

# Voices that shape humanitarian responses: Advancing accountability to affected people in northern Syria



## Overview

This brief is intended for practitioners and policymakers aiming to strengthen accountability to affected people (AAP) and community engagement in humanitarian responses. It captures key lessons and promising practices from northern Syria - one of the first settings globally to implement a comprehensive interagency AAP system.

In light of the ongoing “Humanitarian Reset” initiated in 2025, the AAP system initiated in northern Syria in 2024 offers a timely model to localize response efforts, reduce duplication and promote collective accountability. It was subsequently recognized as a best practice in the [2024 UN Secretary-General’s report](#) on strengthening the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance.

## Context

The 14-years of conflict in Syria, which have led to economic collapse and repeated displacement, along with the 2023 Türkiye-Syria earthquake, have culminated in one of the most complex humanitarian crises globally.

## Acronyms

AAP	Accountability to Affected People
GBV	Gender-based Violence
CERF	Central Emergency Relief Fund
IASC	Inter-agency Standing Committee
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PSEA	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
RMU	Risk Management Unit
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

In 2024, an estimated 16.7 million people, nearly 75 per cent of the population, required humanitarian assistance. Since 2014, cross-border operations from Gaziantep, coordinated by OCHA and implemented through UN and NGO partners, have served as a critical lifeline. Initially, cross-border operations were implemented based on UN Security Council resolution 2165 and continued after August 2023, based on consent by the Government of Syria. This briefing outlines a system that was rolled out within the specific context of Syria that predates the events of 8 December 2024 that led to regime change in Syria<sup>1</sup>. The lessons learned and the promising practices from implementing the collective AAP system in the north of Syria, will help inform its adaptation across Syria and other humanitarian settings.

<sup>1</sup> Prior to 8 December 2024, the international response for Syria was divided across three Hubs: Government of Syria, northwest Syria and northeast Syria. Coordination across these Hubs was done through the Whole of Syria architecture, ensuring impartiality and principled humanitarian response. Following December 2024, the geopolitical landscape in Syria has undergone major changes and since then, caretaker authorities have access to all areas of Syria, in a transition from the pre-established humanitarian architecture and Hub system.

# The AAP system in northern Syria



Figure 1: Overview of the AAP system components

The collective AAP system was designed to embed community voice and feedback into decision-making at all stages of the humanitarian response and at interagency working groups and Humanitarian Country Team levels. It includes three mutually reinforcing components:

## 1 SafeLine (an interagency hotline) paired with a social media rumour tracking system

SafeLine is an interagency hotline that complements, rather than replaces, organizational feedback systems by offering a neutral, trusted and collective modality for affected people to raise concerns, share feedback and access information. Operated by a gender-balanced team familiar with local languages and context, it offers **multiple communication channels** tailored to community preferences – mobile phone calls, text and voice messages via WhatsApp and Telegram, as well as email.

SafeLine is guided by Inter-agency Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) developed in line with the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) standards for collective feedback mechanisms.

These SOPs ensure consistent case handling, including referral pathways for sensitive issues, specifically those related to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), gender-based violence (GBV), and corruption and fraud. Cases are referred to designated focal points within relevant organizations and to the designated clusters and working group. For example, SEA cases are referred to the PSEA focal point in the relevant organization within the timeframe indicated if consent from the complainant has been given. At the same time, the PSEA Network is notified for information accordingly. A critical factor for the success of SafeLine has been the engagement of various clusters and working groups for referrals,

including the AAP Working Group, PSEA Network and the Risk Management Unit (RMU), enabling rapid and efficient coordination across these areas. Another example includes, in cases of alleged aid diversion involving staff within an organization, the SafeLine refers the complaint directly to the Head of that organization, who then initiates an internal investigation. At the same time, the Risk Management Group is notified for information and oversight. If, however, the allegation concerns the Head of the organization, the SafeLine bypasses internal referral and sends the case directly to the Risk Management Group, which immediately initiates follow-up and investigation. Since the Resident Coordinator (RC) chairs the Risk Management Group, this process enhances oversight and ensures accountability at the highest level.

The Rumour Tracker functions as an **early warning system by monitoring public social media platforms** for emerging protection-related concerns, misinformation and community perceptions of humanitarian actors. By listening to communities via online

platforms, the system helps humanitarian actors detect and correct inaccuracies that affected people may not report on SafeLine. Repeatedly, issues are identified via the rumor tracker that then appears on SafeLine months later. For example, rumors of misconduct that were reported in health facilities were already recorded in the Tracker nearly three months before any formal complaints were received on SafeLine. As such the humanitarian country team prioritized the distribution of the SafeLine number in the health facilities. As a result, formal complaints began to be registered accordingly by these health facilities, prompting follow-up with relevant clusters and organizations. This included consultations with affected communities and health workers, which later contributed to shaping updated health guidance and response strategies.

