Syria – Conflict

ETC User Satisfaction Survey report 2021

Survey period 28/10/21 to 21/11/21

Background

The scale, severity, and complexity of needs across Syria remain overwhelming. Across the country, an estimated 11.1 million people need humanitarian assistance.

The Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC) was activated in Syria on 14 January 2013 to provide shared security communications and internet connectivity services to the humanitarian community responding to the crisis. The ETC is operating under the Whole of Syria (WoS) approach which comprises activities in the surrounding countries for an effective humanitarian response inside Syria.

The ETC conducted a user satisfaction survey from October to November 2021 to assess the performance of ETC services and activities, including internet connectivity, security communications, coordination, and Information Management (IM) among humanitarians in the eight common operational areas where the ETC provides services: Aleppo, Damascus, Deir Ez-Zor, Hama, Homs, Qamishli, Tartous and Gaziantep (Turkey).

The survey aimed to identify areas of improvement in line with evolving needs on the ground. The results will help the ETC to better understand the needs of humanitarians responding to this emergency.

Overview and Methodology

The survey comprised 13 questions and was launched on 28 October 2021. The invitation was distributed to the ICT Working Group, inter-agency hubs and ETC service users across Syria and Gaziantep in Turkey.

The survey closed on 21 November 2021 after an extension of one week to facilitate additional participants. 122 humanitarians responded to the survey, compared to 55 respondents in 2020. Almost all respondents represented staff from United Nations (UN) agencies (99%) while the remaining 1% participated from an International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO). The roles most represented among respondents were logistics staff (21%), programme (20%), and technical specialists (12%).

Note: The methodology used in the 2021 user satisfaction has evolved since 2020 to capture user satisfaction levels more accurately, including the addition of a 'very dissatisfied' response option. This has impacted on the overall user satisfaction score compared to 2020, which resulted in a 96% user satisfaction rating.

Key Findings

Overall ETC services and activities

The ETC user satisfaction survey resulted in an **overall user satisfaction rate of 87%** for ETC services and activities provided in the country.

This includes internet connectivity and security communications services, as well as coordination and IM activities. A further breakdown of the results is provided in the various sections below.
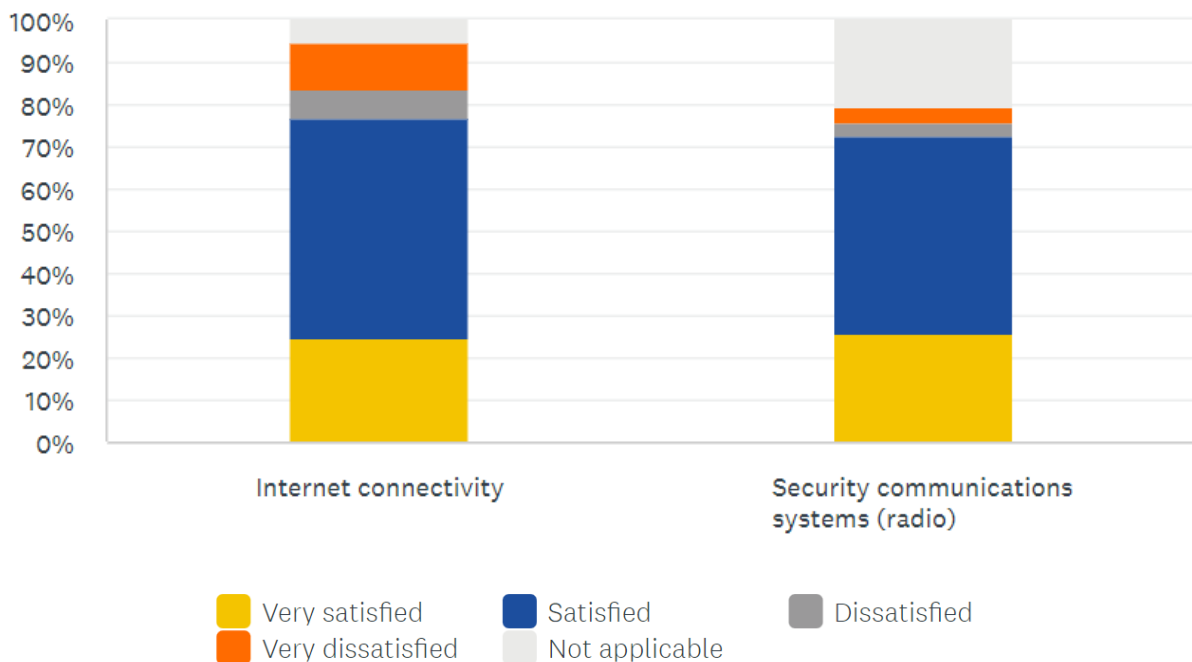
ETC services

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the core ETC services provided in Syria and Gaziantep in Turkey, which includes internet connectivity and security communications services.

