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KOMELEYA BERİ HER TİŞTİ ZAROK
ÖNCE ÇOCUKLAR DERNEĞİ



CHILDREN FIRST ASSOCIATION



Sivil Toplum Geliştirme Merkezi

A Qualitative Study on Rights-Based NGO Experiences in the Post-Disaster Context: The Cases of Diyarbakır and Adıyaman



Diyarbakır

STGM REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The Kahramanmaraş centered earthquakes that occurred on 6 February 2023 causes widespread destruction in 11 provinces in southeastern Turkey. Adıyaman province was one of the region's most severely affected by this disaster in the city, 5,953 buildings were completely reduced to rubble, and 8,561 people lost their lives. Diyarbakır Province was also affected by earthquake; 411 citizens lost their lives in seven buildings that collapsed in the city center. Approximately a year and a half later, on June 2024, a major fire that broke out in the rural are of Diyarbakır's Çınar district spread over a wide area due to strong winds, affecting Diyarbakır and the neighboring province of Mardin, and causing the deaths of 15 people and injuries to 72 others.

In large-scale disasters such as these, civil society organizations play vital roles alongside state institutions. In particular, NGO's that adopt a rights-based approach make significant contributions in the post-disaster period by addressing the needs of needs of the most vulnerable groups and providing humanitarian aid, psychosocial support, legal counselling, and advocacy. This report aims to examine in depth the field experiences of right-based NGO's in Diyarbakır & Adıyaman in the aftermath of the 2023 earthquakes. The aim is offering a comprehensive analysis of the NGO's disaster preparedness level, intervention practices, challenges they had, embodying the right-based approaches, collaboration dynamics between public and other NGO's, capacity needs and policy pools. This analysis aims to contribute more effective, overreaching and right-based intervention strategies for future disaster conditions.

Methodology: This study was designed as qualitative research aiming to understand the experiences, perceptions, and capacities of civil society organizations operating in the provinces of Diyarbakır and Adıyaman regarding disaster risk management processes. Rather than relying on quantitative measurement, the research focused on meaning-making through participants own narratives, using a semi-structured approach. Therefore, the study was conducted based on a phenomenological approach; participants subjective experiences were accessed through in-depth interviews.

Research Field and Participants: The research encompassed civil society organizations in the provinces of Diyarbakır and Adıyaman that were affected by the earthquakes. Within the scope of the study, interviews were conducted with a total of 47 representatives from 30 different NGO's operating in various fields, including women's rights, children's rights, disability rights, refugee rights, human rights, health, education, environment, and humanitarian aid. The participants consisted of managers, project coordinators, and field workers.

Data Collection: The interview questions covered themes such as NGO's pre-disaster preparedness, their interventions during and after the disaster, the challenges they encountered, the ways in which their rights-based approaches were implemented, their cooperation with other institutions, capacity needs, and local needs. The interviews lasted an average of 45-60 minutes; informed consent was obtained from all participants, and in line with principles of confidentiality and anonymity, all data were coded, and subsequently transcribed.

Data Analysis: The data obtained were examined using the thematic analysis method. The transcribed interview texts were carefully read, and main themes and sub-themes were identified. Recurring motifs, contradictory of supporting statements, and key concepts were coded. These codes were subsequently grouped under nine main categories: Pre-Disaster Preparedness, Disaster Response Process, Challenges Encountered, Rights-Based Approach, Inter-Institutional Cooperation, Capacity and Needs, and Policy Recommendations. The sections of the report were structured according to this thematic classification.

Ethical Principles: Ethical principles were adhered to throughout the research process. Participants identity information was kept confidential, and their names and affiliated organizations were not stated directly (in some cases, organization names were presented in the form of general categories or abbreviations). Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their voluntary participation was ensured, and their consent was obtained. It was assured that the data obtained would be used solely for scientific purposes. This methodology aims to provide an in-depth perspective on NGO's disaster experiences, offering rich and contextual information beyond what quantitative research can capture.

Note: : About Institution Coding

The interviews included in this report were conducted with a total of 30 different organizations operating in the provinces of Adıyaman and Diyarbakır. In order to protect the institutional identities of the organizations interviewed and the privacy of their representatives, all information obtained during the interviews was anonymized. Within this framework, the organizations were coded in the report as K-1, K-2, ..., K-30. These codes were used solely to ensure analytical coherence and to facilitate the reader's ability to follow evaluations made across different organizations. The coding was carried out according to the order of the interviews and does not directly reflect the type or identity of the organizations.

PRE-DISASTER PREPERATION

An examination of the disaster preparedness levels of NGO's in Diyarbakır and Adıyaman prior to the 2023 earthquakes indicates that their institutional capacities were generally limited and inadequate. Many NGO's stated that they had not carried out any planning or projects specifically focused on disasters.

