



N E T W O R K

communicating with disaster-affected communities

An analysis of the communication and engagement ecosystem in earthquake-affected Türkiye

September 2023



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Cover photo: Earthquake zone in Antakya, Hatay, Türkiye, February 2023. Credit: UNOCHA/Barbaros Kayan

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Acronyms

AAP	accountability to affected people
AFAD	Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (Türkiye)
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Türkiye)
CCEA	communication, community engagement and accountability
CDAC	Communicating with Disaster-Affected Communities (Network)
CFM	complaints and feedback mechanism
CwC	communicating with communities
GI	group interview
KII	key informant interview
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NWS	northwest Syria
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PDMM	Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (Türkiye)
SMS	short message service
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

In February 2023, catastrophic earthquakes struck southeast Türkiye, causing significant damage and impacting humanitarian aid and communication. This report presents findings from a study conducted between June and August 2023, aiming to understand the information flows and communication ecosystem in Türkiye. The findings are intended to facilitate informed, inclusive and accountable response and recovery planning to meet the needs of affected people.

The study found that, despite shifts in information-sharing, the communication channels that people used remained constant. Demographic differences emerged in preferred social media platforms: Turkish people preferred X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, while Syrian refugees leaned toward Facebook. WhatsApp was universally embraced. Radios gained importance for Syrian youth and men. Although there is a documented preference for and reliance on mobile technology, it is important to note that vulnerable groups continue to be excluded if alternative communication and information dissemination channels are not also used and language preferences are not accounted for.

Engagement with actors involved in humanitarian response is fairly positive. Most respondents who spoke with CDAC were satisfied with information-sharing channels. However, women expressed some dissatisfaction with delays in receiving responses to their questions and people with disabilities remain unsatisfied with existing communication channels. Trust, hinging on credibility, transparency and accountability, varied among communities. Turkish men and youth trusted authorities, TV and social media; Turkish women leaned on non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government and politically aligned TV. Syrian refugees trusted humanitarians and community advocates.

The findings stress the need for contextually relevant, multilingual and inclusive communication approaches. Fostering trust and adapting strategies for different communities and demographics, including speakers of minority and marginalised languages, is vital for effective communication and engagement. The report equips responders with the evidence needed to adapt and expand their communication, community engagement and accountability (CCEA) efforts and meet community information needs. Ensuring accessible and transparent information dissemination reinforces trust, promotes community-driven recovery and thus improves humanitarian outcomes for everyone. In addition, it is equally important to monitor sentiment towards the wider aid operations to inform communication strategies.

Key findings

Shifts in information-sharing and validation

- Increased information sharing was observed after earthquakes.
- Validation methods transitioned from news and TV to cross-checking with public updates, authorities and WhatsApp.

Diverse communication channels

- Communication channels largely remained the same after the earthquakes. Radios gained significance for Syrian refugee youth and men during emergencies but were not mentioned by Turkish people.
- Turkish people leaned toward government channels for information, while Syrian refugees turned to humanitarian organisations.
- TV remained important, but Turkish restrictions on press freedom and the politicisation of media led to a rise in online sources. Use of Turkish-language TV by Syrians is low.
- Social media platforms were preferred by both groups, with Turks preferring X and Instagram, Syrians preferring Facebook, and youth engaging on TikTok. WhatsApp is highly used to share information through dedicated groups, including community, parent and neighbourhood groups.
- People with low literacy levels, older people, people with disabilities and people whose first language is Arabic or Kurdish face more difficulties accessing information. Up to 25% of the population speak languages other than Turkish as the main language of their household and are likely to face language-related barriers.

Humanitarian–media interaction

- There was limited collaboration between humanitarian responders and media, often featuring one-sided broadcasts rather than close collaboration or official partnerships.
- A negative story on the earthquake response was quickly picked up by politically affiliated platforms in the mainstream media, demonstrating how humanitarian efforts can be utilised by different actors to further political agendas.

Two-way communication with humanitarians

- Prior humanitarian support to Syrian refugees enabled responders to expand existing communication channels to reach both Turkish and Syrian people.
- Hotlines were perceived as one-way and requiring improvements to enable quicker response times.
- Face-to-face conversation and social media were the preferred methods of receiving humanitarian information in both communities. Hotlines were also frequently mentioned and used. Posters were only considered effective by some men.
- Monitoring of the aid response's reputation on widely used social media platforms (Facebook, X) was limited.

Trusted sources

- Trusted sources varied across demographics: Turkish men and youth trusted the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), TV, social media and local authorities. Turkish women relied on NGOs, government institutions, politically aligned TV channels and personal connections. Syrian refugees trusted those offering support, activists and influential figures, Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (PDMM) and humanitarians.
- Trust is rooted in factors like credibility, accuracy, delivering on promises, transparency, accountability, responsiveness and reputation.

Introduction

On 6 February 2023, two earthquakes struck 11 provinces¹ in Türkiye, killing more than 50,000 people and affecting more than 9.1 million people in total (OCHA, 2023b). Two weeks later, on 20 February, another two earthquakes struck in the province of Hatay. The earthquakes were catastrophic. Not only were more than 115,000 people injured, but 2.7 million people were displaced (ACAPS, 2023a). The affected population included Turkish people and refugees from Syria and elsewhere residing in the earthquake-affected areas. There were slightly fewer than one million Syrian refugees residing in three of the earthquake-affected provinces (ibid.) Extremely cold weather and heavy rain hampered rescue efforts and left millions of people without shelter vulnerable to the cold.

In the aftermath of a disaster, affected populations need to know how to access relief services, understand targeting criteria for humanitarian assistance, make the best decisions for themselves and hold aid workers accountable. Information and communication in languages and formats accessible to affected communities is critical to ensuring that those affected by crisis are at the centre of humanitarian decision-making. Accurate and accessible information allows people to make the best decisions for themselves and their communities and enables them to stay safe (CDAC Network, 2023). Effective communication and complaint and feedback mechanisms (CFMs) also hold actors involved in humanitarian response accountable to the populations they serve (CDAC Network, 2014).

In response to the earthquakes and the growing humanitarian needs in affected areas in Türkiye, CDAC Network was commissioned to produce analysis mapping the communication and engagement ecosystem in earthquake-affected areas to support effective accountability to affected populations (AAP) in ongoing and planned response programming, and to bring together critical analysis on language, media, culture, access and preferences.² In the case of Türkiye, with such a massive scale of damage and diverse populations in need, timely, relevant and transparent information production and dissemination is key to developing trust and credibility, directly affecting the ability of humanitarians to deliver aid and of communities and individuals to make the best decisions for themselves. The highly political nature of the context and high levels of misinformation necessitated robust CCEA efforts. Lack of in-depth and nuanced information about protection risks, in both formal and informal settlements that were established after the earthquakes, made it difficult for humanitarians to understand and respond to protection needs (ACAPS, 2023b).

