

CRISIS ANALYSIS – SYRIA

RESEARCH SERIES ON THE MEDIUM-TERM IMPACT OF THE 6 FEBRUARY EARTHQUAKES
ON NORTHWEST SYRIA



Volume 7.

OBSTACLES TO POST-EARTHQUAKE REHABILITATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
KEY FINDINGS	3
LEVELS OF RESPONSE	5
I. Humanitarian response level	5
II. Grassroots level	6
III. Local government level	7
IV. Community level	8
CONCLUSION	9



Photo (above): Humanitarian level emergency rehabilitation efforts, Bseniah, northwest Syria. Cover photo: Severe damage to property, Atama city, northwest Syria (Source: Mercy Corps Syria, 2023).

INTRODUCTION

The February 2023 earthquakes in northwest Syria led to widespread destruction as thousands of people were forced to evacuate and seek shelter elsewhere. [Estimates](#) by the Shelter Cluster reveal that: (i) 265,000 individuals (approximately 53,000 households) lost their homes completely due to severe damage; (ii) 225,000 other individuals (approximately 44,000 households) reported their homes sustaining moderate damage; (iii) while 632,000 others (approximately 126,000 households) reported their homes sustaining minor damage. In addition, approximately 1,900 buildings collapsed entirely, and over 9,000 faced partial destruction. Given these numbers, there is an immense need for support to repair and rehabilitate structures.

Despite the massive scale of destruction, rehabilitation efforts in northwest Syria have yet to gain traction, particularly when it comes to addressing severely damaged homes. According to shelter experts, properties with damage are generally classified into three categories:

- i. **Minor damage:** Structurally sound properties with damage such as cracks to surfaces and/or openings;
- ii. **Moderate damage:** In general, structurally sound properties with sustained damage such as ruptures to non load-bearing walls;
- iii. **Severe damage:** Properties that have sustained serious damage to pillar or foundations, they are not fit for occupation requiring reinforcement and structural stabilization. If not rehabilitated in a timely manner, they can become at risk of demolition.

For the time being, humanitarian actors continue to focus on quick fixes for homes that have sustained minor or moderate damage, rather than long-term rehabilitation. This can be understood as part of humanitarian actors' emergency response plans to cover urgent needs first. In addition, these endeavors require less financial support and technical know-how compared to rehabilitating severely damaged homes. Longer-term rehabilitation efforts tailored for severely damaged homes and buildings have yet to materialize at scale due to financial, technical, but also legal and political barriers tied to the nature of the protracted conflict in Syria.

In this seventh report in the Northwest Syria Series, Crisis Analysis–Syria (CA–SYR) unpacks the barriers hindering rehabilitation at the humanitarian response, grassroots, local authority and community levels. We navigate the challenges faced by international and local actors, policy and governance barriers, as well as coping mechanisms homeowners resorted to in light of delayed support. We conclude with the broader implications for future rehabilitation efforts in northwest Syria's earthquake-affected areas.

KEY FINDINGS

I. At the **humanitarian response level**, rehabilitation has remained focused on minor to moderate damage, while severely damaged buildings have yet to be addressed:

- Post-earthquake rehabilitation efforts in northwest Syria have focused on quick fixes and restoration rather than long-term reconstruction, partly due to funding limitations and technical challenges, coupled with strategic ambiguity in the humanitarian response.

- There are no concrete plans by humanitarian responders to reconstruct severely damaged homes due to funding shortages, resource constraints, and a lack of technical expertise for structural assessments. There is also confusion among humanitarian actors about whether such efforts fall under humanitarian or development mandates.
- Coordination challenges among INGOs, UN agencies, and local authorities, along with complex funding mechanisms, are hindering the clarity and commitment needed for long-term rehabilitation efforts, potentially leaving residents responsible for recovery in the face of capacity shortfalls.
- The adoption of the cash-for-rehabilitation approach has expanded the reach of recovery efforts, accelerating response, increasing ownership, and fostering participation. These innovative methods can serve as a foundation for assisting severely damaged homes in later stages of the response.

II. At the **grassroots level**, local and international crowdfunding initiatives have provided flexibility but were limited in their longevity and overall effectiveness:

- Due to limited funding and extensive shelter needs following the earthquakes, the rehabilitation of severely damaged properties in northwest Syria partially relied on local and international crowdfunding initiatives, despite their limitations in terms of short-term funding and geographical reach.
- These crowdfunding initiatives, along with local organizations and private fundraisers, highlight the significance of community-driven efforts, which allow more flexibility during emergency responses.

