

SYRIA



**Capacity-strengthening needs
in non-government-controlled
areas in Northwest Syria:**
a localised approach



ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report explores the capacity-strengthening needs of the local NGOs (LNGOs) headquartered and registered in Türkiye and the local responders operating in the non-government-controlled areas of Northwest Syria (NWS) – Idleb and northern Aleppo – following the February 2023 earthquake response and the July 2023 non-renewal of the UNSC cross-border resolution.

The capacity-strengthening needs are categorised based on the three strategic pillars of the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (HLA): technical expertise, civil society strengthening, and localised leadership. These aim to bolster local humanitarians’ capacity to lead, manage, and deliver more relevant, accountable, and effective humanitarian responses (HLA accessed 04/09/2023).

The report aims to inform international humanitarians, who rely on localised response approaches, about the capacity-strengthening needs of LNGOs and local humanitarians leading the earthquake response. The report’s research draws a distinction between the umbrella term ‘localisation’, which covers all approaches to working with local responders, and ‘locally led initiatives’, meaning locally originated and implemented actions. The response to the earthquakes shows that localisation in the context of NWS is multilayered. It encompasses the power transfer from both INGOs and Türkiye-based LNGOs to local NWS-based responders.

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Terminology: given the specific context of NWS, this report uses ‘LNGO’ to refer to the local Syrian NGOs registered in Türkiye, while ‘local responders/humanitarians’ refers to civil society organisations (CSOs), community-based organisations, and other volunteering grassroots groups within NWS.

KEY FINDINGS

- The earthquake response shows that **grassroots organisations based in NWS are faster and more capable of mobilising** adjacent resources to respond to local disasters and crises than INGOs and LNGOs based in Türkiye.
- The capacity of organisations, as well as the availability of and access to their capacity-building offerings, depends on the location of their office or staff. Representative offices of LNGOs in Türkiye have **greater capability for and access to capacity-building opportunities** than local responders inside NWS.
- **Most operational capacity training focuses on managing and reporting on a specific grant.** It lacks the long-term vision to support organisations in fundamental functions, such as project management, leadership, and data management. Organisations also lack the support to improve in terms of sustainability, such as in developing policies, procedures, and systems.
- Grassroots organisations, especially those that are women- and youth-led, often “feel like they are trapped in a vicious cycle where they do **not have access to capacity-building offerings because they do not receive donor funding** given that they do not have enough capacity and/or registration in Türkiye” (KII 25/07/2023 a).
- **Locally led initiatives require local responders to identify their capacity needs** so they can better design and implement projects. Some of the needs that these local responders have identified include resource mobilisation, fundraising, budget monitoring, logistics, and procurement.
- **Locally led initiatives require equitable partnerships achieved** when international humanitarians invest in local responders and share knowledge, power, and decision-making throughout the project cycle.
- **Strengthening local leadership** is crucial to promoting inclusion and community engagement, as well as reducing corruption, nepotism, and favouritism.

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CONTEXT

Humanitarian needs overview

Before 6 February 2023, 4.1 million of the 4.5 million people living in NWS relied on humanitarian aid to meet their basic needs. This population included 1.1 million boys, 1 million women, 1 million girls, and 900,000 men (OCHA 05/05/2023). In April 2023, there were 2.9 million IDPs in NWS, 1.8 million of whom lived in 1,421 so-called last-resort sites in 2022 (OCHA 28/04/2023 and 22/12/2022). The majority of displaced people came from other areas in Syria, and more than two-thirds of the population in need were forcibly displaced to NWS (Protection Cluster 24/06/2022). Over three million people needed healthcare where there was a lack of doctors, medicine, and hospitals. As at the end of 2022, 3.3 million people were food-insecure (ECHO 06/01/2023; OCHA 22/12/2022). The economic crisis, insecurity, and reduced humanitarian funding have contributed to increased needs and a weakened capacity to meet those needs (MSF 21/12/2022).

