

REPORT

OCTOBER 2023

RAPID REFLECTION ON THE SCALE-UP OF CASH COORDINATION

FOR THE SYRIA EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The opinions expressed are those of the Key Aid Consulting team, and do not necessarily reflect the views of CALP. Responsibility for the opinions expressed in this report rests solely with the authors.

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ACRONYMS

CAG	Global Cash Advisory Group
CWG	Cash Working Group
CVA	Cash and voucher assistance
GCA _s	Government-controlled areas
GoS	Government of Syria
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
ISCG	Inter-Sector Coordination Group
ISG	Inter-Sector Group
JRAM	Joint Rapid Assessment of Markets
KI	Key informant
MEB	Minimum expenditure basket
MPCA	Multi-purpose cash assistance
NFI	Non-food item
SNA	Specific Needs Assessment
SoP	Standard Operating Procedure
WFP	World Food Programme





The February 2023 earthquakes on the Türkiye–Syria border killed over 50,000 people and injured more than 100,000,¹ further exacerbating vulnerabilities and increasing humanitarian needs in an area already affected by a 12-year-long conflict and refugee crisis.²

The magnitude of the disaster and the significant use of cash and voucher assistance (CVA) to respond to the needs emphasized the importance of quality cash coordination. Using the Global Cash Advisory Group (CAG) key performance indicators for cash coordination as a guide, this paper reflects on the extent to which cash coordination was: (1) timely and effective, and (2) inclusive, transparent and accountable.

It draws from eight semi-structured key informants' interviews, desk review of available literature and a round table organized on 8 August 2023 with key cash stakeholders.

¹ UN.org. (2023). 'Türkiye-Syria Earthquake Response'. <https://www.un.org/en/turkiye-syria-earthquake-response>

² Hisham Khan. (2023). 'The Turkey and Syria Earthquake'. Relief Web. <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkiye/turkey-and-syria-earthquake>

OI CONTEXT

Following the earthquakes on the Türkiye–Syria border, the United Nations launched a US\$1 billion Flash Appeal, for which Syria received US\$397.5 million. The Appeal included a dedicated multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) Chapter, under which US\$15.6 million was allocated to Syria.³

THE CASH WORKING GROUP (CWG) IN DAMASCUS SUPPORTED THE EARTHQUAKE RESPONSE WITHIN THE PRE-EARTHQUAKE EXISTING STRUCTURE

Reporting to the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), chaired by OCHA. The CWG functions with two full-time co-chairs: one hosted by WFP and one by Caritas Switzerland. The WFP-hosted co-chair position remained vacant from February to May 2023, for the first four months of the earthquake response. Both positions are fully dedicated to cash coordination functions. Within the Damascus CWG sits a Technical Advisory Group, providing CWG members with more technical expertise to steer technical guidance and decision-making.

Subnational working groups exist in each governorate, mirroring similar chairing systems (one UN, one NGO) as the Damascus group. Throughout the earthquake response, the CWG met every 8 to 10 days.⁴

Key informants shared a few unique context identifiers, which for the most part challenged cash coordination. The pre-existing culture of secrecy across humanitarian interventions led to limited information sharing, making coordination more challenging at the CWG level. The lack of data found on the earthquake cash response in comparison to neighbouring countries and areas of response is evidence of this culture of secrecy.

LACK OF COHESION

The reported lack of cohesion among the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) members limited the capacity of response leadership to resolve inter-cluster disagreements, including those relating to the use or denomination of CVA, specifically on multi-purpose cash (MPC).

GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA

The Government of Syria (GoS) heavily involved itself in the earthquake response, especially from April onwards, but its capacities to respond and coordinate have been understandably overwhelmed by the scale of the crisis. This created bottlenecks and delays for the response, including the cash response, for example, as Operations Rooms coordinating the response at local level were not readily available in every governorate.

³ UN OCHA. (2023). 'Syria and Türkiye Flash Appeal, Appeal Data, MPCA Paid Contributions'. <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1149/summary>; <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1150/summary>
Note that within the Flash Appeal, Multi-purpose Cash & Social Protection sector targeted 1.5 million earthquake-affected people and appealed for US\$143.6 million.
Sectoral cash and voucher assistance is planned under Shelter/NFI, Food Security, Early Recovery and Livelihoods sectors.

⁴ Synthesis from all KIIs on Syria GCAs.

