

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**INTER-AGENCY HUMANITARIAN
EVALUATION OF THE RESPONSE TO THE
EARTHQUAKES IN TÜRKİYE AND SYRIA**

A decorative graphic in the bottom left corner consisting of several concentric, slightly offset circles in shades of teal and blue, creating a ripple effect.

August 2025

FOREWORD

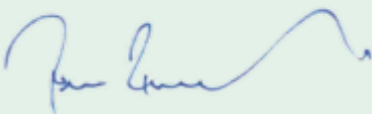
The Türkiye-Syria earthquakes were among the most devastating natural disasters this region has faced in recent memory. In the face of immense destruction and loss, humanitarian workers across both countries responded with extraordinary courage, compassion, and commitment. To all those who stepped forward to save lives and support communities in their darkest hour—thank you. Your humanity and dedication are the foundation of our collective response.

As we reflect on this response, it is essential to do so with humility, honesty, and a genuine commitment to learning. System-wide learning and accountability are central to the humanitarian mission: they enable us to better serve affected communities, adapt to shifting crises, and ensure aid remains relevant. To evolve, the sector must draw lessons from both successes and failures, turning every experience into an opportunity for improvement.

Evaluations like this Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation are not merely technical exercises but vital tools for evidence-based learning and accountability — to affected people, to donors, and to the States that entrust us with this responsibility.

In an era marked by misinformation and growing pressure on the humanitarian system, the credibility of our work depends on our willingness to examine ourselves critically. This evaluation is a testament to that commitment. It is complex, yes, but it is also necessary. I am encouraged to see that it offers clear, evidence-based insights that can inform the Humanitarian Reset we are undertaking.

To the humanitarian workers in Türkiye and Syria: your actions have inspired us. We will learn from your experience and continue striving to serve the most vulnerable with integrity, effectiveness, and compassion.



Tom Fletcher

Emergency Relief Coordinator

Management, funding, and implementation of the evaluation

The evaluation is commissioned by the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group (IAHE SG) and funded by the following IAHE SG members: IOM, OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN WOMEN, and WFP. The IAHE SG is an associated body of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). Itad Ltd. is contracted to conduct the evaluation.

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Disclaimer

The contents and conclusions of this evaluation report reflect the opinion of the authors, and not necessarily those of the United Nations, OCHA, donors, or other stakeholders.

WHO WE ARE

The Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation Steering Group (IAHE SG) conducts independent evaluations to promote system-wide learning and accountability in major crises.

As an independent body working closely with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), we support the leadership and senior management of humanitarian organizations with evidence-based lessons to improve collective humanitarian action.



Executive summary

Context

1. On February 6, 2023, two catastrophic earthquakes with magnitudes of 7.8 and 7.6 struck near the Türkiye-Syria border, affecting 11 Turkish provinces, including Adana, Adıyaman, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, Malatya, and Şanlıurfa, and governorates in Northwest Syria (NWS) including Aleppo, Latakia, Hama, and Idlib. They were followed by more than 7,100 aftershocks and another earthquake of 6.4 magnitude in Hatay province on February 20, 2023. The earthquakes and aftershocks caused major damage and destruction in both countries. The total area affected was estimated to be 120,000km². The earthquake occurred in geographic regions with significant internal displacement and refugees following the civil war in Syria.
2. Protocol 1 for a humanitarian System-Wide Scale-Up activation lays out the procedure for the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) to decide on activation within 48 hours of the event. In the case of the Türkiye-Syria earthquakes, the ERC made the decision on the activation with Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals on February 14, 2023, eight days after the earthquakes struck. The Scale-Up was deactivated on May 17, 2023 in Türkiye and on August 1, 2023 for Syria.
3. On February 14 and 16, 2023, the UN launched two Flash Appeals to provide lifesaving assistance to the people affected by the earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria.

About the evaluation

4. The ERC officially launched the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the collective response to the earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria on September 19, 2023. The evaluation differentiates three very different and complex operating contexts: Türkiye, former non-government-controlled areas of Syria (NGCA), and government-controlled areas of Syria (GCA).¹
5. The evaluation sought to achieve the following objectives:
 - Assess the results achieved and outcomes generated by the collective response.
 - Determine the extent to which IASC members' collective response was relevant, appropriate, coherent, and effective in addressing humanitarian needs.
 - Determine the extent to which IASC members' collective preparedness efforts enabled them to address the humanitarian needs of the affected population.
 - Determine the extent to which IASC members' response was gender-responsive, by identifying, including, and addressing the needs and perspectives of women, girls, and the most vulnerable groups affected by the earthquake.

¹ During the inception phase, the Evaluation Team identified three distinct operating contexts for data collection - Türkiye, NGCA, and GCA - reflecting the complex political, economic, and humanitarian differences between Türkiye and Syria, and within Syria itself, particularly in earthquake-affected Northwest Syria (NWS). Although the political landscape in Syria changed following the fall of the Assad regime, this report retains the terms NGCA and GCA to reflect the context and time in which most of the evaluation took place.

- Identify good practice and learning to illustrate how joint response mechanisms might be strengthened, specifically in the case of earthquake responses.
- Provide learning on the relevance and effectiveness of the Scale-Up Activation for the two responses in Türkiye and Syria and contribute to learning across different Scale-Up Activations.

6. The evaluation was overseen by an inter-agency Management Group chaired by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and implemented by Itad. The evaluation drew on 174 interviews with UN agency staff, national and local NGOs, donors, and governments, consultations with 222 affected community members, a survey of 136 aid workers and a review of over 150 documents. Evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations were validated and refined during in-person and online sessions with key stakeholders in each of the three contexts covered by the evaluation.

Findings

Delivering results for affected communities



The humanitarian response played a vital role in saving lives and meeting urgent needs. In Türkiye, humanitarian actors and the government were able to reach large numbers of people quickly but government restrictions delayed assistance in Syria.

Cash and voucher programming was a relevant and flexible form of assistance in both Türkiye and Syria. Communities were able to cover costs, such as rent, home repairs, and transportation that would not be addressed by in-kind assistance. Food and shelter assistance were especially relevant forms of in-kind assistance because they addressed immediate needs.