Limited Institutional Disaster Planning: A significant portion of the interviewed NGO's did not have a specific 'disaster preparedness plan' or 'disaster risk reduction plan' prior to the earthquake. For example, a representative of a women's association stated, "We had no such preparation before the disaster. I mean, we were working as a women's organization. This was completely outside our field," indicating that their institutional focus differed from disaster-related issues and that they had not undertaken any prior work in this area. Similarly, many trade unions and professional organizations expressed that their routine activities did not include disaster preparedness. This situation can be interpreted as a reflection of the project-based and thematic working tendency that is widespread among NGO's in Turkey.

Indirect Impact of Previous Crisis Experiences: Some NGO's noted that although they were not directly focused on disaster-related work, their past experiences with crises (such as periods of conflict or refugee crises) contributed to their capacity to respond quickly in the post-disaster period. A representative of an education union in Diyarbakır stated, "When conflicts and the Sur events occurred in Diyarbakır, we were constantly in the field. We carried out psychosocial support activities for children there. We had a kind of experience of organizing quickly that came from that process," emphasizing that their crisis management experience facilitated their adaptation to disaster response. Such experiences enhanced NGO's flexibility, adaptability, and rapid mobilization skills.

NGO's with Sytematic Institutional Experience: Some NGO's specialized in humanitarian aid and disaster response at the national or international level stated during our interviews that they already possessed a certain degree of institutional experience prior to the earthquake. For example, organization K-29, which was established after the 1999 Marmara Earthquake and operates in Adiyaman, noted that post-disaster educational activities had become an institutional reflex. A representative of K-29 stated, "We have firefly trucks, mobile education units. Since 1999, we have been able to move quickly to provide education after disasters. This was not a special preparation for this earthquake, but rather part of our institutional culture." Similarly, organizations such as K-25, which were established for humanitarian aid purposes, reported that they were able to rapidly adapt the logistical, camp management, and emergency relief experience they had gained through refugee work to the post-earthquake context. A representative of K-25 said, "We were in the field from hour zero after the earthquake. Drawing on years of experience, we immediately translated our refugee camp experience into shelter, water, hygiene, sanitation, and food assistance," indicating that they did not experience difficulties in institutional adaptation.

Limited Disaster Risk Trainings and Collaborations: : Overall, disaster risk reduction trainings or collaborations focused on emergency planning prior to the earthquake were limited among NGO's. A specialist working in the field of children's rights in Diyarbakır confirmed this gap by stating, "We did not have any projects carried out before the disaster. I can say this very clearly." However, some regional networks and protocols had begun to emerge. Initiatives such as the Amed Children's Rights Network in Diyarbakır had created a platform for inter-institutional communication on disaster preparedness for children. In addition, a professional organization (K-11) had started to sign protocols with local governments envisaging cooperation in the event of disasters. In Adiyaman, a representative of a foundation working in the field of girls' education stated that just before the earthquakes they had initiated efforts to establish a research institute and conduct scenario studies to anticipate potential disaster processes.

In summary, prior to the 2023 earthquakes, the vast majority of rights-based NGO's in Diyarbakır and Adiyaman did not have systematic, disaster-focused institutional preparedness. Nevertheless, past crisis experiences, limited regional networks, and the institutional experience of some pioneering organizations helped generate a certain level of capacity during the initial phase of the disaster. This situation offers important lessons for NGOs and stakeholders regarding preparedness for future disasters.

INTERVENTION PROCESS

Immediately after the 6 February 2023 earthquakes, rights-based NGO's in Diyarbakır and Adıyaman quickly mobilized and began emergency response efforts on the ground. During this process, NGOs both carried out activities in line with their areas of expertise and acted in cooperation with other NGOs and, at times, public institutions.

Emergency Response and Rapid Organization: From the very first hours after the earthquake, specially in Diyarbakır, civil society organizations came together to establish a joint crisis desk. Formed under the name "Diyarbakır Urban Protection and Solidarity Platform," this platform brought many NGO's together under a single umbrella. The professional organization K-7, which operates in the field of health in Diyarbakır, rapidly joined the platform on the night of the earthquake.

K-7 coordinated its members to undertake tasks such as organizing hospital assignments, evacuating the injured, transporting patients, identifying victims, and reaching families. In this way, teams were formed within hospitals to identify physical, psychological, and social needs; based on needs lists, campaigns were organized and assistance such as medical supplies, hygiene kits, and care packages for children were distributed rapidly. A representative of K-7 stated, "From the very first day, we prepared and distributed packages tailored to people's needs. We tried to implement a model of aid that respects human dignity, especially through hygiene materials for women and special support packages for children," emphasizing the principles of non-discrimination and respect for human dignity in humanitarian assistance.

Diversified Support Targeting Specific Groups: Rights-based NGO's developed tailored forms of assistance in line with their areas of expertise and target groups.

Humanitarian Aid–Focused Foundations: Organizations working in the field of humanitarian aid, such as K-25, stated that they focused on meeting basic living needs. A representative of K-25 noted that after the earthquake they “began providing basic humanitarian aid services from hour zero,” established a container settlement in Hatay, carried out water, hygiene, and sanitation (WASH) activities, and provided hot meals over an extended period. In the following weeks, logistical support such as the distribution of tents/containers and the provision of non-food items continued, while at the same time psychosocial support programs aimed at empowering women and girls were initiated.

