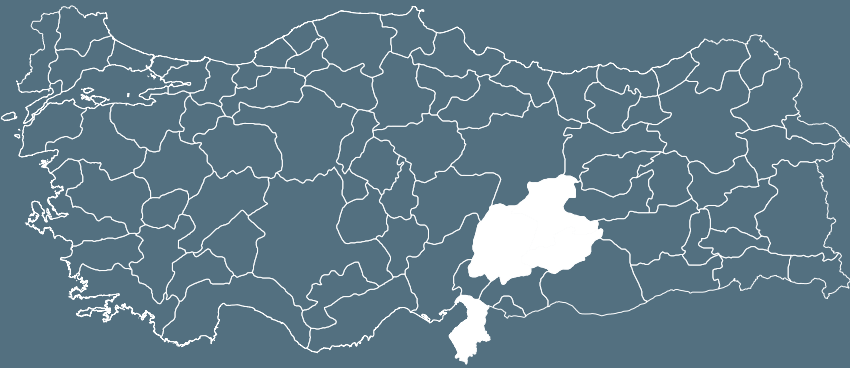


"We constantly worry,
we are always on
edge."

Perceptions of the earthquake
response in Türkiye

Türkiye • July 2023



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Background

The two earthquakes which struck southern Türkiye and northwest Syria on 6 February 2023 have had devastating consequences. In Türkiye alone, over 50,000 people have died and a further 100,000 have been injured.¹ The damage to buildings and key infrastructure has left millions displaced and resulted in widespread disruption to supply and services. The affected area spans a wide and diverse environment made up of 11 provinces. Türkiye also hosts the largest refugee population in the world, and over 1.7 million of the 14 million people registered in the most impacted provinces are refugees, the majority of whom are Syrians living under temporary protection status.

The Government of Türkiye has led the response to the earthquakes, which is coordinated through the Presidency of Disaster and Emergency Management (AFAD) and the Turkish Red Crescent (TRC). The national response has been informed by the National Disaster Response Plan, initially drafted in 2014, and revised in 2022, which sets out responsibilities, mandates and activities for all emergencies in Türkiye.² Local actors have been at the forefront of the response, including local authorities, Turkish NGOs, local civil society organisations, and advocacy groups. The international humanitarian community supported the government in providing immediate assistance to the affected population. OCHA's flash appeal, which ended on 24 May 2023, was underpinned by three key considerations: ensuring the response was as local as possible and as international as necessary; upholding a people-centred approach that included mainstreaming protection, enhancing accountability to affected people, and ensuring sensitivity to vulnerabilities; and utilising cash and voucher assistance wherever feasible.³

Introduction

An independent process of listening to and amplifying the voices of communities is vital for the response to meet overwhelming and diverse needs. Shortly after the earthquake, we launched a qualitative research project to support humanitarian responders design, implement, and evaluate programmes based on the views of affected people. Through this study, we sought to understand how accountable the humanitarian response in Türkiye is to people's needs, priorities, and expectations; and how aid can be more responsive to the unfolding needs of the affected population in Türkiye. We also explored how international actors can effectively support and engage with the localised response.

In adopting a qualitative research approach, our findings in this report do not seek to represent the perceptions of the affected population across the response. Instead, we highlight key issues and experiences of individuals across different parts of the affected area, which can also serve as a platform for further research. We divide our findings among the following key themes: community priorities; participation and feedback; information; access and safety; fairness and inclusion; and localisation.

¹ OCHA. April 2023. "[Türkiye Humanitarian Needs and Response Overview – Interim Update.](#)"

² AFAD. Updated February 2022. "[Türkiye National Disaster Response Plan \(TAMP\).](#)"

³ OCHA. February 2023. "[Flash Appeal: Türkiye Earthquake \(February – May 2023\).](#)"

Key findings

1) Community priorities: Wide range of unmet needs endure; but shelter is top of the list.

Affected communities still have a great number of unmet needs. These needs are context dependent and range from basic needs to livelihood support. Shelter is people's most common concern: they want stable and secure accommodation. Persisting anxiety and traumas mean that mental health and psychosocial support is vital. A sense that support is waning compounds people's worries over unmet needs.

2) Participation and feedback: People feel they cannot influence decisions

When it comes to participation and influence, people feel powerless. Affected people say they cannot influence the decisions that dictate the assistance they receive. Many said no systematic needs assessments occurred, or that needs assessments were ineffectual when conducted. Insufficient needs assessment coverage has resulted in issues around aid relevance; people have received inappropriate and sometimes unusable items. People hesitate to use available feedback mechanisms; they worry they will be ignored or scolded.

3) Information: Uncertainty prevails – people turn to friends and family for information

People struggle to find accurate and up-to-date information from humanitarian actors regarding available assistance. Gaps in information and transparency have resulted in diminishing trust in humanitarian actors. People turn to social networks to learn where and when they can access aid.

4) Access and safety: Uncoordinated distributions lead to access barriers

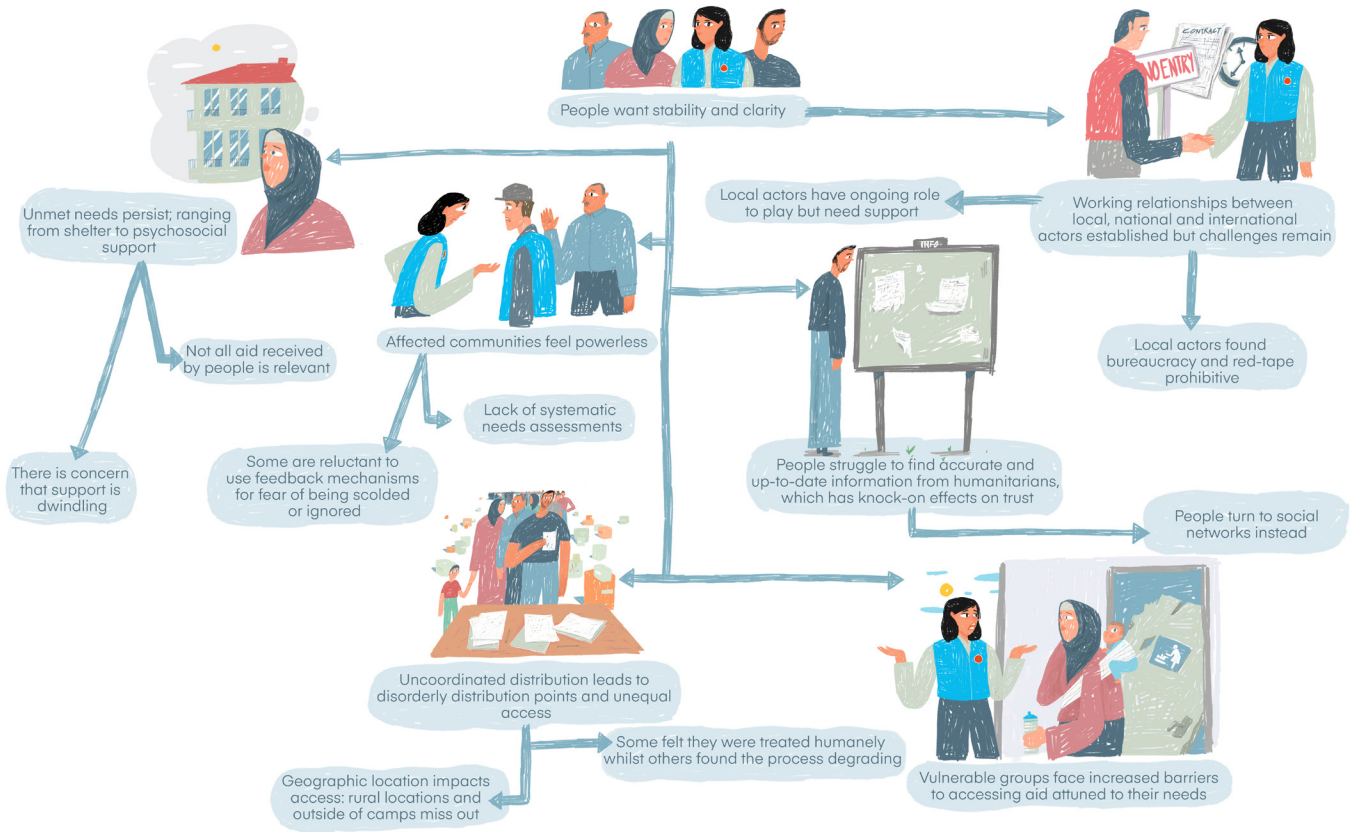
Distribution is poorly coordinated. People described chaotic and crowded distribution points, particularly in the initial stages of the response, which sometimes led to violence and aggression. Where people live strongly influences their ability to access aid. Some people felt humanitarians treated them humanely and politely whilst others felt degraded. People generally felt safe accessing aid, but there are persisting concerns around theft and looting.