1 The 11 provinces were Adana, Adiyaman, Diyarbakir, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmara , Kilis, Malatya, Mersin, Osmaniye and Sanliurfa.

2 This study draws on elements of the information ecosystem assessment approach of Internews, a CDAC Network member. According to Internews, an information ecosystem is the 'complex organisation of dynamic and social relationships through which information moves and transforms and flows. [Information ecosystems] are complex adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers' (Internews, 2015).

Analysis methodology

This report is one of two produced by CDAC on the impact of the earthquakes in Türkiye and northwest Syria (NWS). Both reports make use of existing literature and qualitative primary data to explore the dimensions of information supply and demand in terms of communication and community engagement, access, preference, usability and need.

In total, for both reports, more than 85 documents were reviewed and 56 consultations were held with 139 individuals. For Türkiye, more than 40 documents were reviewed (including general documents on CCEA and documents relevant to both Syria and Türkiye); eight group interviews (GIs) were held with 44 community members, including humanitarian field officers and affected people from both Turkish and Syrian refugee communities; 13 key informant interviews (KIs) were conducted with 16 people involved in humanitarian response; four KIs were conducted with media actors (three of whom target Syrian audiences and one who is a media expert); three KIs were conducted with representatives working with people with disabilities and organisations that support them; and one case study was conducted with a person with a disability.

Data collection was conducted across Adiyaman, Antakya, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaras and Kirkhan, as well as remotely (see Table 1). All individual and group interviews were conducted in a language the interviewee was comfortable speaking, whether English, Arabic or Turkish. Interviews were conducted by three researchers: two from affected areas in NWS residing currently in Türkiye, and one foreign researcher working remotely. Data was collected between 6 June 2023 and 1 August 2023.

Table 1 **Group interview participants (n=44)**

Participant group	Location	Gender	# of participants
Turkish women	Gaziantep, Hatay	Female	6
Syrian refugee women	Gaziantep, Kahramanmaras, Kilis	Female	6
Turkish youth	Adiyaman, Gaziantep, Kahramanmaras	Mixed	5
Syrian refugee youth	Adiyaman, Antakya, Gaziantep, Kahramanmaras	Mixed	6
Turkish men	Adiyaman, Hatay, Kirkhan	Male	5
Syrian refugee men	Adiyaman, Antakya, Gaziantep, Kahramanmaras	Male	6
Humanitarian Field Officers (Turkish)	Hatay	Mixed	6
Humanitarian Field Officers (Syrian refugee)	Remote	Male	4

This study was a collaborative effort, supported by the AAP Task Team for Türkiye. Three collaborative sessions were held with the AAP Task Team during the study: one joint mapping session to identify previously completed studies on AAP/CCEA; one joint feedback session reviewing the primary data collection tools; and one validation session evaluating preliminary findings in advance of drafting this report. Insecurity Insight monitored discussions of the aid response on social media³ and provided insights for this report. CLEAR Global conducted secondary data review and analysis on language and communication preferences.

Limitations: This report makes limited use of quantitative data as access to existing quantitative datasets was restricted. While the study includes local and national organisations involved in humanitarian response, it does not include volunteers or civil society organisations whose CCEA structures are likely much more localised. This perspective is thus missing from the report. Because of political sensitivities around media in Türkiye, CDAC was unable to speak with media providers that cater to Turkish audiences. The conversations with media actors in this report are limited to Syrian media outlets targeting Syrian refugee audiences. CDAC was able to speak with one media expert who focuses on Türkiye, but this expert does not work in media provision.

³ Social media sentiment analysis tries to understand how the aid sector is perceived among social media users. It involves 'listening' to conversations about aid programmes as they are discussed in social media posts or comments on mainstream newspaper articles. Social media monitoring classifies views and opinions by negative or positive sentiment towards the aid sector. It uses qualitative ethnographic approaches to understand the expressed opinions. Social media monitoring has similar objectives to a focus group analysis, but it is limited to 'listening' and cannot ask questions. For more, see: Insecurity Insight (2023a).

Findings

Communication flows

Sources of information

Information sharing

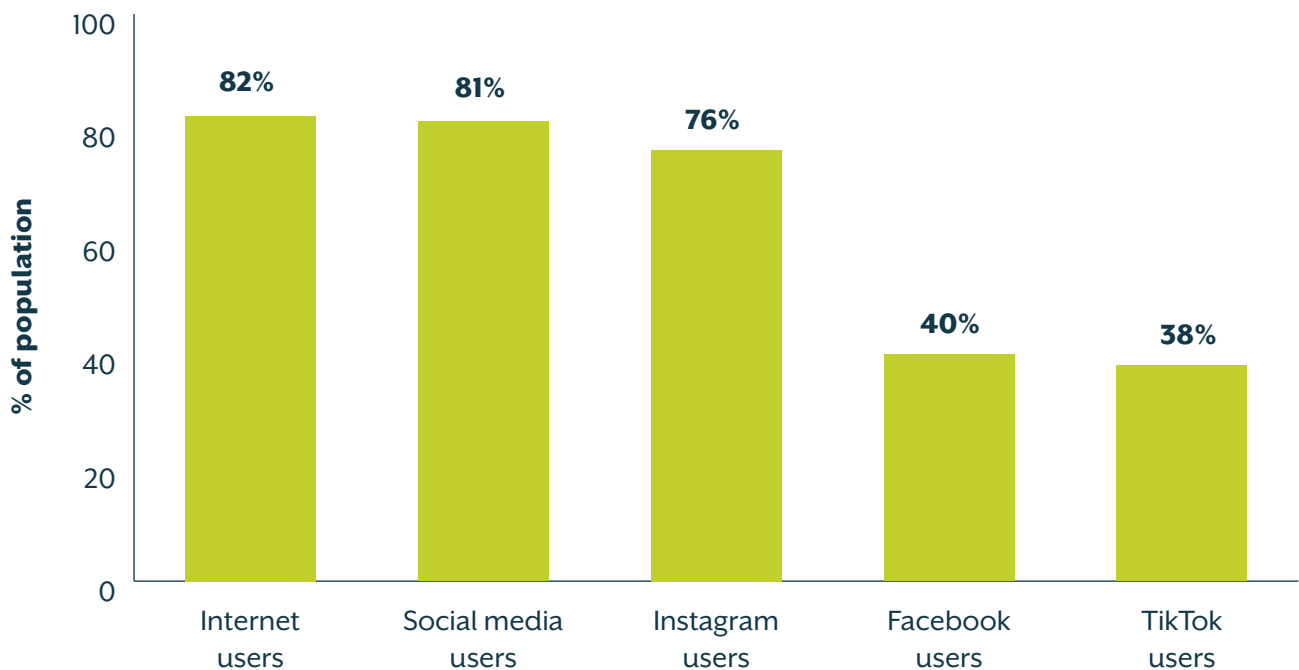
Information-sharing patterns changed for some people after the earthquakes. For example, Syrian refugee youth said they did not actively share information prior to the earthquake, but afterwards they shared information with friends and family as well as via WhatsApp, Facebook groups and Instagram stories. Syrian men also noted that those who did not share information frequently prior to the earthquakes did so afterwards, normally with friends via social media. Turkish people said that, after the earthquakes, they shared information readily and immediately after receiving it, especially concerning humanitarian assistance, often with friends and relatives via social media, phone calls or face-to-face conversation. Turkish women noted that, while phone calls and social media are the fastest ways of sharing information during an emergency, this was hampered in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake because of lack of internet and loss of mobile phones.

