

Solidarity at scale:
Local responder
perspectives and learning
from the first week of
the earthquake response
in Syria and Türkiye



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It is a short and very rapid review based on a limited number of interviews conducted in the 10 days immediately after the earthquake, primarily with Syrian and Turkish people involved in the early humanitarian response. It took place between 10 and 20 February 2023. The interviews were complemented by a review of emerging appeals, situation and other reports, and an analysis of the applicability of reviews of lessons from previous earthquake responses.

The team conducted a series of rapid qualitative, semi-structured interviews with first responders on the ground in Syria and Türkiye, as well as humanitarian practitioners supporting or funding the response from outside the region. Frontline responders are themselves affected by the quakes and they provided poignant perspectives of how they and their communities are responding to and recovering from the disaster and its aftermath.

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The report represents the views of the authors, based on evidence gathered. For further information, please contact info@humanitarianoutcomes.org or info@ukhih.org. This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Acronyms

AFAD	Disaster And Emergency Management Presidency in Türkiye
ASAM	Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (Türkiye)
ESSN	Emergency Social Safety Net programme (Türkiye)
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IDP	Internally displaced person
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UN	United Nations

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Summary

This report provides a brief snapshot of issues and challenges facing humanitarian responders during the first 10 days of the earthquake response. It is based on interviews with local responders in Syria and Türkiye, as well as a review of the emerging reports on the response and lessons learnt papers from previous earthquake responses.

The devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake and its aftershocks that hit southern Türkiye and north-west Syria on 6 February 2023 compounded the already tenuous humanitarian and economic situations in the region. Despite the scale of destruction and needs, local and national actors responded quickly on the ground. The governments and humanitarian aid communities in Türkiye and Syria mobilised search and rescue response efforts. In Türkiye this was led by Türk Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent) and AFAD (Disaster And Emergency Management Presidency within the Turkish Ministry of Interior), and in government-controlled parts of Syria by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and in north-west Syria, largely by the The Syria Civil Defense (The White Helmets) and other local groups. “Solidarity chains” formed quickly as citizens from less-affected areas or abroad mobilised resources to keep the emergency response afloat. In all cases, first responders were part of those affected – and even in communities where displacement is common, the sheer scale of destruction, acute level of need, and complexity of operations was daunting.

Learning from previous earthquakes can inform this response even though the circumstances and scale of this disaster are unique. As initial search and rescue operations wind down and the next phases of the response scale up, local responders recommend a dual focus on mental health and protection as well as people’s basic material needs that is well-coordinated and effectively communicated. A multifaceted response that addresses rubble management as well as secondary health and housing effects should consider a mixed modality approach to ensure first responders and affected people have access to what they need to recover – whether cash, in-kind, or other support.

Given the huge cost of reconstruction, humanitarian aid will be a small part of the overall financing and aid effort. Coordinating domestic efforts with development financing and identifying where international humanitarian actors can add the most value, will be crucial in the next phases.

Introduction: A 7.8 magnitude earthquake and its aftershocks hit an already precarious region

The earthquakes that hit southern Türkiye and north-west Syria on 6 February 2023 exacerbated difficult conditions in the region and created a large-scale humanitarian crisis. The epicentre of the initial 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit just north of the densely populated city of Gaziantep in southern Türkiye, close to the Syrian border. Twelve million people, including 2 million Syrian refugees, live in the hardest hit regions of Hatay, Sanliurfa, Adana, and Kahramanmaras in Türkiye. Another 6 million people are estimated to live in the heavily impacted Syrian provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia.¹ The quakes hit in winter and in a region weakened by over a decade of ongoing conflict, displacement, weak infrastructure, economic hardship, and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic. The quakes were especially devastating in opposition-held areas of Syria, where the response is further constrained by closed borders and reduced international humanitarian access. Aid organisations based throughout the earthquake zone were themselves some of the hardest hit, even as they tried to gear up responses.