February 2023 earthquakes

On 6 February 2023, two powerful earthquakes of magnitude 7.8 and 7.5, preceding thousands of aftershocks, hit southeastern Türkiye and NWS. In NWS, the earthquakes killed around 4,500 people and injured over 10,400, compounding an already complex humanitarian crisis. The earthquakes damaged at least 10,600 buildings and completely destroyed a further 1,870 in NWS (OCHA 28/04/2023). The destruction of at least 67 medical facilities has overwhelmed the healthcare sector, limiting access to health services (ACAPS 16/06/2023). The earthquakes caused widespread destruction and caught response efforts off guard. Damaged infrastructure impeded communication and coordination, resulting in delays in aid delivery, including essential health services. The crisis damaged many health facilities, blocked roads, and limited access to medical care. The earthquakes also worsened the housing crisis, forcing families into overcrowded temporary shelters. This has led to various health risks, such as scabies outbreaks, and created challenges in the installation of proper sanitation facilities. The earthquakes disproportionately affected women and girls, leading to increased gender-based violence concerns. There have been reports of mental health issues, substance abuse, and rising child labour. The earthquakes also damaged farmlands, worsening the already precarious economic situation in the region.

Political affiliations and aid delivery interference in NWS hampered humanitarian efforts following the earthquakes. Different authorities control NWS, a complex situation that has created difficulties in obtaining humanitarian access even before the earthquakes.

There were also delays in the UN humanitarian response in NWS. Following the February earthquakes, the Syrian Government allowed the use of two more crossings, Bab Al-Salam and Al Rae'e, for an initial period of six months and then extended their use until August 2023 (Reuters 15/02/2023; Al Jazeera 13/05/2023). Despite the opening of other crossings, logistical constraints resulting from road damage and blockages impeded international humanitarian assistance access and delivery. There were reports of various controlling authorities blocking aid shipments from reaching their intended destinations (AI 06/03/2023; BBC 08/02/2023). Violations, abuses, and aid diversion and confiscation were also reported (STJ 12/06/2023). The main cited reasons behind the limitations of the humanitarian response were the lack of accountability towards the affected populations, imbalance of power dynamics, and lack of meaningful roles for local responders (HPN 07/07/2023).

UNSC cross-border resolution renewal failure

On 11 July 2023, the UNSC failed to reauthorize the cross-border resolution that allowed UN humanitarian aid delivery into NWS through Türkiye without the consent of the Syrian Government, leaving NWS populations without aid (ACAPS 21/07/2023; SCR 11/07/2023). This suspension severely affected the humanitarian response, threatening the provision of medical and nutrition supplies from UNICEF and WHO to LNGOs in NWS (UN Dispatch 14/07/2023).

Not all humanitarian assistance went through the cross-border mechanism, but its absence has threatened the UN's involvement in the humanitarian assistance process, such as the management of pool funding and operational risks on behalf of donors. It is possible that this role can be replaced by redirecting funds to the INGOs and LNGOs in Türkiye. The Aid Fund for Northern Syria is one example, as it can replace the humanitarian pool fund/emergency fund that the cross-border operations were managing. The absence of the mechanism might also threaten the UN's critical role in the coordination, access negotiation, data management, and technical support of humanitarian assistance in NWS, which reports argued were hard to replace (Al-Jumhuriya 19/07/2023). There have been suggestions that the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, Turkish Red Crescent, or NWS NGO Forum could play a crucial role in providing technical support, coordination, and accountability for LNGOs and local responders, but there are several obstacles to INGOs and other organisations replacing the role of the UN cross-border operations. The main challenge is competition over funding between NGOs, the potential interference of governments, donor anxiety about the presence of proscribed armed groups, and the lack of coordination infrastructure.

Some key informants believe that the non-renewal of the UNSC cross-border resolution may further localisation efforts, forcing LNGOs and other responders to take a bigger role in the provision of humanitarian aid in NWS (Al-Jumhuriya 19/07/2023; KII 18/07/2023).