People share information in slightly different ways and rely on different sources, but TV, social media and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram are popular with most of the population. It is important to note, however, that Turkish people and Syrian refugees have different social media preferences. The former prefer X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, and the latter prefer Facebook. WhatsApp is popular with everyone and TikTok with youth.

While information-sharing patterns changed in response to the earthquake, people generally used the same communication channels. Turkish men and youth who spoke with CDAC cited TV and various social media platforms (TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp and X) as ways to receive information, but Turkish women cited only social media, with an emphasis on Facebook. Syrian refugee youth and men said similar, with Syrian refugee men adding that they received information via radio, and youth noting that radios are especially good sources of information during emergencies when internet and electricity go down.

Syrian refugee women cited similar sources, with the addition of humanitarians, camp managers, awareness sessions, committee meetings, PDMM, friends, relatives and school groups on WhatsApp used to share messages with parents. Turkish and Syrian humanitarian responders who spoke with CDAC reflected this knowledge, noting that humanitarian assistance is often announced via social media, SMS, government channels and civil society organisations.

Turkish people also turn to government sources for information or to report specific issues. For example, the Ministry of Family and Social Services is contacted to address gender-based violence (GBV) or child abuse claims and risks across the country. Turkish youth also noted the importance of WhatsApp groups created by university management and research assistants in disseminating information, as well as social media influencers. Many Turkish people also rely on the *muhtar* (elected village head) for information. However, not all *muhtars* are equally effective.

Figure 1 **Internet and social media usage in Türkiye**

Source: data from DataReportal: digital, 2022.

Verifying information

People verify information in different ways. Prior to the earthquake, Syrian refugee women said they verified information with the PDMM, humanitarians and educational institutions, depending on the type of information. They also used information-sharing as a mechanism of verification. Syrian youth and men said they would look online. Before the earthquake, people would cross-reference information with reputable news sources, TV broadcasts and trusted leaders. However, immediately after the earthquake, this shifted to cross-checking information with public updates from authorities and humanitarians, as well as via WhatsApp groups. Syrian youth noted that, after the earthquake, the multitude of information sources and many inaccuracies made verification difficult.

Turkish youth, by contrast, said verification does not occur very actively. Turkish women said that, if they are seeking political information, they will check with certain TV channels, whereas for government information they will check directly with the relevant centres, and they may also verify information within their community. Both men and women said they verify information by googling it, and call NGOs directly to verify information about aid, while men also said they would verify information with the *muhtar* or AFAD.

Humanitarian responders said they frequently receive calls to their various hotlines, comments on social media and direct questions to field officers from people attempting to verify information. They also noted that people verified information from different sources prior to the earthquake compared with after.

Media landscape

Türkiye's media landscape and its challenges have been well-documented (CAP, 2020; Reuters Institute, 2021; POMED, 2022; BBC, 2023). In 2023, Türkiye ranked 165th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2023). More than 90% of Türkiye's national media is under government control (ibid.) and media outlets critical of the government face near-constant political and financial pressure (Reuters Institute, 2021).

Fox TV, CNN Türk and Halk TV are among the most popular TV channels that do not fall under the government's control (Ibid.; POMED, 2022). The media expert CDAC spoke with explained that local and national government have been reported to use information as a tool of control. Media who publish negative stories about local government have official announcements withheld from them. Political ties are reportedly strong even at the local level as media funding stems from local businesses and government and the survival of these media companies is directly linked to publishing content favourable to their funders. Opposition parties used social media and their own media platforms to share their perspectives.

The Turkish media landscape in Türkiye

Although TV is the main medium for media dissemination (CAP, 2020; BBC, 2023), more people are gravitating to online sources for information. A 2018 survey by the Center for American Progress found that 70% of Turkish people think the media presents biased and untrustworthy information. Political affiliation plays a role, but even 50% of supporters of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) do not think the media produces honest and truthful information (CAP, 2020). This was echoed by the media expert CDAC spoke with, who expressed that most media outlets in Türkiye have an overt political bent which colours their approach to news and influences the communities they reach. The expert also noted that many people seek information from media outlets that are in line with their political affiliations and confirm their views.

Box 1

Media and the politicisation of aid: the case of Turkish Red Crescent's tent sale

On 10 February 2023, four days after the earthquake struck, the Turkish Red Crescent sold 2,050 tents to a national charity. The tents, which the charity bought with money raised from the public, were dispatched to the earthquake zone. Two weeks later, Türkiye's oldest newspaper, Cumhuriyet, published an investigative article on the transaction. The Turkish opposition criticised the Red Crescent for prioritising money over aid during a national disaster by selling the tents instead of dispatching them directly to affected areas. The story of the tent sale spread via social media, in particular X and Facebook. An estimated 20 million Turkish social media users were exposed to largely negative comments about the Red Crescent.

In May, more than two months after the story had first been made public and three days before a hotly contested 2023 election, the President of Türkiye criticised the tent sale. Once President Erdogan had endorsed the story, it was rapidly picked up by politically affiliated platforms in the mainstream media, illustrating how a humanitarian response issue can be instrumentalised in a political context.

On social media, stories about aid responders can quickly assume a political dimension, despite the best efforts of aid agencies to remain apolitical. It is important for responders to understand such sentiments among affected populations and to adjust programmes and communication to ensure safe and effective responses (Insecurity Insight, 2023b).

Although numbers vary, most Turkish people use social media to access information (61% according to Reuters News Agency, 75% according to the BBC) as it also provides an alternative voice to pro-government TV (Reuters Institute, 2021; BBC, 2023). Digital outlets and YouTube have also become key platforms for independent media (POMED, 2022). The growth in popularity of closed messaging applications for news, such as WhatsApp (30%) and Telegram (13%), is in part due to the Government of Türkiye's prosecution of social media users for public posts and the amendment of Türkiye's laws, which critics argue are a threat to free speech (Reuters Institute, 2021).