Areas affected by the earthquakes on 6 February in Türkiye and Syria



Source: ACAPS (2023, 13 February)

¹ ACAPS. (2023, 13 February). *Syria and Türkiye: Profiles of earthquake-affected areas*. Thematic report. <https://www.acaps.org/country/turkey-turkiye/special-reports>.

Over the last decade, there has been a large UN and INGO presence in the region, expanded due to the Syrian conflict. However, most Syrian support was provided cross-border from Turkey, with limited international footprints in country. In Syria the initial earthquake response reflected the lack of international presence or strong governmental bodies coupled with a strong volunteer network. In recent years, humanitarian programming in Turkey had transitioned largely to Turkish actors – Turkish Red Crescent Society (Türk Kızılay), the government disaster relief body (AFAD) and active civil society, thus leaving few active international NGOs. Syrian and Turkish actors – civil society and volunteer groups – led in the early days of this response, and in many locations are likely to continue to do so.

One disaster, two realities

Prior to the quakes, Türkiye's humanitarian aid ecosystem was primarily focused on refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers, and the Emergency Social Safety Net programme (ESSN) implemented by Türk Kızılay, IFRC and AFAD, was characterised by an active civil society and a small number of international NGOs. Within hours of the first quake, Türk Kızılay mounted extensive search and rescue efforts in coordination with AFAD. Local humanitarian organisations quickly pivoted their work from supporting refugees and asylum seekers to supporting search and rescue efforts, and communities across the country began mobilising food and household items to send to affected areas. International organisations present in southern Türkiye, who had also predominantly been supporting refugees and asylum seekers, also shifted their support to the emergency efforts in the region.

By contrast, the initial response in north-west Syria highlighted the absence of a strong government response, large institutions, and international actors. North-west Syria was an already highly vulnerable area following nearly 12 years of active conflict, still with ongoing airstrikes, reduced access, limited (to no) formal governance or administrative services, and waning support from the international community. The provinces affected by the earthquake hosted over 3.7 million internally displaced people (IDPs) and an estimated 7.1 million people in need of humanitarian aid, with reported high levels of malnutrition, food insecurity, and poor health services.² The pre-existing conflict conditions have exacerbated the impact of the earthquake, while limiting the ability to provide sufficient assistance. Syrian responders spoke of an entirely locally-led response, without the heavy machinery, or specialised search and rescue tools and equipment they needed. The White Helmets leveraged their 3,000-strong network of volunteers to begin search and rescue efforts and provide coordination oversight almost immediately, while other groups said the first 24–48 hours were spent finding family and emerging from the shock before they were able to mount any relief efforts. Actors in this area spoke of the overwhelming scale of destruction left by the quakes and expressed frustration with the lack of appropriate equipment and their limited capacity to respond. They stressed their need for external support in the coming months and years.

² Ibid. p. 10.

Türkiye

The more institutionalised response in Türkiye, from both AFAD and Türk Kızılay, built on their experience with previous earthquakes and their coordinated response to the Syrian refugee influx into southern Türkiye.³ In the current crisis, AFAD coordinates and works closely with local, national, and international humanitarian organisations in severely affected areas like Hatay and Gaziantep. Yet the sheer scale of the destruction and widespread needs make it difficult and costly to respond adequately – even if only the most affected areas are prioritised.

Despite being directly affected themselves, local humanitarian organisations on the ground, like the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM), quickly pivoted their regular activities to search and rescue, rapid assessments, and distributions of essential items alongside protection and mental health support. First responders cited significant logistical challenges, including the impact of closed roads and congested routes reducing access to affected areas. A first responder also noted it was impossible to “sustain the normal living conditions” for the huge numbers of people affected across the disaster zones, particularly since each search and rescue operation was so resource-intensive.