**All identified high-risk rumours are verified** in coordination with OCHA's Access Unit and Humanitarian Field Officer to ensure reliability of information and to guide appropriate follow-up actions.





## A community-led, face-to-face feedback mechanism, including regular dialogue with marginalized groups.

In response to community demand for in-person engagement, a network of trained community volunteers, recruited from within affected communities, was established to conduct regular outreach to **collect non-sensitive feedback and relay community concerns** on the responses provided by humanitarian actors. Outreach is conducted through both formal (i.e. focus group discussions) and informal (i.e. chats during field visits) mechanisms. Should sensitive information arise, volunteers are trained to respectfully pause the conversation and provide the individual with a SafeLine card for direct reporting. They also alert the SafeLine operator to ensure timely and appropriate handling of the case. This localized approach helps build trust and ensures that voices often missed in digital or remote channels are heard.

To sustain and expand this engagement beyond the immediate humanitarian response, UNFPA and OCHA are developing online training courses for volunteer groups in local languages, covering key topics related to AAP and community engagement. These efforts aim to further strengthen local capacity and institutionalize community feedback practices for the long term.

**In 2025, over 10,000 persons benefiting from humanitarian assistance used SafeLine and 500 volunteers were trained to collect face-to-face feedback. 1,285** rumors were recorded, reflecting a significant volume of misinformation or unverified reports circulating in the area. 10% of these rumors were considered of potentially high risk (i.e. immediate harm and request for urgent action and major dissatisfaction).

### Example – Community Volunteer Contribution in a Hard-to-Reach Area

In June 2025, SafeLine received a report of child harassment from a hard-to-reach area where no protection services had previously been available. The case was referred to the Protection Cluster, which promptly deployed a caseworker to assess and respond to the situation. Notably, the report came shortly after SafeLine training for community volunteer groups. The complainant mentioned learning about SafeLine during an outreach session conducted by the newly trained volunteers. That session helped them understand that they could safely and confidentially report such incidents, even highly sensitive ones, through SafeLine.

### 3

## A locally-led community of practice (CoP) composed of volunteer groups in northern Syria

Coupling SafeLine and Rumour Tracker, the AAP system also incorporates a locally-led community of practice formed of 240 volunteer groups. This CoP plays a key role in validating feedback from affected people and influencing humanitarian response plans - demonstrating a shift from passive consultation to community-led decision making.

### Example

Initial complaints through SafeLine and the Rumour Tracker highlighted that shelter materials being distributed were not suitable for the current weather conditions – particularly during the cold winters and extremely hot summers. These concerns were raised with the Shelter Cluster, who were then invited to validate the Dignified Shelter Guidance in collaboration with the local CoP. As a result of this joint process, the guidance was revised to ensure that shelter materials are better adapted to the seasonal climate challenges, improving the safety, comfort, and dignity of affected households.

