

Introduction

On 6 February 2023, two devastating earthquakes struck near the Türkiye-Syria border, prompting three distinct humanitarian responses by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC): a) a large-scale (government-led) response in Türkiye, b) a cross-border operation to assist the former Non-government Controlled Areas (NGCA) of Northwest Syria, and c) a Damascus-led response in the former Government Controlled Areas (GCA) of Syria. To assess the effectiveness of this collective effort, the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) commissioned an independent Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the response by IASC organizations and their partners. The evaluation focused on critical components of the response to determine whether the necessary systems and capacities were in place to meet the needs of affected communities.

The IAHE's findings come at a critical moment for the humanitarian sector. In response to escalating global challenges, including funding shortfalls, rising humanitarian needs, and systemic inefficiencies, the Secretary-General launched the [UN80](#) initiative to overhaul the UN system. The ERC introduced the [Humanitarian Reset](#) in March 2025 and announced "phase two" of the [Humanitarian Reset](#) in June. This emphasizes empowering local and national actors, strengthening country-level leadership, restructuring the IASC, simplifying the cluster system, and fostering collective financing and advocacy.

The following sections present timely lessons and good practice examples from the IAHE of the Türkiye and Syria earthquake response, offering practical insights to help translate the Humanitarian Reset's ambitions into concrete action and support the adaptation of humanitarian action to today's evolving realities.

From First Responders to Decision-Makers: The Role of Affected Communities



The evaluation of the earthquake response in Türkiye and Syria identified that affected communities were not passive recipients of aid—they were essential actors in the response. As traditional humanitarian actors face funding shortfalls and reduce their presence in some contexts, investing in community preparedness is more urgent than ever.

In both countries, local people acted as first responders when infrastructure damage limited access for aid organizations. In Syria, where international search and rescue support was lacking, community-led efforts were especially critical. In GCA, local associations, schools, and mosques played key roles. In NGCA, one Syrian NGO mobilized 2,000 trained volunteers to provide ambulance services, rescue operations, temporary shelters, and mobile kitchens. Later, the AAP inter-agency working group supported the creation of a Local Community of Practice (LCOP) in NGCA, which collaborated with volunteer groups to strengthen accountability through tools such as the Safeline hotline and Rumor Tracker. These tools enabled communities to report concerns and helped humanitarian actors adapt their programming in real-time. The LCOP also facilitated inclusive consultations, ensuring that communities, including marginalized groups, had a voice in shaping the response.

These findings highlight good practice as part of the Reset's call to center affected people in humanitarian action, not just as aid recipients, but as active agents. The evaluation underscores that empowering communities and investing in local structures before crises strike is not only possible, but essential for timely, accountable, and effective response.

A Need to Rethink Partnerships with Local and National Actors



The IAHE found that in both Türkiye and Syria, IASC member partnerships were delayed by lengthy and duplicative due diligence procedures. Streamlining these processes, as called for in the Humanitarian Reset and UN80 initiative, is essential for enabling faster, more equitable and trust-based partnerships with local NGOs. In Türkiye, some partnerships took up to eight months to finalize. In Syria's NGCA, SNGOs, despite being directly affected by the earthquakes, faced similar burdens, with smaller organizations particularly disadvantaged by complex compliance requirements. This limited the reach of the response, especially in hard-to-access areas where these NGOs had strong community ties.

Coordination between the Turkish government and HCT members also faced early challenges due to the lack of a clear agreement on the role of international actors. While collaboration improved over time, and IASC members supported the government-led response, their future role remains uncertain—an ongoing concern given Türkiye's high seismic risk.

Prioritizing and assisting the most vulnerable



The IAHE concluded that in both Türkiye and Syria, humanitarian actors encountered systemic barriers in reaching the most vulnerable populations—particularly older people and persons with disabilities (PWD). These groups were often overlooked due to accessibility challenges, a lack of data, and the need for tailored approaches during the early phases

of the response. These issues were further exacerbated by insufficient funding, rigid programming, widespread infrastructure damage, and the absence of agreed-upon criteria for identifying vulnerability.