Localisation in the Syrian humanitarian response

Localisation is the process of shifting ownership and decision-making power from international to local responders (ODI 28/05/2020). When done successfully, it is expected to increase effectiveness, sustainability, and aid ownership, since a localised response relies on local responders who have the required knowledge to respond to the needs, priorities, and capacities of affected communities.

Localisation and locally led initiatives require more equitable partnerships between INGOs, LNGOs, and local responders. This includes the sharing not only of technical capacities but also of resources, knowledge, and decision-making to achieve equitable and impactful partnerships (KII 27/07/2023; KII 25/07/2023 b).

In the context of NWS, localisation originally started with the humanitarian response in northern Syria. The unsafe operating environment necessitated INGOs and UN agencies to work through partnerships with local organisations inside Syria. These organisations continued to deliver the majority of the humanitarian response, although representative offices in Türkiye still remotely managed most projects (KII 27/07/2023). There remain only a few INGO offices established in NWS, with UN agencies conducting monitoring visits. INGOs are imperative to localisation, as they act as a support and quality-control layer for local responders. INGOs also work with donors and advocate more equitable partnerships with LNGOs and local responders, making them instrumental in promoting more locally led approaches (KII 24/08/2023).

In the context of localisation in the Syria humanitarian response, there is a deep imbalance in the flow of funds between INGOs and Syrian organisations (used as an encompassing term that does not differentiate between Türkiye-based organisations and those operating from within NWS). For example, in 2014, these local organisations were responsible for delivering 75% of the humanitarian assistance but received only 0.3% of the direct and 9.3% of the indirect cash funding available for the overall Syria response (L2GP 05/2016). UN agencies and INGOs received the majority of the funding and subcontracted Syrian organisations to deliver and implement the project, and these responders struggled to obtain the standard 7% charge on direct costs to cover overheads, contrary to their international counterparts (KII 27/07/2023; L2GP 05/2016). Based on a follow-up study, funding to these responders slightly increased in 2019, although direct funding was still under 1% (L2GP 11/2020). In the context of NWS, interviewees interpreted these figures as reflective of donors' risk appetite, with international responders tasked with risk management of the local context as well as the local responders, especially since the security outlook in NWS remained complex and in flux. On the other hand, some interviewees argued that it was local responders who faced the risks, especially given the unsafe context (KII 10/08/2023).

Throughout the Syria humanitarian response, LNGOs undergo rigorous risk and capacity assessments to determine the funding level that donors feel safe to entrust organisations with (KII 27/07/2023; KII 08/08/2023 b). These assessments take a lot of time to complete, are repeated with every new funding opportunity, and are not shared with the rest of the donor community, putting a lot of burden on LNGOs to complete the required paperwork (KII 25/07/2023 a). An LNGO coalition established some initiatives to address the repetitiveness of the assessments throughout the Syria humanitarian response, but they were not sustained given a lack of funding and high staff turnover (KII 10/08/2023).

Earthquake response: localised and locally led approaches

The earthquake response showed that grassroots local organisations based in NWS were faster and more capable of mobilising responses to regional disasters and crises than INGOs and LNGOs based in Türkiye (KII 27/07/2023; KII 10/08/2023; KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b). This was mainly because they enjoyed greater autonomy in decision-making and access to flexible funding, such as diaspora donations, compared to LNGOs who more heavily relied on INGO and UN funding (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b; KII 08/08/2023 b; KII 08/08/2023 a; KII 10/08/2023). The INGOs and LNGOs that relied on their offices in Türkiye for coordination and support, including for conducting consultations, planning responses, and approving response strategies, were slower at mobilising (ACAPS 16/06/2023; KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b; KII 20/07/2023). The earthquakes also struck Türkiye and affected cross-border operations managed from the country, including these organisations' offices, resulting in slower responses.