7. Recognizing that Türkiye had well-established cash delivery mechanisms, including as part of the Syrian refugee response, the use of cash assistance was a key consideration to guide the humanitarian response. It was a successful approach, with UN agencies partnering with the Turkish Red Crescent and collaborating with government entities to deliver large-scale cash and voucher programs.

8. The continued operation of markets and some financial services in NGCA made it both feasible and appropriate to deliver cash and voucher programs. Syrian Non-Governmental Organizations (SNGOs) that had existing agreements with financial service providers were able to deliver cash assistance in the first week. Others were impacted by infrastructure damage but found alternative channels. Coordinating cash programming was difficult in the initial stages of the response in both Türkiye and NGCA as new actors established cash programs that did not always follow agreed approaches.

9. In GCA, humanitarian actors implemented cash assistance programs where communities had access to functioning markets and provided in-kind lifesaving assistance, such as tents, kits, and food baskets in areas where markets were destroyed or inaccessible. However, data protection was a significant concern because of Government of Syria (GoS) control over aid recipient details while international sanctions complicated the effective delivery of cash programs.

10. In Türkiye, humanitarian actors and the government prioritized meeting the immediate basic needs of affected populations, particularly food and shelter assistance, which were a priority due to the harsh winter conditions. Within the first two weeks, IASC members had distributed 3.35 million food packages along with kitchen sets and cooking equipment, as well as shelter items, blankets, and heaters. Although governments, private individuals, and the private sector were well intentioned in donating in-kind assistance to Türkiye, its quality and usability was variable. IASC members were also able to support basic service provision within the first month of the response. Female Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants, in particular, highly valued the psychosocial support and specialized assistance for children and women that they received from UN agencies.

11. In Syria, challenges with transporting some types of assistance, including shelter, into NGCA led to initial delays and sharp rises in prices. In GCA, the government's attempt to control in-kind aid distribution, despite its limited capacity for emergency response, resulted in delays in the distribution of food and other aid.

Significant gaps in collective reporting on the responses in both Türkiye and Syria meant that reporting did not fully reflect the type, scale, timing, and quality of assistance that affected communities received.

12. IASC guidance on Flash Appeals does not require agencies to report on assistance provided with the funding mobilized. In spite of this, humanitarian actors generally share output data through dashboards. However, there were gaps in collective reporting on the response across all three contexts, which made it challenging to aggregate even output-level data systematically at the collective IASC level.

13. In Türkiye, beyond the initial emergency response phase, it was difficult to make a distinction between reporting on responding to the ongoing versus the earthquake-specific needs of Syrian refugees and vulnerable Turkish communities who were part of the existing (Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan) 3RP response. Also, some IASC members had limited information on the government's use of their support.

14. In Syria, the earthquakes represented just one (albeit major) event in a 12-year protracted crisis. This meant that, after a relatively short emergency phase, humanitarian actors shifted back to responding to the conflict-related crisis and high levels of vulnerability. The impact of the protracted crisis also made it challenging for humanitarian actors to distinguish between existing and new humanitarian needs, even in the case of physical infrastructure damage.

Timeliness of the response



The immediate response to the earthquakes was rapid in both Türkiye and Syria, though it was shaped by different dynamics. In Türkiye, the response was fast largely because of the activation of global emergency response mechanisms and quick actions by individual IASC members.

15. The scale of the earthquake impact led to the immediate triggering of global Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) and coordination mechanisms through the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC), particularly for Türkiye. The System-Wide Scale-Up Activation took eight days (rather than the 48 hours outlined in Protocol 1) because the Emergency Director's Group (EDG) needed to take into consideration both the Turkish government's perspective on an international response and access to NGCA. However, individual IASC members responded rapidly in both Türkiye and Syria with pre-positioned stocks (including stocks pre-positioned inside NGCA in case of non-renewal of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) and stocks stored in Türkiye), deploying surge staff, and using pre-existing agreements with partners and suppliers, often before the Scale-Up Activation declaration.

In Syria, national/local actors and affected communities played an important role as first responders while aid agencies mobilized and gained access to NGCA. Member States' failure to deploy USAR teams to NGCA, in particular, resulted in unnecessary suffering and loss of life. Their lack of response to advocacy by humanitarian leaders to provide USAR support highlights the limited leverage that IASC members have with donor governments when calling for adherence to humanitarian principles.

16. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, local communities provided crucial lifesaving assistance until aid agencies arrived. Despite requests from senior humanitarian leaders and the White Helmets, Member States failed to deploy USAR teams to NGCA, citing concerns about the sovereignty of the GoS, which had not requested assistance for these areas. However, even though the GoS requested assistance for areas under its control, only Member States supportive of the Assad regime responded. This resulted in unnecessary suffering and loss of life, and highlighted the limited leverage that IASC members have with donor governments in calling for adherence to the humanitarian principles.

17. The impact of the earthquakes led to a breakthrough in the ERC's negotiations with the GoS for direct international access and to reopen additional border crossings. IASC members used this to increase aid provision and their visibility to communities. Direct access to NGCA also enabled IASC members to strengthen a number of aspects of the cross-border operation, which had been weak at the outset, including coordination and accountability to affected populations (AAP). Recognizing that local communities might be cut off again from external assistance in future, humanitarian actors had started strengthening their ability to respond to emergencies, including through investing in the capacity of community volunteers.

International humanitarian agencies in both Türkiye and Syria were unable to agree on a coordinated approach to duty of care.² This resulted in different levels of support to their staff across agencies that left some aid workers in Gaziantep angry and describing their trauma even 18 months after the earthquakes. Although this did not impact the speed or quality of the earthquake response, it had implications for the long-term well-being of humanitarian workers. A couple of agencies also supported Syrian NGO partners in NWS, despite not having legal responsibility for this.

18. A defining feature of the response was the extent to which aid workers themselves were affected by the earthquakes. This was because the earthquakes hit a major hub for the cross-border and 3RP operations. They had a particularly traumatizing effect on those in Southeast Türkiye and NWS where there were three earthquakes in total and more than 7,100 aftershocks. This meant that rather than experiencing one major shock, people felt constantly unsafe over an extended period of time; and even 18 months after the earthquakes, some aid workers from UN agencies as well as SNGOs described how they were still traumatized. However, humanitarian aid workers put aside their extremely difficult personal and professional circumstances to focus on overcoming logistical challenges to get aid to affected communities as quickly as possible.

