

Delayed Aid and the Need for Localization : Insights from the Response to the 2023 Earthquakes in Northwest Syria

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Keywords: Syria, Gaza, Aid Effectiveness, Compound Crisis, Response, Earthquake, Localization, Conflict

Introduction

Over the past thirteen years, the conflict in Syria has led to between 0.6 and 1 million deaths and the displacement of over thirteen million people, including as both refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)[1]. From 2011 to 2024, there have been significant changes in political and military influence. As a result, Syria was divided into three distinct areas of political control: (1) The central, coastal, and southern areas were under Syrian regime control; (2) northwest Syria (NWS), including parts of Idlib and Aleppo governorates, was under opposition or rebel control; (3) northeast Syria (NES), including parts of al-Hasakah, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, was under the control of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). The toppling of the Assad regime on 8th December 2024 has changed this with almost all of Syria, now under opposition control. In some ways, this important political change has dated some of the content of this commentary, however, it remains relevant as we capture some of the key issues of how the response to the February 2023 earthquakes was politicised when Damascus was under the former regime. Therefore, the focus of this commentary is on the region formerly known as NWS

which was particularly affected by the February 2023 earthquakes[2].

The severe earthquakes which affected south-eastern Turkey and northern Syria in February 2023 led to widespread devastation from which, populations in both these areas are arguably still recovering. NWS, which was essentially besieged between the Turkish border on one side and an impermeable front-line on the other, was particularly affected with this compound crisis occurring on top of multiple other stressors which included forced displacement, ongoing attacks and insecurity, attacks on health, economic crises, funding cuts and a deteriorating health crisis[2], [3].

What was apparent was that after thirteen years of protracted conflict and ongoing humanitarian crises, there was limited localisation of the cross-border humanitarian response to the area such that the 5-6 million affected were mostly left to fend for themselves for eight days in its aftermath [4]. This contrasts starkly with other disasters such as the 2010 Haiti earthquake when 27 countries offered emergency teams within 24 hours and 6 of them were operational inside the country within 48 hours [5].

Challenges in the Response to the Earthquakes

Coordination and Access

Access to NWS was significantly disrupted following the earthquakes, particularly due to the damage sustained to highways in southern Turkey. Notably, the main crossing from south-eastern Turkey to northwest Syria via Bab Al-Hawa, the only UN-approved international aid corridor at that time, was affected [6]. Despite this, an interactive map from the logistics cluster in Gaziantep indicated no impediments to aid arriving from the UN hub near Reyhanli, located just 5 km from Bab Al-Hawa. This suggests that the initial closure of the Bab Al-Hawa crossing for the first 48 hours was not due to a lack of supplies but likely a result of Turkey's own disaster-related challenges and the absence of sufficient international pressure for immediate access [7]. Consequently, it was not until late on February 13th, seven days post-earthquake, that the UN secured approval from Syria's then president to open additional border crossings, facilitating much-needed access to the affected areas [8]. The first UN aid only entered northwest Syria from Bab al-Salama, one of the newly opened crossings, on 14th February, eight days after the earthquake [9].

Politics, sovereignty and funding

The delay waiting for approval from the former Syrian regime to send aid to affected areas in NWS was controversial. Legally, the UN did not need to seek such permission and could have bypassed this to ensure life-saving aid reached affected communities [10]. In July 2022, Amnesty International had already highlighted UN guidance stating that international organisations can conduct temporary humanitarian relief operations without the consent of conflicting parties in exceptional situations, to provide life-saving supplies to civilians in extreme need, if no alternatives exist and it does not seriously impair the country's territorial integrity [11]. The UN also coordinates search and rescue efforts through the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC). UNDAC teams can reach anywhere worldwide within 12 to 48 hours of a request [12]. This was the case in Turkey and Syrian government-held areas but not in the former NWS [8], [13]. The UN Under-Secretary-General, Martin Griffiths, stated that 4,948 search and rescue experts were mobilised through the UNDAC mechanism in less than 72 hours to respond to the earthquakes in Turkey and

Syria. However, none of them were deployed to NWS [14]. In the aftermath of these delays, Martin Griffiths apologised to the Syrian people when he visited the Syrian-Turkish border on 12th February 2023, stating, "We have so far failed the people of north-west Syria. They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn't arrived" [15].