Child-Focused NGO's: NGO's working in the field of children's rights carried out activities such as creating child-friendly safe spaces and offering mobile play and educational activities. For example, K-20, which provides art-based therapy for children in Adiyaman, organized workshops in container settlements to deliver psychosocial support for children. Similarly, K-4, which operates in the field of child-focused work in Diyarbakır, established child-friendly spaces in tent settlements and implemented play therapy activities.

Women's Rights Organizations: These organizations focused on the hygiene, safety, and protection from violence needs of women affected by the disaster. Women's organizations worked particularly on ensuring access to personal hygiene materials for women, creating safe shelter spaces, and conducting awareness-raising activities against the risk of violence. Platforms involving women's organizations in Diyarbakır provided active coordination in this area.

Legal and Human Rights NGO's: These organizations assumed the role of monitoring rights violations and providing legal support. Representatives of K-12 stated that after an initial general emergency response in the first days, "women's associations worked with women, and children's associations worked with children," indicating that specialized groups were directed toward fieldwork. K-12 provided legal counseling without discrimination to disaster-affected individuals they were able to reach through their own means, and referred those in need of psychosocial support to relevant specialist NGO's.

LGBTI+-Focused Initiatives: Immediately after the earthquake, K-21—a network established by LGBTI+ volunteers—collected the needs of LGBTI+ individuals affected by the disaster through online forms. During the first two weeks, they coordinated remotely to deliver various forms of support ranging from hormone medications to shelter. Subsequently, they deployed teams to the region and established direct contact, particularly with LGBTI+ earthquake survivors who had been forced to return to family homes and were facing risks of discrimination. A K-21 activist stated, "While everyone is living through the disaster, LGBTI+ people experience it more severely. Their specific needs and security risks could not be ignored," drawing attention to the unique challenges faced by this group.

Inter-NGO Solidarity and Coordination: One of the key elements of the intervention process was strong solidarity and coordination among NGO's. Many organizations acted collectively within local platforms, networks, and coordination units. In Adiyaman, K-30 and other democratic mass organizations established an "earthquake coordination unit" under the leadership of locally organized umbrella organizations, through which volunteers were directed and aid activities were carried out in a planned manner. In Diyarbakır, the Child-Focused Crisis Network brought together nearly 40 organizations and volunteers from different provinces, enabling the establishment of child-friendly spaces. Women's organizations shared information and resources under a women's platform in Diyarbakır. As one representative of a women's association stated, "Even though everyone had their own limitations, we tried to meet the basic needs of women and children by working together," reflecting a collective effort.

In addition, local initiatives sought to communicate with official institutions. For example, the platform of health professionals contacted the governor's office and hospital administrations to match patient information identified in the field with official hospital records. In some cases, NGO's intervened rapidly in areas where public services could not reach, effectively "filling the gap." Overall, the picture shows that civil society demonstrated a rapid, flexible, and needs-based response during the initial shock phase of the disaster.

In conclusion, rights-based NGO's in Diyarbakır and Adiyaman carried out a multifaceted and swift intervention process following the 2023 earthquakes. During this process, they sought to address the needs of vulnerable groups by focusing on their respective areas of expertise, while also enhancing their intervention capacities through strong networks of solidarity within civil society.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

During civil society interventions following the 2023 earthquakes, NGOs encountered various structural and operational obstacles. These challenges significantly affected the effective delivery of aid and the continuity of rights-based work.

The main challenges are as follows:

Coordination Gaps: It was reported that, especially during the first days of the disaster, adequate coordination could not be established between public institutions and NGOs, nor even among NGO's themselves. This situation hindered the efficient distribution of aid and led to duplicate efforts in some areas while needs were overlooked in others. A representative of K-25 emphasized the inadequacy of joint planning in a large-scale disaster by stating, "We had difficulty establishing coordination with public institutions. And with other civil society organizations as well... coordination was very weak." A local NGO representative in Adiyaman noted that political incompatibility between the central government and local authorities resulted in a lack of coordination on the ground, stating that "even the question of who would deliver aid ended up victimizing disaster survivors." This mismatch led to disruptions in information flow and caused resources to accumulate in some areas while others were neglected. As a result, the absence of an effective coordination mechanism among central authorities, local governments, and NGO's became a factor that at times turned the process into an "ordeal" for survivors.

Resource and Logistical Constraints: The extraordinary scale of the earthquake led to shortages of financial resources, materials, and human resources across nearly all NGO's. Many representatives stated that their existing capacities were insufficient to meet the wide-ranging needs created by the disaster. For instance, a representative of K-12 pointed to financial limitations by saying, "We are experiencing difficulties in terms of financial resources. A large amount of donations was collected, but the portion that reached us was very limited." During the first weeks, serious difficulties were experienced in securing logistical support (such as vehicles, storage space, and fuel); finding suitable locations for storing, sorting, and distributing aid took considerable time. K-30, which was active in Adiyaman, reported a lack of warehouse space or suitable areas to properly sort and distribute incoming relief materials. A children's organization in Diyarbakır stated, "Aid was arriving in a very disorganized manner, and unverified information was circulating. This caused chaos in the field," highlighting how uncoordinated aid flows at times led to disorder. Especially in the early days, some areas experienced an oversupply of water and food, while others faced severe shortages in shelter and heating. NGO workers noted the absence of a centralized logistical planning mechanism that could have prevented such imbalances.