CENTRAL BANK CIRCULAR

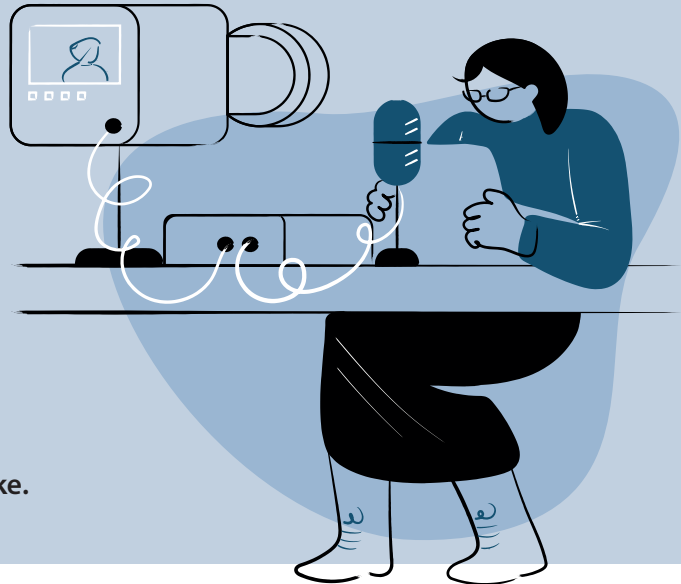
A Central Bank circular on beneficiary identification prior to resources distribution led to a de facto cessation of CVA distribution in April 2023. From April 2023, this directive required, for deduplication purposes,

BOX 1: CENTRAL BANK CIRCULAR

The Central Bank issued a directive at the beginning of April which outlined strict conditions for delivering assistance. According to this directive, authorities (operating from ‘Operations Rooms’) had to approve humanitarian organizations’ potential recipient lists before any assistance could be provided, to ensure there was no duplication of assistance.

The criteria for eligibility were twofold:

- 01** the potential recipient must have partially or completely lost their shelter due to the earthquake, and
- 02** if that was the case, then they should not have been receiving any other assistance. For example, individuals who were receiving rental assistance were disqualified from receiving multi-purpose cash assistance (MCPA) after the earthquake.



According to certain interviewees, the Central Bank circular was issued as a result of the perception of inadequate organization and coordination among humanitarian organizations. The directive became a major strain on cash operations, and had not been lifted as of August 2023.

02 TO WHAT EXTENT WAS THE CASH COORDINATION EFFECTIVE AND TIMELY?

KEY FINDING I

LACK OF COHESION AMONG CWG MEMBERS AND AT THE INTER-SECTOR LEVEL, COUPLED WITH LIMITED LEADERSHIP, LED TO LATE ISSUANCE OF GUIDANCE, THEREBY HINDERING BOTH EFFECTIVENESS AND TIMELINESS OF CASH COORDINATION.

The CWG displayed willingness to coordinate the cash response promptly after the disaster. Immediately after the earthquake, the CWG proactively requested its members to provide details regarding their response capacity and available funding.⁵ In the week following the earthquake, the CWG started drafting a standard operating procedure (SoP) to recommend transfer values and types of assistance to earthquake-affected households.⁶ The document was circulated for approval to the ISC and HCT, and communicated to other partners, including cluster members, for their comments and feedback. CWG members and cluster coordinators provided multiple rounds of comments. A significant portion of these comments were unconstructive and focused on some well-settled topics such as the definition of MPC, with some sectoral stakeholders arguing for multi-purpose grants to be considered sectoral cash grants.⁷

The issue was escalated up to the HCT, which couldn't settle conversations for about two months, leading to major delays in assistance provision. Considering the urgency of the needs, organizations such as UNICEF and UNHCR rapidly started CVA distributions prior to agreement within the CWG on transfer value or targeting criteria. This negatively affected the extent to which the cash response was coordinated, and according to some informants, this contributed to the Government of Syria's (GoS) reservations regarding the use of CVA.






The SoP, later renamed 'Guidance Document', was finally shared with CWG members on 26 March.⁸ This Guidance Document provided information on recommended transfer values for MPC, priority household profiles, recommended frequency, duration of MPC assistance, and information on reporting.⁹

⁷ Impression shared by all KIIs.

⁸ All KIIs; CWG. (2023). 'Earthquake MPC Response (Syria HCT) Cash Working Group Recommendation Report'. Date confirmed by email sent by co-chairs to CWG members with guidance attached on 26th March 2023.

⁹ CWG. (2023). 'Earthquake MPC Response (Syria HCT) Cash Working Group Recommendation Report'.

Beyond the Guidance Document, no tools were directly produced by the CWG, as per the Table below.