The evidence collected by the evaluation team found that despite these constraints, innovative practices emerged. In NGCA, the Protection Cluster developed a risk profiling mechanism to enable more targeted and equitable assistance. By assigning weighted scores to households based on factors such as displacement, disability, and exposure to protection risks, this tool proved especially effective in a context where nearly the entire population was in need and traditional needs assessments fell short. **This example illustrates how inclusive, accountable, and data-driven approaches can significantly enhance the ability to reach and support those most at risk in crisis settings by ensuring that limited resources are directed where they are needed most, as called for in the Humanitarian Reset.**

Humanitarian Access and Upholding Humanitarian Principles in Complex Crises



The IAHE of the Türkiye and Syria earthquake response highlighted that IASC members operated in complex environments, prioritizing access and assistance delivery while striving to uphold humanitarian principles. In Syria, the lack of USAR support, despite urgent needs, highlighted the limited leverage humanitarian actors have, even with donor governments, when advocating for needs-based assistance. In GCA, humanitarian actors faced difficult trade-offs: either risk expulsion or continue operating under restrictive conditions that compromised neutrality and impartiality. In contrast, in NGCA, actors were better able to formalize principled engagement by signing agreements with de facto authorities.

In Türkiye, complementing the government-led response while demonstrating impartiality and neutrality proved challenging. Some communities perceived IASC members as prioritizing Syrian refugees over Turkish nationals, underscoring the need for direct community engagement—not just coordination with authorities—to communicate humanitarian principles and address grievances.

The earthquakes also created a critical opening for the ERC to advance humanitarian diplomacy with the Syrian Government, leading to unprecedented international access to the NGCA and the reopening of additional border crossings. IASC members capitalized on this access to expand aid delivery, strengthen community engagement, and improve coordination and accountability to affected populations (AAP), areas that had been weak early in the response. **This reinforces the Humanitarian Reset's call for the critical role of agile, strategic diplomacy in protecting and expanding the humanitarian space through sustained, context-sensitive engagement and upholding humanitarian principles.**

Ending Turf Wars: Toward Inclusive and context-specific coordination models



The evaluation emphasizes the importance of adapting coordination mechanisms to the specific context and capitalizing on existing coordination mechanisms whenever possible, rather than adopting a standardized approach to establishing a new coordination structure. In Türkiye, for example, the government led the earthquake response, while the System-Wide Scale-Up Activation helped strengthen IASC leadership and foster a more collective approach. The HCT established a new coordination structure intended to be more effective in addressing earthquake-related needs than the existing structure for delivering the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP). However, this approach was not well-adapted to a middle-income country with strong national disaster management systems and existing national coordination mechanisms. Language barriers and a lack of familiarity with IASC terminology and systems limited the participation of Turkish authorities and NGOs, leading to the use of parallel coordination mechanisms. These issues were partially resolved in August 2023 with the introduction of Area-Based Coordination.

In northwest Syria, the cross-border operation offers a strong example of localized coordination. Syrian INGO staff in cluster co-coordinator roles stepped into leadership positions when the earthquakes struck, leveraging their experience and language skills to engage effectively with stakeholders inside NGCA. The earthquakes also exposed the limitations of coordinating solely from Gaziantep, prompting the creation of localized structures that enabled greater SNGO leadership and direct engagement with de facto authorities.

The former Whole of Syria (WoS) architecture proved too cumbersome for a rapid-onset emergency and failed to overcome competition between GCA and NGCA operations. This hindered collaboration on how best to assist affected communities and limited the sharing of good practices. **The competitive rather than collaborative dynamic underscores the need for a mindset shift to deliver on the Humanitarian Reset's commitment to ending turf wars and fostering inclusive, context-driven coordination.**

Coordinating Needs Assessments for Better Response



The IAHE highlighted the consequences of uncoordinated needs assessments - multiple actors using different methodologies with limited data sharing, resulting in delayed prioritization and resource allocation. In Syria, the main challenge was the absence of a unified approach, along with the lack of an inter-sectoral coordination tool to bring together needs and evidence. In Türkiye, collective needs assessments were conducted quickly, including the Türkiye Earthquakes

Recovery and Reconstruction Assessment (TERRA), undertaken in collaboration with the government; however, they were not comprehensive in their geographical scope or coverage of vulnerable groups. Significant efforts were made later in the response to address these gaps, such as the creation of the Earthquake Solutions and Mobility Analysis Team (ESMAT). The severity index, developed with ESMAT's support, helped identify areas where the earthquakes had medium to high impact, enabling the prioritization of assistance to the most affected populations.