Locally affected populations mostly lead local responders operating at the grassroots level themselves, highlighting their role in being the first and last responders to any disaster. These responses designed and led by people in their own contexts are referred to as 'locally led'. These locally led approaches tend to provide responses that are better suited and aligned to local needs, priorities, and expectations (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b). These initiatives typically prioritise the communities' active participation in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of their own change processes, improving the accountability of the affected populations (HPN/ODI 05/2021). The locally led earthquake response in NWS showed better cooperation with the private sector than the responses in Türkiye and other regions of Syria. For example, the NWS private sector mobilised heavy machinery to local responders to aid in the search-and-rescue efforts amid the absence of UN agencies, INGOs, and, at times, LNGOs (KII 10/08/2023). Local responders also complemented the work of NGOs instead of replacing them, filling gaps that were not typically covered by donor funds or any cluster's remit, such as rehabilitation work for buildings and support for university students (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b).

Interviews with different organisations, including local responders, LNGOs, and INGOs, suggested that following the earthquakes, there was a need to scale up and improve these locally led approaches. The earthquake showed that current localisation initiatives mainly focus on LNGO offices in Türkiye. Current localisation initiatives also sometimes overlook the important role of CSOs and local communities inside NWS during any humanitarian response (Syria Untold 25/08/2023). There is a need to shift the power from the INGOs and LNGO representative offices in Türkiye to local communities to enable them to create and implement effective locally led initiatives (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b; KII 25/07/2023 a). When assessing the capacity-strengthening needs of local responders in NWS, it is important to ensure that comprehensive assessments include all responders.

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING IN NWS

This research conceptualises capacity strengthening as an overarching term for all activities aiming to improve the capacity, preparedness, and sustainability of organisations. More importantly, training courses are considered one approach to achieving these goals instead of the main method. The term includes other solutions, such as coaching, mentoring, and secondment.

The capacity of organisations, as well as the availability of and their access to capacity-building offerings, varies depending on the location of the office or staff. LNGO representative offices in Türkiye have greater capability and access to capacity-building opportunities than local responders inside NWS (KII 21/07/2023 b; KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 25/07/2023 a; KII 08/08/2023 a; KII 08/08/2023 b). This hierarchy applies when analysing the capacity-strengthening opportunities available in NWS, where the values and standards of international responders are sometimes pushed down towards local responders through top-down and pre-tailored training courses (KII 27/07/2023; KII 08/08/2023 b; KII 25/07/2023 b; L2GP 05/2016). While there are good capacity-strengthening offerings available, especially on bolstering technical expertise, the focus is usually to improve the implementation of and reporting on specific projects and grants.

Technical expertise pillar

This research finds that Syrian LNGOs operating in Türkiye regularly receive capacity-strengthening offerings on the technical aspects of humanitarian responses, such as protection standards and child protection in emergencies. Interviewees did not have any gaps or needs to highlight (KII 20/07/2023; KII 08/08/2023 b; KII 10/08/2023). In NWS, capacity-strengthening offerings are mostly available for staff working on specific donor-funded projects (KII 20/07/2023; KII 21/07/2023 a).

Access to and the availability of these offerings are substantially less for local grassroots responders, especially those not registered in Türkiye. This can be explained by the grassroots organisations' geographical lack of access and availability to some INGOs. These INGOs often rely on LNGOs, mainly the ones with representative offices in Türkiye, for funding, capacity strengthening, and support, despite leading crucial locally led initiatives (KII 25/07/2023 a; DEMAC accessed 14/08/2023). Grassroots organisations, especially those that are women- and youth-led, often "feel like they are trapped in a vicious cycle where they do not have access to capacity-building offerings because they do not receive donor funding given that they do not have enough capacity and/or registration in Türkiye" (KII 25/07/2023 a). Consequently, and given their limited access to capacity-strengthening offerings, some local responders rely on cultural and religious customs to guide their work instead of international humanitarian standards.

Local responders, especially CSOs, could appropriately benefit from training on humanitarian principles, needs assessments and monitoring and evaluation, project proposal development, child protection and gender mainstreaming, and safeguarding (KII 25/07/2023 a; KII 08/08/2023 a; KII 08/08/2023 b; KII 25/07/2023 b). This is especially important as these organisations have more local acceptance and access (KII 25/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b). This could also benefit camp managers, local councils, and community leaders, who often lack access to these training courses. Interviewees argued that these activities needed to localise their content, methodology, language, and delivery to be effective and meet the needs of the participants (KII 27/07/2023; KII 08/08/2023 a).