Problems in Public-NGO Relations: Many rights-based organizations reported that public authorities displayed a distant or exclusionary attitude toward civil society. A representative of K-11, an organization based in Diyarbakır, criticized this situation by stating, "The state's refusal to cooperate and its attempts to keep us away from the field were a major problem. In particular, no needs of disadvantaged groups were addressed." It was emphasized that trust issues arose especially between municipalities under trustee (kayyum) administration and independent NGOs, and that public authorities were reluctant to include civil initiatives in the process. This situation led to the complete neglect of groups vulnerable to discrimination, such as refugees and Roma children. In some areas, efforts by law enforcement to control aid distribution or bureaucratic obstacles restricted the flexible operational capacity of civil society.

As one NGO representative noted, “The conflict between the government and local administrations created a lack of coordination... We, as NGO’s, tried to fill the gap,” indicating that institutional discord within the public sector was also reflected in civil society work. Altogether, these issues demonstrate the barriers faced by organizations working from a rights-based perspective in participating in public decision-making processes.

Psychosocial and Humanitarian Strain: The difficulties of fieldwork were felt not only at the institutional level but also at the individual level due to the magnitude of the human tragedy. NGO volunteers and staff, working in an environment of intense trauma, began to experience burnout, while continuous aftershocks and harsh living conditions affected operational efficiency. For example, an experienced cultural center director working in the field described the devastation they encountered in Pazarcık as follows: “It was an extremely exhausting process on a human level. We all experienced trauma.” In addition, the fear among some survivors that “aid might not come again” led to panic-driven behaviors in the disaster area, including attempts to stockpile incoming aid and tensions during distribution. NGO workers at times struggled to manage these issues of collective psychology and encountered instances of violence. Thus, the unique psychosocial challenges of the disaster environment pushed the resilience of response teams to their limits. In summary, rights-based NGO’s in Diyarbakır and Adıyaman were compelled to confront multifaceted challenges after the earthquake, including resource shortages, inadequate coordination, public-sector barriers, and harsh working conditions. Despite the extensive efforts of civil society, these obstacles made it difficult for aid and rights-based services to reach all those in need in an equal and timely manner.

RIGHTS BASED APPROACH

In disaster response, rights-based NGO's sought to be guided by principles grounded in human rights. The interviews indicate that many organizations took care to frame aid activities not as acts of charity, but as entitlements and rights of disaster-affected individuals.

Anti-Discrimination and Human Dignity: A representative of K-12 emphasized that the entire intervention process was conducted with an anti-discriminatory and dignity-centered approach, stating, "At the core of our work were anti-discrimination and respect for human dignity. We carried out the process within the limits of our resources by taking everyone's needs into account. We did not discriminate against anyone." This understanding entails upholding the principle of equality by ensuring that no group—based on ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, refugee status, or similar factors—is prioritized or neglected in the distribution of aid or the provision of services. Accordingly, while special programs were developed for vulnerable groups such as women, children, persons with disabilities, and refugees, these were framed not as "privileges" but as measures to ensure equal access to rights. For example, a representative of K-29 stated that their post-disaster education activities were planned "so that children's right to education would not be interrupted," noting that this approach aligned with the right to education enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Similarly, a representative of K-7 emphasized that they acted with the awareness that access to health services is a matter of the right to life.

Participation and Accountability: Among the concrete manifestations of the rights-based approach, the principles of participation and accountability stand out. Many NGO's sought to ensure the participation of disaster affected individuals in decision-making processes. For example, an association working in the field of women's rights organized workshops and meetings in tent settlements that included women themselves in order to develop solutions to the problems they raised. One NGO representative explained that needs identified in the field were prioritized together with survivors, stating "We included everyone in the decision-making processes.. women, spouses, and children were all able to express themselves. We thought together about what we need and how to address it," demonstrating the implementation of a participatory intervention. Through this approach, particular care was taken to avoid discrimination when determining the content and targets of distributed aid kits. As one statement put it, "When distributing from the needs depot, we did not discriminate at all... since both refugees and local residents of Adiyaman were present, ensuring that there was no discrimination among women, children, and the elderly was the foremost principle we upheld." In addition, NGO's operated in accordance with the principle of accountability by maintaining transparency; aid lists, expenditure reports, and activity outcomes were shared both with platform members and with the public.