III. At the **local government level**, post-earthquake policies have provided some flexibility for residents to rehabilitate their homes but were still obstructed by financial and planning constraints:

- In the aftermath of the earthquakes, local authorities in northwest Syria made efforts to assess damages and adjust policies to facilitate rehabilitation, including providing free building permits and tax exemptions for quake-affected areas.
- In Aleppo, a policy shift has made building permits free, leading to a more flexible landscape. Properties requiring minor renovation without structural changes no longer need permits. However, the unregulated construction environment in rural areas raises concerns about reconstruction quality, public safety, and housing rights.
- In Idlib, residents affected by the earthquake or conflict were exempted from various fees by the Syrian Salvation Government's (SSG) Ministry of Local Administration and Services. However, financial constraints remain a significant obstacle to rehabilitation efforts. Political complexities, ongoing clashes, and competing geopolitical interests also complicated reconstruction efforts.

IV. At the **community level**, some homeowners and local communities had to adopt their own coping mechanisms to complete the rehabilitation of their homes:

- Households in northwest Syria facing structural damage reported inconsistent aid from various entities, making it challenging to standardize rehabilitation efforts.
- Homeowners in Aleppo expressed disappointment in unmet promises by organizations and local authorities, while the rehabilitation process was delayed as it depended on evaluations by an engineering committee, leaving residents waiting for necessary surveys and permissions.
- Northwest Syria has also been struggling with rising inflation and price hikes due to currency depreciation and economic instability, which began before the earthquakes. Residents reported exorbitant prices for construction materials and labor posed significant obstacles to their personal rehabilitation efforts.

LEVELS OF RESPONSE

I. Humanitarian response level

Rehabilitation works have remained focused on minor to moderate damage, while severely damaged buildings have yet to be addressed. Post-earthquake rehabilitation efforts in northwest Syria continue to largely focus on quick fixes and restoration, as opposed to longer-term structural rehabilitation and reconstruction. Homeowners with severely damaged properties assert that humanitarian organizations predominantly prioritized emergency response, while humanitarian organizations report funding challenges, technical limitations, and lasting strategic ambiguity in the Syria crisis response as the main reasons for deprioritizing the rehabilitation of severely damaged houses.

The shelter sector's response strategy has been phased, focusing initially on emergency relief and subsequently on rehabilitation. In March, the rehabilitation requirements of only 211 individuals were [addressed](#). However, in April efforts expanded to meet the needs of [5,980 individuals](#), and this upward trend continued in June, with actors reporting addressing the rehabilitation requirements of [30,537 individuals](#). Emergency relief related to shelter has generally [included](#) infrastructure improvements in IDP sites, transitional shelters, emergency shelter provision, and rehabilitation of damaged or unfinished shelters. These renewed efforts come as the Shelter Cluster enters the second phase of response, which is said to prioritize interventions focusing on repairing homes with minor to moderate [damage](#).

The shelter sector's revised strategic [objectives](#) refer to the provision of temporary/alternative shelters for people whose houses are severely damaged or completely destroyed. Actors confirm that there are no plans for engaging in the reconstruction and stabilization of severely damaged homes due to a confluence of challenges. Firstly, the shortage of funding – the shelter response is [less than 23% funded](#) – leaves little room for comprehensive rehabilitation projects. As a result, resources are predominantly directed toward immediate, life-saving measures such as repairs of partially damaged or unfinished shelters, sidelining long-term strategies. The overwhelming priority is to provide support to as many affected individuals as possible with the limited resources at hand. This prioritization excludes the resource-intensive task of rehabilitating severely damaged homes. Moreover, the technical expertise required for structural assessments is often scarce, both among shelter actors and within the private sector. For example, for some of the severely damaged buildings, complex structural assessments are needed such as extracting samples from foundation blocks to evaluate the extent of the damage and the robustness of the structure. Finally, actors also reported confusion over whether severely damaged buildings would better fit 'humanitarian' or 'development' response mandates, which are yet to be defined in the ongoing response.

INGOs and UN agencies, often armed with sizable resources, are ensnared in complex funding and bureaucratic response mechanisms. Alternatively, local entities, equipped with intricate understanding of on-the-ground realities, grapple with resource constraints. Coordination for long-term planning between UN agencies, INGOs and local authorities appears minimal. This has resulted in a lack of clarity at all levels of the response regarding future rehabilitation prospects. Local councils in Aleppo project that rehabilitation delays could span years due to a lack of commitment and funding from the international community, humanitarian actors, and donors. In the meantime, shelter actors have reported that displaced families temporarily residing in collective shelters are becoming much more vulnerable to eviction while their properties remain severely damaged and at increasing risk of demolition.

Cash for rehabilitation deemed successful in post-earthquake response

Cash-for-rehabilitation interventions targeting properties with minor and moderate damage have emerged as a strategic approach with distinct advantages in the context of post-earthquake recovery. Through this intervention, shelter actors co-design the scope of repairs with the homeowners and provide a conditional grant to homeowners to manage rehabilitation works with installments linked to work progress. It grants homeowners the autonomy to decide how to allocate funds, providing ownership and participation in the recovery process. Cash assistance is also known for its efficiency in scaling up rehabilitation efforts by eliminating the time-consuming distribution of construction materials or lengthy procurement processes and additional communication layers with the engagement of contractors.