Capacity-strengthening offerings are also recommended to run through a coordinated framework that guides the process across organisations to avoid duplication and enhance efficiency. The framework can also include the monitoring and evaluation of capacity-strengthening projects to ensure sustainable offerings. This could improve the sharing of data, knowledge, and learning among local responders, as well as accountability towards affected populations (KII 25/07/2023 a; KII 25/07/2023 b; KII 27/07/2023). Diversifying the participants and trainers to move towards a more localised approach to capacity strengthening may also improve these offerings' impact. Interviewees especially noted that capacity-strengthening offerings lacked a diversity of trainers, training subjects, and outcomes. Similarly, senior staff sometimes monopolised these capacity-strengthening workshops, which usually offered free hotel accommodation and/or free meals. This further complicated the pre-existing power dynamics between staff of different job seniorities. In some cases, trainers were seeing the same people for the same training every year (KII 10/08/2023). One possible mitigating measure is the more frequent use of participant profile requirements for specific training courses, such as positions, job functions, locations, and genders.

Civil society-strengthening pillar

The capacity strengthening of local organisations can bolster civil society and improve its preparedness for a bigger role in future humanitarian responses (Syria Direct 14/02/2023). Consequently, this research also explored the operational capacity-strengthening needs of local organisations, especially as most interviewees acknowledged that current offerings did not cover all their needs. Interviewees argued that current offerings focused on the capacity of managing and reporting on a specific grant and lacked the long-term vision to improve the operational capacity and sustainability of organisations (KII 25/07/2023 b; KII 08/08/2023 b). There is a lack of more long-term support, such as developing and improving systems, policies, and procedures (KII 10/08/2023). More importantly, support for small organisations on fundamental operational functions, such as project management, leadership, and data and knowledge management, was scant and sometimes absent. Capacity-strengthening offerings can be more impactful if the focus shifts from standardised project-based or compliance-related development support towards investment-style support (KII 25/07/2023 b; KII 25/07/2023 a; KII 10/08/2023; RDPP 12/2022). To achieve this, capacity assessments need to reflect organisation-wide mandates, needs, and priorities instead of focusing on those tied directly to a specific project or funding (KII 25/07/2023 b; KII 25/07/2023 a; KII 27/07/2023). There is a need for more localised approaches to capacity strengthening that allow LNGOs and local responders to identify their own capacity needs and how to address them (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b; KII 25/07/2023 a; KII 08/08/2023 b).

Interviewees also showed great interest in a secondment approach to capacity building. The secondment of external international and national experts provides an opportunity for on-the-job and hands-on experience and training (KII 25/07/2023 a; KII 08/08/2023 a; KII 08/08/2023 b; L2GP 05/2016). Providing flexible budgets for capacity strengthening also allows local humanitarians to address crosscutting and other organisational needs not typically covered by current capacity-building programmes (KII 25/07/2023 a). Among these are funds to upgrade websites, consultancies for organisational restructuring, and finance software upgrades. LNGOs and other implementing partners also handle and mitigate the majority of risks inherent to working in NWS. Mitigating these risks requires additional resources, such as the provision of unrestricted funds or overhead costs and training, to deal with any unforeseen challenges. For example, the February 2023 earthquakes showed a lack of standardised approaches for the provision of duty of care for staff during emergencies (KII 10/08/2023; KII 20/07/2023; KII 08/08/2023 a). On the other hand, another interviewee shared how Save the Children Denmark provided unrestricted grants to support LNGOs and local humanitarians with their operational and administrative capacity-strengthening plans. These grants had a great impact on the operations of several LNGOs, who were able to hire the consultants they saw fit for the requirements and goals they had identified. The grants were also not limited to training but allowed organisations to carry out assessments and upgrades to their systems

and procedures. Similarly, the fund allowed organisations to have a long-term approach to capacity strengthening and gave them the space and time to revisit their mission and goals. Interviewees recommended the expansion of such initiatives to include more organisations and functions (KII 25/07/2023 a).