It is worth noting that use of Turkish-language TV by Syrian refugees is relatively low, indicating that language remains a barrier. Slightly less than half (42%) of Syrian refugees surveyed by Médecins du Monde Türkiye during COVID-19 said TV channels broadcasting in Arabic were a source of information (MDMT, 2020).

There is little engagement between Turkish local media and humanitarians. No actors involved in humanitarian response who spoke with CDAC noted frequent engagement with the media to share information with communities. This may be for a range of reasons, including politicisation of the press. The media expert who spoke with CDAC flagged the language barrier as a major difficulty impeding engagement, along with the media's lack of understanding of the bureaucratic systems within the aid sector and the necessary steps to support the delivery of assistance.

The Syrian media landscape in Türkiye

In contrast to Turkish people in Türkiye, radio plays a role in the media landscape for Syrian refugees, with Syrian radio stations seeing themselves as information channels with a responsibility towards their communities. Syrian media broadcasters (radio and social media) who spoke with CDAC said they actively engage with communities via social media, whether through voice messages on WhatsApp or commenting on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. Facebook in particular and social media in general were considered the most effective platforms for community engagement.

Syrian media in Türkiye generally maintains some distance from local and national government. Engagement with humanitarians is also limited, with more collaboration with Syrian organisations than international NGOs. For the most part, the nature of the relationship is one wherein media tries to identify what NGOs are doing and broadcasts it to communities, but it is not characterised by close collaboration or official partnerships. One media actor who spoke with CDAC said some actors involved in humanitarian response refuse to share statistics and information and refuse to appear in local media.

Communication with humanitarian actors

Prior to the earthquake, most humanitarian messaging targeted Syrian refugees and some vulnerable members of the host community. However, in the aftermath of the earthquake, all traditional humanitarian communication channels were leveraged to access both Syrian refugees and Turkish people in the affected areas. Humanitarians shared information via hotlines, SMS, face to face, and eventually social media (KIIIs; IFRC, 2022).

Humanitarians also used call centres, Facebook, women's safe spaces, community groups and mobile teams to disseminate information (KIIIs; OCHA, 2023a; b; Relief International, 2023; TRC, 2023; UNFPA, 2023b). Some humanitarians established more creative avenues such as using community centres in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of Syrian refugees (IFRC, 2022).

Box 2 Information flow during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) and Turkish Ministry of Health (MoH) used WhatsApp lines to share information about pandemic and virus mitigation measures (OCHA, 2023a). Other actors involved in humanitarian response also made use of digital platforms, including phone calls and video conferencing (UNHCR, 2020). According to Turkish youth, the MoH was the most important and trusted source of pandemic information.

During COVID-19, Syrian refugees noted that they most frequently sought information via social media and the internet (72%), followed by Arabic-language TV broadcasts (42%) and WhatsApp groups (31%) (MDMT, 2020). Many of these were also important sources of information after the earthquakes struck.

Although humanitarians knew social media was a preferred information channel, it was not a priority in the immediate aftermath, but use of social media among international actors involved in humanitarian response increased over time. Social media listening was also used by some actors to improve their understanding of the needs of communities. Humanitarians also shared information via word of mouth, in-person visits, posters and awareness sessions.

The multipronged approach to information-sharing after the earthquakes reflects the diverse communication preferences across different demographics. Older people are more likely to prefer hotlines; youth prefer social media; and Syrian refugees who speak Turkish are more likely to seek information via official government channels. For specific information from the government, people would make use of the relevant emergency numbers (183, 112 and 157) or, in the case of refugees, consult the PDMM.

Two-way communication with aid actors

Syrian refugee youth said they interact with aid workers directly, via social media or email. Syrian men mentioned consulting websites and calling organisations directly in addition to the aforementioned channels. Syrian women likewise discussed using hotlines and visiting field offices in person. Turkish people affected by the earthquakes used the same channels to communicate with humanitarians. Turkish women, however, also stressed that personal relationships with aid workers greatly facilitated access to them and the information they could provide.

For their part, humanitarian field officers confirmed that communities were in contact with responders via social media, hotlines, focal points and outreach workers, committee groups and email. It is also worth noting that, according to humanitarian responders, prior to the earthquakes, Syrian refugees were more familiar with humanitarian information-sharing channels than their Turkish counterparts. These include hotlines, WhatsApp groups and awareness sessions. Syrian refugees were also already registered with NGOs prior to the earthquakes.

Complaints and feedback mechanisms

According to the Inter-Agency Coordination for Türkiye, there are currently 28 organisations with active communicating with communities (CwC) lines. These organisations use primarily hotlines and WhatsApp, but also community centres, household visits, participatory assessments, community leaders, outreach volunteers and more to share information, as well as phone lines, complaints to staff, email, complaint feedback boxes, committees and other mechanisms to receive information (IAC Türkiye, 2023). Almost all humanitarian responders who spoke with CDAC confirmed the use of phones, hotlines and social media in sharing and receiving information, including feedback.

For the most part, both Syrian refugees and Turkish people said they were satisfied with existing information dissemination channels. This contradicts findings of another recent study among earthquake-affected communities, where people expressed lack of knowledge of and dissatisfaction with CFMs (GTS, 2023). Potentially, as a humanitarian explained to CDAC, Syrian refugees may express satisfaction because they fear that negative feedback will result in a discontinuation of services. Syrian refugee women did note that the efficiency of communication mechanisms could be improved so that aid workers responded to needs more quickly. Despite these communication efforts, and reflecting the complexity of the crisis, there were still people with insufficient information (ACAPS, 2023b; Relief International, 2023).