19. Despite attempts to develop a harmonized approach to duty of care at country level in both Türkiye and Syria, agencies applied their own internal policies (which are set at headquarters level). This meant that some agencies provided higher levels of support to their staff than others, and the disparities angered some aid workers in Gaziantep, who were still feeling traumatized. In Syria in particular, some cases of bureaucratic procedures and delays in making duty of care payments reduced the effectiveness of the duty of care support that aid agencies provided to their staff. Also, while psychosocial services were a common form of support in the initial phase of the response, aid workers were focused on addressing urgent needs and it may not have been the best time for them to process their trauma. This means that longer-term health policies may be required to address the need for sustained mental health support.

20. UN agencies did not have a legal responsibility to provide duty of care support to the staff of partners but a couple of them made exceptions for the staff of SNGO partners out of a sense of moral obligation. SNGO staff in both Gaziantep and NWS who were most affected by the earthquakes, since they were on the front line of delivery, were frustrated because they had expected greater levels of support from their international partners, particularly after long-term discussions of the localization agenda.

Assessment of needs



In both Türkiye and Syria, initial needs assessments suffered from duplication, delays, and inconsistent data, resulting in a lack of information for planning and programming. However, IASC members made efforts to overcome these obstacles as the response progressed.

21. In Türkiye, collective needs assessments were conducted quickly but lacked comprehensive data collection (both in terms of geographical scope and the inclusion of vulnerable groups). This resulted in an incomplete needs picture that made programming decisions difficult for IASC members. The challenges were exacerbated by the fluid post-earthquake environment, in which affected people were frequently relocating and needs were evolving rapidly, particularly among the most vulnerable groups. Although there were initial attempts to coordinate needs assessments with the government, such as with the Türkiye Earthquakes Recovery and Reconstruction Assessment (TERRA), difficulties in coordinating and engaging with the Turkish government hindered a

² UNDP has defined duty of care “as a non-waivable duty to manage foreseeable risks that may harm or injure our personnel and eligible family members in the line of duty.” See <https://popp.undp.org/taxonomy/term/7091>. The ICRC explains that the “consequence of a breach of such a duty is a legal liability imposed upon the author (of the breach) to compensate the victim for any losses they incur.” See https://unsceb.org/sites/default/files/imported_files/ICRC%20-%20Duty%20of%20Care%20ICRC%20definition.pdf. The IASC developed a global set of minimum standards for duty of care specifically for the COVID-19 pandemic. See IASC (2020) Minimum Standards on Duty of Care in the Context of COVID-19: Guidance, Endorsed by the IASC Operational Policy and Advocacy Group (OPAG) in November 2020.

comprehensive approach early on. However, significant steps were taken later in the response, such as the creation of the Earthquake Solutions and Mobility Analysis Team (ESMAT), to address these gaps.

22. In Syria, the absence of a unified needs assessment approach, along with the lack of standardized tools and guidance, led to untimely and inconsistent assessments. This made it challenging to make informed planning and programming decisions at the outset of the response. In NGCA, IASC members took steps to address this through a tailored Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA) tool that was launched and tested in October 2024, and in GCA the Syria Needs Assessment Tool (SNAT) was used for the first time in May 2023. However, there was still no inter-sectoral coordination tool that brought together needs and evidence. There were some positive but limited steps toward coordination and systematic needs assessment at the cluster level later in the response but, overall, the lack of a standardized approach and of high-quality data substantially limited the effectiveness of needs assessments and their use.

Resource mobilization



Flexible and timely funding from pooled funds, internal agency reserves and private donors was a key factor in enabling rapid mobilization despite slight delays in launching Flash Appeals. There was limited evidence that the Appeals helped to mobilize additional funds.

23. Across all three contexts, UN and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGO) internal emergency funding mechanisms provided quick and flexible funding that helped them to respond quickly. Further, individual members of the public and the private sector made significant financial and in-kind contributions to UN agencies and NGOs. In Türkiye, the private sector gave at least \$3bn in cash and in-kind donations, mainly to the Turkish government, members of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and NGOs.³ This public and private sector funding was flexible. In Syria, humanitarian actors relied more on bilateral donor funding, which was generally restricted to specific geographic locations or to earthquake-related needs. This was challenging because, in a context of extremely high levels of vulnerability caused by the protracted crisis, it was difficult to distinguish between conflict- and earthquake-related needs. UN and NGO interviewees in GCA pointed out that this made it difficult to follow a needs-based approach.

24. Both the Türkiye and Syria Flash Appeals were issued slightly outside the stipulated timeframe because it took time to agree on the level of needs and amounts requested, including with the Turkish government. However, this did not impact the overall speed of resource mobilization as international agencies were able to access internal emergency funding mechanisms, individual and corporate donors responded to the images on their TV screens, and bilateral donors allowed partners to reprogram existing funding. Also, few bilateral donors relied on the Flash Appeals to release additional funding because the scale of the disaster was clear so there was limited evidence that the Appeals helped participating agencies to mobilize funding beyond what donors would have provided anyway.

25. The global Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and the two Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) for Syria made funding available very quickly.⁴ In Türkiye, recipient agencies reported that the CERF's early allocation of funding was a catalyst for mobilizing additional funding and scaling up interventions. The Syria CBPFs added value by financing important activities that other donors may not have supported. The Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) was innovative in obtaining a CERF loan to allocate funding to partners quickly, which had not been done by a CBPF before and set a precedent for other emergencies. It also provided significant funding for the earthquake response (\$106mn between February and May 2023). CERF country-level

³ According to OCHA-UNDP Connecting Business Initiative's Türkiye-Syria Earthquake Private Sector Donations Tracker. For further details, see <https://data.humdata.org/visualization/turkiye-ps-tracker/#/>

⁴ The CERF made a regional allocation of \$25mn on February 7, 2023 and allocated a further \$25mn to Syria on February 10, 2023. The CBPFs allowed partners to reprogram existing funding immediately, where appropriate. The SCHF then made a Reserve Allocation within two weeks while the Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF) also made a Reserve Allocation in February 2023.

prioritization processes were challenging in Syria, with those delivering the cross-border operation largely excluded. This was symptomatic of the challenges with the Whole of Syria (WoS) approach and led to a lack of clarity about the extent to which grant allocations were needs-based.