Local and international resources were predominantly directed towards supporting the disaster responses in Turkey. As of 9th February, 95 countries and 16 international organisations had pledged aid to Turkey with 6,479 rescue personnel from 56 countries already in Turkey; at that time there was no support to NWS, except for six trucks carrying food and non-food items from the World Food Programme that was already scheduled before the earthquake [16]. The humanitarian needs in NWS at the time were considerable, given the population's prolonged exposure to conflict. While the challenges faced in Turkey were significant, the situation in NWS was equally dire. The discrepancy in the humanitarian response on either side of the Turkish border may have contributed to preventable deaths in NWS. This disparity was exacerbated by the fact that donations from countries and other entities were predominantly channelled to international NGOs such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). These organisations typically operate through the sovereign state, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and its Syrian counterpart, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) [17], which has had no access to NWS since 2020, with much criticism directed at SARC, including accusations of corruption and collusion with the former Syrian regime in the collective punishment policy against areas outside its control including NWS [18].

Localization in Humanitarian Response

The example of the earthquake response to NWS remains relevant as it demonstrates not only the impact of corruption on such life-saving, urgent responses but also the essential role which localization has in areas which are essentially besieged. Localization refers to the process of transferring funding, responsibility, and power from international organizations to local humanitarian actors, something which goes beyond simple geographical localisation [19]. This approach emphasizes the need for local entities to lead disaster response efforts, as they are often nimble, trusted by local communities, have better contextual knowledge, have greater reach to affected communities - particularly in high-risk settings - and often have lower overheads,

making them more efficient [20]. The localization concept has been discussed for several decades. However, it gained significant traction following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which emphasized the importance of empowering local actors [21]. Despite these calls, the international humanitarian system has struggled to shift the power dynamics and funding structures to adequately support local organizations. Though this goes beyond funding, it is estimated that only 1.2% of humanitarian funding goes to local and national organizations, as of 2022 [22].

Localization in Syria

Though discussions about localisation of the humanitarian response in NWS have been ongoing since 2020, it has been met with limited success. In the wake of the earthquakes, given the devastation in Turkey, including Gaziantep, where the WHO-led health cluster for cross-border humanitarian aid to NWS is based, this was paralysed in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes [23]. This gap in the leadership and coordination role of the health cluster in the very needed moment further highlighted the significant need to build local capabilities. Humanitarians based on both sides of the border were themselves affected, interrupting their operations to NWS [24], [25]. The international humanitarian organisation and UN responses were restricted, delayed and inadequate resulting in the further deaths and injuries beyond the immediate, leaving those in NWS with knowledge that they are neglected [26]. On top of this, there was very limited capacity inside NWS on the day of the earthquakes. This was partly due to a lack of localisation combined with other aspects of a failed international early response; for example, there was also an absence of the required heavy equipment needed for search and rescue and a lack of fuel and medical supplies in the hospitals, suggesting that preparedness for such scenarios is also essential for these essentially besieged areas [27]. Effective disaster risk reduction and preparedness are essential in responding to such catastrophic events. Moreover, at these times, mechanisms to open border crossings for the sake of access and bypassing sovereign states and their institutions for areas outside of their control must be rapidly activated [28].

The earthquake example is just one of many that indicate the need for empowering local actors; another was the response to COVID-19 when NWS was neglected for months in its aftermath [29]. The COVID-19 response in Idlib's governorate highlighted several critical needs, particularly the importance of local ownership and

priority setting. Local-level coordination and community engagement, as seen with civil society groups, volunteer organisations, and the local health directorate, proved essential [30]. Despite limited international support, local health leadership established quarantine and isolation centres mobilized volunteers and ran awareness campaigns to support the overburdened health sector [30].