Shelter actors report addressing concerns about the misuse of funds or the potential exclusion of vulnerable populations through rigorous monitoring, adaptive payment modalities, and targeted assistance. Shelter actors recruit engineers to provide technical assistance to homeowners and monitor the progress of the works. However, as raised by some actors, this approach is only effective for a limited scope of repairs where safety risks are low. More complex rehabilitation is undertaken by many actors through contractors, complementing the use of cash. Other limitations to the use of cash assistance or transfers in the context of northwest Syria's volatile economy also include the need to calculate the cash assistance amounts based on both rehabilitation needs and [fluctuating currencies](#), which also impact the costs of labor and construction materials.

The adoption of the cash-for-rehabilitation approach has had a significant impact on the scale and reach of recovery efforts. It has helped actors respond faster while increasing ownership and participation among homeowners, local workers, and local businesses. The approach could provide strong justification for developing similar strategies to assist those with severely damaged homes in the next stages of the response.

II. Grassroots level

Local and international crowdfunding initiatives have provided flexibility but were limited in their longevity and overall effectiveness. In light of limited funding for longer term recovery and reconstruction, the rehabilitation of severely damaged properties partially relied on local and international crowdfunding initiatives. Despite their notable limitations – such as one-off donations (rather than sustained flows of funding), limited geographical reach/scale, and disorganized or unclear surveying and selection approaches to destroyed areas – the Syrian diaspora and other international crowdfunding initiatives emerged as a main source of funding for interventions outside the scope of local authorities and (I)NGOs. As such, crowdfunding often prioritized assisting homes that had sustained severe damage. Limited yet tangible financial support was also provided by local initiatives and organizations, which offered, for example, one-time cash assistance for rehabilitation. This was confirmed by some of the surveyed homeowners in northwest Syria, while the one-time donations ranged between \$150 to \$1,200. However, the effectiveness of these local and international grassroots initiatives faces challenges with a lack of experience, organization and coordination – unlike established humanitarian response actors, there is unlikely to be institutional knowledge in order to be able to respond efficiently.

Amid these individual and collective efforts, the importance of local actors and personal initiatives and fundraisers play a significant role in times of crisis. Despite their limitations, they include community-driven solutions and flexibility which larger INGOs often lack. The utilization of crowdfunding as a semi-formalized channel for financial support challenges traditional, and often bureaucratic,

aid channels and presents an opportunity for critical evaluations concerning the reliability, equity, and sustainability of current response models.

III. Local government level

Post-earthquake policies provided some flexibility for residents to rehabilitate their homes but were still obstructed by financial and planning constraints. The aftermath of the earthquakes spurred local authorities into mainly assessing damage and amending existing policies to facilitate rehabilitation-related processes and accommodate the increased demands for permits. Despite some policy initiatives by authorities to facilitate rehabilitation efforts, challenges and uncertainty persist.

Residents of Syrian Interim Government (SIG)-controlled Aleppo have witnessed an evolution in the approach of local authorities concerning construction mandates. Historically, under the building law of 1967, securing permits and paying tax fees were mandatory for any construction or restoration. In the case of [informal buildings](#), which dominate the quake-affected landscapes, the process of obtaining permits was more complicated. In a noteworthy policy shift, building permits are now provided for free, coupled with other [tax exceptions](#) to residents of affected areas.

While complexities around securing permits have been [reported](#) at times, local sources reported that many residents found it easy to obtain legal permits (post-earthquake). Notably, properties that required limited renovation, without the need for structural modifications, did not require a permit. The rural areas of Aleppo also depict a relatively unregulated environment with the majority of constructions proceeding without permits. This enables quick and easy rehabilitation, but can also have adverse short and long-term outcomes on reconstruction quality, public safety, and overall housing, land and property rights. Due to the absence of documentation linked to displaced persons' homes, some informal processes were necessary to put in place – such as vetting by neighbors or relatives – to ensure the ownership of dwellings destroyed in the earthquake.

In Idleb, the SSG's Ministry of Local Administration and Services (MLAS) [exempted](#) residents affected by either the earthquake or the conflict from many [fees](#) on 17 June. This exemption spans building permit fees, penalties for building violations, and charges for engineering plan verifications. On 28 September, MLAS added the technical inspection fees to the exemption list. While this policy theoretically eases the rehabilitation process, there remain a number of challenges such as the absence of reliable entities to spearhead and finance the rehabilitation of damaged infrastructure.