In both Türkiye and Syria, it was positive that IASC members developed plans to integrate Early Recovery into the earthquake response but funding constraints limited the ability of most agencies to implement these.

26. In Türkiye, prior to the earthquakes, donors were disengaging from the Syrian refugee response and earthquake response funding was inadequate to address the scale of humanitarian needs. While Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Early Recovery indicators were integrated into the TERRA, most IASC members were only able to implement limited activities due to significant funding constraints (although there were a couple of notable exceptions). As a result, considerable residual needs remained unmet, particularly in the shelter sector but also in education and psychosocial support.

27. Syria had faced a situation of increasing humanitarian needs and decreasing funding even before the earthquakes. Humanitarian funding in response to the earthquakes was insufficient to meet the new needs generated that came on top of the unmet existing needs. Funding then decreased sharply in 2024, leaving significant unmet needs. In addition to lack of funding, donor restrictions on the use of humanitarian funding and the application of sanctions across NGCA and GCA made it difficult to implement DRR and Early Recovery activities. Cluster coordinators in NGCA developed an earthquake-specific Early Recovery strategy at the end of 2023 but there was no funding to implement this. In GCA, the Resident Coordinator (RC)/Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) led the development of a WoS Early Recovery Strategy in 2024, with the aim of mobilizing funding through an Early Recovery Trust Fund. However, stakeholders in NGCA had grave concerns about the coverage of needs in NGCA and access to funding for SNGOs, before the fall of the Assad regime completely changed the operating context.

Leadership and coordination



IASC leadership and coordination were partially effective, with humanitarian actors in Türkiye adapting over time to integrate better with national systems, while the GoS's rigid structures and political constraints made it challenging to deliver a needs-based response.

28. In Türkiye, the government used its significant capacity and experience to lead the earthquake response. To strengthen humanitarian leadership and coordination capacity for a crisis of this magnitude, in accordance with the Scale-Up Activation Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), the ERC appointed the RC as HC for a period of three months to lead the international humanitarian response. A Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) that included representatives of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, and national and international NGOs, was established to support him. The Scale-Up Activation helped to strengthen the collective nature of the response by IASC members and their partners to some extent, for example through a new coordination structure, discussions around the CERF allocation, and the development of the Flash Appeal (despite challenges with government buy-in for this). IASC members and their partners supported and complemented the government-led response in a variety of ways and made efforts to align with the government when developing a transition plan and post-activation measures.

29. In Syria, the System-Wide Scale-Up Activation did not lead to any changes in the leadership and coordination structure. In GCA, the effectiveness of IASC leadership was limited by the government's control over the response. The restrictions and bureaucratic impediments made it challenging to deliver neutral and impartial assistance. The government's decision to decentralize response management to newly established Operations Rooms, chaired by governors, also made it difficult for IASC members to work with the authorities on the earthquake response. This was because of government staffing issues, difficulties with obtaining data to guide needs-based

assistance and data protection concerns. Although the GoS promoted crossline assistance to NGCA from Damascus as a mechanism for providing a principled humanitarian response, it was highly politicized and, in practice, very little aid was delivered through this mechanism and none for the earthquake response.

30. In NGCA, vacancies in leadership and senior positions of the cross-border operation at the time of the earthquakes did not have a detrimental effect on IASC members' leadership of the response. This is because staff who were on the ground stepped up to the challenge until the positions were filled. NGOs also supported leadership of the response, particularly by taking on cluster leadership responsibilities. A combination of quick appointments and rapid surge support deployments also helped to fill staffing gaps in the response.

In Türkiye, the HCT coordination structure established for the emergency response was not well suited to the context of strong government leadership and significant national/local response capacity. IASC members engaged with national/local actors more actively once the coordination mechanism evolved into Area Based Coordination.

31. The HCT in Türkiye decided to establish a new coordination structure for the earthquake response, based largely on the structure established by UNDAC for the USAR response. The justification for adopting a new mechanism was that the pre-existing 3RP structure was focused on addressing the needs of Syrian refugees and it did not include certain sectors critical for the earthquake response. However, there were concerns that the new structure was unfamiliar to national/local actors, did not capitalize on existing 3RP partnerships and mechanisms, and was a resource-intensive structure for a short emergency response.

32. The new coordination mechanism proved useful for HCT members and their partners but failed to adapt to accommodate existing national/local response capacity, resulting in parallel coordination mechanisms led by the government, Turkish NGOs, and international humanitarian actors. Factors contributing to the lack of adaptation included a lack of contextual analysis, the speed of the response and the lack of established communication channels with the government. As the response progressed and the coordination structure evolved into the Area Based Coordination (ABC) approach in August 2003, there was an effort to increase the participation of government entities and NGOs. From August 2024, NGO networks started to co-chair the hubs together with the UN.

In Syria, the design of the WoS architecture was not well suited to a timely, agile, and collaborative response. Limitations of coordinating the cross-border operation from Gaziantep highlighted the need for more localized coordination structures in NGCA.

33. The protracted conflict context in Syria had led to complex leadership and coordination arrangements that were too slow for a sudden onset emergency. Although the earthquake response was delivered at hub level, there was competition over resources and the WoS coordination was not able to add value by overcoming this, partly due to the leadership and coordination structure and partly to donor approaches. An informal function of Scale-Up Activation is to strengthen the collective nature of humanitarian response, but this did not overcome the long-standing divisions between the humanitarian operations in GCA and NGCA either.

34. When the earthquakes cut communications as well as physical access to NGCA in the first few days after the earthquakes, Syrian NGOs inside NGCA had to find ways of coordinating among themselves. This led to the recognition of the importance of coordination mechanisms closer to affected communities, and humanitarian actors went on to establish more localized coordination structures. This had resulted in SNGOs playing a greater role in coordination and also being better connected to clusters in Gaziantep.