5) Fairness and inclusion: Unequal struggles to meet basic needs

Many perceived aid distribution to be unfair. Multiple people mentioned favouritism towards personal connections by aid distributors. Some groups face bigger barriers than others accessing the aid they need, including women, people with disabilities, Syrian refugees, LBGTQIA+ and ethnic minorities including Dom and Abdal peoples. Fear and desperation fuel mistrust, and rampant rumours and misinformation further aggravate social tensions.

6) Localisation: The full potential of localisation has not yet been realised

The response is not fully attuned to local contexts. Local and national NGOs have struggled to break into international actors' trusted circles, and bureaucracy and red tape have hindered them when they have. Local actors have a key role to play in the next stages of the response, but they need support from authorities and donors.



A variety of factors mean communities do not feel they are getting what they need, when they need it most.

Wide range of unmet needs endure; but shelter is top of the list

The overriding sense from affected people we spoke to is that aid provision has been insufficient, and they have many unmet needs. These needs are context dependent. In some areas, meeting immediate and basic needs remains people's main desire, whilst in other areas people are focusing on longer-term needs, such as livelihoods and reconstruction.

Shelter

Shelter is the most important ongoing need mentioned for affected communities. People whose houses have been assessed as undamaged are still seeking tents and containers as they are too scared to sleep in their homes. Those currently in tents are waiting to move into containers. In the summer months, tents are unsuitable for the warm temperatures, and people mentioned hygiene concerns and pest infestations. People not currently in tents are in a precarious position due to rising rental prices and housing shortages. This is a common concern for Syrian refugees.

Five of six Syrian focus group discussions mentioned experiencing eviction or threats of eviction from homes. A Syrian woman in Hatay explained, **"There is a shortage of houses, and even if we find one, the rents are very high. Sometimes the landlords evict people to make room for their own relatives."** Some people also mentioned taking short-term loans to combat rising rental prices, which deepens their sense of insecurity. People advised that they need rental support or temporary accommodation in container camps. Housebuilding, price caps, and rental assistance are also key factors in building long-term resilience according to focus group participants.

Other basic needs

Most people said they can access food and nutrition assistance, however many said that provisions were simply not enough: aid packages designed to feed a family left people hungry. A Turkish man in Malatya told us, **"There are [redacted organisation's] boxes and inside they provide two pasta packs and two-to-three small milk cartons to each person, it's like they're making fun of us. It shouldn't be like this."** Access to water and hygiene kits also remains a significant challenge, particularly in Hatay. People we spoke to explained that large volumes of remaining debris and dust have exacerbated hygiene needs, which will continue to grow over the summer. Seasonal clothing and cooling systems are also needed for the summer. A Syrian woman in Adiyaman told us, **"The needs are certainly different in summer, including clothes and water coolers. The clothing assistance we received, for example, is all very thick and suitable for winter [...] Assistance needs to be adjusted."**

Psychosocial support and healthcare

Many people said they needed psychosocial support, as trauma and anxiety still affect many earthquake victims. People are also worried about the psychological health of their children. Numerous agencies provide this type of support, but the scale of need is vast. Mental health and psychosocial support were also the most commonly stressed needs in interviews with humanitarian actors. A national civil society organisation explained, **"The need for psychosocial support will continue for longer periods. There are significant traumas involved. Strengthening psychosocial well-being will become even more important in the upcoming period."** Access to healthcare services was also frequently mentioned by people we spoke with as an ongoing need. People reported difficulties finding specialised medication, getting appointments for medical care, and meeting pharmacy costs. Access to medical care is particularly challenging for Syrian refugees as several people explained that



There are different situations in each region. Some have been unable to meet even their basic needs, while others have focused on rebuilding their livelihoods and social opportunities.

– Representative from a national NGO



The package they give doesn't last for one month for a family, it's impossible. In addition, the Red Crescent is making meals, but they don't go to everyone. For example, many families have set up tents in their own gardens, but they don't receive meals. The food is delivered to the outskirts of the container city and left there. If someone with ill intentions comes and poisons the food, who is responsible? The one responsible for the food should distribute sufficient amounts to all households.

– Turkish man in Malatya



People's psychology is disturbed. Children especially need help. They wake up from their sleep at night and ask if there will be another earthquake.

– Turkish man in Hatay

specific demands for medical records – which they do not have – prevented them accessing the care they need.

Cash and voucher assistance

Cash and voucher assistance has been an important aspect of the response.⁴ Nonetheless, several affected people told us that they felt that further cash and voucher assistance would allow them to meet their needs more effectively. People also told us about price hikes, rising rental costs, and deferred utility bill payments, which increased cash support could alleviate. Women in Hatay were concerned that loan debts from rebuilding costs will be recalled in the near future, which they cannot repay. In light of these economic challenges, people called for rental assistance and emphasised the importance of job creation and economic development for long-term recovery and self-sufficiency. Many people we spoke to received cash payments of between Turkish lira (TL) 10,000–15,000 from national authorities for housing support. However, people felt this was insufficient to rebuild their lives. People also spoke of receiving envelopes of cash assistance from humanitarian actors. Most people have spent the cash they received on meeting basic and household needs. A recent market assessment study indicates that, generally, multipurpose cash assistance is feasible in the affected region, and that cash assistance can effectively support the affected population.⁵

Longer-term needs

People need job opportunities, as many livelihoods and workplaces were destroyed by the earthquakes. However, the response has included little livelihood programming so far. Getting people back into work is a key step in re-establishing self-sufficient communities, but this seems a distant prospect for many. Affected people in Adiyaman and Malatya explained that agriculture work has been severely affected, and shortages in water, fertiliser, and fuel, have left them unable to work. A Turkish man in Malatya told us, “It would be good if job opportunities were provided to the people [...] The people here plant crops, vegetables; they have vineyards and gardens, but they can’t do anything because there’s no water.” Our interviews with humanitarian actors confirmed that agricultural communities such as those in Adiyaman and Malatya have specific needs, including machinery and livestock, which the response has not yet addressed.

Although most schools have re-opened, education needs persist. Children require support to attend school. A Syrian father in Hatay told us, “When the schools re-opened, I tried to arrange a shuttle for my child by hiring a service. I paid for it out of my own pocket, TL 300.” People also identified student scholarships as a step to help communities to rebuild in the long term.

Affected communities and humanitarian organisations alike have underlined that people’s needs and their prospects for self-sufficiency are entirely dependent on location and context. Because of this variety of ongoing needs, the response must move beyond a blanket approach to provision and focus on decentralisation and specialisation. However, the potential for such a process is jeopardised by the general sense that services are being scaled back. This presents a major concern for people as they strive for stability and recovery.



Some of the aid that came was unnecessary. If it had been given as money to people instead, they could spend on their basic needs according to their own preferences.

– Turkish woman in Adiyaman



In two months, the banks will demand money from me, but I don’t have any [...] I haven’t been working for three and a half months. I used to sell appetisers and tobacco products, but my tobacco products were buried under the rubble.

– Turkish man in Hatay



In the beginning, aid was coming, but it gradually decreased. Currently, very little is coming.

– Turkish woman in Hatay



The external aid sent to the region has decreased significantly. Both individual and institutional assistance are decreasing day by day. However, the needs persist.

– Representative from a national non-profit organisation

⁴ OCHA. April 2023. “[Türkiye Humanitarian Needs and Response Overview – Interim Update.](#)”; IFRC. July 2023. “[Earthquakes Operation Update #3.](#)”

⁵ Cash Based Interventions Technical Working Group. July 2023. “[Joint Market Assessment Report – May 2023.](#)”



Not all aid provided was relevant or suitable to those receiving it.

✓ Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from discussions with affected people and humanitarian actors:

- **Localise decisions on resource allocation**, so the response can meet the diverse needs of different regions and localities more effectively. At an organisational level, humanitarian actors working on the response should ensure that projects are location specific, and decision-making is as regionalised as possible.
- **Equip people with up-to-date information**, especially regarding future accommodation and financial support or livelihood opportunities. This is increasingly important as some actors finish their projects and leave the earthquake response entirely.
- **Expand and accelerate protection work**, as the need for mental health and psychosocial support will continue for a long time. This should also be extended to affected people who have relocated from the affected area. Clarify and streamline referral pathways and the roll-out of grief counselling. This includes more systematic support for gender-based violence.
- **Use cash and voucher assistance more widely**. Shops and markets have re-opened, so this offers people more flexibility and autonomy to meet basic needs, housing costs or education fees.⁶

“

Stability is most important. We are naturally anxious because we are on the streets. They tell us every day that we will be moved. We can't relax, we constantly worry, we are always on edge.

– Syrian woman in Malatya

“

A previous organisation came and assessed the needs, evaluated the situation, and distributed cards. With the card, you could go and collect your aid. Whether you wanted to receive it immediately or the next day or the day after, you could get your aid. This way, we can ensure that everyone receives their aid. People with jobs don't have to leave work and run to get their aid.