Operational needs, which are similar to technical capacity needs, are greater at the local level in NWS than in Türkiye. This will especially be the case if more localised and locally led approaches are pushed forward. After the earthquakes, more independent local respondents were able to take quicker action than LNGOs hindered by their reliance on offices in Türkiye. LNGO responses were described often in interviews as 'delayed', 'sporadic', 'disorganised', and 'uncoordinated'. This can influence the UN cross-border resolution to transition to cross-line operations relying more on local organisations (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b).

One factor to the delayed action of LNGOs is the absence of some INGO and LNGO staff in Türkiye following the earthquakes leaving gaps in donor communication and approvals to mobilise funding. This highlights the need to further empower local responders inside NWS to lead localised response planning and implementation, especially during the decision-making stage. This empowerment is not only expected from INGOs and UN agencies but also from representative offices in Türkiye.

Overall, local responders can benefit from capacity strengthening in various areas. There is a need to strengthen resource mobilisation and business development capacity for local and small organisations in NWS, especially those working in hard-to-reach areas who lack access to partnerships and funding from donors. This requires more localised approaches that can identify which trainers can deliver locally (KII 25/07/2023 a). Both LNGOs and local humanitarians also brought up the need for capacity strengthening on project management, fundraising, donor engagement and communication, and budget monitoring (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b; KII 25/07/2023 b; KII 25/07/2023 a; KII 08/08/2023 b). At the same time, the earthquakes highlighted the need for stronger logistics and warehouse management, especially for local responders. There is a lack of capacity offerings for procurement as well (KII 08/08/2023 a; KII 08/08/2023 b). Lastly, training on understanding the importance of segregating duties for overlapping functions can reduce errors and cases of fraud (KII 08/08/2023 a).

Interviewees also highlighted that the move towards locally led responses would require the provision of training and funding through equitable partnerships, enabling LNGOs and local responders to improve preparedness for future shocks and disasters (KII 20/07/2023; KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b).

Partnerships

The non-renewal of the UNSC cross-border resolution highlights the need for working in and leading coalitions and consortiums, which most LNGOs require capacity strengthening on. This can improve access to funding for local responders. The absence of cross-border operations leaves a gap in the overall coordination of the humanitarian response in NWS (Al-Jumhuriya 19/07/2023). Some interviewees believe that alliances, such as the Syrian NGO Alliance, can take a bigger role in filling this coordination gap if they become more inclusive of INGOs, local responders, and other humanitarians. These alliances can also include more humanitarian, development, and peace-building responders to help bridge the nexus gap in comparison to the UN's cluster coordination groups that focus primarily on humanitarian organisations (KII 25/07/2023 a).

As the NWS suffers from insufficient ministerial and government support, the non-renewal of these cross-border operations would leave LNGOs and local responders without a centralised administrative and representative body during crises (NoonPost 19/02/2023). One way to mitigate this is by providing training on how to form alliances and coalitions with local responders and community members to conduct successful access negotiations. Alliances would require capacity strengthening to improve inclusion, humanitarian assistance coordination, meeting facilitation, and the prioritisation of active participation (KII 25/07/2023 b). Training on the sharing of knowledge and learnings between various stakeholders, partners, NGOs, and local responders can be instrumental in improving future disaster responses.

Funding

The shift towards a locally led response would require comprehensive support for grassroots organisations, local councils, and community leaders (KII 08/08/2023 a). The earthquake response shows that LNGOs lacked flexible seed funding to mobilise emergency responses without the approval of offices in Türkiye (and donors). In comparison, local responders relying on unrestricted funds and donations from diasporas were able to take action more promptly. The following section presents two global anticipatory and early action locally led approaches and initiatives that combine flexible funding elements.