Additional capacity arriving from abroad could make it more challenging for local responders to focus on the needs at hand. The international organisations meant to bolster the local response cannot locate their own premises, and in some cases their own staff and those flown in on surge support need guidance on where to begin. A coordinator with ASAM who arrived in Hatay shortly after the quake noted that “[their] offices are destroyed, they cannot recognise the place because the destruction is so total” (interview). In the initial phases of the response, the first responders consulted for this piece said they did not have much information on international partners’ plans to support or respond, and that they often did not know they were arriving until they were on site. Interestingly, some first responders did not distinguish between international search and rescue support, like the emergency teams arriving from nearby countries like Romania, Georgia, and Greece, and international humanitarian organisations (including UN agencies) offering a wider range of emergency assistance.⁴

Communities across the country began mobilising food and household items to send to affected areas in what one citizen responder called “solidarity chains” (interview). People in cities like Ankara or Istanbul could leave goods they had collected at designated drop-off points, where community volunteers would sort, bundle, and repackage items for distribution at scale in affected areas. An anthropological researcher interviewed for this report, who has worked with Turkish and refugee communities across the region, was in Ankara when the first quake hit. Having volunteered for the Marmara earthquake in 1999, he was impressed by the huge number of people who mobilised quickly to support community-led responses, particularly the youth. Turkish businesses across the country have also mobilised their national and international networks to provide critical supplies and logistical services and their initiatives are supported by the UN, as reported by the Turkish Enterprise and Business Confederation (TÜRKONFED).⁵ This type of citizen solidarity action often fills gaps in the early stages of a

³ AFAD is the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency within the Turkish Ministry of Interior, established in 2009 as a way to consolidate disaster management following the Marmara earthquake in 1999.

⁴ See: Marica, I. (2023, 8 February). *Romania sends second search and rescue team to Turkey*. Romania Insider. <https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-second-rescue-team-turkey-2023>; REF/RL. (2023, 7 February). *International rescue teams race to Turkey, Syria after devastating earthquake*. RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty. <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkey-earthquake-syria-rescue-teams-international-/32259850.html>; Kokkinidis, T. (2023, 13 February). *Greek rescue team returns from Turkey as hopes of survival fade*. GreekReporter. <https://greekreporter.com/2023/02/13/greece-rescue-team-turkey-earthquake/>

⁵ See: TÜRKONFED. (2023, 12 February). *Turkish businesses support the response to the Kahramanmaraş earthquake*. Press release. <https://www.turkonfed.org/en/detail/3947/turkish-businesses-support-the-response-to-the-kahramanmaras-earthquake>

response, where aid traceability (a key metric for accountability to humanitarian funders) is less of a priority than simply getting assistance to people – even in places where communities do not have much themselves.⁶

Another activist noted that despite longstanding political differences in Türkiye prior to the quake, all sides of the Turkish political spectrum mobilised their networks to assist communities and families in need. While this community solidarity across party lines is largely viewed as positive, political discord still colours the response – for example, how some people did not think the state was as present and responsive this time around as it was after the 1999 earthquake.⁷ Others felt the government dampened citizen-led responses, for example by limiting the bandwidth for Twitter, which people were using to communicate their locations under the rubble (interview).⁸ There are also concerns that when the initial acute phases of the crises give way to a longer recovery period, groups that are currently busy responding to emergency needs will refocus on political positioning and disagreements.⁹

North-west Syria

“Currently, the priorities are providing shelters, removing rubble and debris, providing psychological support programmes for survivors.”

– Ammar Al Selmo, The White Helmets, North-west Syria

Idleb, Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia were the most affected provinces in Syria. With a shifting patchwork of allegiances and state and non-state authorities governing the provinces, access and information are inconsistent, and in some cases wholly restricted. Responder interviews focused on actors in the harder-to-access, non-government controlled areas. When the quake hit, groups operating in these areas, like the White Helmets, had been responding to needs in the area for over a decade. They spoke to us of diminished attention on the crisis in recent years, but not diminished needs. Fuel reserves were low, they had limited equipment, and the impact of the border restrictions were still being felt across the north-west. Against this backdrop, the quake hit “at the worst possible time”.

