



16 March 2023

Dear Minister Mitchell

Türkiye-Syria earthquakes: protection risks and needs in north-western Syria

As UK CEOs of leading child-focused humanitarian organisations responding to the Türkiye-Syria earthquakes, we are gravely concerned by the child protection risks that have been exacerbated by this crisis. The effects upon those in north-western Syria are especially grave due to the lack of resilience, services, infrastructure and access due to the conflict which enters its 13th year this week.

With 7 million children estimated to have been directly impacted by the quakes, our teams on the ground are now in a race against time to prevent secondary impacts which threaten children's safety, health, learning and wellbeing. In both Syria and Türkiye, 850,000 children are stranded outside in the cold without adequate shelter or access to healthcare or education, leaving them at risk of illness, neglect, exploitation, violence and abuse.

World Vision's initial assessment found that 94% of surveyed people's homes and shelters have been affected by the earthquake, while 82% were living in collective shelters as a result of damage. 42% of respondents reported that education facilities had been damaged in their neighbourhoods, and 84% said the earthquake had impacted their children's access to education.

In Syria specifically, children have faced bombardment, displacement, bereavement, destruction, illness and hunger for much of the past 12 years. 85% of families across Syria were already unable to meet their basic needs. This earthquake is likely to worsen their economic plight leading to negative coping mechanisms, with reports of sexual harassment in collective shelters already emerging. Girls and women in north-western Syria were already at high risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), with early forced marriage being widely practised. Mental health needs and psychosocial distress, including suicidal ideation, was also on the rise, particularly among women and children, and likely to be exacerbated.

Some displaced Syrian children, whose caregivers in Türkiye were killed in the earthquakes, have returned to Syria to find relatives. Consequently, there are hundreds of separated and unaccompanied children in north-western Syria, many without identification documents. Children who were previously unaccompanied in the earthquake-affected areas in Syria now face heightened vulnerabilities. This adds to the challenge of reuniting them with surviving family members and increases their vulnerability to trafficking and child labour.

Our organisations and Syrian partners reached millions of children in north-western Syria in 2022 and are well placed to partner with the UK government and other actors to meet these protection needs. We applaud the UK public's generosity and are grateful for the UK Government's pledge of £25 Million to support the humanitarian response. Moreover, we note the allocation of 70% of this figure for meeting the needs of residents of Northwest Syria and welcome the commitment to implement through Syrian NGO partners where most effective. In addition to helping fully to replenish pooled funds such as the Aid Fund for North Syria (AFNS) and Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF), it is vital that the UK Government places gender-equitable and disability-inclusive child protection at the heart of the emergency and longer-term response.



Beginning with the donor conference of 20 March, we call on the UK Government to:

- **Ensure that the maximum feasible proportion of UK humanitarian spend in north-western Syria directly tackles one or more child protection risk indicator**, including by funding: family tracing, reunification and case management; interim care; specialist provision of comprehensive mental health and psycho-social support services; Child-Friendly Spaces; the provision of alternative housing which prioritises the safety and dignity of displaced people, especially children; education in emergencies to ensure that children can access safe, quality learning as quickly as possible; access to nutrition and safe WASH facilities; rebuilding of essential health services; and livelihoods for displaced people.
- **Advocate for the maximum feasible proportion of the emergency flash appeal and the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) spending to tackle at least one child protection risk indicator**, in addition to meeting the designated 5.1% (\$20.5 million) of the earthquake humanitarian response plan specifically for child protection interventions.
- **Commit substantial new *long-term* funding for urgently needed Mental Health and Psycho-social Support Services (MPHSS) interventions, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) prevention and multi-sectoral response services** including in camp settings, such as Women and Girls' Safe Spaces, mobile GBV prevention teams, and Child- and Youth-Friendly Spaces.

Thank you for your ongoing attention to this devastating crisis, and rest assured we stand ready to play our part in the UK's response.

Sincerely

Rose Caldwell, CEO, Plan International UK

Gwen Hines, CEO, Save the Children UK

Othman Moqbel, CEO, Action for Humanity

Mark Sheard, CEO, World Vision UK

Jon Sparkes, Chief Executive of the UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK),

Rob Williams, CEO, War Child UK