Survivor and community-led crisis response (SCLR)

SCLR relies on existing local capacities, solutions, and strengths to respond to sudden or protracted humanitarian crises. After the February 2023 earthquakes, the approach showed heightened efficacy, responsiveness, relevance, social cohesion, accountability towards served populations, and learning in humanitarian programming. The provision of microgrants to local responders could provide the needed autonomy and transfer of power and resources to allow them to mobilise during crises (L2GP 2021). SCLR can also provide an opportunity to work across clusters and sectors, resulting in a more comprehensive response compared

with mainstream aid (L2GP accessed 10/08/2023). Training on SCLR programming and the facilitation of co-designing responses with local communities and leaders, NGOs, and other stakeholders can be beneficial in improving the preparedness of local responders for future disasters.

Pre-positioned funding: anticipatory, early action, and locally led responses

Pre-positioned funding models, such as those facilitated by Start Network and Trócaire, provide flexible grants to local partner organisations responding to emergencies. The mechanism is expected to promote locally led decision-making on how and when the fund is spent. For example, Trócaire's pre-positioned funding trial showed promising results in boosting the timeliness of responses to affected populations. This, in turn, strengthened the social standing of local organisations with both the affected population and local authorities (Trócaire 04/2023). The reliance on local consultation and approval committees can ensure that the funding is used to respond to local priorities and needs, rendering it a genuine community-led initiative.

Localised leadership

Besides strengthening local responders' technical and operational capacities, there is also a need to improve leadership, especially on the local level, to drive the localisation agenda forward. This is especially the case for CSOs targeting specific communities or groups more susceptible to nepotism and favouritism (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b). Leadership capacity strengthening would also encourage community engagement and improve the inclusion and participation of minorities and marginalised groups. The capacity development and adoption of leadership styles that recognise leadership as collective, with the decision-making power shared with followers, as well as the multidirectional sharing of knowledge between CSO leaders and the community, can help produce more impactful responses (Kassoumeh 2022). This would, in turn, improve the engagement of local communities to co-create projects that are more relevant to their expectations (KII 25/07/2023 b). LNGOs and local responders also need the space to take ownership of their localisation and locally led initiatives and processes to garner the trust of donors (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b; KII 25/07/2023 b; Expertise France 2021).

Corruption reduction

Strong leadership also reduces corruption and fraud in the humanitarian response. The interviews revealed mixed opinions about the performance of local authorities in the earthquake response. Some acknowledged their successful coordination role, while others were critical of their lax anti-corruption procedures (KII 08/08/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b; KII 21/07/2023 a). In consensus, interviewees suggested that accountability in camp management

and local authority levels could be improved given cases of nepotism and favouritism, especially during aid distribution (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b). The interviews also revealed that there were strong feedback and complaint mechanisms in place to report high levels of corruption and protection risks in NWS (KII 21/07/2023 a; KII 21/07/2023 b). Most LNGO distribution staff were also trained in protection and safeguarding. This good practice can be rolled out to local responders through capacity development. A committee of community leaders and protection, monitoring and evaluation, and finance staff also monitor LNGO and local responder distributions to reduce corruption, fraud, and protection risks (KII 20/07/2023).

Regardless, more can be done to stop the politicisation of aid distribution and guarantee that all Syrians have equal access to aid. Setting up more effective monitoring mechanisms to ensure non-discrimination and non-partiality during aid distribution in NWS can prevent parties to the conflict from confiscating aid provision shares (STJ 12/06/2023).

