

Lessons on communication, community engagement and accountability for the Türkiye–Syria earthquake response

February 2023



A 7.7 magnitude earthquake struck southern Türkiye and northwest Syria on 6 February 2023, causing devastating damage and loss of life. As of 13 February, more than **31,000 people have lost their lives** across both countries, with search and rescue efforts ongoing. Tens of thousands of buildings have been destroyed or damaged, making countless people homeless and in great need of assistance. Cold weather, existing social tensions and the compounding needs of a large internally displaced and refugee population further challenge the ongoing response.

As the disaster continues to unfold – and with a view towards recovery – humanitarian responders must prioritise the provision of life-saving information in relevant languages and formats, two-way communication and engagement with affected communities. In a crisis of this magnitude, accountability to affected people (AAP) and ensuring their needs inform response planning will be critical.

Here are top lessons and recommendations to strengthen communication, community engagement and accountability (CCEA) for the response in Türkiye and Syria.¹

¹ Based on CDAC Network members' situation updates from ongoing responses in Türkiye and Syria, as well as CDAC's learnings from earthquake responses in Haiti and Nepal. See: CDAC Network (2017) [Are you listening now? Community perspectives on communication with communities during the Nepal earthquake](#); CDAC Network (2012) [Ann kite yo pale \(let them speak\): best practice and lessons learned in communication with disaster affected communities, Haiti 2010](#) ; BBC Media Action (n.d.) [Nepal earthquake](#).

1 People need information they can use *now* to stay safe and make critical decisions

The situation following an earthquake continues to worsen until basic survival and protection needs are met. As the first to respond, affected people need focused, accurate information in their main language on how to stay safe and make critical decisions that impact their survival, coping, reunification and recovery. Early reports from Syria indicate that people don't have enough information on how to access relief, shelter and temporary settlement – with people resorting to sleeping in cars and staying in damaged buildings.² Concerns around [cholera outbreaks, protection and other risks](#) indicate the need to integrate and prioritise information provision and communication across sectors. Research from other crises shows that people want to hear actionable information from sources they trust, which often includes information from government, local leadership and other service providers.

Recommendations

- Leverage and amplify government messaging and public information in relevant languages through various, accessible channels.
- Support local media and journalists to respond to the crisis and information needs, while recognising sensitivities with media coverage and reporting.
- Mainstream CCEA approaches among diverse actors and identification of information and communication needs across different sectors.

Resources

- [How-to guide on collective communication and community engagement in humanitarian action](#) (English, Arabic) – CDAC Network
- [Communication needs assessments](#) – CDAC Network
- [Local media and community engagement in humanitarian settings](#) – Internews
- [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
- [Lifeline production manual for journalists](#) (English, Arabic) – BBC Media Action
- [Guide for humanitarians on working with media](#) (English, Arabic) – BBC Media Action
- [Engaging with people affected by armed conflicts and other situations of violence](#) – International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

2 CDAC member situation updates. See also: Mercy Corps (2023) [Depleting supplies, limited communications challenge earthquake response in northwest Syria as aid efforts get underway](#), press release, 9 February.

2 Support people to reconnect and communicate with loved ones

Reconnecting and communicating with loved ones and service providers is always a high priority in the aftermath of a disaster. Restoring connectivity and ensuring people have access to communication devices is essential – and provides survivors with much needed psychosocial relief. Early reports from Türkiye indicate [some disruptions to connectivity and damage to infrastructure](#), while mobile operators have stepped in to deploy mobile base stations and free phone and internet services.

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.
- Work with telecommunications actors to ensure access to essential channels remains free.

Resources

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

3 Prioritise and communicate findings from early analysis to understand two-way information flows with affected communities

Investing in understanding the full spectrum of channels that people use and trust can improve information flows and the effectiveness of the response. The initial response in Türkiye has seen a prioritisation of SMS blasts by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) to widely disseminate public information. Responders can support and amplify these messages, as well as establishing two-way communication channels so that affected people and responders can engage in continuous dialogue on their needs and concerns. For example, Türkiye Red Crescent has an operational national call centre, accessible in Turkish, Arabic, Farsi, Pashto and English.

Online information has significant reach in Türkiye, where **84% of the population are internet users and about 75% social media users**. Meanwhile, strategies for two-way communication and engagement must look different in Syria, where **less than half of the population are internet users**.

Recommendations

- Include key questions on information and communication in needs assessments. Early analysis of information ecosystems is essential to understand, engage and build relationships with communities.
- Don't underestimate the importance of word of mouth and face-to-face interactions when designing communication and engagement strategies.
- Be aware that some speakers of minority languages will struggle to understand or make themselves understood in Turkish or Arabic.

