

Information Management Capacity Needs in Syria

Findings from a Multi-Partner Assessment - January 2026



1- INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

1.1 HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

Recent political developments in late 2024 have contributed to a rapidly evolving humanitarian operating environment in Syria. These changes have coincided with efforts to reconfigure coordination arrangements and strengthen in-country leadership, while humanitarian needs remain severe, with an estimated 16.5 million people in need for assistance. The operational landscape continues to be characterized by access constraints, security risks, and significant regional disparities in coverage.

1.2 PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

A consortium composed of iMAP Inc., CartONG, MapAction and Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team (HOT) has initiated a multi-partner approach to strengthen the Syrian humanitarian data ecosystem. This initiative is implemented under the Humanitarian-to-Humanitarian (H2H) framework and is designed as an enabling service to the broader humanitarian system. It does not replace existing coordination, information management, or assessment structures, but rather strengthens the ability of local and national actors to collect, manage and utilize ethical and interoperable data.

The project operates Key operational pillars include:

- **Capacity Building:** Strengthening context- appropriate skills in low-tech, open-source, OpenStreetMap and offline-capable tools (e.g., Kobo Toolbox, Excel, Power BI).
- **Information Management (IM) Helpdesk:** Establishing a dedicated support service to provide tailored IM products, such as maps, dashboards, and automated data pipelines.
- **Data Interoperability:** Consolidating datasets into a standardized system using P-codes, HXL tagging, and Common Operational Datasets (CODs) to ensure data can be aggregated across clusters.
- **Geographic Focus:** While maintaining a national approach, the project places a reinforced intervention on the Aleppo governorate, identifying it as a vital but under-resourced humanitarian hub.



A total of 82 organizations participated in the assessment, including national and international NGOs operating across 14 governorates, with the highest concentration in Aleppo (65 organizations) and Idlib (63), comprising 50 national NGOs and 17 international NGOs.

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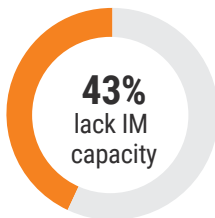
1.3 THEORY OF CHANGE

The intervention is built on the principle that if Syrian CSOs are equipped with the technical capacity and governance frameworks to generate ethical, timely data, they will transition from passive data consumers to active evidence providers. By embedding these capacities within inclusive coordination mechanisms, the project ensures that local insights directly shape humanitarian priorities and resource allocation.



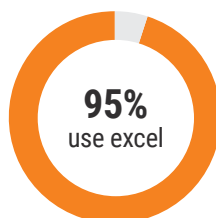
1.4 KEY FIGURES

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT STAFFING CAPACITY



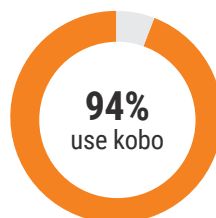
Nearly half of assessed organizations lack dedicated IM or GIS staff

RELIANCE ON SPREADSHEET-BASED SYSTEMS



Excel remains the primary data management tool for 95% of organisations

USE OF MOBILE DATA COLLECTION TOOLS



Kobo Toolbox is used for data collection by 94% of organisations

CAPACITY NEEDS IN DATA VISUALISATION



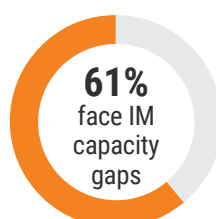
While 63% of organisations use Power BI, many indicated a need for additional technical training to effectively manage and analyse large datasets

USE OF MANUAL DATA SHARING MECHANISMS



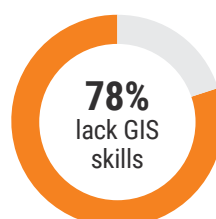
Most organisations (71%) rely on email and spreadsheet-based templates for data sharing, reflecting a preference for manual processes over centralized platforms

CHALLENGES IN INFORMATION MANAGEMENT CAPACITY



61% of assessed organisations reported challenges related to staff capacity and training, with the most cited barriers being limited access to training and the absence of dedicated IM staff

GIS CAPACITY GAPS



78% of assessed organisations reported limited access to staff with GIS skills as a key technical constraint, contributing to gaps in spatial analysis across areas such as Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor

DATA RESPONSIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS



65% of assessed organisations reported interest in further data responsibility training, while 35% identified challenges related to the collection of sensitive data without fully established protocols

Participating organisations reported operating across a wide range of humanitarian sectors, including protection, food security and livelihoods, early recovery, GBV, education, WASH, health, shelter/NFI, nutrition, mine action, and other thematic areas, reflecting the multi-sectoral scope of the response. Across these sectors, organisations expressed strong demand for information management support services as helpdesk, particularly for the production of maps, development of interactive dashboards, and analytical reporting. Respondents also highlighted the need for standardized data packages, such as up-to-date population figures and sub-district-level administrative boundaries (P-codes), to improve consistency, interoperability, and targeting across interventions.