TABLE 1		
	Minimum expenditure basket (MEB)	Not updated during the earthquake response (the most recent one at the time of the earthquake, from December 2022, was used throughout). ¹⁰
	Joint Rapid Assessment of Markets (JRAM)	Conducted by REACH with support from CWG and NGO forum partners. ¹¹ The extent of the support by the CWG to produce the JRAM, however, remains unclear. A rapid market assessment was conducted by CWG members in the first few weeks after the earthquake and shared within the CWG.
	4W matrix	Noted to exist, but still being finalized. ¹²
	SoP guidance	First draft shared with CWG members on 13th February. Final draft shared on 26th March.
	Earthquake response risk matrix	Shared as a part of the package prepared by the CWG.

KEY FINDING 2

THE CWG TRIED TO ENGAGE WITH CLUSTERS TO SUPPORT SECTORAL ASSISTANCE, BUT THIS DID NOT LEAD TO MAJOR PROGRESS WITH SECTORAL CVA.

The exact extent to which the CWG was given the space to support sectoral cash remains unclear. The CWG co-chairs reported that the CWG was working closely with the shelter/non-food items (NFIs) and food clusters throughout the response, and that it provided technical advice to different clusters as well. Nevertheless, other KIIs felt that there were no apparent links between these clusters and the CWG, despite the numerous revisions of the SOP, and the fact that cash was on the agenda of the ISC multiple times. The only concrete evidence of sectoral cash support was the circulation of the document on transfer value for NFI assistance by the CWG to its members on 9th February, only three days after the earthquake.¹³

¹⁰ All KIIs.

¹¹ CWG. (2023). 'Earthquake MPC Response (Syria HCT) Cash Working Group Recommendation Report'.

¹² KIIs with co-chairs.

¹³ Email shared by CWG with NFI transfer value guidance attached on 9th February 2023.

KEY FINDING 3

FROM APRIL ONWARDS, THE CENTRAL BANK CIRCULAR DE FACTO HALTED THE USE OF CVA. THE CWG WAS UNABLE TO STEER TARGETING AND DEDUPLICATION. FURTHER, CWG ADVOCACY EFFORTS TO RESUME CVA HAVE NOT YET BEEN SUCCESSFUL AND ARE PERCEIVED AS UNTRANSPARENT.

As stated, the Central Bank issued a directive that imposed strict eligibility criteria for post-earthquake assistance. This directive severely limited the CWG's ability to provide guidance on targeting and duplication, and it resulted in a complete cessation of CVA, as humanitarian organizations refused to share their recipient lists due to data protection concerns. The efforts of humanitarian organizations, and the HCT in particular, to advocate to lift or adjust the directive and resume cash operations have so far not been successful. CWG members felt sidelined from the discussion surrounding the directive, as the CWG was not adequately informed about it upon issuance, and the HCT requested that the CWG refrain from advocating to lift the directive. Throughout this period, upon HCT request, the CWG did not communicate the progress or absence thereof of its engagement in advocating for a resumption of cash operations to its members. This contributed to a perceived lack of transparency by the CWG members, who felt that high-level CWG deliberations appeared to occur 'behind closed doors'.¹⁴

The guidance offered by the CWG regarding deduplication seems to have been notably weak, especially as no prior system was set up for systematic reporting. Presently, the CWG is exploring the potential of implementing 'building blocks' in Syria, a privately managed blockchain network aimed at streamlining deduplication efforts among different humanitarian organizations.¹⁵ A first field mission is planned for the second week of October 2023. Additionally, the option of interoperability between organizations for deduplication is also being considered. However, neither of these approaches have been implemented in practice, and guidance on deduplication was absent in the earthquake response.

KEY FINDING 4

INCREASED RESOURCES FOR CASH COORDINATION DID NOT LEAD TO INCREASED CLARITY IN THE STRUCTURE OR THE TRANSPARENCY OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS.

To support the earthquake response, the CWG is chaired by two full-time co-chairs (albeit that one position was vacant until late May 2023). Such dedicated full-time human resource is a rather unique occurrence among CWGs, especially considering the cessation of cash operations since April 2023, and makes the Damascus CWG a very well-resourced CWG. Nevertheless, the strengthening of cash coordination capacity did not translate into increased effectiveness of cash coordination. The interviewed CWG members identified this as mostly owing to a lack of willingness of some CWG members to meaningfully coordinate, along with the limited ability of leadership at inter-sectoral levels to steer decision-making.