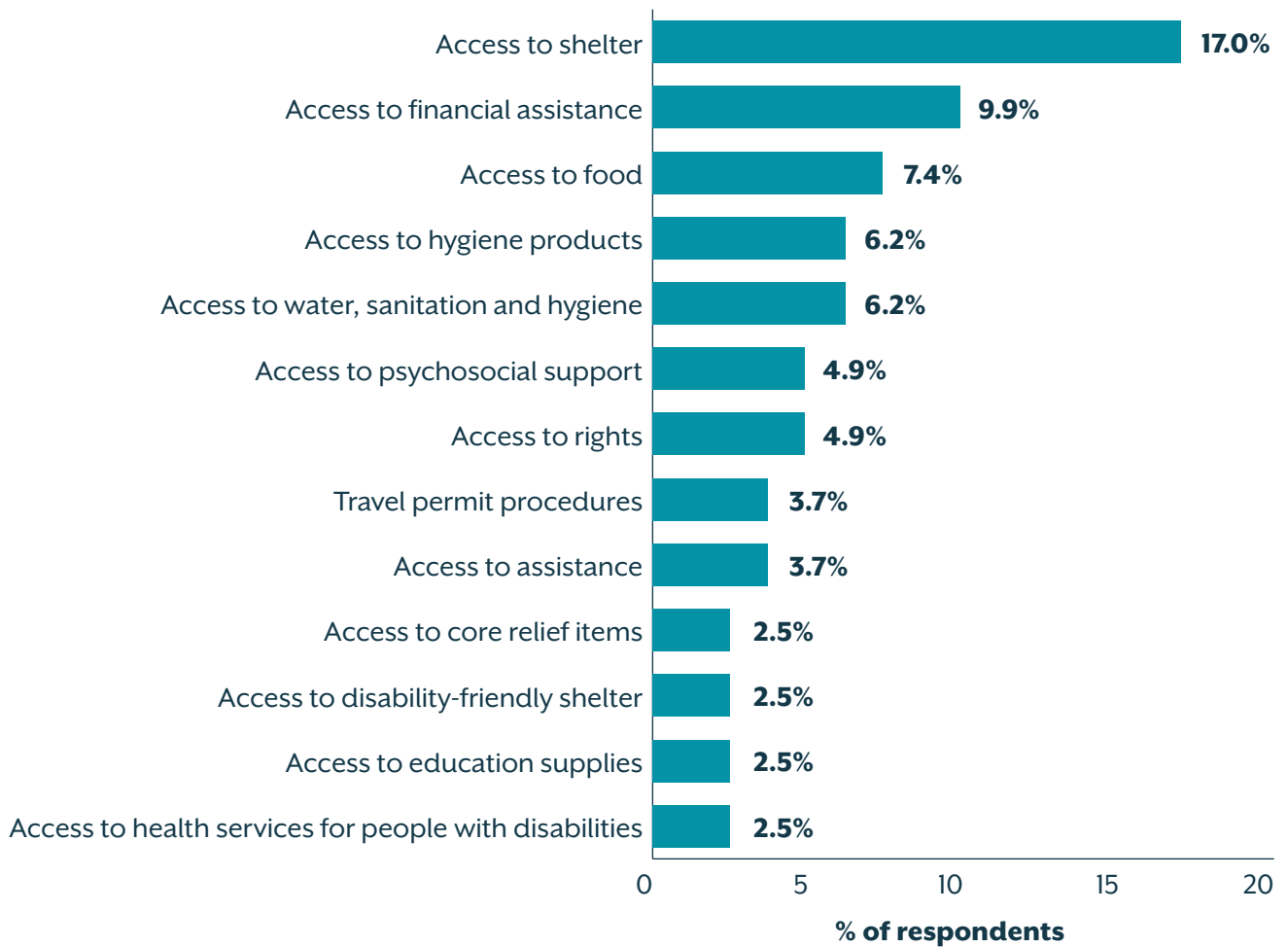
Monitoring discussions of the aid response within Turkish media and social media platforms was not systematic, limiting insights into how the aid response was perceived among wider society.

Information needs

After the earthquake, survivors were determined to gather information from every available source and utilise as many communication channels as possible. Actors involved in humanitarian response immediately leveraged existing communication channels that were part of the Syria refugee response (KII; OCHA, 2023a). It is also important to note that the entire country responded in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, not only the pre-existing humanitarian response. The earthquake response in Türkiye included faith-based, grassroots and civil society organisations, local and national NGOs, individuals and more.

Immediately after the earthquakes, people needed information on safe shelter, medical and psychological care, food and non-food items, access to cash and financial support, and humanitarian assistance in general (IAC Türkiye, 2023; Relief International, 2023; UNFPA, 2023b). People actively sought information about damages, casualties and how to access resources. People also needed information on how to prevent outbreaks of disease and how to make complaints and give feedback (UNICEF, 2023). Information needs varied based on legal status (UNHCR, 2023a) and gender. For example, women and girls needed information on sexual and reproductive health, access to menstrual hygiene products and GBV counselling and referral mechanisms (DEEP et al., 2023; UNFPA, 2023a; UNICEF, 2023).

People lacked clarity on access to public services, social protection schemes and government support packages, especially those residing in informal sites and peri-urban, remote and rural areas, as well as those who chose to stay on their land near their communities, livelihood opportunities and services. People whose homes were determined to be structurally sound but were uninhabitable also needed information (DEEP et al., 2023; OCHA, 2023b). Those living in tent cities were in particular need of information about fire and water safety (OCHA, 2023a).

Figure 2 **Reported information needs**

Source: data from Community engagement and CwC modalities dashboard, Türkiye Interagency Coordination Group.

In the immediate aftermath, there were also reports of disinformation circulating via social media (DEEP et al., 2023). People needed mechanisms to help identify credible information and avoid acting on messaging that demonised certain demographics and promoted racism.

Information access

The immediate aftermath of the earthquakes was marked by chaos and confusion. People struggled to contact loved ones and sought information from all possible sources, relying on community leaders, relatives, friends and neighbours (GTS, 2023). Guided by their own connections and group memberships, people consulted different sources for different types of information they desperately needed. Syrian refugees turned directly to NGOs because of their historic relationship, while Turkish people turned first to local authorities and then eventually to NGOs. Turkish people also relied on their *muhtar* (ACAPS, 2023b). Syrian refugee women noted that, amid the confusion concerning who would receive government assistance to fix damaged rental properties, they turned to their landlords for information. However, for information on humanitarian assistance, they contacted organisations

directly. Aid workers, however, were also affected by the earthquakes. Staff were among those killed and injured, and emergency response operations were hampered by the same interruptions to electricity and internet access that affected the general population.

Affected communities leveraged a diverse range of information sources during this period. Syrian men and youth, more than women, noted social media, authorities, Turkish NGOs and AFAD as important sources of information. In contrast, Turkish men, women and youth all noted that their main sources of information were TV, AFAD and social media. Turkish men were the only population group who mentioned TV and announcements by sheikhs in mosques, and Turkish women were the only population group to mention E-devlet.⁴ Turkish youth noted that people were actively sharing information on public social media accounts or via private messaging services, and there was a broad range of active communication channels.

International actors involved in humanitarian response struggled to reach people in remote areas and informal sites, especially in the immediate aftermath. It has been reported that local NGOs did better in terms of information dissemination than their international counterparts (ACAPS, 2023b). The Turkish government also implemented channels to disseminate information (ibid.). Given the responsibility they feel towards their audiences, Syrian media actors leveraged existing relationships and established new ones with local and national NGOs to provide messaging to affected communities. Their goal was to facilitate a connection between audiences and humanitarian actors and to help humanitarians expand their reach.

While phones and social media remained important ways to access information, many people lost their phones during the earthquakes and could not readily secure new ones. This undercut the efficacy of social media as a communication channel, even after electricity and internet were restored (TRC & IFRC, 2023). Lack of electricity and internet was a commonly cited barrier by both Syrians and Turkish people of all demographics and was confirmed by humanitarian field workers, especially in the acute period immediately after the disaster. Disruptions in internet access particularly affected younger people who rely heavily on social media, while this general over-reliance hampered access to information for elderly people who have low digital literacy and predominantly depend on mass media.