Partnerships with local and national actors



In Türkiye, early efforts to collaborate and harmonize with national actors faced limitations and the IASC-led response did not effectively integrate existing national and local response capacities.

35. The Turkish government and HCT members made efforts to collaborate and coordinate but there was limited information sharing with national actors on concrete aspects of the response in the early stages. This was due to the lack of an established agreement on the role of international actors in the response and limited coordination with the government in the initial stages of the response. The level of collaboration improved, particularly around UN agency provision of in-kind support to the government's response, and on needs assessments.

The expansion of IASC member partnerships with NGOs was slow in both Türkiye and Syria, partly due to the time required for due diligence. In Türkiye, the delay was further compounded by Turkish NGOs initially prioritizing their own earthquake response efforts. In Syria, the earthquakes' impact on SNGO capacity was an additional factor.

36. In Türkiye, there were long-standing partnerships between UN agencies, the government, and NGOs under the 3RP mechanism. However, it took time to establish new partnerships with Turkish NGOs. This was partly because the NGOs were focused on USAR operations and partly due to their limited participation in IASC coordination structures in the initial emergency phase of the response. Nevertheless, their participation increased later in the response and UN agencies were able to provide valuable training and capacity-strengthening to smaller Turkish NGOs or those new to humanitarian response.

37. In Syria, due diligence requirements and the impact of the earthquakes on SNGO capacity determined the length of time taken to establish new partnerships. As funding increased, SNGOs faced pressure to expand programs and form new partnerships, but struggled with lengthy due diligence, especially with UN agencies. Smaller SNGOs found it challenging to meet complex administrative requirements, affecting their ability to operate in hard-to-reach areas.

In Syria, power imbalances between SNGOs and IASC members and compliance requirements meant that SNGOs saw their relationships with international agencies as contractual rather than collaborative.

38. In NGCA, SNGOs struggled to fulfill compliance requirements while simultaneously trying to deliver response activities, although INGOs were more flexible with their requirements than UN agencies. They felt that the level of scrutiny did not embody a spirit of equitable partnership. A reliance on international humanitarian actors for funding inevitably meant a power imbalance in relationships between SNGOs and IASC members, and smaller SNGOs felt that IASC members could do more to support them, particularly to work in hard-to-reach areas.

Assisting the most vulnerable



Across all three contexts, IASC members struggled to address the needs of older people and Persons with Disabilities (PwD) adequately and faced significant challenges in collecting disaggregated data during the early response. Despite these challenges, they made commendable efforts to implement an equitable and gender-sensitive approach.

39. Evidence from the aid worker survey, interviews and focus groups revealed that the inter-agency response struggled to address the needs of the elderly and PwD across the three contexts. This was primarily due to insufficient funding, difficulties in adapting programs, and a lack of agreed criteria for identifying the most vulnerable groups. However, across the three contexts, IASC

members took observable steps to integrate gender-sensitive approaches at coordination and planning levels, including appointing a Gender Adviser in Türkiye, a Gender Standby Capacity Project (GenCap) adviser in NGCA, establishing specific working groups, and enhancing cluster coordination mechanisms.

40. Across all three contexts, early in the response, IASC members faced significant challenges in collecting disaggregated data which hindered tailored support to vulnerable groups. These included time constraints, limited data quality, coordination issues, and access limitations. However, as the response progressed, IASC members improved the quality of disaggregated data in both Türkiye and Syria through better coordination and advocacy.

Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) mechanisms in NGCA had been strengthened considerably to improve community reporting. However, PSEA delivery was more challenging in Türkiye and GCA.

41. In Türkiye, despite a new strategy and training initiatives with local NGOs, the effectiveness of PSEA efforts was limited due to the constrained role of the PSEA Adviser (characterized by short-term, non-continuous deployment), insufficient funding, inadequate mechanisms for ensuring timely investigations, and ongoing challenges in integrating protection and gender-sensitive language into communications. In GCA, PSEA efforts were also significantly limited due to a government-centered context and a lack of strong PSEA mechanisms. In NGCA, on the other hand, PSEA efforts were notably advanced and responsive due to pre-existing, well-funded mechanisms established during the protracted crisis. Despite funding challenges, the Protection Cluster in NGCA developed protection profiling to ensure vulnerable groups were considered and recognized in the response.

Engaging affected communities



Consultations with affected people across the three contexts were limited due to the lack of a clear engagement strategy and poor communication. In Türkiye and Syria, this led to perceptions of favoritism, discontent, and mistrust in some areas. However, in NGCA the establishment of inclusive engagement mechanisms represented a positive step toward strengthening accountability and fostering trust with communities.

42. In Türkiye, community engagement was limited throughout the response and was often perceived as a one-way communication. Moreover, poor coordination between local authorities and IASC members resulted in confusion over communication responsibilities. In NGCA, community engagement was initially limited, with an absence of clear consultations on aid distribution or recipient selection criteria. However, IASC members have since taken positive steps, including through establishing a local community of practice (LCOP), which led to several successful consultations demonstrating the value of community engagement and empowering the community to play an active role in the response, setting a precedent for future humanitarian initiatives. In GCA, community members noted that while there had been some engagement and consultations with the community, these were primarily conducted with local community leaders without a clear strategy to engage the wider community.

43. In both Türkiye and Syria, limited community engagement practices led to perceptions of favoritism, corruption, and aid diversion among affected communities, resulting in social tensions and mistrust in some areas. In NGCA, after gaining access post-earthquake, IASC members implemented risk management and improved AAP measures to address these challenges. One of the most successful mechanisms was the rumor tracker, which helped UN agencies develop communications to counter misinformation and negative messaging on social media, as well as adapt programming to respond to community concerns.

Preparedness



Across all three contexts, IASC members did not have a joint preparedness plan for their actions in case of a large-scale rapid onset emergency. As of the end of 2024, IASC members in all the contexts still did not have such a plan in place, raising concerns about the response to future disasters, particularly in Türkiye, which is prone to earthquakes.