Reconstruction in Idleb is also further complicated by a layer of political complexity including ongoing clashes, disputed territory and competing geopolitical interests. This past [month in](#) Idleb, the Syrian army responded viciously to an attack on a Military Academy in Homs, launching extensive aerial campaigns targeting hospitals, schools and residential areas throughout opposition-held areas. Displacement and civilian casualties have been extensive as a result. Political complexities are also seen in northern Idleb, with a total ban by the SSG on reconstruction in Harim and other areas close to the Turkish border. This ban ties the prospects of recovery and reconstruction to the achievement of an eventual political agreement, unlikely in the short to medium term.

Despite the observed leniency from local bodies, financial constraints still emerge as a blatant obstruction to rehabilitation efforts. As highlighted by homeowners and local council representatives in Aleppo, rehabilitation efforts are severely underfunded. In the [Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund \(SCHF\) 2023 Third Reserve Allocation Strategy](#), \$4 million are allocated for the rehabilitation of buildings for families who cannot afford it and require technical assistance for the execution. Despite these allocations, the shelter cluster response is currently facing a [77% funding gap](#) largely due to the colossal rehabilitation needs in the area.

IV. Community level

Some homeowners and local communities had to adopt their own coping mechanisms to complete the rehabilitation of their homes. Households affected in northwest Syria reported inconsistent aid provided by different entities for similar types and severity of structural damage, making the standardization of relief efforts an uphill task. Homeowners in Aleppo recount a series of disappointments, stemming from perceived unmet promises by various organizations and local authorities. Local authorities were also reported to have hampered or delayed rehabilitation efforts. In Aleppo, rehabilitation work was contingent on evaluations by a dedicated committee of engineers, in tandem with the local council. Consequently, residents faced a month-long wait following the quakes before being able to start on any rehabilitation activity, pending necessary surveys and permissions. In Aleppo, the vacuum created by the lack of sustained support from local authorities and humanitarian actors alike pushed numerous homeowners to using personal savings. Personal funds, often from sold assets, as well as remittances from family members settled abroad, facilitated the rehabilitation process. Some homeowners personally conducted the repair works to avoid the expensive labor fees, while some capable renters struck deals with landlords where they took on the responsibility of rehabilitation in lieu of rent for the next few years.

In addition to the myriad additional challenges faced by the people of northwest Syria, the region has been grappling with rising inflation and price hikes as a result of [currency devaluation and economic instability](#), which began even before the earthquakes. In a [survey](#) conducted in April 2023, 93% of participants in northwest Syria reported rising food prices and nearly half of respondents noted a decrease in access to food. Price increases and declining purchasing power brought on by currency devaluation reinforce negative coping strategies and make it difficult for homeowners to pay for food for their families, let alone labor and building materials for the renovation of their homes. Homeowners reported the exorbitant prices associated with construction materials and labor as primary obstacles. In addition, the palpable lack of expertise in rehabilitation-centric construction adds to the layers of challenges. Aleppo's local councils echo these concerns, highlighting the dire need for technical specialists and an experienced workforce. As people increasingly tap into their personal savings, as well as debt and credit, to cope with rising inflation, economic instability, and recovering their losses from the earthquake, financial resilience to future shocks is compromised and vulnerability is increased.

CONCLUSION

The path to rehabilitating earthquake-affected buildings in northwest Syria is likely to be protracted due to the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the earthquake response. Although international humanitarian actors and donors have made progress with minor to moderate rehabilitation by introducing innovative approaches such as cash for rehabilitation initiatives, severely damaged or destroyed buildings have yet to be addressed due to financial and technical limitations. Meanwhile, local actors and crowdfunding initiatives – although more flexible and adaptable in times of emergency response – have only been able to provide short-term financial support which cannot meet the significant rehabilitation needs of residents in the mid to long term, particularly when it comes to addressing severely damaged homes.

The proactive measures of homeowners and local communities, driven by sheer necessity, also highlight gaps in institutional support. Affected communities have partially filled these gaps themselves, relying on personal savings or leveraging networks in the Syrian diaspora. Although these ground-up efforts can offer a more rapid response in times of natural disaster or crisis, they also underscore deficiencies in structured institutional response mechanisms that are necessary to usher in longer-term, sustainable solutions. Meanwhile, local authorities in Aleppo and Idlib sought to ease reconstruction efforts however also found themselves operating under the larger, unresolved political backdrop of the Syrian conflict. This adds an additional layer of complexity, slowing down rehabilitation efforts, and placing severely damaged buildings at greater risk of being demolished, while displaced residents continue to face growing risks of eviction from temporary or collective shelters.



Photo: Rehabilitation efforts in Harim district, northwest Syria. (Source: Mercy Corps Syria, 2023)

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The Crisis Analysis – Syria team (formerly HAT), was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. CA-SYR's most important function is to collect and analyze data and information. Since 2015, our analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the conflict. CA-SYR is a team within Mercy Corps, and is part of the Mercy Corps response to the Syrian crisis.