– Syrian woman in Malatya

⁶ Cash Based Interventions Technical Working Group. July 2023. “[Joint Market Assessment Report – May 2023.](#)”

People feel they have no means to influence decisions

Focus group participants see little or no opportunity for them to have a say in the design and implementation of the assistance they receive. Feedback mechanisms are generally unknown or perceived as ineffective. A common observation is that needs assessments have been insufficient both in number and in scope.

Participation in decision-making

On the rare occasion that people mentioned participating in decisions, the channels they identified were either AFAD or their local muhtar. However, in most discussions, people said that no one had consulted them and there were no routes for them to influence decisions. A Turkish woman in Hatay explained, **“I don’t believe that earthquake victims can influence these processes.”** The absence of community participation and influence inevitably means people feel powerless, resigned to the impulses of decision-makers. Affected people expressed frustration with the humanitarian organisations, that neither they nor their community representatives had been consulted. Some people also spoke of being sent from one actor to another when trying to communicate their needs, deepening their sense of frustration and helplessness. When attempts to influence decisions are ignored, people tend to give up trying.

Lack of coordinated processes to understand needs and priorities

Needs assessment coverage seems patchy: while some people reported needs assessments occurring, others said none had been conducted. However, even where needs assessments were conducted, it does not appear to have been communicated well that assessing needs will not necessarily mean that support will be received, and as a result several people expressed disappointment that was no difference to aid provision thereafter. For example, a Turkish woman in Adiyaman explained, **“They said make a list, send it to us, we’ll bring you what you need. After that, we never saw them again.”** A Syrian woman in Adiyaman echoed this sentiment: **“Many people came, they took our names, and our contact numbers, but we haven’t received anything from them.”** Discussions with humanitarian actors highlighted that the lack of systematic needs assessments, particularly at the beginning of the response, was severely challenging for response programming, and resulted in significant gaps in provision.

A national non-profit organisation explained that substantial logistical and personnel-based barriers hindered the ability of actors to conduct needs assessments at the outset. Damaged transport routes restricted access, particularly to people in more remote locations, and the destruction of communication infrastructure, including disrupted phone and internet services, compounded the challenge in conducting accurate assessments. The resulting standardisation of provision failed to grapple with the range and complexity of needs across the affected area.

Responses from communities across the four provinces underlined that relevance of aid was generally poor. Items that people received were often not suited to their needs and sometimes unusable. People received dried food products but had no gas or stove on which to cook them. They also received unwearable clothes that were inappropriate for the conditions or the wrong sizes. These experiences underline the importance, and evident lack of, systematic needs assessments across the response.

Numerous people we spoke to explained that they have applied for particular goods or services but have been refused or told they are ineligible. One reason is that aid is often based on a person’s living conditions. Therefore, people have been told



There is a neighbourhood committee here. You can get involved through family elders and muhtars. They need to be consulted. No one else can protect our rights except us.

– Turkish man in Hatay



During aid preparation, the contents are standardised. Since needs assessments are not conducted, different needs are overlooked, and everyone is provided with the same type of support. Individuals with different needs are ignored.

– Representative from a national NGO



There were quality differences among the received items. Some sent clothes as aid that were completely unwearable, such as evening gowns, high heels, and torn clothes.

– Turkish woman in Hatay

they are unable to access financial or in-kind support because their houses were assessed as undamaged or only minorly damaged. Conversations with humanitarian actors also highlighted that affected people, particularly in rural communities, did not want to move to camps as they were reluctant to leave their homes and belongings behind. The damage assessments conducted by authorities on buildings affected by the earthquakes were identified as a particular area of contention among focus group participants. People described these assessments as inconsistent, deficient and sometimes unfair. Several people mentioned that they had lodged petitions to challenge decisions from authorities which they felt were inaccurate. In some instances, assistance went to people who had second homes in the affected area and in other cases, landlords stood to benefit from the cash assistance at the expense of tenants.

Ineffective feedback mechanisms

Several people explained that they were unaware of any available feedback mechanisms. Those who were aware mentioned humanitarian actors visiting and requesting feedback personally, phonelines displayed on cards, or their local muhtar collecting feedback. A representative from an international NGO explained that feedback mechanisms in the response are not sufficiently linked or centralised: **“Generally speaking, these mechanisms are quite inadequate [...] It is not possible to talk about a general feedback and complaint mechanism.”**

Where people knew of feedback mechanisms, numerous barriers prevent their use. In the first instance, without independent and impartial feedback mechanisms, people feel uncomfortable raising their views directly with the institutions in charge of the response. This is closely tied to reports from affected people that scolding aid recipients is common practice among humanitarian actors, which detracts people from offering feedback. A Turkish woman in Adiyaman explained, **“We go to AFAD, for example, to ask something. But there is also this attitude of reprimanding people.”** This was confirmed in conversation with a national non-profit organisation, who advised that societal factors mean that people can perceive feedback as criticism, which hinders the efficacy of these mechanisms in the response.

People explained that they have tried to give feedback, but their efforts have been ignored so they have given up trying. A Syrian woman in Malatya told us, **“There are people who tried and called before. But they just ignore them by saying that they will assess the situation. There is no follow-up on complaints.”** The seeming indifference to the opinions of affected populations has meant that people have had to take a public stand to get any sort of traction. A Turkish man in Malatya explained, **“There is a saying that goes, ‘the crying baby gets the milk;’ that’s how it was. You go and explain your situation humanely, you tell them, they don’t understand. You rant, you get angry, you get abrasive, and maybe then you get what you need.”** The need to make a public stand like this, however, means that marginalised groups have little hope of getting their feedback noticed. In interview, a man with a disability told us, **“No, nobody asked me anything. If you have someone who will advocate for you, you survive; otherwise, you’re like the living dead.”** Humanitarian actors seem to have responded to criticism on social media. A Turkish woman in Hatay noted, **“It was only after the reactions on social media that water distributions increased again through volunteer trucks.”** A local civil society organisation also confirmed that social media became a useful tool for them to identify gaps and shortages felt by people.

“

I wrote 20 petitions about the damage assessment of my house, including online. It took months until it was finalised.

– Turkish man in Kahramanmaraş

“

As far as I know, the complaint channels are the police and the administrative authorities. But should I complain to them about themselves? If I go to an NGO’s director, they also protect their staff. What should we do?

– Turkish man in Malatya

“

Both the public sector and society are quite inadequate in terms of complaints and feedback. We perceive complaints as whistleblowing or plugging, and feedback as criticism. This leads to the activation of defence mechanisms instead of development. It is a cultural and structural shortcoming. Unfortunately, these mechanisms frighten both the recipient and the user.

– Representative from a national non-profit organisation



People do not know who to voice feedback to.

✓ Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from discussions with affected people and humanitarian actors:

- **Improve coordination of needs assessments** across the affected area and make them more systematic. Capacity-development may be necessary to ensure appropriate and comprehensive needs assessments are conducted.
- **Undertake comprehensive consultations with community groups** including men, women, people with disabilities, older persons. These need to be repeated on a frequent basis.
- **Establish community committees** in informal and formal camp settings⁷ and in communities outside of camps, to facilitate two-way communication with the humanitarian response. Within such committees, community representatives could participate, hear updates, and provide feedback on the response.
- **Target greater communications through muhtars** (elected neighbourhood heads), as they act as intermediaries between people and authorities.
- **Make existing feedback mechanisms more visible and accessible.** Many organisations across the response have their own feedback mechanisms, including the national authorities and Turkish Red Crescent.

“

They should visit each house and ask if anyone is sick, if they have medication, if they lack firewood or water, and list their needs. But there's nothing like that, we haven't seen or heard anything.

– Turkish man in Malatya

“

A coordination centre should be established. Whether it's a district, village, or neighbourhood, there should be a district governor, a muhtar. People come together; their problems are heard. Solutions can be found in a short period, not in one or two months but in three-to-five days.

– Turkish man in Kahramanmaraş

“

Direct interaction between people and the authorities can change things, change a lot. But it's difficult for me to have a meeting with a district governor, an official, or someone for a problem. However, a muhtar can meet with the district governor.

– Turkish man in Kahramanmaraş

⁷ Camps are often referred to as settlements or sites within the response in Türkiye. 'Formal camp' in this report is used to denote settlements run by AFAD.