44. Despite Türkiye being seismically active, the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) did not have a joint preparedness plan in case of a major earthquake because the government had demonstrated its capacity to respond to previous disasters without international support and had not put disaster management on the agenda for its discussions with UNCT members. In the absence of emergency preparedness planning, UNCT members had not considered the impact of a major earthquake on their collective ongoing operations and staff either. With warnings of the high risk of a significant earthquake in Istanbul, UNCT members were acutely aware of the need to prepare to respond should the government's capacities become overwhelmed again. Efforts to engage with the government at national level had not resulted in a concrete plan but the Emergency Preparedness and Response Working Group was reactivated in 2024 to work on a joint preparedness plan for future large-scale disasters.

45. In NGCA, humanitarian actors were focused on contingency planning for non-renewal of the UNSCR on the cross-border operation in 2023, which meant they had limited time and resources to consider the consequences of a large-scale natural disaster. The decrease in funding for the Syria crisis as a whole also meant that there were very limited resources to invest in preparedness measures. Since the earthquakes, humanitarian actors had focused on responding to ever-growing needs due to the protracted crisis, with shrinking resources, so they had not made preparations for responding to a natural disaster or rapid onset emergency. Initial work on preparedness planning was overtaken by the events of December 2024 and, with the fall of the Assad regime, the cross-border operation was scheduled to close in June 2025.

46. In GCA, the Syria HCT was focused on responding to the protracted conflict with limited funding, rather than planning for a large-scale natural disaster response. The lack of resources and donor restrictions on the use of funding made it difficult to invest in DRR and prepositioning supplies in case of a large-scale rapid onset emergency. Post-earthquake efforts to engage with the GoS on a plan for future emergency responses had not yielded results before the fall of the Assad regime and the dramatic change in the Syrian context.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1: IASC members were unprepared for a large-scale rapid onset disaster, which led to challenges with the initial response. These were addressed in Türkiye and the cross-border operation as the response progressed, but IASC members still did not have a joint plan to deal with any future large-scale natural disasters due to ongoing context-specific challenges.

48. The devastation caused by the earthquakes and their impact on aid workers themselves overwhelmed existing response mechanisms across all three contexts. IASC members were also not prepared for the impact of the response on their own operations and staffing. While challenges with the initial response were addressed in Türkiye and the cross-border response, IASC members still did not have a joint plan to deal with any future large-scale natural disasters in the region. This was a particular concern in Türkiye because of ongoing seismic activity so the reactivation of the Emergency Response Preparedness Working Group to develop a joint plan was a positive development.

Conclusion 2: The delay in declaring the System-wide IASC Scale-Up Activation did not make a significant difference to the speed and scale of the mobilization of operational capacities and resources by IASC members because the scale of the disaster and the need to respond were clear.

49. Given that the scale of the crisis and the need for a response was apparent from the outset, most agencies took immediate actions to mobilize surge support, release stocks that they had in storage, and use pre-existing agreements with partners and others to speed up the delivery of assistance without waiting for the System-Wide Scale-Up Activation. The Activation declaration led to the establishment of empowered humanitarian leadership in Türkiye but there was no change to the existing leadership and coordination structures in Syria. In addition to mobilizing operational capacities, a Scale-Up Activation serves informal functions. Though it contributed to strengthening the humanitarian and collective nature of the IASC response, it brought about little change to the response in Syria. The signaling function was less relevant in Türkiye because the impact of the disaster received extensive media coverage. However, the Activation contributed to strengthening the collective and humanitarian nature of the IASC response that supported and complemented the government-led response.

Conclusion 3: In Türkiye, the initial HCT coordination structure and other emergency response mechanisms were not adapted to a middle-income country that had a strong government with considerable disaster response capacity. Efforts to address the coordination challenges through the ABC model were a positive development.

50. IASC members and the government appreciated the rapid deployment of UNDAC teams to Türkiye and their coordination structure for the USAR response. The HCT established a new coordination structure that did not take account of the context of a middle-income (G20) country with long-established government coordination and response mechanisms and partnerships (nor did it build on existing coordination structures, such as those of the 3RP coordination and the government). It failed to secure adequate participation by the government (both national and sub-national) and Turkish NGOs, partly because IASC ways of working were not comprehensible and accessible to national and local actors delivering the response. However, this was addressed through the ABC approach, which increased the participation of national/local actors. Getting the government's buy-in for the launch of the Flash Appeal was also problematic, and the rationale for having a Flash Appeal for Türkiye was not clear. The challenges highlighted that a one-size-fits-all approach, predicated on a humanitarian response in a country with limited government capacity, is no longer appropriate. With climate-related disasters, in particular, potentially overwhelming the response capacity of middle- and upper-middle-income countries, global emergency response

mechanisms could be activated increasingly in contexts with fully functioning governments and disaster management capacity, requiring them to adapt in order to remain relevant.

Conclusion 4: The role of national/local actors and affected communities as first responders was crucial in the provision of lifesaving assistance in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, particularly in Syria. Therefore, efforts in NGCA to strengthen the capacity of local communities for disaster response and AAP, and to make coordination structures more localized, were important for improved emergency responses in future.

51. While local communities mobilized quickly to be first responders across all three contexts, their role was particularly important in NGCA because of the lack of international USAR teams and short-term access limitations. The evaluation identified good practice examples of strengthening community capacities in NGCA, which made community members part of the solution rather than passive aid recipients. At a time of major funding cuts, investment in preparing communities to deal with future emergencies will be particularly valuable.

Conclusion 5: One notable weakness of the initial response across all three contexts was assistance to the most vulnerable groups such as the elderly and PwD. Although humanitarian actors made improvements as the responses progressed, systemic barriers to addressing the needs of vulnerable groups remain.

52. Across the three contexts, IASC members put in place measures to integrate gender-sensitive approaches, but mainstreaming of disability and inclusion and assistance to vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and PwD (who were significantly impacted by the earthquakes) was a weakness of the response. Systemic barriers identified through the aid worker survey remain, but the evaluation identified good practice in prioritizing assistance based on risk and vulnerability of specific groups. International humanitarian actors will need to use such approaches to identify and prioritize those most in need due to the significant reduction in humanitarian assistance globally.