Given the critical role of local actors in these processes, it is imperative to support them in planning, owning, and leading these efforts [31]. Such investments are worthwhile, particularly in protracted crises where funding shortfalls force international organisations to reduce activities or pull out [32]. For areas such as former NWS which were essentially besieged, localisation is therefore not only conceptually important but also lifesaving as seen after the earthquakes. Despite limited resources, local organisations are often better positioned to navigate the complex terrain and provide immediate, life-saving assistance [33].

In the global humanitarian system, there remains an imperative for funding, responsibility and power to be transferred more directly to local humanitarian organisations, bypassing some of the traditional actors which have dominated humanitarian response; these include international organisations [34]. Local organizations may, as in the NWS response, require capacity building and support to develop a track record in being able to access funding from key donors.

Investment in local organisations is essential for the sustainability of responses in complex, protracted crises and for development, as emphasised in the Triple Nexus. This refers to the integrated approach of combining humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts to address complex crises more holistically [35]. This dual approach, which includes localization and the Triple Nexus, aims to ensure that immediate relief efforts are complemented by long-term development and peacebuilding initiatives, thus reducing aid dependency by encouraging people affected to rapidly shift from emergency mode to income generation [36]. Additionally, it enhances fostering sustainable recovery, local ownership and building legitimate systems in alignment with people's culture, resources, and beliefs.

The need for localization in a similar context, the Gaza example

The lessons from NWS's earthquake response underline

the necessity of bolstering local capacities and supporting local healthcare workers and responders in Gaza to ensure a more resilient and responsive humanitarian framework. This was clearly demonstrated in NWS in the response by local organisations including Idlib Health Directorate and the Syrian Civil Defence (White Helmets) in the wake of the earthquakes, without whom, there was the potential for even more livestock to be lost.

Though international organisations may have greater funds at their disposal and may be better able to respond rapidly in acute crises, their role in the humanitarian space is arguably changing, particularly where access is restricted, and they may be comparatively risk averse. Many have become so large that they are less agile, may face restrictions across borders, particularly in besieged areas such as Gaza, be less willing to take security risks compared to local humanitarian organisations and often lack local contextual knowledge or trust with local communities [37]. Gaza, like NWS, suffers from restricted access and severe security risks, due to the current escalation of attacks by Israel since October 2023, that impede international humanitarian responses [38]. These access issues compromise the international community's ability to provide timely and effective aid. The situation in Gaza has been even more complicated due to the rapid evolution of attacks on health facilities and infrastructure, multiple forced displacement of the population and severely restricted access [39], [40], [41]. The UN has accused Israel of imposing "unlawful restrictions" on humanitarian operations such as blocked land crossings and routes, communications blackouts and air strikes [42]. According to WFP's Deputy Executive Director, Carl Skau, the challenging operating environment makes it near-impossible for humanitarian operations to deliver urgently needed food aid [43]. As such, though international organisations have a role, whether through long-term projects or 'fly-in/ fly-out' 'medical or surgical missions' they do not in themselves build the capacity of local systems. However, their direct support may address a significant gap in the most acute, severe phases of conflict as seen now in Gaza and previously in Syria.

Conclusion

The earthquakes in former NWS exposed significant gaps in the international humanitarian response, emphasising the critical need for localisation and preparedness in complex crises. Similar challenges are evident in other besieged areas like Gaza, where local responders and organisations play a crucial role. Moving forward, the global humanitarian system must support funding shifts

and empowerment of local entities to enhance their capacity and ensure more effective and sustainable responses to emergencies. The international community must also advocate for mechanisms that facilitate rapid access to besieged areas, bypassing political impediments to deliver timely aid. For Syria, in the sorry event that another earthquake or disaster should occur again in NWS, the response will be different given the fall of the regime as there will be the possibility of a depoliticised response to occur through state mechanisms. Beyond this, for lessons learned from the earthquake response to NWS, we argue that investing in local humanitarian actors not only addresses immediate needs but also builds long-term resilience in communities facing protracted conflicts and crises, supporting future development in early recovery.

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