

RECONNECTING HOPE: TSF ON THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION FOR PEOPLE IN CRISES

A CLOSER LOOK



A building standing in the middle of rubble, in Kahramanmaraş, one of the areas where networks were impacted the most. ©Photo: Télécoms Sans Frontières

When the 7.8 and 7.7 magnitude earthquakes hit southern Turkey and North Syria on 6 February, we at Telecoms Without Borders (TSF) were immediately on high alert. Natural disasters can destroy communication infrastructure, impact electricity which affects networks, and saturate networks when affected people try to reach their loved ones. The earthquake was the deadliest worldwide since the 2010 Haiti earthquake, with more than 50,300 casualties in Turkey and Syria ([UNICEF, 2023](#)).

After 25 years of responding to these kinds of crises, our team of highly-trained ICT specialists was ready to respond and be deployed quickly to Turkey in the early hours of 7 February. The team headed to Hatay and Kahramanmaraş, two of the areas most affected by the earthquakes in Turkey, to provide connectivity and support the coordination of humanitarian organisations' relief efforts. In Syria, the earthquake worsened an already dire situation. With the country at war for 12 years, the economy, infrastructure and health system struggled to cope with the disaster.



The streets of Kahramanmaraş. ©Photo: Télécoms Sans Frontières

“Given the opportunity to hear their loved ones’ voices in real-time after days of nerve-wracking waiting and uncertainty, people did not hesitate to queue for kilometres. The importance of reconnecting communication, reconnecting people after a crisis, was impossible to ignore.”

TSF has been supporting civilians affected by the war in Syria for 11 years. In the medical facilities of the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM), reliable connectivity provided by TSF supports daily activities from teleconsultations to logistics and coordination. When the earthquake struck, the White Helmets organisation also needed emergency communications to connect their headquarters and mobile dispatchers, who could, in turn, send ambulances to those in need. TSF, therefore, provided mobile terminals and also extended its support to three new UOSSM medical facilities.

As well as supporting NGOs in the relief efforts and their coordination, the original driving force of TSF is to help people reconnect with their loved ones.

While working as volunteers in several humanitarian missions, the founders of the future TSF kept bringing home phone numbers and messages to be sent. They thought that rather than collecting messages, they could bring a phone, connected by satellite, directly in the field. Given the opportunity to hear their loved ones’ voices in real-time after days of nerve-wracking waiting and uncertainty, people did not hesitate to queue for kilometres. The importance of reconnecting communication, reconnecting people after a crisis, was impossible to ignore.

Telecommunications have evolved in 25 years, and so has TSF. The Internet has become an important part of the way everyone communicates and shares information, and we take this into account in our work with people affected by crises. We focus on 3 main points: connectivity, access to reliable information, and digital inclusion.

In Ukraine, millions of people were forced to leave their home, and many are sheltered in temporary centres where they need connectivity to keep contact with their loved ones and sometimes continue to work remotely. One of TSF’s objectives in Ukraine is to ensure that these shelters have available connectivity, in partnership with the managing Ukrainian organisations.



Marta Moreton, ICT specialist and Head of Mission, on her way to Gaziantep. ©Photo: Télécoms Sans Frontières

In 2022, 100 million people were displaced worldwide ([UNHCR, 2022](#)). Displaced people often lack reliable information about their options, so TSF centralises trustworthy and reliable information from a network of humanitarian bodies. Information is displayed in welcome centres with a focus on refugees’ rights, administrative procedures, mental health, and educational content for children.

Lack of access to technology or lack of digital literacy can cause inequality in access to information, education, and resources. There were 2.7 billion people offline in 2022 ([ITU, 2022](#)), and even though mobile services prices are lower, they’re still too high for many. In Madagascar, we are working to bridge the digital divide by introducing computer literacy to young people, some of whom have never used a computer before.

Communication is essential in our lives. It is even more so in humanitarian crisis situations. For organisations, connectivity facilitates coordination, both for immediate relief operations and for long-term projects. For people affected by crises, access to communication and information is a way to regain hope after hearing from loved ones and to make informed choices.

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