The response inside Syria has been locally led, although no one was sufficiently prepared. Local actors had significant experience from responding to the effects of conflict, but not at this scale. The White Helmets interviewed for this report explained that during the conflict, search and rescue efforts were typically localised, and there were safe spaces to bring the injured for treatment. Now, hospitals were damaged, destroyed or overwhelmed, and all buildings posed some risk of further collapse. At the same time, they noted that although the scale of damage from the earthquake presented additional challenges, they were able to remain on site longer than they could after airstrikes, and were able to coordinate support in the open without fear of additional attacks. They said the first week after the earthquake was the first time in 12 years they had not responded to an airstrike.

⁶ See: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2023). *Afghanistan: Earthquake response. Lessons learnt exercise*. Final report. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-earthquake-response-lessons-learnt-exercise-final-report-january-2023>

⁷ See discussions in local, regional, and global media outlets: McKernan, B. (2023, 12 February). *Turkey earthquake death toll suggests lessons of 1999 were not learned*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/12/turkey-earthquake-death-toll-suggests-lessons-1999-not-learned>

⁸ See also: Fung, B. (2023, 9 February). *Twitter access in Turkey is restored, according to network monitoring firm*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/08/tech/turkey-twitter-restriction/index.html>

⁹ Key informant interview; see also discussion between Piotr Zalewski, The Economist, and Michel Martin, National Public Radio: NPR. (2023, 11 February). *The earthquake in Turkey could have political aftershocks*. <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/11/1156344064/the-earthquake-in-turkey-could-have-political-aftershocks>

A sudden onset natural disaster at this scale was unprecedented and responders were personally affected. A hospital employee in Idlib told us, “During the first and second day after the disaster we were still in shock and focused on getting our friends and relatives out from under the rubble.” It took several days for responders to gather themselves, and check on family and colleagues, before many felt they were able to respond more professionally to wider needs. The White Helmets were able to mobilise their entire volunteer force of over 3,000 individuals and worked in coordination with more than 300 volunteers from other organisations. Despite training as first responders during the conflict, most of these volunteers lacked the advanced search and rescue training necessary for this degree of destruction.

When the earthquake struck, only one official border crossing into north-west Syria (Bab Al-Hawa) was operational and it was so severely damaged that no aid could pass until 9 February 2023.¹⁰ On 11 February, Syrian state media announced that aid would be allowed into all parts of the country, coordinated by the UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent.¹¹ This included a promise to open both cross-border and cross-frontline access points. On 14 February, Bab Al-Salam and Al Ra’ee border crossings were opened, and as at 17 February, 178 trucks from six UN agencies had crossed the border, as well as aid to local actors from regional bodies such as the Barzani Charity Foundation.¹² The deal to open these additional crossings was met with scepticism across the region, and a sense of further politicisation of aid.¹³ One local group said they received legal advice indicating the regime had no basis to stop aid from crossing the borders, and that waiting those additional days for the government’s approval cost lives. Others felt it was a political move for the regime to reassert its control over the area, and that the delay to deliver cross-border was a failing of the humanitarian system.

¹⁰ ACAPS. (2023, 13 February).

¹¹ Doucet, L. (2023, 11 February). *Crisis upon crisis: Why it's hard to get help to Syria after earthquake*. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-64600913>

¹² OCHA. (2023, 17 February). *Earthquakes: North-west Syria*. Flash Update No. 11. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/earthquakes-north-west-syria-flash-update-no-11-17-february-2023>

¹³ See discussions in media outlets: Chehayeb, K. and Sewell, A. (2023, 14 February). *Syria's Assad could reap rewards from aid crossing deal*. Associated Press and SFGate. <https://www.sfgate.com/news/world/article/syria-s-assad-could-reap-rewards-from-aid-17784035.php>; and Doucet (2023, 11 February).

Key issues and lessons

Needs on an overwhelming scale

Despite extensive mobilisation of the local population and local organisations, the scale of destruction was overwhelming. One group in north-western Syria explained that the lack of human resources and insufficient equipment forced it to focus rescue efforts only on buildings and areas where voices could be heard under the rubble. Once rescued, available health services were extremely limited, and many survivors had nowhere to go. One actor highlighted challenges finding safe spaces for evacuation, as well as finding hospitals that were still standing and with capacity to treat survivors.

