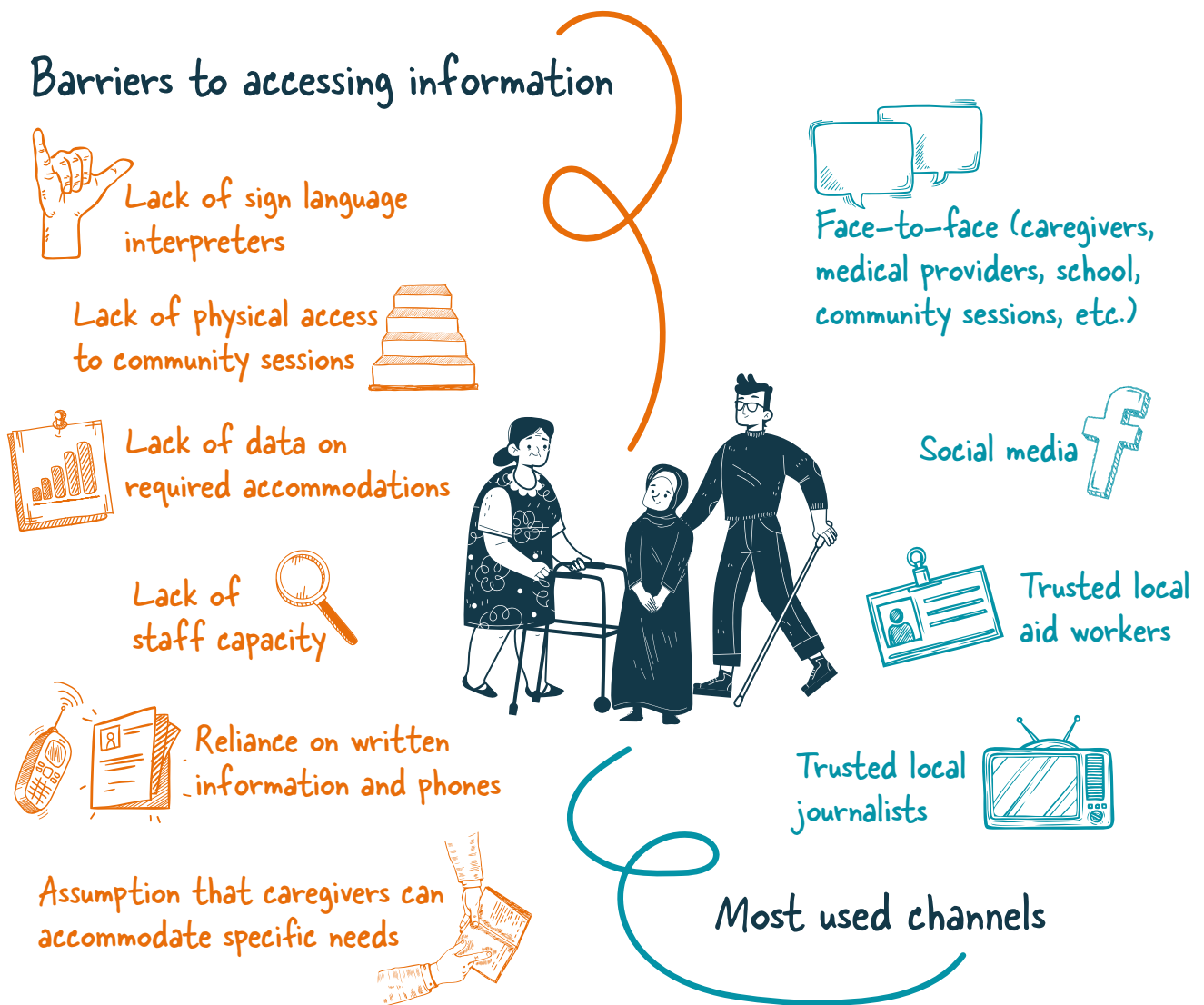
Key challenges to accessing information include inappropriate physical environments that restrict movement; the absence of trained specialists to deliver information in ways that accommodate specific needs; the lack of assistive devices; and inability or lack of knowledge about how to use a smartphone or navigate social media platforms. A study by the Syrian American Medical Society found that the way information is presented to people with disabilities lacks accommodations for their specific needs. Currently, information is presented using complicated language or jargon, and much of it is designed for people without disabilities. It is assumed that family members or the system itself will accommodate the needs of people with disabilities (SAMS, 2023). However, there is little evidence of these accommodations in key spaces, such as health facilities (ibid.). Caregivers, who are another main source of information, face their own challenges accessing information, including limited access to smartphones, lack of familiarity with rehabilitation centres, the absence of local TV or radio stations and low literacy levels or illiteracy.

When people with disabilities receive information, it is rarely timely or relevant. Often, information targeting people with disabilities is delayed because of ignorance around effective communication channels. People with disabilities struggle to access information about how to access healthcare and camp coordination

and camp management (CCCM) services. They need information about available services, free services and humanitarian services tailored to their specific needs; information was identified as one of the key barriers preventing adequate access to healthcare (OCHA, 2022; SAMS, 2023). People have been required to find strategies to overcome these barriers, such as relying on family members to understand or share information (SAMS, 2023).

People with disabilities also face additional physical barriers to engaging in community information sessions, a common way of disseminating information, along with an increased threat of exploitation and abuse in the community (Protection Cluster, 2021). There is also an overall lack of reasonable accommodation and referral pathways for people with disabilities, along with limited participation in community consultations and decision-making (ibid.).

Figure 4 **Spotlight on information access for people with disabilities in northwest Syria**



Conclusion

This study highlights the challenges that Syrians face in accessing information. This is particularly true for women facing resource constraints and sociocultural norms, as well as people with disabilities who face additional barriers. Evidence of how intersecting vulnerabilities, for example of gender and disability, affect access to information remains underdeveloped and requires further exploration.

The results show that Syrians' reliance on information sources remained consistent during and post-earthquakes. Face-to-face interactions and social media platforms and groups are generally preferred communication channels due to their accessibility and established history of providing and triangulating information. Local councils, camp managers, humanitarians, community gatherings and awareness-raising sessions were trusted sources before and after the earthquakes. Though Syrians actively share information via social media platforms, face-to-face interactions gained importance after the earthquakes, particularly for women. Post-earthquake information needs shifted towards shelter, food, WASH and access to assistance. Women and young girls also needed tailored information as to available channels through which to raise sensitive issues like sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

Trust in sources is linked to active community engagement and expertise on the specific issues. Engaging with a diversity of sources is crucial for building trust between humanitarian actors and communities, as not all sources are equally trusted across contexts. Actors involved in humanitarian response need to consider these nuances around trust when establishing partnerships with interlocutors and community organisations. Monitoring the reputation of the aid response on social media can provide useful insights for the design of transparent communication strategies to alleviate misinterpretations.

Establishing effective and accessible CFMs is vital. While social media is favoured, an over-reliance on social media risks excluding those who cannot access these platforms, those who require tailored communication approaches due to disability and those without adequate technological literacy to navigate them.

Actors involved in humanitarian response would strengthen their CCEA activities by diversifying communication channels; leveraging traditional tools such as radio broadcasts; and understanding the determinants of trust in information sources. The diversification of communication channels alone will not suffice if messages are not aligned with audience preferences and languages. Communication strategies must be sensitive to language, culture and context, which entails consistently collecting, monitoring and making available data on languages and preferences. Effective humanitarian response planning requires diverse engagement with trusted sources within communities, along with sensitivity towards the needs of marginalised groups. This approach enhances ownership of the response and recovery, thereby amplifying the overall impact.

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