Uncertainty prevails – people turn to friends and family for information

The complex dynamic between national, local, and international actors in the response in Türkiye raised distinct issues surrounding transparency and access to information from the outset. The perceived political nature of the response has not helped.⁸ The effective mobilisation of communication channels to provide affected people with information about humanitarian services and government assistance is a key factor in strengthening accountability to affected people and in meeting the second key consideration underpinning the response.⁹

People feel uninformed

Focus group participants explained that information from humanitarian actors has not been forthcoming. Across all four provinces, people said that they had received no information from humanitarian actors on the aid or services they are entitled to. A Turkish man in rural Malatya said, **“I’ve been here for almost three months, and no one has provided any information.”** Equally, a Turkish woman in Adıyaman complained, **“We don’t know anything about the services we can receive at the moment. We have no information.”** It was also apparent in our conversations with affected people that they were generally unable to identify who had provided them with aid and what actors were present in their areas. Focus group participants told us that accessing information relating to assistance was particularly difficult for affected communities living outside of camps. Although there may be channels established within camps, for example, information sessions or focal points, such channels do not exist outside of camps. The lack of information and transparency within the response perpetuates feelings of distrust and inequity among affected people, as they are conscious of large amounts of aid coming to the region but have little knowledge of where it goes or how distribution decisions are made. This deepens feelings of helplessness and precariousness as people lose their ability to plan ahead.

Several participants shared their perception that authorities had restricted incoming aid that was destined for affected communities. A Turkish man in Kahramanmaraş reported, **“Our fellow citizens in Europe sent all these items. AFAD just confiscated the incoming aid and stored it in their warehouse.”** Another in Hatay reported, **“Foreigners also came, including Koreans and Estonians. Afterwards, AFAD intervened and prevented the aid being provided; the police seized it.”** A Turkish woman in Kahramanmaraş provided another example: **“The Izmir Municipality built containers in the upper part of Narlı, but AFAD took them away.”** However, our conversations with humanitarians clarified that, in actual fact, incoming aid was often channelled through AFAD and other national authorities in their roles as the primary coordination bodies in the response. A national NGO explained, **“In some places, distribution was not allowed. It was instructed to give your aid to AFAD, Kızılay [TRC], or the Ministry of Family and Social Policies.”** This therefore reiterates the fact that a lack of transparency and information pertaining to targeting within the response perpetuates suspicions and feelings of distrust among affected people.

Challenges in accessing up-to-date information – for both humanitarians and affected people

Interviews with humanitarian actors reinforced the message that clear and consistent public access to information has been a major shortcoming. Humanitarian actors explained that a lack of coordination and joined-up-thinking was one reason for the lack of information to affected communities. Much of the government response was decentralised, which did not help to clarify consistent messaging. Humanitarians

⁸ Article 19. April 2023. [“Turkey: Access to information must be embedded in the earthquake response.”](#)

⁹ OCHA. April 2023. [“Türkiye Humanitarian Needs and Response Overview – Interim Update.”](#)

had great difficulty in accessing reliable and accurate information, which contributed to the challenge of passing on accurate and helpful information to communities. A national NGO explained, **“The support systems are constantly being updated or changed, which disrupts the flow of information. We try to provide as much information as possible, but I’m not sure if every organisation was able to do it adequately. For instance, the procedures for obtaining earthquake victim documents were different from one city to another. At some point, we couldn’t keep up with the changes.”** Humanitarian actors also highlighted that damage to communication networks was another major barrier to providing reliable information to affected people. Nonetheless, they presented an impression that whilst challenges remain, particularly for hard-to-reach communities, information channels are becoming more established and effective as the response goes on. National and international actors that we spoke to employ a variety of methods to provide information to affected people, including through websites, phone lines, social media and community meetings.

People ask for better online and offline information-sharing

In the absence of established information channels, many people said their main source of information regarding available assistance was word of mouth. People received distribution times and locations through neighbours and family networks, or through chance encounters with other affected people. For example, one Turkish man in Malatya told us, **“No announcements, no official statements, no news, no messages. We would see someone with water or clothes, and we would ask where they got them from, and then we would go.”** This reliance on social networks also extended to the use of social media. Some people mentioned accessing information online via government websites, phone alerts or WhatsApp messages. Others felt that employing technology was a missed opportunity, and more should have been done to harness the power of the internet. Still others, however, looked to muhtars to provide them with information on the response. Reflections on the muhtar’s role are mixed. Some people have been able to access information from their muhtar, whilst others felt that information provision ought to have been the muhtar’s responsibility, but that the muhtar had failed in this regard.



Knowing how to access support can be confusing.

“

Uncertainty prevails. There is a lack of information. For example, there is no clear answer about when the water will come or to which region and to how many people the distribution will be made.

– Representative from a local civil society organisation

“

[In the beginning] information pollution was at its peak. When the uncertainties and shock overlapped, an accurate flow of information could not be provided. Now everything is clearer, the flow of information is on a more level-ground, and there have been good developments.

– Representative from an international NGO

“

I was able to access up-to-date information from the news, social media, and the internet. Topics such as tenant and landlord support, educational process updates, and services provided by institutions and municipalities were shared on social media. Additionally, my friends and relatives were sharing important matters related to us in WhatsApp groups.

– Young man with a disability in Kahramanmaraş

✓ Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from discussions with affected people and humanitarian actors:

- **Increase communication with affected people regarding the role of different organisations** within the response and the modalities of assistance available. It is apparent that people did not know what to expect from specific actors.
- **Consult with affected communities** to understand how they prefer to receive information and communicate with humanitarian organisations. Thereafter conduct regular accountability assessments to ensure that the information shared by humanitarian actors is what people are looking for.
- **Improve coordination and communication channels amongst different types of actors** working in the response in order to ensure that accurate and up-to-date information is available to all actors, including national authorities, local authorities, civil society actors and donors.
- **Share information more effectively using technology and social media**, including direct messaging on people's phones. Ensure that communications are available in context-appropriate languages, including Arabic.
- **Hold information-sharing sessions in formal camps, informal camps, and within communities.** This should also include information regarding available services which go beyond basic needs, such as legal aid or entrepreneurial support.
- **Capitalise on the unique role of muhtars** and their respective proximity to communities by using them for information provision. Due to widespread misinformation, muhtars can act as a trusted source of reliable information.

“

An announcement could be made. Now everyone has the internet, everyone has a phone. An announcement can be made on the internet.

– Turkish woman in Adiyaman

“

To improve, information sessions can be conducted in the camps. Identifying what will be distributed, who will distribute it, and determining needs can lead to more effective progress.

– Representative from a national NGO

Uncoordinated distributions lead to access barriers

Humanitarian actors faced significant logistical challenges and resource limitations (both human and financial) from the outset. A lack of coordination exacerbated these obstacles. The people we spoke to mentioned chaotic and undignified distributions. Not everyone was able to access aid, and where people live strongly influenced their ability to access aid. Some people felt that humanitarians treated them humanely and politely whilst others felt degraded.

Ineffective communication between humanitarian agencies

Whilst a number of people we spoke to were satisfied with the distribution of aid, many faced significant access challenges. One of the greatest impediments to access has been a lack of coordination by humanitarian actors, particularly in the initial months of the response. Affected people in all four provinces spoke of an incoherent and unsystematic distribution process. People spoke of a process that lacked direction and targeting. Aid would arrive at random times and be distributed on a first-come-first-serve basis, meaning many missed out. A Turkish man in Malatya described one scene: **“There was no organised and proper distribution; the coordination was weak. Without considering what the others were doing, everyone distributed things according to their own judgment.”** In fact, a Turkish man in Kahramanmaraş explained that such was the lack of organisation, he was forced to step in to shepherd humanitarian staff to the right locations: **“At one point, we were directing them [...] I was directing the aid trucks and lorries to where the people in need were.”**

The absence of a coherent distribution system was reflected just as strongly by humanitarian actors we spoke with, as every interviewee identified coordination as a problem. The multiplicity of actors reacting to the response without any oversight led to confusion and uncertainty about the allocation of responsibilities and tasks. Ineffective communication lines meant that multiple humanitarian actors arrived at the same locations with the same goods, resulting in duplications and gaps. The breakdown in communication even extended to public sector institutions, as one local civil society organisation reported, **“There is also a great division between local authorities and public institutions. They do not involve each other in the process, and there is no coordination.”** Furthermore, actors inexperienced in emergency response programming also arrived at the scene, frantically trying to help but further deepening inefficiencies. Humanitarian actors did, however, tell us that coordination and organisation between actors has improved over time, as the response has established communication channels, filled information gaps, and developed specialised mandates.

Chaotic distribution points

People we spoke to explained that distribution points would often become overcrowded and chaotic. As a result, older people and people with disabilities struggled to reach the aid available. A Turkish woman in Hatay recounted her experience: **“There were crowds and chaos around the trucks at times. The elderly had difficulty accessing help. Tall people and young individuals could benefit [from aid].”** Furthermore, several women mentioned that the chaotic distribution points made them feel unsafe.

Uncoordinated distribution methods resulted in people having to queue for long periods of time to collect aid. Some found this process so degrading that they preferred to forego their share. A Turkish man in Kahramanmaraş described the



In my opinion, there was a lack of coordination, and this was applicable to NGOs as well. Some organisations got involved quickly without conducting a proper needs assessment, while others experienced delays because they followed procedures. As a result, there could be duplications, with the same services or the same organisations reaching the same areas.