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2- INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

Following the political transition in December 2024, Syria's humanitarian response is undergoing a reform aimed at empowering local civil society organisations (CSOs). This assessment identifies a significant asymmetry in the data ecosystem, where local actors possess contextual expertise but lack the technical infrastructure and standardized methodologies required for high-level strategic influence. The findings highlight a critical need for localized IM systems, advanced technical training (GIS, Power BI), and unified data-sharing protocols to move CSOs from "passive data consumers to active evidence providers".

2.1 CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Syria faces a fragile transition with approximately 16 million people requiring assistance. The fall of the previous regime has shifted coordination hubs from neighboring countries (Türkiye, Jordan, Lebanon) to inside Syria, specifically Damascus. This centralization creates both opportunities for coherence and risks related to perceptions of neutrality, access and principled humanitarian action. Local NGO alliances (SNA, SNL, NES Forum) remain vital for ground access but struggle with interoperability and technical data standards.

2.2 METHODOLOGY

This assessment employed a mixed-methods approach:

- **Quantitative:** A survey of **82 organizations**, primarily National NGOs (50) and International NGOs (17), operating largely in Aleppo and Idlib.
- **Qualitative:** Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with MEAL and IM officers from organisations including IYD, Amal, Molham Team, WHH, and HRO.

3- KEY FINDINGS

3.1 THE "EXCEL CEILING" AND TECHNICAL TOOLING

While the assessment data shows that **Excel (78 organisations)** and **Kobo Toolbox (77 organisations)** are the near-universal standards for data management and collection, qualitative interviews reveal these tools are reaching a breaking point.

- **Performance Bottlenecks:** Large-scale programs, particularly in the **Protection sector**, report that the volume of beneficiary data has exceeded Excel's processing capacity, leading to significant performance issues (otherwise known as the 'Excel ceiling').
- **The Sustainability Gap:** Organisations that attempted to move beyond Excel often faced "maintenance cliffs." For instance, one organization developed an in-house ERP system that became non-functional once the lead programmer departed, highlighting the risk of custom-built solutions without institutionalized support.
- **Advanced Needs:** There is an urgent, identified demand for "level-based" training in **Power Query, SQL, and automated data pipelines** to handle large datasets more efficiently than traditional spreadsheets.



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3.2 HUMAN CAPITAL AND THE "DAILY WORKER" CYCLE

A critical contradiction exists between the quantity of staff and the quality of data operations. While 35 organisations report having **5+ dedicated IM/MEAL staff**, the KIIs reveal a fragile staffing model.

- **High Turnover:** Organizations rely heavily on **daily workers** for field data collection (short-term, task-based field staff). This results in constant staff turnover, which informants cited as a primary bottleneck that frustrates data workflows and leads to a loss of institutional memory.
- **Technical Skill Gaps:** The quantitative data identifies a **"lack of staff skills" (42 organisations)** as a top barrier. KIIs elaborate that this isn't just about software; there is a foundational struggle with **survey design and questionnaire development**, which impacts data quality from the start.
- **The Training Vacuum:** Informants noted that existing data-related capacity building is "scarce and not customized," often failing to cover the entire data cycle from collection to decision-making.

3.3 GEOGRAPHIC AND THEMATIC DATA SCARCITY

The assessment highlights significant spatial data gaps that hinder equitable aid delivery.

- **Governorate-Specific Gaps:** While Aleppo is a major hub of operation (65 organisations), it also has the most acute needs for **spatial data improvement**. Furthermore, informants highlighted **Lattakia** as an area of extreme scarcity where a lack of field experience and access constraints prevent reliable data collection.
- **Underrepresented Groups:** Data remains "scarce or inaccessible" for populations living outside of formal camps, such as **IDPs in private or unfinished buildings** and **returnees**, due to rapid movement and assessment fatigue.
- **Real-time Lag:** Although UN and OCHA data are considered a reliable baseline, they often **lag behind rapid population movements**. One informant noted that in rapid-onset emergencies like the post-earthquake response, organisations must triangulate rapid assessments with satellite imagery because formal reports cannot keep pace.