Gender Equality and Child Welfare: Rights-based principles such as gender equality and child protection were kept at the center of the intervention as much as possible. Field data indicate that the knowledge and experience of NGO staff in these areas had a positive impact on the process. In the K-12 interview, the statement “Since we are all experts in these areas, we carried out the proves within this framework” reflects how sensitivity to gender equality and children’s rights was naturally integrated into working principles. Accordingly, practices such as preparing hygiene kits tailored to women’s specific needs and observing child safety standards in the design of child-friendly spaces were widespread. For instance, K-25 reported they they did not deploy any staff to the field without first providing orientation training, and that they sought to prevent mistakes related to child protection or gender issues by newly recruited personnel joining under urgent conditions. However, this was not equally easy for all organizations; some NGO’s observed that the influx of inexperienced volunteers disrupted orientation processes in the field and posed certain risks. Nevertheless, no serious cases were reported, and NGO’s attempted to uphold rights-based principles through internal control mechanisms, such as bans on photography, rules for safe spaces, and ethical codes emphasizing privacy and informed consent.

Barriers to a Rights-Based Approach: Barriers to implementing a rights-based approach were also articulated. Some participants noted that the distant attitude of central authorities toward civil society, in particular, constrained rights-based work. One NGO manager stated, “If we were reconciled with the state, all barriers would be removed... we are not estranged, they are excluding us,” arguing that the lack of public–NGO cooperation constituted the greatest obstacle to rights-oriented service provision. Likewise, administrative centralization prevented locally initiated actions from being implemented, leading to the “suspension” of rights-based approaches. For example, there were instances in which volunteer groups seeking to organize self-help activities in public parks were blocked by official authorities, or where aid activities that turned into displays of goodwill through photography were restricted by professionals working in the field. Such tensions stemmed from the efforts of rights-based NGO’s to uphold ethical and professional standards. A child rights advocate criticized the lack of “collective and shared reasoning,” emphasizing that uncontrolled aid initiatives during disasters can cause more harm than benefit to children.

In this context, rights-based NGO’s were sometimes misunderstood or faced backlash for opposing demeaning aid practices, attempting to prevent the photographing of everyone or the stockpiling of excessive materials. Nevertheless, despite all these challenges, NGOs endeavored not to compromise on an approach centered on human dignity, equality, and participation. In summary, rights-based NGO’s in Diyarbakır and Adıyaman sought to apply human rights principles meticulously in disaster response. Principles such as anti-discrimination, respect for dignity, participation, accountability, gender equality, and child protection were central to their activities. However, public-sector barriers and coordination gaps created significant challenges in fully realizing this approach.

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATIONS

During the disaster response, NGO's collaborations with local governments, state institutions, and one another took place at varying levels and through complex dynamics. Many participants stated that they had "worked with almost all institutions," indicating that they were in contact with a wide range of public and civil actors.

Strong Solidarity and Division of Labor Among NGOs: In particular, civil society organizations demonstrated notable examples of solidarity and division of labor among themselves. A representative of K-12 emphasized this strong cooperation within civil society by stating, "NGO's worked well; coordination and communication were good." Indeed, NGOs from various fields came together around joint platforms and benefited from one another's expertise. For example, in Diyarbakır, the women's rights center K-2 operated within the same networks as the child-focused organization K-4 and the health-focused organization K-7, jointly organizing activities for women and children in tent settlements. In Adıyaman, K-16 hosted child-focused associations such as K-20 at its center, organizing joint workshops over a two-month period. Likewise, K-16 signed protocols with humanitarian aid NGO's to conduct sessions aimed at women. The strength of these collaborations lay in each organization's awareness of its own limits while complementing one another's capacities. As K-16 noted, "On days when we could not hold activities, they ran workshops and provided support. Thanks to this solidarity, we were able to reach many people," highlighting how NGO solidarity ensured continuity of services. These collaborations enhanced NGO's capacity to respond to broad needs in a multidimensional crisis such as a disaster, even while they remained specialized within their respective fields.

Relations with Local Governments and AFAD: A complex picture emerged in relations with local governments and AFAD. In some cases, limited channels of cooperation were opened with local administrations. For example, in Adıyaman, NGO's participated in coordination meetings with the governor's office, conveying their demands regarding the establishment of tent settlements, waste collection, and water supply. A representative of K-17 in Adıyaman stated that immediately after the earthquake they applied to the governor's office to open a local support center and were able to quickly complete official permit procedures and begin field operations. In Diyarbakır, however, the fact that municipalities were under trustee (kayyum) administration prevented many NGOs from accessing formal cooperation channels. A representative of K-11 in Diyarbakır explained, "The local government was under a trustee, but coordination among NGO's was good. We tried to fill the gap among ourselves," indicating that they attempted to compensate for the disconnect at the municipal level through NGO solidarity.

Although direct references to relations with AFAD were limited in the interviews, there were implicit indications that AFAD's coordinating role remained weak and that a culture of joint work with NGO's was limited. Some international NGO's participated in coordination meetings organized by AFAD and UN OCHA; however, at the local level, it proved difficult for these meetings to translate into concrete collaboration. In certain cases, communication with the military and law enforcement was necessary; for example, local associations shared information with police units during debris removal and funeral procedures. Overall, however, public-NGO cooperation was carried out largely at an informal level or through personal relationships. The non-institutional nature of these relations clearly revealed the absence of a sustainable and structured mechanism for collaboration.