– Representative from a national NGO



There was chaos when trying to access the aid. People crowded around the truck, everyone trying to get something. Some were crushed in the process. It was also difficult to reach the food supplies due to these chaotic situations.

– Turkish woman in Hatay

experience: **“The distribution method is torture. You have to line up to receive a receipt. You get a receipt. After getting the receipt, go back and wait again. It’s complete torture until you receive the aid. You have to line up two days in advance.”** People with disabilities and mothers with young children also explained how this process was restrictive for them. A Syrian woman in Malatya explained, **“You have to wait all day to receive that aid package. People who don’t have work can go and wait, but I have a child. I can’t leave him alone for that many hours.”** Long queues also present protection risks for women and LGBTQIA+ people.

The trouble of being in the right place at the right time

People reported difficulties in attending distributions at specific times. Distributions tended to take place during the day, which challenged people who had to work, particularly in agricultural communities. For example, a Turkish woman in Adiyaman told us, **“Everyone there has their own work and responsibilities. I can’t wait all day for one package [...] They should call us. We can say, either deliver it to our neighbour or we’ll take it when we come in the evening. But they don’t do that.”** Along the same lines, a Turkish man in Malatya said, **“Sometimes we’re out in the field when they give us a relief package, but if we can’t make it in time, they don’t keep it for us.”** This underlines the need for aid provision to be context-specific and alert to the needs of distinct communities. On the other hand, evening distributions presented protection risks for certain groups. An interviewee with partial sight explained, **“They would sometimes distribute aid in the evenings as well because the daytime wasn’t enough. During those times, I wouldn’t go alone.”**

Geographic location played a significant role in people’s ability to access aid. Adiyaman was the most frequently identified location in our focus group discussions and interviews in which people faced difficulty accessing the aid they needed. However, people also variously mentioned that they felt that Hatay and Malatya missed out. For example, a representative from a national NGO said: **“Adiyaman and Hatay were the cities that did not receive support and suffered a lot of damage.”** Discussions with affected people also demonstrated that people living in rural communities or in suburban districts found it more difficult to access aid. For example, a Syrian man in Hatay said, **“Those who lived close to the municipality received support directly, but those on the other side couldn’t access it.”** Humanitarians we interviewed highlighted access difficulties for rural communities, particularly due to the heightened logistical challenges and damage to critical infrastructure.

Another issue with the locality of aid provision is that we heard that aid delivery was often restricted to camps. Even those whose homes were damaged in the earthquake struggled to find aid to meet their basic needs, simply because they did not live in a camp. A Syrian woman in Hatay recounted her experience: **“They prioritised giving aid to those living in camps. Sometimes when we went to the camp to get water, they said they only provided aid to those living in the camp and refused to give it to us.”** In fact, some humanitarian actors confirmed that they restrict their work to camps. For example, an international NGO explained, **“Organisations mainly work in the camp areas. We can’t provide help outside the camps. That’s why their requests are not being fulfilled.”**

The substantial differences in where aid is delivered has also meant that people have often travelled long distances to access it. This has been compounded by a lack of public transport, road closures, and gasoline shortages. As a result, people reported walking far to collect food and water. In an interview with a representative of a local civil society organisation we heard that this led to a socio-economic divide, in which those with cars or motorcycles could access aid but those without missed out. This divide also went beyond transport, as those with access to social media and those without language barriers found it easier to reach the aid they need.

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Some people were like me, ashamed and hesitant to get in line. That way, help couldn’t reach me either.

– Syrian man in Adiyaman

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What happened was quickly forgotten. There is still debris here. We feel abandoned. Necessary sensitivity should be shown to our needs. People should be reminded of the situation here. I feel like we have been abandoned. It’s been three months.

– Turkish woman in Hatay

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Road blockages and closures made access impossible for a while. Access to villages, in particular, became extremely difficult [...] Mountains collapsed, roads were blocked, and fields were split in half.

– Representative from a national non-profit organisation

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We used to walk about three kilometres to reach the aid. If a vehicle happened to pass by, they would give us a ride; otherwise, we had to carry it on our backs, which was very difficult.

– Turkish man in Malatya

Mixed experiences interacting with humanitarian staff

Many focus group participants highlighted positive behaviour from people involved in the humanitarian response, particularly NGO staff and volunteers. Affected people were grateful for the empathy and kindness shown by the people helping them, particularly as many humanitarian workers were affected themselves. One woman in Hatay said, **“We found their behaviour positive and empathetic. They were also scared and saddened.”** The traumas faced by humanitarian staff were also reflected in their interviews with us. One interviewee described their own experience of loss in the earthquake: **“I lost my uncle, his wife, his daughter-in-law, and their entire family. Only two people survived from that family.”**

However, perceptions were not all positive. The most common complaint from participants was that they often felt humiliated, and even dehumanised, when accessing aid. People found experiences like having to pick through piles of clothes on the side of the road degrading. A Turkish woman in Hatay explained, **“They were giving it away by throwing, and only the strong ones could get it. There was chaos. We felt like beggars.”** A Syrian woman in Malatya was left with similar feelings: **“We felt humiliated. We didn’t feel like we could accept any of the aid with our dignity intact.”** Several people felt exploited by humanitarians taking photos during aid distributions.

On two occasions reported to us, rude behaviour went further than words and manifested in violence. A Syrian woman in Adiyaman explained, **“The owner of the cafeteria in the camp here is very rude, he shouts at us. He had even started fights before and beat up women and men.”** However, many people generally felt safe when interacting with humanitarians. Instead, their primary safety concerns arose from persistent threats of robbery and looting. A Turkish man in Malatya described the situation: **“[We] wouldn’t go outside after even five or six in the evening. Personal safety was at risk, and there were thefts. We were afraid even to go to the bathroom at night.”** A Syrian man in Adiyaman also reported, **“I had a grocery store nearby; they looted more than half of it.”** This threat of looting calls for greater security within camps and communities. However, humanitarian actors we spoke with argued that reports of looting were sometimes weaponised and used to stoke discrimination of marginalised groups, particularly Syrians and ethnic minorities including Dom and Abdal peoples.

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They took photos of the children while distributing the aid. Everything was muddy and it was very bad. It made me uncomfortable. I found the behaviour hurtful.

– Syrian woman in Hatay



Distributions are sometimes chaotic and undignified.

✓ Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from discussions with affected people and humanitarian actors:

- **Conduct service-mapping of all actors providing services within the response**, including those actors which fall outside of coordination structures. Furthermore, existing sectoral-activity mapping (who is doing what where), ought to be expanded to include information on activity timing to allow actors to track gaps and duplication.
- **Improve coordination amongst international NGOs and national NGOs on a regional basis**, so that organisations with similar mandates and projects are dispersed across different areas.
- **Increase the usage of registration systems** (including name or ID) to improve distribution coverage, and to avoid the perceived injustices of some people receiving lots of aid and others missing out.
- **Deliver items directly to those who need them**, especially to vulnerable groups. This would foster safety and dignity and reduce the need for people to queue.

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It would be fairer to provide support based on the home address, house number, and number of family members. Nobody would infringe on anyone's rights, and distribution would be equal for everyone.

– Syrian man in Hatay

Unequal struggles to meet basic needs

Women, children, older persons, and people with disabilities have faced specific challenges to accessing support they need from the outset.¹⁰ Syrian and Kurdish minority groups were also in a particularly difficult situation from the early stages, as pre-quake reports of discrimination were common, and intensified in the aftermath.¹¹ Türkiye's unique position as host to the world's largest refugee population means the humanitarian response needs to address social cohesion, particularly in provinces with larger refugee populations, such as Hatay.¹² Humanitarian actors confirmed to us that insensitivity to vulnerabilities was particularly prevalent in the initial stages of the response. Humanitarian actors adopted a one-size-fits all approach to aid provision at the beginning, focusing on meeting the basic needs of the masses. However, several interviewees stressed the response's improvement in this regard, as specific challenges of community groups are becoming increasingly visible and service provision is consequently becoming increasingly specialised. Whilst it is encouraging that the response is increasingly focusing on specific vulnerabilities, these efforts must continue to accelerate and expand.¹³

Politics diminishes public trust

The uncoordinated distribution of assistance has left many feeling it was unequal, as some have received very little whilst others have received in abundance. As one Syrian woman in Hatay described, **"It is not equal at all. For example, many people receive food aid twice a month, while some receive it once a month. And some don't receive it at all."** Unequal distributions were exacerbated by opportunistic individuals exploiting the system. Affected people frequently reported individuals hoarding aid. A Syrian woman in Adıyaman described the problem: **"The fault lies not only with the organisations but also with the people. If everyone only took the help they needed, everything would be better. But everyone is greedy and tries to get more help."** Humanitarian actors explained that hoarding practices were, in fact, manifestations of coping mechanisms employed by earthquake victims who are anxious and sceptical that the response will not otherwise meet their needs.