However, the restoration of internet and electricity did not always positively affect access to information. Humanitarian field officers and international humanitarian actors explained that information overload resulted in the proliferation of fake news and misinformation. Turkish women discussed how the proliferation of rumours made it especially difficult to separate truth from fact. Exacerbating the situation, local media with nationalist leanings circulated xenophobic messages and conspiracy theories, predominantly targeting Syrian refugees and the assistance they received. Thus racism, language and sparse social networks further hampered Syrians' access to information (GI; Government of Türkiye, 2023).

Other reported barriers for both Syrians and Turkish people included the movement of key services damaged in the earthquake; gender imbalance around phone usage, with men generally controlling

4 E-devlet is a Turkish government platform where users can access multiple government services without having to visit a government office.

phone access within households with fewer phones; physical and financial barriers; and delays in hearing back from humanitarians. Turkish youth were the only demographic who noted that government censorship was a barrier.

Humanitarians who spoke with CDAC emphasised difficulties reaching demographics like adolescent girls and the drawbacks of relying on mechanisms like hotlines, which a humanitarian described as a one-way mechanism to share information, not to receive information. Reaching adolescent girls is challenging both because they are less likely to have access to mobile phones and because some have been withheld from school because they need to help with increased household chores, affecting their ability to access information.

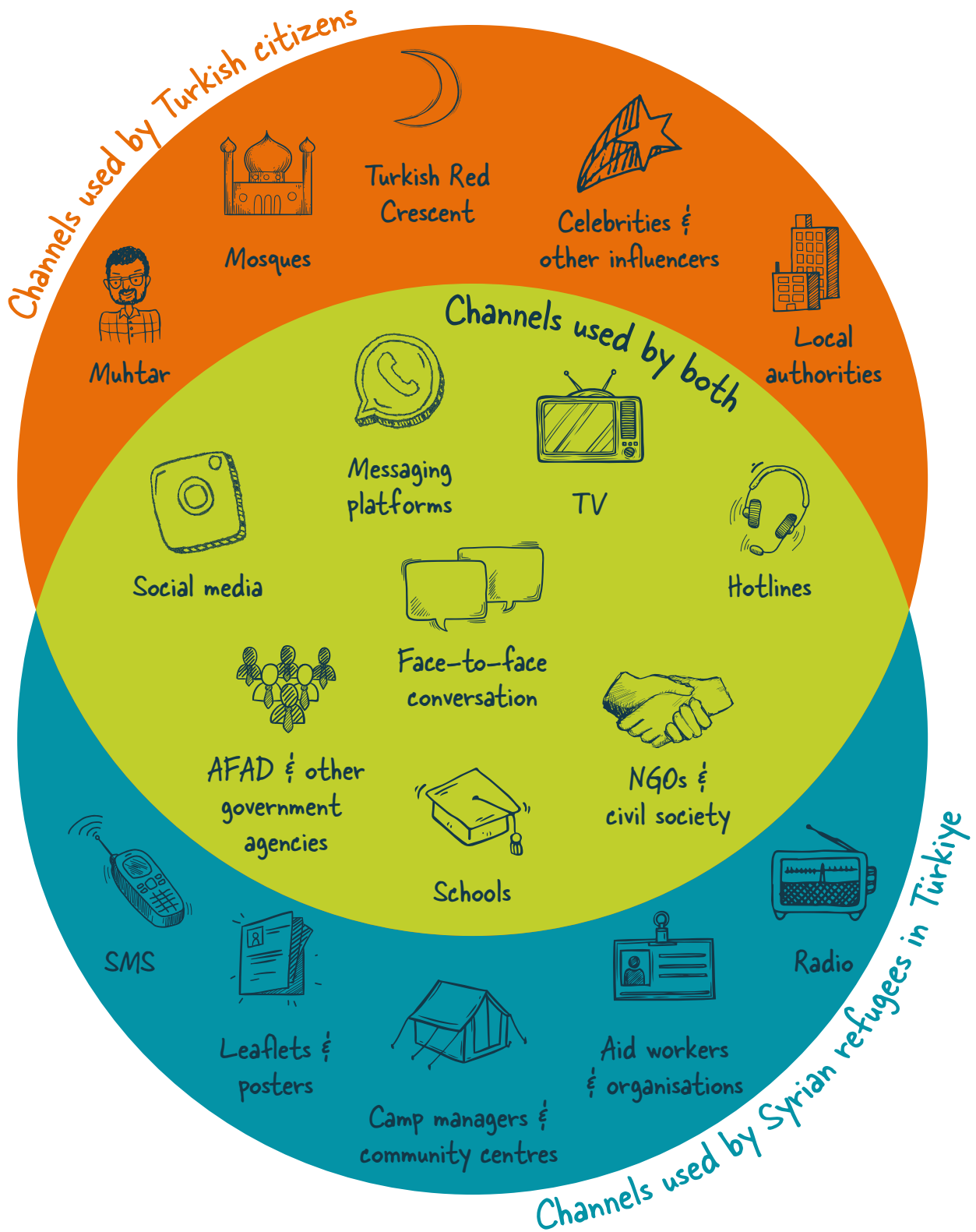
Preferred channels

According to one study, immediately after the earthquakes people preferred to receive information from family, friends and neighbours rather than from community leaders and government officials (GTS, 2023). Syrian refugee youth and men added that they preferred to receive information via social media. Only Syrian men mentioned posters as a preferred source.

According to Turkish and Syrian humanitarians from and working in earthquake-affected communities, additional preferred channels for receiving information and providing feedback included hotlines, face-to-face communication and social media. Some noted a preference for short, informative videos, and posters were frequently cited by male humanitarian responders. Turkish field officers responding to the earthquake in Hatay noted that posters are not always clear, and humanitarians receive many questions regarding information shared via posters.

Syrian refugee youth said that WhatsApp groups created by civilians were an effective way of sharing information after the earthquakes. Turkish men and women also noted the efficacy of WhatsApp in disseminating information, with women noting that each social circle has its own WhatsApp group that shares information, and they are considered trusted sources. Syrian refugee men noted that government media was effective because it is transmitted so quickly and is reliable, while Syrian field officers responding to Syrian communities in Türkiye considered community networks, local radio stations, community centres and trusted community leaders as effective ways of sharing information.