Humanitarian actors in Türkiye have decades of experience responding to earthquakes and other natural disasters within their own country and abroad.¹⁴ Yet the sheer scale of destruction in southern Türkiye, where 10 major cities are severely affected across vast regions, make this response very different, according to aid actors. Moreover, the scale means that many more first responders are personally affected by the crisis – they have lost friends, colleagues, family members, and homes. This increases the mental health burden on aid providers as they face overwhelming needs, and affecting the overall response. Finally, the large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers already living in southern Türkiye, often in very vulnerable situations, increases the demand on aid actors and implies a duty of care to existing aid recipients that is difficult to navigate in the current response, given the extensive needs of Turkish people in the same areas.

Despite the very different realities in Syria and Türkiye, there are some overarching issues in common. Lessons from past earthquake responses have cautioned against the use of transitional shelters amidst fears they would become permanent substandard housing provision.¹⁵ Given the extent of damage in the area, shelter reconstruction will constitute a significant part of the recovery process. Moreover, immediate needs can rapidly evolve into more complex and chronic concerns. After an earthquake mass displacement and inadequate access to drinking water can leave people vulnerable to communicable disease. In this instance, cold weather, already strained services, and an existing cholera outbreak in Syria will further increase the risks. Both the Turkish and Syrian hit areas were experiencing strained (oversubscribed or weak) health services with high rates of malnutrition. Early assessments released by REACH and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) indicate that at least 53 health facilities have been damaged, and as at 15 February there were over 47,000 suspected cases of cholera.¹⁶

Finally, protection risks can be overshadowed by other needs but are critical following an earthquake. Affected people often have nowhere to sleep, and levels of crime and violence can increase. In both Türkiye and Syria, we heard a great deal of concern about the significant loss of life and the number of unaccompanied minors as a result. Each of the responders we spoke to raised the issue, and highlighted the need to provide safety and security for people facing specific risks.

¹⁴ See, for example, the Van earthquake in 2011 in eastern Türkiye, and the Marmara quake in 1999.

¹⁵ Juillard, H. and Jourdain, J. (2019). *ALNAP Lessons paper: Responding to earthquakes*. ALNAP/ODI. <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/alnap-lessons-paper-responding-to-earthquakes>

¹⁶ OCHA (2023, 17 February).

Funding complications

Although some actors spoke of international funders reaching out to discuss financial support, as of 20 February, much of that money was yet to materialise. In both Turkey and Syria, responders were relying heavily on private donations to fund their activities. In Syria these came primarily from the diaspora, and in Turkey from private individuals both domestically and abroad. Although efforts in the immediate aftermath were heavily supported by the private donations, concerns were raised that this was unlikely to continue nor be sufficient to fund the full recovery needed.

In southern Türkiye, many of the humanitarian actors present were able to pivot existing project funds to relief efforts with donor approval, or to use their own funds to fund the initial emergency response. Türk Kızılay deployed its numerous experienced teams across the country to the earthquake zones, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement mobilised its global network to channel funds to both Türkiye and Syria.¹⁷ The UN launched a flash appeal for Türkiye on 16 February, soliciting US\$1 billion for the response and recovery efforts – to be channelled through UN agencies (who will implement via local organisations and AFAD).¹⁸ However, several actors expressed concern that there will be a gap in the coming weeks between the current response and when funding will actually reach organisations on the ground, as existing funds are rapidly dwindling due to extensive needs.

Communication and coordination

Strong coordination is a cornerstone of an earthquake response as different actors who may be working together for the first time must work collectively to coherently organise response activities – to find survivors, communicate with communities, and maximise the efficient use of limited resources in a given area. A project manager with a local NGO in Idlib said, “At the beginning of the disaster, coordination between local NGOs and volunteer teams was limited, there was no one to manage the response.”