Many Turkish people we spoke to shared a view that personal connections have affected aid distribution. They mentioned distributors giving extra goods to friends and family members or reserving particular items for their social networks. **"They would reserve the better ones for their own circle and give the leftovers to others,"** bemoaned a Turkish man in Malatya. Political motivations are another factor for decision-makers; people stated that aid distributors favoured those with the same political affiliations. Humanitarian actors also witnessed these practices. The politicisation of aid seems to mean that some areas were targeted earlier and more heavily than others. Some people suggested that the response's failure to conduct systematic needs assessments provided space for political biases to grow. The timing of the Turkish general election in May 2023 also fed into this narrative. Several humanitarian actors we interviewed mentioned that the electoral process led to a politicisation of aid and reduced the fairness of service provision. These perceived malpractices have had knock-on effects on public trust in humanitarian organisations and institutions.

Women face various challenges

Conversations with affected communities and humanitarian actors uncovered a series of specific barriers and obstacles faced by women. Multiple women who received aid reported that the chaos and aggressive crowds at distribution points raised safety



Initially, the focus was solely on basic needs. Everyone focused on meeting whatever they had in hand. Later on, these sensitivities and specific needs were given more attention. For example, the distribution of hygiene kits was done based on gender distinctions.

– Representative from a national NGO



If your political views were the same as theirs, everything would come easily to you, they would somehow make it happen. Just because I have a different opinion, I even had difficulty getting a tent.

– Turkish man in Malatya



The government's assistance was merely symbolic as the election approached.

– Representative from an advocacy organisation



There were situations we didn't want to see: abuses of power and political tensions. The election acted as a catalyst. Being a supporter of the current government grants you different privileges.

– Representative from a local civil society organisation

¹⁰ OCHA. February 2023. "Flash Appeal: Türkiye Earthquake (February - May 2023)."

¹¹ Amnesty International. February 2023. "Türkiye/Syria Earthquakes: A Human Rights Approach to Crisis Response."

¹² OCHA. April 2023. "Türkiye Humanitarian Needs and Response Overview – Interim Update."

¹³ Amnesty International. April 2023. "We all need dignity": The exclusion of persons with disabilities in Türkiye's earthquake response."

concerns for them. Humanitarian actors also advised that since the response, incidents of domestic and gender-based violence have escalated. One factor which may contribute to this trend is the lack of private and secure areas for women within camps. One focus group participant recalled having to go to the bathroom in their backyard as there was no other space for them to use. Another recalled having to shower at the home of a complete stranger. Humanitarian actors also confirmed that a lack of private and segregated spaces for women is an ongoing issue within the response. An international NGO worker told us, **“There are also many protection risks related to the safety of women and children. There are common shower areas and toilets in these camps.”** A representative of a local civil society organisation specialising in woman’s rights explained that the issue is so severe that some women have stopped drinking water in the evenings in order to avoid having to use the bathroom at night.

Humanitarian actors also mentioned various unmet needs for women, including hygiene kits, sanitary pads, birth control pills, and medicine for genital diseases. The gendered burden of caregiving also weighs heavy for women, as participants mentioned difficulties in accessing baby formula, milk, and food for their children. They spoke of the challenges in attending distribution sites due to caregiving duties, and their ongoing concerns regarding children’s education and psychological traumas. In order to identify specific needs, and ensure that women are forthcoming with their feedback, it is vital for women to be assisted by other women in a way that is sensitive to their specific circumstances, experiences, and gender roles.¹⁴ Several humanitarian workers told us, however, that the number of women working within the response has been insufficient.

Stigmatisation and specific needs of the LGBTQIA+ community

According to a representative from an advocacy organisation, **“The biggest factor in marginalisation is that LGBTQIA+ individuals are seen as responsible and the cause of the earthquake.”** LGBTQIA+ people are blamed for the earthquake as a penance for their perceived sins. As a result, they face substantial barriers to meeting their most basic needs. Safety concerns mean that living in communal areas is out of the question, and many resorted to staying within damaged homes. Societal prejudice has resulted in many people within the LGBTQIA+ community hiding their gender or sexual orientation. A trans woman with HIV explained that besides rental support and a hygiene kit, the response had ignored her. She revealed that she still needs assistance meeting basic needs including nutrition, housing, and healthcare, and she is unable to work. She has not been proactively consulted by providers and when she tried to contact humanitarian organisations, she received no response. She also told us that she has received no support regarding her HIV diagnosis. An interview with a representative from an advocacy organisation highlighted that access to HIV medication has been a particular challenge as supplies were buried under the rubble.

Access to specialised goods and services is a key challenge for people with disabilities

The number of people with disabilities in the area increased substantially following the earthquake, and the response was unprepared to meet their varied needs. Several people with disabilities who received aid said they felt neglected by the response and were not consulted about their specific needs. An interview with a local civil society organisation revealed that accessing toilet facilities has been a great challenge for some people with physical disabilities. As a result, they have received reports of people risking their safety to return to damaged homes to use the toilet. This is consistent with another study which showed that although conditions within camps vary, the majority are tent sites with shared sanitation facilities which were inadequate and unusable for many persons with disabilities.¹⁵ The chaotic nature of aid distribution can also present challenges for people with disabilities. For example, one person explained

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Everyone had their own homes. But now, because we are living together, nobody has privacy anymore.

– Syrian woman in Malatya

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Women faced difficulties in accessing birth control pills, addressing needs arising from genital diseases, and elderly care needs. They were initially struggling to voice these needs. We addressed this issue.

– Representative from a women’s organisation

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LGBTQIA+ individuals were living while hiding their sexual orientations or identities.

– Representative from an LGBTQIA+ rights organisation

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I would like them to ask about my health condition as the first question. I would like them to inquire about my psychological state, my level of fear, and the situation regarding my HIV. I would want them to ask about how I am managing my meals, including breakfast and lunch, whether I can afford my rent, how I am coping in terms of my health, and if I require any support from hospitals.

– Trans woman with HIV in Gaziantep

¹⁴ UN Women. April 2023. [“UN Women brief on earthquake in Türkiye: Impacts and priorities for women and girls.”](#)

¹⁵ Amnesty International. April 2023. [“‘We all need dignity’: The exclusion of persons with disabilities in Türkiye’s earthquake response.”](#)

that she cannot attend distributions because of the queues, as she cannot stand, and she gets dizzy. A representative from a local civil society organisation also advised that the living conditions in camps can be particularly challenging for people who are neurodiverse. Studies show that staying in a camp is particularly straining for people with mental health conditions and their families, and for people with intellectual disabilities and their families.¹⁶

Racial and religious discrimination

Some people told us discrimination based on race and religious denominations was a contributing factor to exclusion. Syrian focus group participants highlighted that distinctions were made between Syrians and Turks in aid distribution. This differential treatment came in a variety of forms: Syrians faced difficulties accessing certain items; they felt that they received smaller quantities of aid; they felt they were the last to receive aid; and they said they were treated less humanely. A Syrian man in Kahramanmaraş explained, **“There wasn’t enough for Syrians, but there was enough for Turks. We don’t get it; we are the lower class. Turks have more rights than us.”** Differential treatment also extended to accommodation. Several Syrians explained to us that access to formal camps and containers were prioritised for Turks. Humanitarian actors told us that separating Turks and Syrians was seen as a precautionary measure to reduce social tensions. However, these measures effectively marginalised Syrians. Syrians also reported difficulty in communicating with humanitarians due to language barriers. These language barriers have further distanced Syrians from the aid they need. This issue is critical as it perpetuates the marginalisation of already vulnerable groups, denying them proper access to essential assistance. Humanitarian actors we interviewed said that in some cases, Syrians are scared to speak Arabic in public for fear of abuse.

Syrian focus group participants said that their issues were not with humanitarians, but with host community members. They discussed how they had been subjected to verbal abuse and discriminatory behaviour by other affected communities. For example, a Syrian man in Adiyaman said, **“The discrimination was only among the people here. Syrians have been told ‘Go back to your country!’”** Humanitarians confirmed a marked rise in hate speech against Syrians since the earthquakes. Prejudices against Syrians have also intensified through rumours and misinformation.