National and International Networks: National and international networks also became involved. Many local NGO's received support from nationwide professional organizations or federations. For example, teams sent to the region by structures such as KESK, the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), and the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB) were paired with local NGO's. International organizations (such as UNICEF and UNHCR) held meetings with civil society stakeholders to collect data and provided some financial support. However, during this process, local NGO's expressed concerns that international actors sometimes set priorities disconnected from realities on the ground. A child rights advocate noted that although the nationally established child crisis network was effective in the media, it "rendered some on-the-ground needs invisible"; for instance, while there was an excess of water in the field, public attention focused on news about child abductions. This situation highlights not only the importance of horizontal networks but also the challenges inherent in vertical (international–local) networks.

In summary, an intensive network of cooperation and solidarity emerged among NGO's in Diyarbakır and Adıyaman, through which information and resources were shared. As one K-12 official stated, "We coordinated with all civil society organizations and everyone in the field." While the strength of these collaborations lay in their flexibility and speed, their weaknesses included occasional duplication of efforts and difficulties in transitioning to long-term planning. Cooperation with public institutions sometimes progressed through the efforts of well-intentioned individuals, while in other cases it encountered structural barriers. In the face of a major crisis such as a disaster, the absence of multi-actor governance mechanisms was clearly felt. These experiences point to the need for more institutionalized and participatory collaboration platforms in the future.

CAPACITY AND NEEDS

Based on the findings obtained from our interviews, and on points shared by all participants, we aim to present a locally participatory framework to strengthen NGO's capacities and enable their more effective involvement in disaster management through a proposed model designed to facilitate effective interventions during disaster crises:

- 1. Participatory Disaster Councils (bringing together community members, NGOs, and representatives of professional chambers)
- 2. NGO–Public Protocol Inventory and Responsibility-Sharing Matrix
- 3. Neighborhood-Based Risk Mapping and the Establishment of a Volunteer Pool
- 4. Inventory of Mobile Response and Psychosocial Support Teams
- 5. Field Practices Based on Gender Equality and Child Protection
- 6. Transparency and Accountability Mechanisms (integrated with digital monitoring systems)
- 7. Annual Drill and Training Schedule

The majority of the NGOs interviewed agreed that, in light of the experiences gained after the 2023 earthquakes, disaster risk management and response capacities need to be further developed. In current situation assessments, the most frequently emphasized issue was the lack of financial sustainability.

Lack of Financial Sustainability: A representative of K-12 highlighted the insufficiency and depletion of financial resources in long-term post-disaster efforts by stating, “We are experiencing difficulties in terms of financial resources. In long-term work, financial resources tend to be exhausted.” Many local associations expressed that without financial support, it is not feasible to generate resources to respond to large-scale crises such as disasters. A representative of K-28 in Adiyaman, which works actively in the field of combating discrimination, emphasized their dependence on project-based funding in terms of both human resources and financing, stating, “Without an international fund related to disasters, this is not a sustainable situation for us,” underscoring the inadequacy of internal resources. This indicates that NGO’s were able to cover only short-term relief through their own budgets, while a significant funding gap emerged during the long-term rehabilitation and reconstruction phases.



Need for Training and Technical Capacity: There is a significant gap in training for NGO staff and volunteers working in disaster areas in areas such as disaster response, psychological first aid, and search-and-rescue skills. An NGO in Diyarbakır reported that immediately after the earthquakes they began planning trainings by preparing modules on Disaster Awareness, Disaster Management, First Aid, Psychological First Aid, and Light Search and Rescue. Within this framework, they stated that they would provide training both to their own teams and to relevant local institutions. However, the limited number of qualified trainers presents a major challenge; therefore, they aimed to develop “training of trainers” programs to cultivate more instructors. Across the interviews, psychosocial support capacity emerged as a particularly critical area of need. It was emphasized that there is an insufficient number of specialists in areas such as trauma counseling and psychosocial rehabilitation for children and women. Some NGO’s reported that, due to their inability to employ psychologists and social workers, they had to refer cases to other organizations. For example, K-12 noted that specialized support for children experiencing trauma was provided by other institutions, and that they managed the process by referring needs beyond legal assistance through their networks.

Support for Communication and Technical Usage: During the disaster periods, the rapid flow of information and the effective use of digital tools proved to be critical. Some NGO’s stated that while they had experience in establishing digital infrastructure, they required financial support for human resources and content production. Gaps were observed in the use of communication tools for volunteer management and coordination. For example, technical support was needed for tasks such as updating needs lists and monitoring online forms on certain platforms. Particularly in rural areas, limited internet Access, deficiencies in mobile communication, and power outages negatively affected NGO’s ability to communicate in the field.