ANNEX 1. METHODOLOGY

This report relies on a mixed data collection methodology. The research commenced with a desk-based review of publicly available reports and needs assessments to obtain an understanding of the basic needs after the earthquakes. Given its localised approach, the research design ensured a particular focus on literature produced in Arabic to complement the available English literature. The desk review was then validated and expanded through the use of semi-structured key informant interviews. As part of the localisation focus, interviews were conducted with local humanitarian responders in NWS to identify their own needs. Interviewees included humanitarians working with LNGOs and NLAs inside non-government-controlled areas of NWS who had in-depth knowledge and experience of the earthquake relief efforts and understood the needs of local humanitarian responders. In total, there were 15 online interviews, mostly conducted in Arabic and translated to English, with the following profiles:

- international independent localisation consultant
- two Syrian localisation consultants based in the UK
- Northeast Syria WG coordinator and localisation expert with experience in working without cross-border operations
- Syrian MEAL Manager of an INGO based in Türkiye
- child protection manager of an INGO based in Türkiye
- granting body (confidential)
- two local INGO workers also part of a CSO, one based in Idleb and the other in Aleppo
- chief executive officer of a Syrian capacity-building organisation
- international localisation consultant working on a similar assignment based in the US
- two HLA staff members
- international researcher
- author of Local2Global reports.

The research explored the training needs of local responders through the lens of the HLA's three strategic pillars of technical expertise, civil society strengthening, and localised leadership. The three strategic pillars are summarised in Annex 2.

LIMITATIONS

This report aimed to identify capacity needs but not the actions required to address those needs, which were outside the scope of the report. It can be an area for further research.

ANNEX 2. STRATEGIC PILLARS OF THE HLA

The HLA believes that local and national humanitarians are the first responders to disasters and are at the heart of any humanitarian response. This is because of their deeper understanding of local challenges and how to overcome them. Local responders are also able to better mobilise local networks and access a wider base of affected populations, so their engagement is critical to the success of any humanitarian response.

HLA's approach to achieving this is by:

- offering locally relevant and locally driven learning products and methods
- supporting locally emerging initiatives through strong regional and country-based partnerships
- strengthening local responders institutionally through a co-creation process with CSOs
- enhancing capacity sharing and exchange through innovative evidence and learning strategies
- providing learning solutions for local responders' capacities to improve access to financial resources directly from donors.

HLA acknowledges the importance of CSOs, and their role in advancing localisation, and is committed to investing in the development of the operational, technical, and leadership capacity of local responders. Below is a summary of each pillar:

Technical expertise pillar

The pillar aims to improve the quality and inclusiveness of humanitarian responses by equipping humanitarian responders with the technical knowledge and skills identified through a needs-based learning assessment.

The following sectors and areas of work have been selected to be part of the portfolio of this pillar:

- education in emergencies
- child protection in emergencies
- public health in emergencies, including the sub-areas of health, WASH, and nutrition.

Additional areas, which may be addressed through programming on the three priority technical sectors above or in standalone projects, include:

- mental health and psychosocial support in emergencies
- cash and voucher assistance in emergencies.

Civil society-strengthening pillar

This pillar aims to foster a more localised humanitarian response and elevate the centrality of civil society in humanitarian response. This comes from the belief that CSOs are often the first responders in times of crisis. In a fast-changing humanitarian landscape, it is integral for the humanitarian sector to focus on how it can best support the strengthening of civil society in countries most likely to face crises. This pillar acknowledges that both sectors and programmes that deliver a product or service to people in need and **operational expertise**, such as financial, procurement, and logistical processes and capacities, are essential parts of any humanitarian response. Programme managers must work closely with operational areas to successfully implement interventions.

This pillar aims to achieve its goals by:

- strengthening operational capacity both at the individual and institutional levels
- making strategic partnerships with CSOs
- co-creating learning solutions
- enhancing capacity exchange and sharing
- providing localised learning materials.

Localised leadership pillar

The leadership pillar aims to shift the power towards the improved and more effective participation of local and national organisations to ensure that all those affected by emergencies are participating and benefiting from humanitarian responses. The pillar's objective is to allow, prioritise, and foster diverse and inclusive leadership practices, including taking a gender-sensitive and gender-transformative approach to localisation, to promote female leadership. Similarly, it believes that capacity-strengthening initiatives should ensure the offering of a contextualised, robust, and evaluated leadership training package for underrepresented groups. The pillar highlights the importance of coaching and mentoring in achieving its objectives.