3.4 DATA RESPONSIBILITY, SECURITY, AND "ACCEPTABLE DUPLICATION"

Data protection is a high priority, with **71 organisations** expressing interest in further training, but practical implementation faces unique Syrian challenges.

- **Security Risks:** Organizations expressed concerns regarding potential misuse or unintended disclosure of sensitive data by **authorities or armed actors**, which makes strict data responsibility essential for "Do No Harm" compliance.
- **Anonymization vs. Coordination:** Some organizations deliberately practice "data siloing" or accept **data duplication** as a necessary byproduct of protecting beneficiary identities through strict anonymization.
- **Incident Learning:** Organisations reported real-world breaches, including **phishing hacks** and misunderstandings regarding informed consent (e.g., unauthorized photography during cash distributions), leading to the development of more robust internal policies.

3.5 COORDINATION FRICTION AND "DOUBLE WORK"

Coordination is hindered by administrative and technical fragmentation.

- **Conflicting Requirements:** A major source of frustration is the **contradiction between donor and cluster requirements**, which forces organisations to perform "double work" by filling out different forms for the same data. 14 organisations explicitly flagged "duplicate reporting requirements" as a challenge.
- **Lack of Standardization:** Data sharing is complicated by the use of **different data collection tools** that are not considered when clusters request data, making interoperability difficult.
- **Fragmentation of Sources:** Informants described the current ecosystem as "fragmented" and called for a unified **IM/MEAL working group** to provide a single, reliable source of truth.

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These findings underscore the value of light, service-oriented H2H support that reduces transaction costs for local actors without introducing additional reporting layers.

3.6 GIS AND MAPPING: THE UNTAPPED RESOURCE

Despite the high demand for maps (62 organisations requested helpdesk support for this), GIS remains underutilized.

- **Minimal Analytical Use:** Currently, mapping is used "minimally" and primarily for **descriptive purposes** in reports rather than as an analytical driver for project implementation or strategic planning.
- **Barriers to Entry:** The primary blockers are a **lack of staff with GIS skills (64 organisations)** and the **high cost of software licenses (49 organisations)**. This supports the project's proposal to focus on low-cost, open-source tools like QGIS and OpenStreetMap.

3.7 CONTRADICTION SUMMARY FOR STAKEHOLDERS

The assessment identifies key contradictions that limit the effective use of data across the humanitarian response, particularly in relation to staffing models, the timeliness of commonly used datasets, and the operational application of data responsibility policies.

Key Contradictions Identified:

- **Staffing Levels:** The data suggests many organizations have "dedicated staff," but KIIs clarify these are often high-turnover daily workers, not technical experts.
- **Data Reliability and Timeliness:** UN/OCHA data is highly used but frequently cited by local actors as being too slow for the current "fragile transition" phase in Syria.
- **Policy versus Practice:** While many claim to have Data Protection policies, the KIIs reveal that field-level staff often lack the training to implement these policies during raw data collection.

4- CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The assessment confirms the project's logic: technical training alone is insufficient without institutionalized mentorship and localized systems.

- **Establish a Dedicated IM Helpdesk:** To address the "massive volume" of data and tool performance issues, a helpdesk should provide surge support for complex analysis (SQL, Power Query).
- **Localized GIS Training:** Focus training on OpenStreetMap, QGIS and Power BI mapping, specifically targeting the **Aleppo governorate**, which is a high-priority yet under-resourced hub.
- **Standardize Data Collection:** Advocate for standardized tools and templates to reduce the "double work" caused by conflicting donor and cluster requirements.
- **Sustainable Staffing Models:** Address the "daily worker" turnover by providing resources for dedicated long-term IM roles within local CSOs.

While the project addresses the majority of gaps identified in the needs assessment, longer-term, sustainable support remains essential, particularly to enable durable staffing models that reduce turnover and ensure continuity of IM capacity within local CSOs.

All proposed interventions are intended as time-bound, demand-driven services under H2H that strengthen, rather than substitute, existing coordination mechanisms. Sustainability will be pursued through skills transfer, documentation, and progressive handover to local and national actors, in line with localisation commitments and humanitarian best practice.