Resources

- [Information ecosystem assessments – Internews](#)
- [Community engagement and accountability \(CEA\) toolkit](#): Questions to integrate into assessments (tool 13) – International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)
- [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

4 Link CCEA efforts with local systems and existing coordination structures

Agencies ramping up their responses must prioritise actively linking 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 AAP and ensure NGO participation in cluster coordination.³ Local networks that agencies can support include the League of Syrian Networks and the OCHA-led Syrian Civil Society Organisations' Platform, as well as many NGOs that have existing complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFMs) in affected areas.⁴

At the international coordination level, it will be critical to link with the Humanitarian Liaison Group's Action Plan for Change (AAP) Multi-stakeholder Taskforce to amplify common messages and promote inclusion of key questions on CCEA within needs assessments, as well as strengthen a coherent approach to CFMs. The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster further provides essential coordination on telecommunications services and reestablishing connectivity.

Recommendations

- Fortify existing links between local/national and international coordination mechanisms to strengthen information-sharing, amplify common messages and promote coherence in CCEA efforts.
- Promote information-sharing with existing CFMs in affected areas, cross-check information between agency-specific hotlines and compare feedback and questions. This will be strengthened by adopting common taxonomies to tag complaints and feedback.

Resources

- [Learnings from Peer-2-Peer project in Gaziantep](#) – Peer-2-Peer/IASC
- [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)

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

4 London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) (2022) [Accountability to affected people: assessing NGO engagement with the Collective AAP Framework](#) (case study on Gaziantep and north-west Syria).

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

Concerns around rumours are already increasing among responders in Türkiye. During the 2015 earthquake response in Nepal, there was high demand for information to counter rumours that were circulating about aftershocks and relief efforts, particularly in the first days and weeks after the earthquake when people were most fearful.⁵ Rumours can create undue suffering, raise expectations and provoke unsafe behaviour. Getting clear, up-to-date and verified information to affected people in the languages they understand best is critical to stop harmful rumours in their tracks.

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; verifying and triangulating facts; and engaging 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](#) (English, Arabic) – CDAC Network
- [Managing misinformation in a humanitarian context](#) – Internews

6 Elevate the 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 a growing need. 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.

Resource

- [Language-related questions for new and ongoing surveys](#) – CLEAR Global
- [Five easy steps to integrate language data into humanitarian and development programmes](#) – CLEAR Global

7 Cash will be a key component of the response: this requires specialised communication and community engagement to increase impact and resilience

Türkiye has the world's largest humanitarian cash programme – the European Union (EU)-funded [Emergency Social Safety Net \(ESSN\)](#), run by the Turkish Red Crescent and IFRC. Early investment in communication and community engagement around cash assistance programmes will be vital to increase their impact and reach. 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 circulated on the radio.⁶ Promoting and socialising cash programmes through affected people's preferred channels in Türkiye and Syria will be essential, with detailed and accurate information on eligibility, application and activation processes.⁷

Cash distribution can present an excellent opportunity for information-sharing not only on the programme but also on available services, key messages and feedback.

Recommendations

- Collaborate with cash colleagues and coordination structures to ensure CCEA is integrated and prioritised. This includes 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, complaints and 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
- [Cash and CEA](#) – IFRC
- [Türkiye cross-border: Cash Working Group – Northwest Syria \(NWS\)](#)

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

7 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: International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2015) [Communicating with communities: a case study and guide from Pakistan and elsewhere](#).

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

Millions of people in the affected areas in both Türkiye and Syria were refugees or internally displaced people already battling challenging circumstances prior to the earthquake. As more and more people are faced with homelessness and temporary accommodation in camp settings, communication and engagement strategies must consider diverse needs.

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.

The affected area in Syria is particularly hard to reach, exacerbated by severe winter weather. Communication and engagement approaches must consider the needs of these remote and rural communities.

Recommendations

- Collect gender- and diversity-disaggregated data and use this to ensure there are active efforts to reach women and diverse community groups such as transgender people.
- 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](#) (Arabic, Turkish) – IASC
- [PSEA glossary](#) (Arabic, Turkish, three Kurdish dialects) – CLEAR Global
- [Rules on sexual conduct for humanitarian workers](#) (Arabic (MSA), Turkish, Kurdish Kurmanji (Badini)) – CLEAR Global
- [No excuse for abuse](#): PSEA training (Kurdish Kurmanji, Turkish, Arabic) – InterAction



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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