In the first few days of this response, however, damage was so extensive that most organisations were simply trying to find their own staff. Several groups of people interviewed for this report said it had taken about 48 hours before they were ready to provide any kind of coordinated support externally, and 72 hours before they felt that coordination was in place and improving the response. When asked how they were coordinating and sharing information with others, one group said that it felt “like the professional capacity had vanished and we all reverted to instinct, how we used to do things with Excel, Facebook and Google – we ditched the information management systems we’d built up” (interview). Two weeks after the earthquakes, there are increasing signs of formal coordination mechanisms stepping in to provide information to actors and communities in affected areas.

Given that there was previously ongoing humanitarian programming and the coordination architecture was in place – it seems to have been just a matter of time before it recovered. These efforts will support more coordinated assessments and programme design as the response moves from initial search and rescue to recovery programming.

¹⁷ International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (IFRC). (2023, 6 February). *IFRC launches international emergency appeals for CHF 200 million to respond to deadly earthquake in Türkiye and Syria*. <https://www.ifrc.org/press-release/ifrc-launches-international-emergency-appeals-chf-200-million-respond-deadly>

¹⁸ OCHA. (2023, 16 February). *Flash appeal: Türkiye earthquake (February – April 2023)*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkiye/flash-appeal-turkiye-earthquake-february-april-2023>

Land tenure and rubble management

Rubble management requires clearing and removing rubble, not only to access people and areas, but also to reduce the risk of secondary crises. In dense urban areas, this can become increasingly complicated as physical space to move rubble to is limited. Cash for Work (CFW) has often been used in post-earthquake contexts, to engage the local population in rehabilitation efforts while providing cash to support recovery and basic needs. In this case, rubble management may take on more complexity. Earthquake-affected populations often have limited access to their ID or land tenure documentation in the aftermath of the crisis. In a context where displacement and conflict dynamics have so significantly shaped the landscape, land tenure and ID are likely to become significant issues.

One example of this impact came from the White Helmets who explained that where they might normally seek to repurpose materials after a blast, in this instance, clearance and removal of debris will be held up subject to identifying and gaining permission from building owners. In an area that by all accounts has been virtually levelled, and where many have left the area, this could significantly complicate and delay any clean-up, rehabilitation, or rebuilding efforts. Previous earthquakes have shown that unstable and unmanaged debris can further lead to additional injuries as well as water and sanitation problems.

Reports from Türkiye and Syria have highlighted that pre-earthquake structural vulnerabilities will have exacerbated the level of damage done. Years of conflict and airstrikes had weakened the structural integrity of buildings throughout north-west Syria, increasing the level of destruction. Response teams in Syria also raised concerns about the potential for there to be explosives amidst the rubble, requiring additional teams to continue scanning before areas could be deemed safe. Dense urban landscapes, building code issues, and over a decade of conflict, add layers of complexity to the already challenging task of cleaning up rubble and transitioning to reconstruction.

Fuel and heavy machinery are key for rubble management but are conspicuously absent at the scale required, particularly in Syria. Local actors interviewed emphasised the need for fuel, heavy machinery, and specialised search and rescue equipment that was otherwise unavailable in the region. In north-west Syria this included large machinery such as cranes, as well as specialised equipment such as thermal cameras that were previously denied by donors because they were considered “dual use” materials prohibited in conflict zones.

Impact on markets

The feasibility of market-based responses, including cash assistance, will need to be considered based on the specific and very local context. Responders in Hatay mentioned that market activity is still very much affected by aftershocks and damaged infrastructure. One interviewee noted that, “People cannot buy anything in Hatay region – maybe some [shops] are open, but the aftershocks are seven per day, and infrastructure is very destroyed from the first two large earthquakes, so we are unsure about the sustainability of these kinds of markets.”

In Syria, early accounts indicated markets continued to function, although were also dependent on border access to continue to restock. There continued to be shortages of key items, and fears that these would be further exacerbated if borders and access did not open rapidly. Just a few days after the quakes, some organisations were seeing ongoing use of previously distributed e-voucher cards, indicating shops had reopened and had goods available. Some multipurpose cash has been distributed as a one-off rapid response mechanism recognising

that even when markets are not fully functional for commodities, people use cash for much needed services (such as transport, communication, and medical assistance). Early market assessments have indicated that fragile markets continue to have some capacity. On 13 February the Cash Working Group in north-west Syria released a bulletin that included some initial assessments, a summary of one-off cash assistance distributions, and information from needs and market assessments conducted in the area.¹⁹ The use of multipurpose cash as a quick response mechanism was also highlighted in the Syria flash appeal.²⁰

What next?