Conclusion 6: IASC members' lack of a coordinated approach to duty of care support (largely due to policies being set at the global level) led to disparities in support that angered and frustrated some aid workers, particularly in the cross-border response.

53. Aid workers often went above and beyond the call of duty to respond to the disaster, putting aside their personal losses and circumstances. Therefore, those in Gaziantep were frustrated by the different approaches that aid agencies took in providing duty of care support to their staff (and to SNGO partner staff in the cross-border operation). This was because some agencies were more generous than others. While the IASC developed minimum standards on duty of care for COVID-19, evidence from the evaluation highlights the urgent need to agree on a coordinated approach, with a set of minimum standards applicable across a wider range of emergencies. This needs to be dealt with at the global level given that this is the level at which duty of care policies are developed. There is also a need for clarity on whether IASC members would ever provide duty of care support to the staff of partners, particularly in cases where they have little or no presence on the ground.

Conclusion 7: In all three contexts, IASC members faced challenges and difficult choices in upholding the humanitarian principles and prioritized access and their ability to provide assistance. The challenges highlighted the limited leverage that IASC members have when advocating with donor governments or in contexts where the government tries to control or manipulate humanitarian aid, as in GCA.

54. In contexts like Syria where governments/de facto authorities regard their priorities differently and make it challenging to adhere to the principles, humanitarian actors faced difficult choices between the risk of being expelled and losing all access or continuing to provide assistance knowing that the principles will be compromised. However, as in the case of calling for Member States to

provide USAR teams to NGCA demonstrates, they also have limited leverage with donor governments in calling for the needs-based assistance. The evaluation found that humanitarian actors were better able to make their adherence to humanitarian principles clear in agreements with relevant authorities in NGCA but, in GCA, IASC members had limited room for maneuver. In Türkiye, they found it challenging to communicate how they were upholding the principles of impartiality and neutrality in their role of complementing the government's response. This led to some misperceptions about a focus on Syrian refugees rather than Turkish nationals.

Conclusion 8: Affected communities across Türkiye and Syria benefited from relevant forms of assistance, including cash and voucher programming. However, the lack of a requirement for collective reporting against Flash Appeals along with context-specific factors impacted the ability of IASC members to report on and demonstrate collective results systematically.

55. Communities valued cash and voucher programming in Türkiye and Syria as a particularly relevant and flexible form of assistance. IASC members in Türkiye were able to support basic service provision within the first month of the response and to support the government with the procurement of kits and shelter assistance. It was challenging, however, for the evaluation to identify the full extent of results, even at output level, including the timing of assistance provided, due to different types and timeframes of reporting. In Syria, the decision to combine reporting on the protracted crisis and earthquake response made it difficult to disaggregate results, and there were gaps in pooled fund reporting. In the current context of funding pressures, it will be even more important for IASC members to demonstrate what has been achieved with the funding mobilized for a response (which is not currently required for a Flash Appeal). Reviewing Flash Appeal guidance (which dates from 2009) and data collection mechanisms would ensure that IASC members are clear at the outset of a response about what data they need to collect to report against Flash Appeal objectives.

Conclusion 9: The earthquakes were a catalyst for change in the quality of the cross-border response. However, weaknesses in the WoS coordination architecture and a competitive rather than collaborative approach meant that the GCA and NGCA hubs missed opportunities to share good practice and identify how best to support affected communities.

56. While tight government control over the response in GCA restricted the international humanitarian community's operational space, in NGCA the earthquakes were a catalyst for change in the quality of the cross-border response. Although the initial response had limitations, humanitarian actors made major improvements once they gained access, particularly around coordination, AAP mechanisms, and risk management. Political developments in Syria since late November 2024 provide an opportunity to restructure and revitalize the humanitarian operation in the country and to develop a unified humanitarian response mechanism that builds on lessons learned from the cross-border operation and replicates the good practices identified by this evaluation across the country.

Recommendations

57. The table below presents global and country-level recommendations, highlighting the link to the relevant conclusion(s) and identifying which actors need to implement them. The Evaluation Team has focused on a targeted set of practical recommendations rather than trying to address all the issues identified by the evaluation. Field-level stakeholders provided input into the formulation of the recommendations, and the team reviewed the recommendations made by stakeholders for the cross-border operation in light of the change in the political context in Syria in December 2024.

Recommendation 1: Ensure that global emergency response mechanisms adapt to the context of strong government leadership and capacity		
Conclusion	Sub-recommendation	Actions
Conclusion 3: In Türkiye, the initial HCT coordination structure and other emergency response mechanisms were not adapted to suit a middle-income country that had a strong government with considerable disaster response capacity. The initial coordination structure did not capitalize on existing in-country structures and capacities.	1.1 Global level: In situations of large-scale rapid onset disasters in countries where existing national emergency response capacities and mechanisms have been overwhelmed, the IASC must first assess whether the activation of international response tools like UNDAC or Flash Appeals is needed. If these tools are activated, the IASC should consider whether and how to adapt them to fit the local context and existing systems, to avoid using a one-size-fits-all approach or creating entirely new structures.	Global level: IASC, OCHA
	1.2 Global level: As large-scale, rapid onset disasters become more common, UN leaders (for example RCs and UNCT members) in countries focused on development work should be trained on Protocol 2 of the Scale-Up SOPs and global emergency tools, such as the CERF. Countries that are at greater risk of natural disasters should be prioritized for the roll-out of training.	Global level: OCHA and UN DCO
	1.3 In Türkiye, ensure that existing national and sub-national coordination structure is sufficiently flexible to respond to large-scale emergencies and is inclusive of national/local actors.	Türkiye: UNCT+
Recommendation 2: Assess the applicability of the System-Wide Scale-Up Activation declaration as a response tool for contexts of large-scale sudden disasters and communicate the rationale for the decision clearly		
Conclusion	Sub-recommendation	Actions
Conclusion 2: The delay in declaring the System-wide IASC Scale-Up Activation did not make a significant difference to the speed and scale of the mobilization of operational capacities and resources by IASC members because the scale of the disaster and the need to	2.1 Global level: The IASC should guide decision-making on whether and how the Scale-Up will add value to the response by taking into consideration the following issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether the signaling function is necessary when the disaster has already attracted significant media and political attention. • Reviewing the need for the informal functions typically associated with a Scale-Up Activation. • Assessing the type and level of operational capacities that may need to be mobilized to complement national or local capacities, especially in contexts where those capacities are already substantial. 	Global level: EDG