This was not, however, a universal experience. Affected people also report that in the face of adversity, diverse communities have displayed considerable solidarity. A focus group participant in Malatya stated that authorities had tried to forcibly remove Syrians from an informal camp, but fellow Turkish residents would not allow it: **“The Turks who stayed with us were very kind. I am very grateful to them. They said they wouldn’t accept such a thing. They said we all suffered from this earthquake, we are all human beings, and they didn’t allow it.”**

Members of the Alevi community (a sect of Shia Islam predominantly based in Türkiye) we spoke to said they had suffered discrimination within the response. They mentioned that aid was slower to reach Alevi communities and that Alevi communities received comparatively less than their Sunni counterparts. A Turkish woman in Adiyaman summarised, **“Assistance was less for the Alevi community. Assistance was abundant for the Sunni community.”** A conversation with a national non-profit organisation worker reaffirmed the perception that aid had been diverted away from Alevi communities for political reasons: **“Religious discrimination can be voiced in this process. There is the reality of Samandağ. It is a region densely populated by Arab Alevis. It has an oppositional identity. The aid went there later.”**

Finally, interviews with humanitarian actors revealed that Dom and Abdal peoples, already marginalised groups, have faced barriers to assistance, and been subjected to discrimination and abuse. In fact, a representative from an Abdal-led community organisation advised that Abdals are subjected to double discrimination based on

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I felt abandoned to my fate. I was watching the aid coming from a distance. I couldn’t go and ask for it. It made me feel pushed aside. If someone fortunately noticed me and came to help, only then could I receive assistance.

– Man with a disability in Hatay

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They divided the Turks and Syrians and put each group on one side. When someone came to distribute any kind of assistance, whether it was goods, cash, or any other aid, they would take it to the Turks. There was no aid for the Syrians.

– Syrian woman in Malatya

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In the post-earthquake period, the Syrian-Turkish distinction in humanitarian aid became clear. They were placed in separate camps. Perhaps this was an important move to prevent social tensions, but with our current observations, we see that the services in the camps where Syrians live are fewer and less adequate. There is still no electricity in the camp in Malatya.

– Representative from an international NGO

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They don’t see us as equals because we are Abdals. The government and local public institutions exclude us. Discrimination against us has always existed. We also have the Alevi faith. It is both faith-based and racially discriminatory. Being an Alevi also leads to discrimination. It was not only us, but support did not reach Alevi regions in the entire earthquake-affected area. The Alevi community itself does not consider us as equals either.

– Representative from an Abdal-led community organisation

¹⁶ Amnesty International. April 2023. [“‘We all need dignity’: The exclusion of persons with disabilities in Türkiye’s earthquake response.”](#)

their ethnicity and faith. These communities have been stigmatised and have become the target for abuse and blame for lootings – together with the Syrian community. As they have been largely excluded from the response, they still have unmet needs including financial support, transportation, and fuel. Furthermore, people told us that homelessness is a major concern as communities face the risk of separation through urban transformation as reconstruction begins.



Aid did not always go to those who need it most.

✓ Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from discussions with affected people and humanitarian actors:

- **Consider the unique needs and barriers of different community groups** when designing and implementing aid programmes. There are groups that face unique cultural and logistical barriers that complicate participation and require tailored programming.
- **International actors should partner with local organisations** that have specialist knowledge and experience with particular groups. This may require additional capacity development support and more involvement of such organisations in decision-making. Where possible, distribute aid through members of the targeted vulnerable community themselves.
- **Establish more comprehensive and rigorous security within camps** to respond to women’s protection and safety concerns, including increasing the number of private spaces for women.
- **Humanitarian organisations should hire more women.** In order to identify specific needs, and ensure that women are forthcoming with their feedback, it is vital for women to be assisted by other women in a way that is sensitive to their specific circumstances, experiences, and gender roles.
- **Continuously listen to communities** – not only to understand their concerns, suggestions and questions, but also to identify and address instances of misinformation. Proactively address harmful rumours and misinformation by working with trusted stakeholders and using a range of communication channels.
- **Develop strategies for how to address and alleviate social tensions** together with representatives of different demographic groups, including host communities and Syrian refugees and/or support local organisations focusing on this work.

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Even after another six months, people will feel the same pessimism, the same uncertainty, the same loneliness, and the same sense of exclusion. It is necessary to erase the traces of these severe traumas. Traumas of individuals with a disability like me, of oppressed and marginalised people, need to be healed and erased.

– *Man with a disability in Hatay*

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It is necessary to look at groups individually. While there has been progress for some groups, such as with gender and nationality-based discrimination, work for people with disabilities and Doms has not improved at all. Life for people with disabilities is getting worse and worse in the region.

– *Representative from a national non-profit organisation*

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Mapping should be done according to provinces-districts-rural areas and according to the level of impact (less-medium-highly impacted). Different group distinctions should be made (age, occupation, nationality, gender-based distributions).

– *Representative from a national NGO*

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In emergency situations, LGBTQIA+ individuals can only trust and rely on their peers; even if an organisation demonstrates sensitivity, this does not eliminate the importance of peer support. In fact, there is a need for LGBTQIA+ organisations and individuals in this field. LGBTQIA+ individuals cannot benefit from services provided by other organisations. Therefore, the presence of an LGBTQIA+ association is important for LGBTQIA+ individuals to access services.

– *Representative from an LGBTQIA+ rights organisation*

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They should work with locals who know the area and the Abdal community well. [...] Understanding the locals is necessary to work here.

– *Representative from a local civil society organisation*

The full potential of localisation has not yet been realised

Local and national actors have been at the forefront of this response. This is reflected in OCHA's flash appeal, which prioritised supporting the leadership of national authorities and the dynamic community of local organisations.¹⁷ Decentralisation was also addressed in the Türkiye National Disaster Response Plan, which envisaged a multi-levelled response, with distinct but coordinated Disaster and Emergency Management Centres being established at national, provisional and district levels.¹⁸ It is, however, apparent from the accounts of affected people and humanitarian actors that barriers have prevented localisation from functioning as effectively as hoped.

People felt left alone in the early stages

Many people said they were left to fend for themselves, particularly in the early stages. They told us that they were forced to survive by their own means. Through that experience, many people shared testimonies of the value of solidarity they felt with fellow earthquake victims. People were moved by the empathy and compassion shown by those around them, who went out of their way to help where they could and share what little they had.

Affected people we spoke to frequently mentioned volunteers and informal civil society actors positively, as many felt they had done the most, particularly at the outset of the response. Also, in Kahramanmaraş and Malatya in particular, focus group participants mentioned the assistance provided by the military and the gendarmerie favourably. On the other hand, some people felt like major institutions had not reached them. Particularly from Turkish focus groups discussions, people said the government and the Turkish Red Crescent had not done enough. There is also a more general sense that humanitarian responders were too slow to act. People feel let down by humanitarian actors and they cannot forgive them for what they perceive as a failure of their duties.

Unequal working relationships

Multiple local and national NGOs felt that the response was not sufficiently attuned to local contexts. We were told that language barriers prevented affected communities from being able to articulate themselves to humanitarians, and organisations failed to effectively research the needs and structures in place within differing communities. A representative from a local civil society organisation commented, **"Generally, they try to work here without understanding the situation, without understanding this place."** Such testimonies from local humanitarian actors in Türkiye underscore the value of regional planning and decentralisation to respect the unique characteristics of each region. Prioritising community participation can ensure that the needs and preferences of distinct affected communities are considered throughout the design and implementation phases.

Some local and national actors reported difficulty working with international actors, and that the relationship can be more akin to sub-contracting than a partnership. Heavy bureaucratic processes both in terms of reporting and applying for funding have affected the agility of local and national organisations. We heard from one organisation that international agencies prioritised national over truly local organisations. It was easier for international actors to simply continue working with organisations they had already established relations with prior to the earthquake, working on refugee programming, than to establish new partnerships specific to the context. Interviewees stressed the importance of future support programmes that foster the expertise of local actors and move beyond short-term training initiatives. Customised assistance, tailored to the unique strengths and requirements of respective



I gave birth to my son during this process, and we had nothing. Our neighbours, bless them, provided us with beds and all the baby supplies. There was no help from any organisation at that time. They brought everything. I was overjoyed when my son slept on a bed for the first time, thanks to them.

– Syrian woman in Adiyaman



In such a situation, the solidarity and support between neighbours and people is a beautiful thing. For example, when we were on the streets after the earthquake, our neighbours opened their cars for us, and our children stayed in the cars.

– Syrian woman in Hatay



Many people were abandoned to death. We even tried to remove the bodies from the rubble on our own without receiving any help. We were in shock because we lost our loved ones in the early days.

– Turkish woman in Hatay



No help came for four days [...] During this time, we ate whatever we could find outside, including grass. I remember eating grass [...] So, the government had no idea about any of this. No help ever reached the people here.

– Turkish woman in Kahramanmaraş

¹⁵ OCHA. February 2023. "Flash Appeal: Türkiye Earthquake (February – May 2023)."

¹⁶ AFAD. Updated February 2022. "Türkiye National Disaster Response Plan (TAMP)."

local organisations, is essential. For instance, a representative from a national NGO underlined the need for disaster management training for local organisations.

When it comes to working with public institutions, many humanitarian actors reported strong relationships. In fact, establishing such relationships have been fundamental to functioning effectively within the response. However, a couple of local and national actors also expressed that they found the level of control exerted by public institutions to be restrictive. A representative from a national NGO reported that the scope for advocacy work and policy change when working within the public sector is limited, as public institutions are generally resistant to civil society input in this respect. To achieve sustainable localisation, it is vital that public institutions acknowledge and empower local actors, creating opportunities for civil society engagement in policy-making processes.