As most of the search and rescue efforts have now phased out, and many of the international search and rescue teams rotate out of the hardest-hit sites, teams across both countries are turning their minds to what comes next.

Experienced responders perceive the next phase of the response in Türkiye will be even more challenging. For example, ASAM continues to work in places where asylum seekers and migrants live, helping to meet their needs and maintain their wellbeing. However, after the earthquake, ASAM began carrying out search and rescue operations and humanitarian aid work for all earthquake victims in the affected cities without prioritising any group, which extends the needs considerably. ASAM and other first responders say they are concerned about the hygiene situation going forward. Not only is clean water an issue in places that previously had the infrastructure to support large populations, the plan for water supply and purification across an affected zone this vast is still unclear. Moreover, preventative health needs such as tetanus shots are in short supply or unavailable. Actors on the ground are preparing to respond to local epidemics if necessary.

Shelter and Infrastructure

Despite local differences in needs and priorities for basic items (such as food items, cooking stoves, heating and clothing), shelter is a clear need across the region. Many people, especially in economically vulnerable areas, were previously living in substandard housing; they are now on the street, together with thousands of people suddenly homeless because of the quake, and there is a shortage of tents.

Organisations reported struggling to find safe shelter for those rescued from damaged buildings. Comprehensive verification of the structural integrity of remaining infrastructure as well as provision of safe shelter is necessary and will require coordinated and well financed interventions. Specialist teams and equipment were called for, to complement locally led efforts. In Syria, responders were focused on establishing safe shelter and meeting the immediate needs of displaced people. Concern for orphans and unaccompanied women and children were repeatedly raised.

¹⁹ OCHA. (2022). *Syria: Cholera outbreak – Sep 2022*. ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/ep-2022-000310-syr/>

²⁰ OCHA (2023, 14 February).

Protection, mental health, and psychosocial support

Almost all actors in Türkiye and Syria spoke strongly of the impact on mental health and the need for support. They also emphasised concern about unaccompanied children and ongoing protection risks such as exploitation or abuse, particularly in cities like Antakya and Gaziantep where the sheer number of people affected compounds these risks. There was a clear call from local actors to support orphaned children. Some in north-west Syria spoke of fears that 'local gangs' would take advantage and use the chaos and frustration with the international response to recruit or traffic children.

Respondents repeatedly stressed that the scale and catastrophic nature of the event and extensive losses were having a significant impact. "We are still in shock, but there will be a long road to recovery, and we will need support to get past this" was a common refrain.

Recovery

The quakes left extensive damage to livelihoods in the affected areas across a wide range of industries. Once the immediate response gives way to longer-term recovery efforts, aid actors across the humanitarian to development spectrum will have to grapple with the economic effects of the damage and disruption to livelihoods. Some agencies, like the International Labour Organization (ILO), are already pivoting their longer-term programmes focused on connecting vulnerable people (including refugees and migrants) to formal employment in Türkiye.²¹

In Türkiye alone, recovery is anticipated to cost up to US\$84 billion, according to TÜRKONFED, the majority of which is calculated based on the damage to homes.²² How that recovery happens and how it is shaped by regional politics remains to be seen. Many of the local actors we spoke to in both countries expressed their fears about the further politicisation of the recovery funding coming in. They raised concerns that this crisis would be leveraged politically, to delay elections or suppress relief efforts, to the detriment of the overall response and the living conditions for people in the affected areas.

²¹ International Labour Organization (ILO). (n.d.) *ILO's refugee response programme*. <https://www.ilo.org/ankara/projects/refugee-response/lang--en/index.htm>

²² Harper, J. (2023, 23 February). *Turkey earthquake: How are the true costs calculated?* Deutsche Welle / MSN.com. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/markets/turkey-earthquake-how-are-the-true-costs-calculated/ar-AA17PBCW>

What did people want us to know?