Most Pressing Support Needs in Emergencies: During the disaster, the areas in which support was most acutely needed were psychosocial support and logistics. When interviewees were asked, “In which areas did you need support the most?”, many responded by highlighting the need for psychosocial support specialists as well as logistical and first-aid supplies. For example, one NGO representative stated, “We felt a strong need for support in logistics and first aid. External assistance was needed for search-and-rescue equipment, ambulance support, tents, containers, and generators.” After the initial shock subsided, shortcomings became evident in areas such as legal counseling—particularly regarding entitlement to rights, compensation, and housing rights—and communication tools (such as field radio systems and internet connectivity). Indeed, one participant noted that legal problems for which no one was prepared began to surface after the earthquake (for example, issues related to property ownership documents and inheritance), stating, “Almost no one could provide legal support because we were unprepared. There is an urgent need for specialized human resources in this area,” thereby emphasizing the need for expert personnel.

Long-Term Plans for Capacity Building: Many NGO's reported that they plan to strengthen their internal capacities in order to be better prepared for similar disasters in the future. For example, an ecology association in Diyarbakır stated that following the pandemic experienced after 2020 and the subsequent earthquake, they plan to prepare an internal disaster action plan that will be revised annually in line with different disaster scenarios. Others expressed a similar intention by saying, "We now need to conduct regular disaster drills and trainings. We should establish this as a tradition." Professional organizations such as K-16 reported that they have been implementing a one-year capacity-building project through their branches across the country, aiming to strengthen their members' skills in case management, household visits, and referral mechanisms. These efforts indicate that civil society has entered a process of institutional learning at its own scale. However, for such initiatives to be sustained, funding support and expert collaboration will be critical. As a representative of K-28 stated, "You need the right person or consultancy, but unfortunately everything comes down to money. Funding sources are very important in this regard," clearly demonstrating that the continuity of capacity building depends on financial resources. In conclusion, rights-based NGO's in Diyarbakır and Adiyaman, through their post-disaster self-assessments, identified shortcomings in areas such as training, technical knowledge, financing, human resources, and psychosocial support. To address these gaps, they have taken steps such as initiating training programs, seeking financial resources, and expanding volunteer pools. Nevertheless, it is evident that coordinated and comprehensive capacity building requires cross-sector collaboration and public support.

In the interviews, representatives of rights-based NGO's in Diyarbakır and Adiyaman articulated numerous forward-looking policy recommendations in light of the problems they encountered and the experiences they gained in disaster management. These recommendations encompass structural changes and practical measures at different levels, ranging from central government to local administrations and civil society organizations. The key policy recommendations can be summarized as follows:

Participatory and Democratic Local Disaster Mechanisms: It is recommended that participatory platforms be established at the local level for disaster preparedness and response processes. Many representatives suggested the creation of “local disaster councils” and community forums through which the views of residents, NGO’s, and professional chambers could be gathered at the neighborhood level. It was emphasized that the decisions of these councils and forums should be submitted to the official authorities and shared with the public. In this way, disaster management could be shaped not solely by bureaucrats, but through the collective wisdom of those directly affected and expert civil actors. Re-establishing mechanisms for civil participation is considered particularly important in municipalities under trustee (kayyum) administration.

Data-Based Reporting and Monitoring: It is recommended that local governments and relevant institutions regularly collect and report data on disaster risks and post-disaster conditions. For instance, documenting issues such as levels of destruction, shortages of tents or containers, and problems in access to education and health services is considered important, as these reports can transparently reveal areas where the central administration has fallen short. In this way, rights violations can be substantiated through concrete data, enabling appropriate interventions. Actively involving NGO’s in these data collection processes would further contribute to accurately identifying real needs on the ground.

Emphasizing Rights-Based Obligations: NGO’s stress that fundamental rights such as housing, education, health, a safe environment, and the right to life are obligations of the state under the Constitution and international conventions. One recommendation is that whenever the central administration fails to fulfill these obligations after a disaster, local governments and NGO’s should create public pressure through reports, press statements, and legal initiatives. In this way, the rights-based approach would move beyond remaining merely on paper and function as an accountability mechanism that reminds state institutions of their responsibilities.

Developing Alternative Models at the Local Level: It was recommended that feasible pilot projects be developed locally in areas where the central government proves insufficient. For example, some participants suggested establishing neighborhood disaster volunteer systems, safe living spaces specifically for women and children, and accessible disaster communication systems. Such models could be developed and tested in line with local needs and then scaled up. Indeed, NGO's noted that innovative solidarity practices that emerges during the earthquake response (such as neighborhood kitchens and volunteer information centers) could be transformed into lasting solutions if properly supported.

Rights-Based Awareness and Education Activities: It was recommended that awareness-raising trainings and workshops on "the rights of disaster-affected individuals" be organized for the general public both before and after disasters. In particular, under the leadership of local governments, citizens should be made aware of their rights in disaster situations, such as the right to shelter, to receive aid, and to access information. NGO's should also continue to provide trainings to both their staff and volunteers in areas such as child protection, gender equality, and humanitarian aid standards within their respective fields. One NGO specifically suggested that regular child safety training be provided to the staff of municipalities and NGO's in order to strengthen the protection of vulnerable children against risks during disasters.