A representative from a national NGO highlighted that one of the strengths of the response was that the direct involvement of local authorities facilitated the rapid and accurate utilisation of local resources. However, it was also suggested that national and local authorities were not always on the same wavelength. **“There is also a great division between local authorities and public institutions. They do not involve each other in the process, and there is no coordination”** explained a representative from a local civil society organisation. At a domestic response level, the TAMP had provided for a decentralised response in which national, provincial and district disaster and emergency management centres would be established and headed by various of national and local authorities to carry out disaster and emergency services. However, it is apparent from our discussions with humanitarian actors that a synchronised response between national and local authorities was not as effective as planned.

Trends in localisation

Moving forward, the continuing role of local actors is unclear. On one hand, as basic needs persist in some areas, some see local actors simply continuing to focus on meeting such needs. However, as the response also moves towards longer-term development work, with more defined goals, areas, and indicators, others foresee a potential leading role for local actors. This is important as the prominent role of volunteers in the initial stages of the response is not sustainable in the longer term, particularly in the context of current economic conditions in Türkiye and given the absence of volunteer oversight and monitoring. However, the overarching feeling is that local actors are at the mercy of authorities and international actors. Their future, and possible role in the recovery effort, is dependent on whether authorities and international actors will support them with ongoing funding and capacity-development.



National actors sometimes struggled with international bureaucracy.

“

Even on the fourth day of the earthquake, people we knew were still under the debris, we could hear their voices, but no one came to help. Everyone died screaming in the cold.

– Older man in Adiyaman

“

Some of them worked a bit slowly. The evaluation processes were delayed. This had a negative impact on our activities. For example, we needed blankets, but they arrived when summer came.

– Representative from a national NGO

“

They constantly ask us to prepare concept notes and budgets. Then they're reviewed at headquarters, which sends them to the donor, and the donor may request revisions, and so on. These are lengthy and demanding processes.

– Representative from a national NGO

“

We worked closely with public institutions [...] Our public relations were good and developed further during the earthquake. It would have been very difficult to carry out the process without cooperation.

– Representative from a national NGO

“

Public institution and government policies will be decisive. Maybe it [localisation] will disappear completely. Maybe it will continue improving, the state may want to develop earthquake response activities through provincial organisations. Besides government policy, the attitude of donors is also important. If they decide to support local actors, local actors can play a more effective role.

– Representative from a national non-profit organisation

✓ Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from discussions with affected people and humanitarian actors:

- **Improve partnerships with local organisations who better understand local contexts.** This includes increasing funding for local organisations and reducing bureaucracy (where possible), which is a major barrier for local organisations. This is important because the current reliance on volunteers is not sustainable.
- **Increase the roll-out of earthquake-specific capacity-development** to local partners, particularly where local partners have limited experience in disaster management work, or where they are working in new sectors which were established post-earthquake, such as the water, sanitation and hygiene sector. Field-level capacity development ought to be provided in local languages wherever possible.
- **Increase the systematic involvement of local actors within coordination structures** to improve outreach and advocacy opportunities, including their representation within working groups and task teams. Public institutions must also acknowledge and empower local actors, creating opportunities for civil society engagement in policy-making processes.

“

Simplifying project forms and accelerating processes are necessary. The process of granting funds and implementing work in the field should not be a race. The approach should be clearer and more coordinated. There is an unequal relationship between donors and organisations like ours. We feel the time pressure very clearly when donors receive reports or forms from us. However, we don't receive the funds from the donors on time.

– *Representative from a local civil society organisation*

“

There should not be too many procedures or too much paperwork. Sometimes it is necessary to be able to use the budget quickly, but the procedures are lengthy. They do not allow for that. We are obliged to prove to both donors and aid recipients how we use the budget. Donors sometimes want photos, but we cannot arrange them immediately. I understand that this may not be very feasible in terms of accountability, but some things need to be flexible.

– *Representative from a national NGO*

Methodology

Objective

We used a qualitative approach for an in-depth inquiry into the complex experiences of affected people in Türkiye. Given the early stages of the response and the lack of comprehensive data collection programmes, we chose an exploratory qualitative research method to understand people's evolving experiences as aid recipients, to examine how affected communities understand accountability in the humanitarian response and explore possible gaps and vulnerabilities.

We asked people to answer our research questions from their own experience, and also to reflect more broadly from the points of view of others in their community. In this way, we gathered a wider range of views and recommendations, relevant to broader sections of society.

Design

In collaboration with our Turkish research partner TK-APS, we conducted 12 focus group discussions, six oral history interviews, and 23 key informant interviews.

Focus group discussions

We sampled for equal representation of gender and nationality. The targeted provinces (Hatay, Kahramanmaraş, Adıyaman, and Malatya) were selected based on the priorities of the humanitarian response and the severity of the damage in those areas. Participants were identified via focal points in each community and thereafter through adoption of a snowball sampling approach, in accordance with the sampling criteria.

The table below shows the number of participants by location.

Location	Location type	Gender	Number of participants	Nationality
Hatay				
Harbiye	Urban	Men	8	Turkish
Iskenderun	Urban	Women	8	Turkish
Kırıkhan	Urban	Women	9	Syrian
Payas	Rural	Men	8	Syrian
Kahramanmaraş				
Narlı	Rural	Men	8	Syrian
Pazarcık	Rural	Women	12	Turkish
Pazarcık	Urban	Men	6	Turkish
Adıyaman				
Adıyaman	Urban	Women	10	Turkish
Adıyaman	Rural	Women	8	Syrian
Adıyaman	Urban	Men	4	Syrian
Malatya				
Doğanşehir	Rural	Men	5	Turkish
Malatya	Urban	Women	5	Syrian

Oral histories

Oral histories are in-depth accounts of an individual's personal experience and recollections and allow their stories to be heard in greater detail. We conducted oral history interviews with aid recipients from vulnerable groups: people with disabilities; people living with auto-immune diseases; Syrian refugees with language barriers; older people; and LGBTQIA+ people.

Key informant interviews

We interviewed key informant representatives from the following groups:

- Local civil society organisations and community groups;
- National NGOs and non-profit organisations;
- The Turkish Red Crescent and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies;
- International NGOs;
- United Nations agencies;
- Donors;
- Advocacy organisations (including women's organisations and LGBTQIA+ rights organisations);
- Individual volunteers.

Interviewees were identified through a desk-review of organisations conducting and supporting earthquake response activities. The sample included both senior decision-makers and staff or volunteers working directly with earthquake-affected people.

Data collection

Data was collected between 10 May and 17 June 2023. The focus group discussions were conducted face-to-face, and the oral history interviews and key informant interviews were conducted either face-to-face or remotely. Responses in Turkish were recorded using tablets and smartphones, and subsequently translated into English. Focus group discussions lasted between 50 and 90 minutes; oral history interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes; and key informant interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes.

Data collection team

The TK-APS team facilitated the focus group discussions and conducted the oral history interviews and some of the key informant interviews. [TK-APS](#) is a Türkiye-based company that values relief and development from a "community-first" perspective. TK-APS focuses on economic and social research to improve the sector efficiency of clients from public, private, and humanitarian sectors.

Data analysis

The transcribed interviews were coded with MAXQDA qualitative analysis software, utilising mixed inductive and deductive methods. Transcripts were systematically coded and organised into themes. Analysis was also concurrently carried out by our data collection partner, and findings were aggregated and cross-checked. Validation meetings were subsequently held with humanitarian actors and focus group focal points to discuss the key findings and recommendations.

Challenges during data collection and limitations

Due to the nature of the qualitative study, these results should not be interpreted to represent the views of all community members in the affected area in Türkiye, but rather to provide deeper insight into some of the challenges faced, programming issues, and potential areas for improvement.

Due to strict authorisation requirements, none of the focus group discussions took place within formal camps. Nonetheless, several participants in focus group discussions were living in formal camps. At the time of data collection, estimates suggested that around one-third of displaced persons within the affected area were in formal camps, whilst the remaining two-thirds were in informal camp settings.

Due to time and resource constraints, we conducted four of the six oral history interviews remotely.

The target group for focus group participants was designed to be aid recipients. However, it was hard to systematically screen participants to ensure that they had received humanitarian assistance prior to taking part in the focus group discussions. Nonetheless, we are confident that each participant had received assistance in some form prior to taking part in the focus group discussions.

While data collectors were explicit in communicating that they did not work for aid providers and stressed that responses would not directly affect the aid they receive, people's perceptions of (international) NGOs may nonetheless have influenced their willingness to share their opinions fully. This potential bias was mitigated as much as possible by explaining the role of Ground Truth Solutions to interviewees and by making sure the interview was conducted in a private location. Nonetheless a courtesy bias was evident among some participants.



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