Actors repeatedly stressed their concerns about access and the politicisation of aid in the region. They expressed concerns about the Syrian regime and the impact reduced access had on the situation in north-west Syria. They spoke of the need to avoid allowing the regime to exploit the situation for political gain and international standing. The international humanitarian community has struggled for years to adequately support and navigate the needs of those most affected by the conflict in Syria – many felt that this earthquake would end up as yet another chapter in that struggle.

In Türkiye, we heard of concerns about upcoming elections. There was real anger expressed toward the government and administration, and concerns about the reactions people would have once the immediate crisis phase of search and rescue, and emergency response, transitions to recovery.

“People here are exhausted after years of tragedy. Syria needs a political solution; we need safe return for those who were displaced. There shouldn’t be any barriers to deliver aid to people wherever they are. We need a long-term solution.”

– The White Helmets, North-west Syria

“This disaster also showed the resilience of civil society – NGOs and volunteer teams – despite their limited capabilities, they were able to manage this crisis.”

– Local Administration Councils Unit, Aleppo – Azaz

“This disaster has led to the formation of lots of concerns on the future of aid to the region, in light of the inaction of the international community, we fear that aid will be further politicised in the future, and the Syrian government will exploit this disaster and politicise it to its advantage.”

– Hospital employee in Idlib, North-west Syria

“Surviving this with some stable emotional state will be the success, besides the logistical and living condition problems – getting out of this trauma as a nation, as a region, will take so much time.”

– First responder in Hatay

Humanitarian aid: What to consider going forward

- Coordinating domestic efforts with development financing, and identifying where international humanitarian actors can add the most value, will be crucial in the next phases. Given the huge costs of reconstruction and recovery, humanitarian aid will be a small part of the overall financing and aid effort.
 - The importance of cash assistance in any response should not mean an “either/or” decision between cash and in-kind; both are likely needed, together, to meet needs of this scale and complexity. Markets have proven time and again to be incredibly resilient after temporary and even catastrophic disruptions.²³
 - Even if people cannot buy some essential items now, cash can help meet a range of other needs from transportation away from dangerous zones to communication with loved ones. Cash in itself can be a priority need when the future is uncertain, as it is now for millions of people in the region.
- As with many recent disaster responses, the case for local actors and response efforts to be better supported is overwhelming. Local responses and the “solidarity chains” that mobilised so quickly should be supported and adapted based on local actors’ priorities, beyond the usual implementing partner model used by many international organisations.
- There is a huge need to prioritise mental health and protection for affected people – which includes first responders, who already report experiences of acute and secondary trauma.
- Solidarity should extend beyond financial assistance to consider how best to support those continuing to live with the effects of this disaster.

²³ Levine, Simon (2017). *Markets in crises: the implications for humanitarian action*. Overseas Development Institute (ODI). <https://odi.org/en/publications/markets-in-crises-the-implications-for-humanitarian-action/>

Key informants

Name	Organisation & title	Country
Anas Khitou	Genius Tags, Co-Founder and Product Manager	Türkiye and Syria
Ammar Al Selmo	The Syria Civil Defense (The White Helmets), Board of Directors member	Syria
Husam Badawi	The Syria Civil Defense (The White Helmets), Search & Rescue trainer	Syria
Amer Abu Ahmad	Idlib Hospital employee	Syria
Anonymous	Al-Omari Association for Orphans, Public Relations Manager	Syria
Eng Hazem	Local NGO, Project Manager	Syria
Abdullah Al-Hafi	Local Administration Councils Unit (LACU), Aleppo-Azaz	Syria
Onurcan Yilmaz	Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM), Manager	Türkiye
Ozgur Dirim Ozkan	Qualitative Research Director and citizen responder, Ankara	Türkiye
Anonymous	Turkish aid worker and citizen responder, Hatay	Türkiye
Lewis Sida	Institute for Development Studies, Co-director of the Humanitarian Learning Centre	UK

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