Alliances Between Civil Society and the Public Sector: The importance of collective action for rights-based disaster management was emphasized. In order to institutionalize a culture of collaboration, it was recommended that local governments sign protocols with trade unions, professional chambers, and NGOs to jointly develop policies. For example, municipalities are advised to establish prior agreements with organizations such as Eğitim-Sen, medical chambers, chambers of architects, and social service networks, and to prepare cooperation plans for disaster situations. In this way, in the event of a disaster, all actors would know their roles and responsibilities in advance, ensuring alignment between volunteerism and public obligations. As one NGO representative expressed, “If the state makes peace with us... we can meet on common ground in working for the public good,” indicating that such alliances must first begin at the level of mindset.

Institutional Strengthening of Local Capacity: The establishment of Emergency Disaster Coordination units within municipalities was mentioned in nearly every interview. An expert in Diyarbakır suggested that each municipality should have an Emergency Management Dept., that inventories of available resources (vehicles, equipment, shelter materials, food stocks, etc.) should be continuously updated, and that psychosocial support and social service teams to be activated during disasters should be kept ready. This would create a foundation on which NGOs could quickly connect with official counterparts and work collaboratively. In addition, local disaster action plans should be reviewed annually, and drills should be conducted with the participation of NGO’s and the public. The recommendations outlined above reflect approaches that were frequently repeated in the interviews and broadly agreed upon by representatives of different NGO’s. Overall, they point to a vision of disaster management that is more participatory, transparent, equitable, and supportive of local initiative. Within this framework, both legal and regulatory changes (such as trainings on the rights of disaster affected individuals and disaster volunteer systems) should be considered together. The field experiences of NGO’s demonstrate that disaster management is not merely a technical issue, but also a matter of governance grounded in human rights. Implementing these recommendations would enhance societal resilience and governance capacity in the face of potential future disasters.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of rights-based NGO's operating in Diyarbakır and Adıyaman following the 6 February 2023 earthquakes clearly demonstrate that civil society plays an indispensable role in disaster management. The key findings is that NGO's provide significant added value, particularly in their ability to organize rapidly during crises, reach disadvantaged groups, and make rights violations visible. At the same time, the coordination, resource, and communication problems encountered during this process have also exposed shortcomings in the existing disaster management system. Accounts from NGO representatives indicate that a rights-based approach should guide every stage, from pre-disaster preparedness to long term recovery. Post-disaster emergency aid should be regarded not as charity, but as the right of disaster-affected individuals; it must not be forgotten that the state and all stakeholders bear responsibility for realizing these rights. The findings of this report point to the need for improvements in many areas of practice. First and foremost, NGO's need to strengthen their own capacities. Organizations participating in the interviews stated that this research itself constituted a learning opportunity for them, and that they have decided to update their internal disaster plans and to initiate volunteer trainings and psychosocial support programs. Second, there are important lessons for local governments and the central administration: ensuring transparency, participation, and enabling local initiatives in disaster management will multiply the effectiveness of interventions. To this end, it is of critical importance that the policy recommendations presented in this report be considered by the relevant authorities. In particular, steps such as establishing local disaster councils, creating institutional disaster units within municipalities, and developing NGO–public sector cooperation protocols will contribute to the institutionalization of a rights-based approach.

Finally, information sharing and advocacy activities will play a crucial role in ensuring that the results of this study are put into practice. It is planned that the findings of the report will be disseminated to wider audiences through workshops organized among NGOs. These workshops, with the participation of civil society actors from different provinces, will open up discussions on what should and should not be done in similar disaster situations. In addition, the data and recommendations obtained will be communicated to policymakers, and advocacy will be carried out for legal and structural reforms. For example, national-level platforms and campaigns could be organized to establish a rights-based disaster management framework across Turkey. In this way, the report will not remain merely an academic study, but will serve as a practical guide that informs and shapes practice.

Ultimately, the practices of solidarity and struggle demonstrated by civil society in Diyarbakır and Adıyaman after the 2023 earthquakes contain valuable lessons for preparedness for possible future disasters. As one civil society representative put it, “We experienced it, we lived through it, we saw it... if it happens again, at least let us be prepared, let us see it ourselves; let us also set an example for others,” a statement that encapsulates the core message of this report. Developing an approach to disasters that is equitable, inclusive, and respectful of human dignity is both possible and necessary. Achieving this depends on strengthening rights-based NGO’s, ensuring their participation in the process as equal partners alongside public authorities, and sustaining the spirit of social solidarity. Every step taken in this direction will contribute to overcoming future disasters with less suffering and to strengthening society’s resilience as a whole.

RESOURCES

The findings of this report are based on the transcripts of qualitative interviews conducted in Diyarbakır and Adıyaman in 2025. The quoted excerpts reflect the statements of the respective NGO representatives. The names and abbreviations of the NGO's are explained in the relevant sections throughout the text. As the content of the report is grounded in the compilation and analysis of field data, each recommendation and finding is directly based on the experiences and observations of the participants. In this respect, the study constitutes a field research report that contributes to the existing literature. For future studies, it is recommended that similar rights-based assessments be conducted in different regions and for different types of disasters, and that general policy frameworks be developed through comparative analyses. In this way, even a modest contribution can be made to the transformation of disaster management in Turkey and globally on the basis of human rights.







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