Figure 3 Communication channels used by Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees in Türkiye



Trust, influence and reliability

Influence is not always equated with trust. Syrian refugee men and youth said social media influencers, politicians and government officials are influential because of their large followings, but are not always trusted. People with large followings who *are* trusted include those offering help and advice, athletes and artists with a history of supporting the community, and local activists and journalists. Syrian refugee women also said that, because of a lack of choice of trusted sources, they trust the PDMM and humanitarians. Syrian refugee men and youth said TV broadcasts with field correspondents, AFAD, social media influencers and some TV news channels⁵ are trusted sources.

Turkish men were the only demographic to refer to *muhtars* as an influential source of information, mostly due to their connections with government offices and service centres. *Muhtars* are sometimes trusted, depending on their track record in the community. Trusted sources for men were AFAD, TV and local authorities. TV was trusted because viewers can switch between channels to verify information.

Both Turkish men and youth said AFAD lost some trust after the earthquakes, but as the main responder they remained a key source of information. Turkish youth also noted that social media, especially X and Instagram, are trusted sources. Women, in contrast, expressed more trust in NGOs and government institutions, including AFAD. They also said they trust TV channels with similar party affiliations. Turkish women also noted that they distrust people from different political parties or other countries, and they prefer to receive information from people and humanitarian actors they know and trust. It is worth noting that some field officers also mentioned religious leaders and local leaders as influential sources of information in communities.

Trust is often directly tied to proximity, accuracy and intention.⁶ Across communities, trust is dependent on credibility, accuracy, delivering on promises, demonstrated truth and accuracy of information, transparency, consistent communication, accountability, responsiveness, reputation and history within the community.

Language and culture

Varying levels of literacy and language differences further reinforce barriers to accessing accurate, timely and relevant information. Türkiye's population is linguistically diverse, including Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish and Persian speakers, among others. Sources of data for language use in Türkiye are poor. However, according to 2018 data, Turkish is the dominant language in the affected provinces (Adana, Adiyaman, Diyarbakir, Elazig, Gaziantep, Hatay, Malatya, K. Maras, Sanliurfa, Kilis, Osmaniye) – but at least 25% of the population speak

5 Trusted news channels that were named were Anadolu Agency, TRT and Syria TV.

6 According to the Internews Trust Framework (Internews, 2023), trust can be influenced by four components, three of which were found to be directly relevant to the context of Türkiye. Proximity refers to information that is accessible, understandable and representative. In this case, respondents noted trust in eyewitnesses, humanitarians, community leaders, friends and family, and people who have a positive track record in the community. Accuracy was also highly valued, with people expressing a preference for timely, factual and contextually relevant information. Intention includes information that is transparent and where the interests of the source are aligned with the community, both of which were also described by respondents as influencing trust.

other languages as their main language (DHS, 2019). There is great variation between affected provinces in Turkiye: in four provinces, more than 25% of the population use languages other than Turkish; in Sanliurfa and Adiyamayan, more than half the population speak languages other than Turkish.

The availability and quality of data on language use in the affected area is poor, which impacts the ability of the response to properly meet the needs of diverse language communities. In addition, aid actors do not consistently collect, monitor or make available data on the language of people in need, which also impacts their ability to understand how language use can affect people's access to information communication mechanisms.

Everyone who spoke with CDAC said they prefer receiving information in their own languages (Turkish, Arabic and Kurdish), though Syrian women noted that if they receive information in Turkish, they will translate it using Google Translate. They said the presence of translators in humanitarian organisations, hospitals and at the PDMM is helpful but limited.

Turkish women and humanitarians noted that people with low literacy levels, older people, children and people whose first language is Arabic or Kurdish struggled to access information. A humanitarian who spoke with CDAC likewise stressed that one of the biggest challenges in providing information relates to the divide between literate and illiterate community members. Combined with not completely reliable translations, like those sourced through Google Translate, and community reliance on informal communication channels which spread information rapidly and indiscriminately across demographic groups, risks of misinformation, rumour and community tensions are heightened.

These dynamics can reinforce exclusion. For example, Syrian refugee women noted that the refugee community banded together to support one another because they felt that affected Turkish populations were being prioritised. On the other hand, Turkish women noted a perception that people in Samandag and Akbez (both in Hatay) received assistance later than other areas (notably Kahramanmaras) and attributed the delay in Samandag to the fact that it has a majority Arab Alevi population.

Such potentially divisive perceptions can also stem from the inadequately considered actions of responders and journalists. Turkish women conveyed that some people made them feel like material for social media, flying in immediately after the earthquake, taking pictures and leaving.

Case study: communication and engagement ecosystems of people with disabilities

Information needs and challenges for people with disabilities are wide-ranging and diverse, dependent on their specific type of disability, community of origin (Turkish or Syrian refugee) and where they live (formal or informal settlements). For example, people with disabilities living in informal settlements have far less access to information than their counterparts living in formal settlements. In formal settlements, there are more organisations with offices and camp managers have household lists that note the households with a member with a disability. This is not the case for informal settlements.

Many people with disabilities, both Turkish and Syrian refugees, lost their assistive devices and mobility aids in the earthquakes, limiting their mobility and access to information and services, and increasing their risk of experiencing violence (OCHA, 2023a; b; UNFPA, 2023a).

In conversations with actors serving people with disabilities,⁷ they noted that people with disabilities often depend on family members, carers and social media to access information, as well as technical or rehabilitation experts and directly contacting public institutions and NGOs. During emergencies, people with disabilities rely on their carers, community and social service centres, NGOs, public institutions or the district governor's office for information. People with disabilities tend to verify information directly with the relevant institution, if possible. However, this was difficult immediately after the earthquakes as government offices were overwhelmed and hotlines were not always answered. When someone did answer, they did not always have an Arabic-speaking staff member who could respond to questions.

People with disabilities are not passive recipients of information. They share information face-to-face, via social media or messaging applications and in group sessions. They also use web chatrooms.

People with disabilities who have access to phones and the internet prefer to receive information via social media and messaging applications. However, not all people with disabilities can access the internet, meaning some people are left behind. It is also important to note that, despite a preference for information received via social media or messaging applications, accessing information after the earthquake was very challenging because many people lost their phones and could not afford to replace them.

People with disabilities are not satisfied with the information they receive. Many still face stigma in Türkiye, especially women and girls, and people with learning, psychosocial or intellectual disabilities, making it difficult for them to access information presented in communal settings. Information is also often shared with heads of households with the assumption that it will trickle down, but does not always reach members of the households with disabilities. When information does reach people with disabilities, it is not always adapted, especially for people who are blind or visually impaired. There is need for more audio support

⁷ The various actors support people with disabilities across the country and in Hatay specifically, and focus on people with sensory, physical and intellectual disabilities in the refugee and host communities.

and sign language, and people prefer social media posts with audio, video and options for different language. However, not all people who are hearing impaired or deaf understand sign language, and there is no one universal sign language.

People working to support people with disabilities said that influential and trusted sources are first and foremost other people with disabilities and disability activists, and people who are considered knowledgeable, including experts, NGOs and government officials from certain departments.