Fragmented and duplicative continue to undermine humanitarian response so the Humanitarian Reset's call for shared services, including needs assessments, pooled data systems, and information management, offers a clear path forward. Joint assessment frameworks and interoperable platforms can enable faster, more accurate, and inclusive decision-making, especially in sudden-onset emergencies.

Leveraging National Systems for Multi-Purpose Cash



The IAHE concluded that by leveraging established systems and partnering with national actors, the response in Türkiye was able to deliver cash programs at scale, illustrating how pre-existing frameworks can be adapted to meet evolving humanitarian needs during sudden-onset emergencies. Effective partnerships with the Turkish Red Crescent and government entities enabled the rapid expansion of cash assistance, building on systems originally developed for the Syrian refugee response. Despite early coordination challenges as new actors launched cash programs without aligning with these established approaches, multi-purpose cash assistance proved especially valuable to affected communities in both Türkiye and Syria. Its flexibility allowed people to meet urgent needs, such as rent, home repairs, and transportation, that in-kind aid could not address. In Syria's NGCAs, functioning markets and existing agreements with financial service providers enabled Syrian NGOs to deliver cash quickly, despite infrastructure constraints. In contrast, in government-controlled areas (GCAs), concerns over data use and international sanctions complicated the rollout of cash programs.

These findings reinforce the direction of the Humanitarian Reset, which calls for “more multi-purpose cash assistance wherever feasible and appropriate, with local actors fully involved”. The evaluation demonstrates that when local systems and partnerships are in place, cash programming can be scaled rapidly and effectively.

Timely and Flexible Funding, and the Role of Pooled Funds



The IAHE found that, in both Türkiye and Syria, the most timely and flexible funding came from agencies' internal funding mechanisms (which helped to kick-start their responses) and from individual and corporate donors moved by media coverage. This meant that overall resource mobilization was not dependent on the Türkiye and Syria Flash Appeals. Both appeals were issued slightly late, due to delays in agreeing on needs and funding levels, particularly with the Turkish government. Only a few bilateral donors used the appeals to release additional funds, and there was limited evidence that they helped mobilize more than what donors would have provided regardless. **This supports the Humanitarian Reset's call to simplify and streamline planning and appeals processes.**

The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and Syria's Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs) provided critical early support. The Syria CBPFs also filled important gaps by funding activities that other donors might have overlooked. The Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) was particularly innovative—securing a CERF loan against donor pledges to enable rapid disbursement, and covering duty of care costs for SNGO partners. However, challenges remained: CERF prioritization in Syria was affected by coordination issues under the Whole-of-Syria approach, which excluded key cross-border actors and raised concerns about whether some funding decisions were truly needs-based. **While the good practice examples strengthen the Humanitarian Reset's calls for increased donor contributions to pooled funds, the challenges identified need to be addressed to ensure the most effective use of funding.**

Harmonize, Don't Minimize: Smarter Results Reporting



In both Türkiye and Syria, the IAHE found gaps in collective reporting that made it challenging to aggregate even output-level data, let alone assess the type, scale, timing, or quality of assistance received by affected communities. While such limitations are not uncommon, especially where funding is not tied to results, they are increasingly untenable. In today's context of growing financial pressure, the absence of collective results data makes it difficult to demonstrate value for money and sustain donor support. Current Flash Appeal guidance does not require IASC members to report on what has been achieved with mobilized funding. IASC members should therefore reflect carefully on the rationale for requesting further reductions in reporting requirements as stated in the Humanitarian Reset. **While the intent may be to reduce administrative burden and streamline operations, doing so without strengthening collective results reporting risks undermining transparency, accountability, and trust. Instead, the focus should shift toward developing harmonized reporting systems.**