Furthermore, the structure of the CWG itself remains unclear to most key informants. The role and responsibilities of the CWG steering group, involving OCHA and Caritas, are neither well-defined nor documented in Terms of Reference.

Key informants further expressed concerns about the lack of clarity in the decision-making process and the somewhat 'too consultative' process, which required members to vote on multiple occasions. This led to uncertainties and delays in decision-making, as some CWG members were perceived by others to have prioritized their organizational interests over collective coordination efforts.

¹⁴ Synthesis from KII's.

¹⁵ See 'Building Blocks' by WFP, at: <https://www.wfp.org/building-blocks>

03

TO WHAT EXTENT WAS THE CASH COORDINATION INCLUSIVE, TRANSPARENT AND ACCOUNTABLE?

KEY FINDING 5

THE CWG WAS PERCEIVED AS BEING VERY INCLUSIVE, BUT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY WERE WEAK.

Overall, CWG meetings were perceived as very inclusive by all key informants. Any actor interested in cash coordination could join the meetings, if they are allowed to operate in the GCAs.¹⁶ Meetings were held in English, once every 8 to 10 days, but simultaneous translation in Arabic was possible if requested in advance by attendees.

CWG members felt that it was difficult to make decisions among such a large group, with diverse technical capabilities across the membership.¹⁷ Informants collectively agreed that more than half of the CWG's meeting attendees were not directly engaged in cash-related activities.

To ease decision-making, the CWG went through a restructure into different subgroups:

- ▶ **A broader CWG, organizing plenary sessions which any CVA practitioner or organization interested in CVA could attend;**
- ▶ **A Technical Advisory Group (TAG) where more technical discussions could occur, serving as a pool of expertise to form potential task forces; and**
- ▶ **a third subgroup for organizations responding to the earthquake only.**

Yet difficulties in reaching decisions seemed to stem from a lack of clarity in the decision-making process, rather than too much inclusion being adopted by the group.¹⁸ At times, engagement and collaboration by both international and local actors was especially low, even if they were present in the meetings or on communication channels like mailing lists. Three key informants reported that it would have been more effective to collaborate at the district level, with the subnational CWGs at the centre of a more decentralized response.

¹⁶ KIs.

¹⁷ It was mentioned by one KI that more than half of the CWG's meeting attendees were not directly engaged in cash-related activities.

¹⁸ All KIs.

04 IMPLICATIONS AND GOOD PRACTICES

Cash coordination in the earthquake response was rather ineffective and untimely, mostly because of the limited willingness of CWG members to coordinate, and a lack of leadership at the Inter-Sector Group (ISG) level to make decisions related to cash coordination. This situation illustrates that, in general, the quality of coordination is intrinsically tied to the willingness of organizations and the individuals representing them to participate in cash coordination. These issues have been amplified by several contextual factors unique to Syria GCAs, such as the Central Bank circular, which have altogether led to a cessation of CVA following the earthquake. The following paragraphs highlight some implications for the future for this specific context.

▶ A RENEWED COMMITMENT, AND WILLINGNESS, TO MEANINGFULLY PARTICIPATE IN CASH COORDINATION.

This is crucial at a senior level for more effective and qualitative cash coordination processes. This fundamental requirement for quality cash coordination is not limited to this context but applies universally.

▶ TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATION.

Building upon a proposal put forth by the CWG co-chairs, the ISG's involvement could lead to a clearer understanding of cash-related terms, ensuring a common language for effective communication. This could be ensured by, for example, making effective use of existing resources like the CALP CVA Glossary of Terms.¹⁹

▶ ADDRESSING INTERNAL DIVISIONS AND UNCLEAR DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES.

More regular communication of CWG activities (or even lack of activities when relevant) would contribute to increased cohesion. **This includes increased communication with sector clusters and regular participation** by the CWG co-chairs in relevant sectoral meetings. Decision-making processes can be improved by the proposal, put forward by some members and initiated by the CWG, of reviewing group membership and layering the CWG into different subgroups. In this way, decision-making processes are clarified, and cohesion increased.

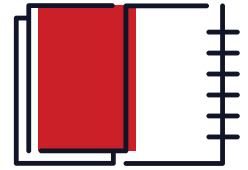
▶ TASK FORCE CREATION.

Task forces with diverse participation could support transparency, agility and proactiveness. It was noted by one key informant that while task forces existed and functioned before the earthquake, they were not active during the earthquake response, therefore renewed commitment on this front is essential.



19 <https://www.calpnetwork.org/resources/glossary-of-terms/>

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