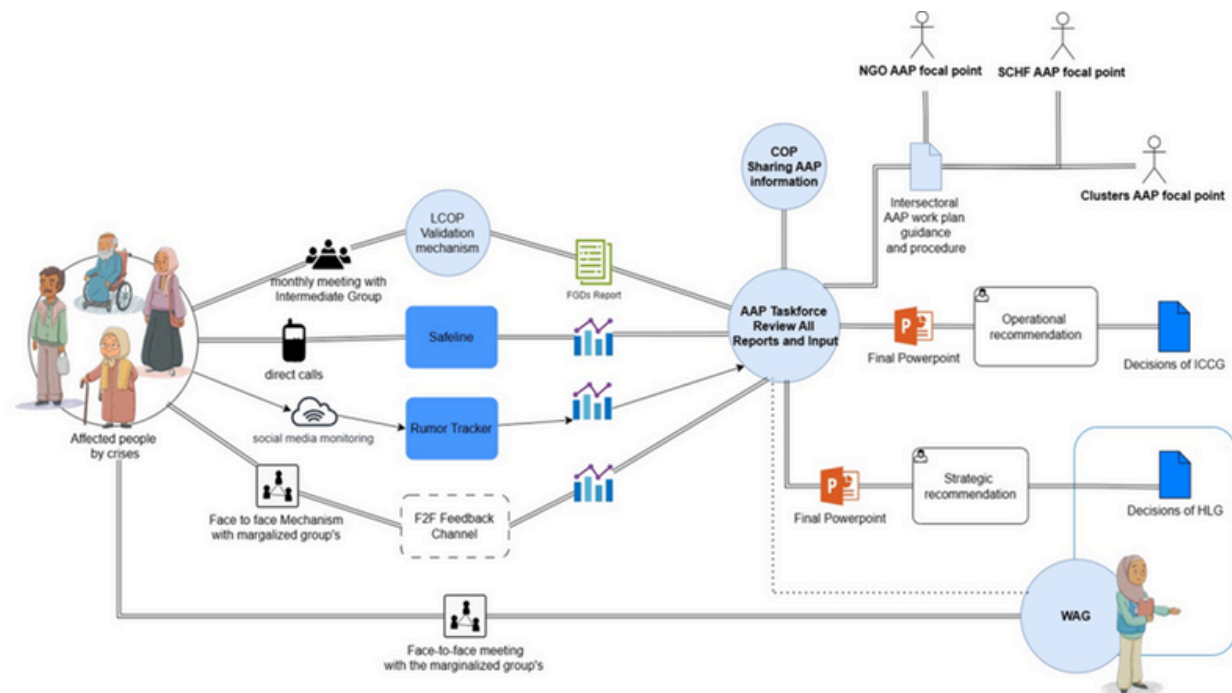


Figure 2: Overview of the information flow for the AAP system

## Lessons learned

### Enabling factors for the AAP system in northern Syria

**Pre-existing feedback mechanisms already in place:** Various communications channels, including hotlines, were already familiar to affected people. Equally, humanitarian actors had information about which communications channels were most accessible. This laid the groundwork for building a trusted, collective system. For example, SafeLine was originally a hotline for protection from SEA and quickly evolved into a broader feedback tool since the majority of calls were not PSEA-related, but rather requests for information and assistance.

**Fit-for-purpose host agency:** UNFPA, designated as the lead administrative agency since mid-2024, hosted interagency staff and managed three integrated units - AAP, Risk Management and the PSEA Network. UNFPA's leadership is rooted in its rights-based, people-centered mandate and long-standing expertise in GBV and SRH. UNFPA's operational presence, strong ties with local actors, particularly women-led organizations, further enabled inclusive and accountable community engagement. By having a dedicated AAP Advisor heading the AAP network, OCHA served as the technical lead, ensuring alignment across the humanitarian system.

**High-level commitment from humanitarian leadership and funding:** Coordination and backing from the Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator were instrumental in unifying pre-existing feedback mechanisms into a formalized system that catalyzed engagement beyond the AAP working group. Additionally, funding from CERF in 2024, provided the financial backing necessary to formalize the system.

**Active and enabling space for civil society:** Unlike many contexts with shrinking civic space, northern Syria has an active network of local organizations. Lessons from the 2023 Türkiye-Syria earthquake response underscored the importance of direct and sustained community engagement, particularly in shaping the humanitarian response and establishing an early warning system to counter misinformation. Affected people demonstrated a strong desire to participate in decision-making processes. The vibrant civil society network enabled the locally-led community of practice to thrive, with meaningful engagement from diverse and marginalized groups, including women and girls. This environment also supported the success of in-person feedback mechanisms, reinforcing two-way accountability and trust.

## What worked well

**System-wide integration:** While UNFPA served as the administrative agent, the AAP system was co-developed and maintained through active engagement with key clusters and working groups (particularly the AAP Working Group, PSEA Network and the RMU) - ensuring aligned referral pathways and system-wide accountability.

**Ongoing consultation of affected communities:** Building an AAP system requires a step-by-step, inclusive approach in which communities are consulted at every stage. Their feedback informs the initial design and continues to shape the system throughout implementation.

## Challenges

**Slow uptake by some stakeholders:** Securing buy-in from key stakeholders, including some of the Humanitarian Clusters took time, with some resistance to shifting from vertical/less integrated approaches to a system-model for AAP. However, investing in inclusive engagement early on was critical for long-term success.

**Scaling case management:** The rapid increase in case-load made manual case management unsustainable. To address this, UNFPA, with CERF funding, procured adapted technology for a data platform and referral / ticket system, to streamline case management and referrals. This might also facilitate the expansion of the system to other areas of Syria.

**Complementarity across channels:** The combination of a centralized hotline (SafeLine), in-person outreach (face-to-face) and community networks (locally-led community of practice) enabled more inclusive access to feedback mechanisms and stronger validation of needs and preferences.



## Promising practices

**System-based versus project-based models:** Transitioning from a project-based approach with siloed standalone community engagement channels through respective UN agencies and NGOs, to a coordinated system-based model ensures long-term viability of the AAP system, ensuring that communities are regularly consulted and their views are integrated in decision-making processes. As the AAP system is embedded within the existing humanitarian architecture, it allows for scalability, adaptation and continued engagement.

**Access to secure funding:** Access to CERF funding was instrumental in scaling up and maintaining the system. However, sustaining collective AAP efforts remains a challenge and requires long-term and predictable financing embedded within relevant programming frameworks and funding opportunities.

**Step-by-step rollout strategy:** Engaging communities at each stage and adaptation based on geographic and cultural context was essential to ensuring SafeLine's relevance and credibility. Lessons from northern Syria will inform future expansion, while national consultations helped tailor approaches to diverse operating environments.

**Rumour tracker as a real-time tool:** By tracking emerging trends and concerns in real time through the Rumour Tracker, the system enables the humanitarian community to identify timely rumours and respond proactively, address misinformation, and mitigate potential risks or social tensions before they escalate into larger challenges.



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