Conversation with a woman with a disability

Aysun⁸ was born blind and works in both the disability field and the humanitarian sector. Aysun notes that it is rare for people with disabilities to work in humanitarian aid; they are generally treated as recipients of assistance, not as people providing aid and involved in planning and decision-making.

Many of Aysun's friends were affected by the earthquakes and it was hard for her to reach them in the immediate aftermath. Many phones and assistive devices were destroyed or lost, hampering the ability of people with disabilities to access immediate assistance. In many cases, responders simply did not know where people with disabilities were. Many people also acquired disabilities after the earthquake.

Information from humanitarian responders was often shared as photos, which made them inaccessible to people who were visually impaired or blind. The phone numbers for hotlines that were shared did not work or were overloaded. Aysun said that, although the Ministry of Family and Social Services took action after the earthquake, it did not do so quickly enough and the phone numbers that were circulated were either not answered or the turnaround for responses was very slow.

Many people with disabilities who survived the earthquake struggled with survivor's guilt because they could not contribute directly to earthquake relief efforts. Despite challenges, people with disabilities banded together to help one another, such as procuring new assistive devices, providing travel assistance to areas not affected by the earthquake and sharing information. Aysun explained that most people and organisations they reached out to for support for individuals with disabilities promised to help, but then passed the responsibility on to someone else. In the end, people with disabilities supported each other. Aysun also recounted how some agencies providing immediate relief retraumatized people after their rescue. She concluded that all the workshops and money spent on inclusion has not effected much change. Messaging on information preparedness remains generic, for example, and does not include specificities for people with disabilities.

Aysun notes that many facilities established after the earthquakes, including places providing psychosocial support, are neither accessible nor inclusive. Many facilities also lack the capacity to support children with disabilities, including those with autism.

Another challenge faced by people with disabilities is documentation. For example, people with disabilities who need financial assistance or social services require a disability health board report. This report is also required if people with disabilities want to apply for a job in the public sector as it serves as proof of their

8 Name has been changed to ensure anonymity.

ability to work. Although renewing documentation was a priority for people with disabilities after the earthquakes, there was no comprehensive information on public authorities' websites on how to do this. For people with newly acquired disabilities, such as those acquired because of the earthquakes, this posed a major challenge.

Other people with newly acquired disabilities, including Syrian refugees, refugees from other countries, minorities and members of the LGBTQIA+ population faced difficulties having their disabilities recognised because of the lack of information around how to certify their disability status. This was exacerbated by fear of stigma and physical harm. People with mental disabilities and their support persons (usually family members) often hesitate to reveal their disability status. However, without revealing this status one cannot get the required health report to benefit from additional services.

In the absence of accessible information from other actors, Aysun notes that people with disabilities rely on each other's experiences to navigate the system. They will also call service providers such as hospitals directly. However, vulnerable and isolated people with disabilities, such as those from minority communities, refugees, or those with newly acquired disabilities, have less access to the community and are left to figure things out on their own.

Like other interviewees who spoke with CDAC, Aysun notes that people with disabilities actively use social media to communicate and seek information. Facebook especially is used as a platform to request support or advice, as is WhatsApp. The deaf community also actively uses Instagram to develop and share videos using sign language.

People with disabilities struggled to meet their individual needs after the earthquakes, but also in general. Overall, there is a lack of support and of an accommodating environment. Aysun stresses that people with disabilities are individuals deserving of respect and must be included in humanitarian response planning.

Aysun's recommendation to humanitarian responders is that all information shared should be available in written format, not only in the form of posters or photos. Creating accessible information is key. This includes broadening and expanding the formats, reducing the use of complex words and long sentences, and ensuring that accessibility extends from information to service provision. She notes that maps are frequently shared but can be difficult for people with disabilities to use. However, tailored applications could be developed to show accessible points for food delivery or humanitarian assistance.

Conclusion

Humanitarians used diverse communication channels to connect with earthquake-affected Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals, building on existing systems to support Syrian refugees and introducing new strategies. Social media emerged as the primary means of communication for most affected demographics. Yet, humanitarians faced the same challenges as the communities they assisted – restricted mobility, power outages, internet disruptions and infrastructural damage – further challenging the CCEA response.

Many people who spoke with CDAC commented on delays in the response itself and in responses to their queries. Humanitarians likewise lamented the unidirectional nature of some communication mechanisms and the weakness of CFMs. The engagement of international humanitarian actors with the media remains limited, representing a possible missed opportunity to not only inform but engage with affected communities.

Preferred communication platforms, including social media, WhatsApp groups and face-to-face discussions, remained constant post-earthquake. Nevertheless, power and internet interruptions rendered some channels inaccessible. People relied more on one another, and Syrians turned to radio, resuming social media activity once power had been restored. Information verification methods also evolved, shifting from relying on news outlets and local leaders to prioritising updates from authorities, humanitarians and WhatsApp groups. Information sharing increased in frequency compared to prior to the disaster.

In the chaos and confusion of the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, people drew on whatever information they could source and disseminated it indiscriminately. Turkish people more frequently turned to government channels while Syrian refugees turned to humanitarian organisations. An information overload included biased media outlets spreading xenophobic content, particularly targeting refugees. This deluge made it challenging to distinguish fact from fake news, leading to the breakdown of verification mechanisms.

People turned to sources with established track records in their communities. These trusted sources varied across demographics: Turkish men and youth, for example, embraced AFAD, TV broadcasts, social media and local authorities; Turkish women leaned towards NGOs, government institutions, politically aligned channels and personal connections; and Syrian refugees trusted humanitarians, PDMM and influential figures with a history of supporting their communities. Notably, influence does not equate with trust. Trusted sources of information are known for their credibility, accuracy, transparency, accountability, responsiveness and reputation.

Accounts like Aysun's and interviews with disability support actors highlighted the additional hurdles faced by individuals with disabilities in accessing post-earthquake information. The disabled community united to assist one another, but the humanitarian response still lacked appropriate consideration for their needs. These concerns encompassed content, format, language, and channel adaptations tailored to the preferences of all affected demographics.

A significant proportion of the population in the affected provinces speak languages other than Turkish as the main language of their household, and there is significant variation and diversity of language use across the affected area. Those who do not use Turkish as their main language are likely to face significant barriers to receiving information and engaging in effective two-way communication with aid actors.

Effective humanitarian response planning requires diverse engagement from trusted sources within communities, along with sensitivity towards the needs of marginalised groups. This approach enhances ownership of the response and recovery, thereby amplifying its overall impact.

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CDAC is a network of more than 35 of the largest humanitarian, media development and social innovation actors – including UN agencies, RCRC, NGOs, media and communications actors – working together to shift the dial on humanitarian and development decision-making – moving from global to local.

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