respond apparent.	were	If the IASC declares a Scale-Up, the rationale and functions should be communicated clearly to stakeholders at field level to ensure alignment among different actors involved in the emergency response.	
Recommendation 3: Develop a coordinated approach to duty of care at global level, including a set of minimum standards			
Conclusion	Sub-recommendation		Actions
Conclusion 6: IASC members' lack of a coordinated approach to duty of care support (largely due to policies set at global level) led to disparities in support that angered and frustrated some aid workers in the cross-border operation.	3.1 Global level: IASC members need to agree on their approach to duty of care. This should include minimum standards, which should be contextualized at country level and identify, for example: Whether and how to finance duty of care for national/local NGO partners. Who is eligible for support and what types of assistance will be provided, such as psychosocial support, medical evacuation, financial aid. Levels of support, such as amount of paid leave and financial payments.		Global level: IASC
Recommendation 4: Address the identified barriers to assisting the most vulnerable groups by advocating for funding, clarifying guidance implementation for staff and replicating successful practices			
Conclusion	Sub-recommendation		Actions
Conclusion 5: One notable weakness of the initial response across all three contexts was assistance to the most vulnerable groups such as the elderly and PwD. Although humanitarian actors made improvements as the responses progressed, systemic barriers to addressing the needs of vulnerable groups remain.	4.1 Global level: IASC members should: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Advocate strongly for funding to address the specific needs of vulnerable groups like the elderly and PwD.Ensure that program staff are clear about how to implement IASC guidance/internal policies on the inclusion of vulnerable groups in humanitarian programs.Identify and replicate good practices in adapting programs to be accessible to those with specific needs.Develop risk profiling or other mechanisms to target assistance to the most vulnerable.		Global level: IASC members
Recommendation 5: Invest in community emergency response capacities and strengthen partnerships with national/local actors			
Conclusion	Sub-recommendation		Actions
Conclusion 4: The role of national/local actors and affected communities as first responders was a crucial element in the provision of lifesaving	5.1 Across humanitarian contexts, IASC members should strengthen the ability of local communities to respond to emergencies by replicating and building on the good practices in NGCA, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none">Establishing networks of volunteers and training them in a variety of roles for emergency response, including needs assessment, assistance delivery,		Global level: IASC

assistance in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, particularly in Syria.	and cross-cutting issues (GBV/PSEA) and supporting AAP.	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training community members on basic rescue and first aid, and supporting them to organize themselves in an emergency. 	
	5.2 Global level: IASC members should agree on a shared and mutually accepted due diligence mechanism/system (building on existing country-level examples). This would avoid the need for national/local NGOs to be subjected to multiple due diligence processes when a disaster happens and speed up the establishment of new partnerships considerably.	Global level: IASC
	5.3 In Syria, IASC members should invest in community-based NGOs (especially in hard-to-reach areas), local structures such as camp management, Area Mukhtars (community leaders), and local unions, and advocate for them to get greater direct access to humanitarian funding.	Syria: HCT supported by ISCG

Recommendation 6: Develop emergency response preparedness plans for both Syria and Türkiye, based on multiple scenarios and their impact, in line with IASC guidance and based on consultations with national disaster management authorities

Conclusion	Sub-recommendation	Actions
Conclusion 1: IASC members in both Syria and Türkiye were unprepared for a large-scale rapid onset disaster, including for the impact this had on their own operations and staffing, which led to challenges with the initial response.	6.1 In Türkiye, take action at strategic, sectoral, and individual agency levels to improve preparedness, ensuring a coordinated and comprehensive response. This should include engagement with the government on the UN emergency response capacity and to formalize roles and responsibilities. IASC members should also strengthen their relationships with the TRC, understanding their emergency preparedness plans and response procedures in order to complement these.	Türkiye: RC and UNCT+ and SET-ICG
	6.2 In Syria, under the leadership of the RC/HC, the HCT should develop an emergency preparedness plan, taking into account the new context and risks.	Syria: RC/HC and HCT, supported by ISCG

Recommendation 7: Strengthen needs assessment tools and mechanisms to ensure that assessments are timely, coordinated (to avoid over-burdening affected communities), comprehensive (including coverage of hard-to-reach areas) and include disaggregated data

Conclusion	Sub-recommendation	Actions
Conclusion 5: Mainstreaming of disability and inclusion and assistance to vulnerable groups was a weakness of the response across the three contexts, including the collection of needs data.	7.1 In Türkiye, IASC members and their partners should: ensure a single knowledge management hub, using ESMAT and other tools, is ready for large-scale disasters; strengthen relationships with government and local authorities for data collection; and collaborate with national/local actors to better identify and address the needs of vulnerable groups.	Türkiye: UNCT

<p>Conclusion 8: Weaknesses in the WoS coordination architecture and a competitive rather than a collaborative approach between the humanitarian operations for NGCA and GCA had a negative effect on both responses. This included a failure to build a shared understanding of the needs of affected communities and how best to address these by putting them at the heart of the response.</p>	<p>7.2 In Syria, inter-cluster groups should consolidate needs assessment data and strengthen the capacity of small SNGOs, volunteer groups, and local associations to identify the needs of vulnerable groups.</p>	<p>Syria: ISCG</p>
<p>Recommendation 8: Replicate good practices, including AAP mechanisms and the role of SNGOs, developed in the cross-border operation across Syria</p>		
Conclusion	Sub-recommendation	Actions
<p>Conclusion 9: The earthquakes were a catalyst for change in the quality of the cross-border response, particularly around improving coordination, AAP mechanisms, and risk management.</p>	<p>8.1 In Syria, IASC members and NGOs should scale up good practices, including AAP mechanisms, such as Safeline and the rumor tracker, to the rest of the country. They should also strengthen the role of volunteer groups in humanitarian response and ensure that SNGOs have a significant role in coordination and decision-making.</p>	<p>Syria: HCT members; agency AAP focal points; ISCG</p>