In response, participants reported an **86%** user satisfaction rate for ETC services provided in the country.

The survey highlighted:

- **81%** satisfaction rate for **internet connectivity** services.
- **91%** satisfaction rate for **security communications** services.

User satisfaction rating for ETC services

Feedback on ETC services

The survey asked respondents the reasons for the user satisfaction rating given, as well as asking for suggestions on how ETC services may be improved (respondents were given an open-ended option):

- **Internet connectivity:** The availability and speed of internet connectivity services in some locations can be inconsistent and unreliable. In particular, respondents reported the quality of connectivity services in Deir Ez-Zor and Homs as an escalating issue in need of resolution. Suggestions to improve connectivity services include checking the installation of equipment, increasing the bandwidth, and utilizing the services of an alternate Internet Service Provider (ISP) as a back-up.

  The ETC recognizes the urgent issue of access to internet connectivity services in the inter-agency hub in Deir Ez-Zor and is working to improve the performance of the service by establishing a fibre link via a second ISP. The process for these improvements was started in Q1 2021 – the ETC is addressing lengthy approval processes to complete the work.

  The ETC is also planning to install back-up solar power solutions and equipment in all five UN hubs to support data connectivity services.

- **Security communications:** Respondents noted the significant improvements made to the security communications network since the feedback given in previous user satisfaction surveys in 2019 and 2020. Some suggestions to further improve services in multiple locations included enhancing the VHF radio network by implementing the remaining TESS recommendations from the Telecommunications Security Standards (TESS), facilitating the distribution of more handheld radio devices to field staff to improve emergency communications, ensuring the functionality of vehicle radios is optimum, mobilizing more than one telecommunications officer, and working more closely with security teams.

  Planning is ongoing to phase out HF radio networks in Syria, after VHF equipment is upgraded to enhance VHF services.
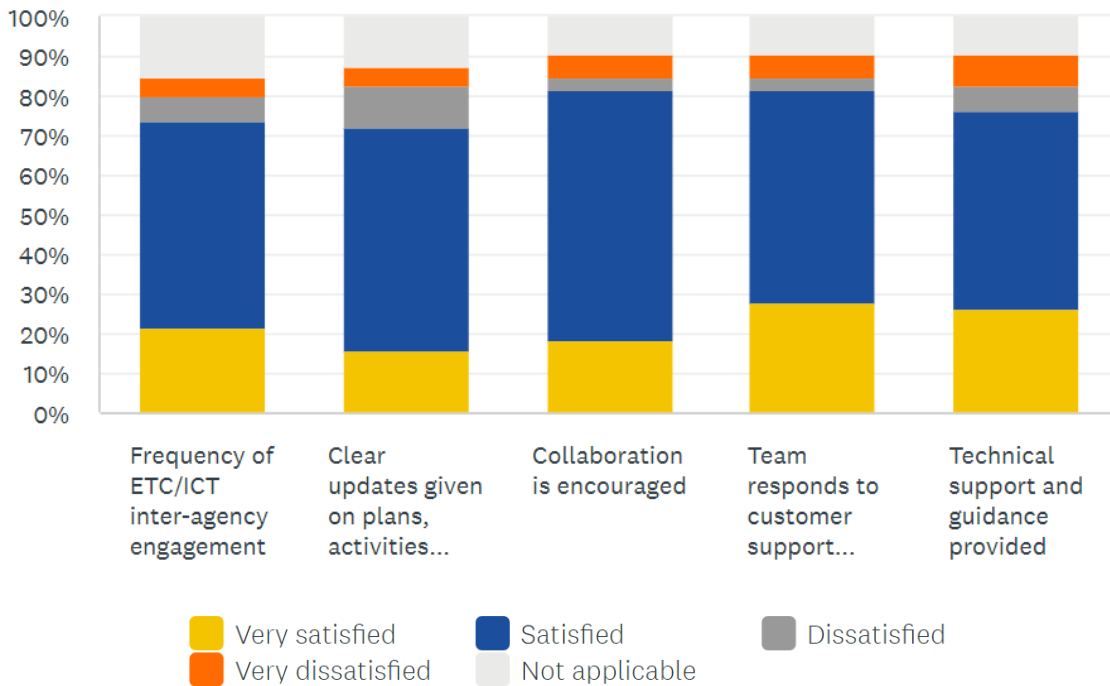
ETC coordination activities

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the quality of ETC coordination activities e.g. coordination meetings, ICT Working Group meetings, advocacy on behalf of partners, fostering of relationships between partners, advice, and support.

In response, participants reported an **87%** user satisfaction rate for ETC coordination provided in Syria.

The survey highlighted:

- **87%** satisfaction rate for **frequency of ETC/ICT inter-agency engagement.**

- **82%** satisfaction rate for **clear updates on plans, activities, and gaps**.

- **90%** satisfaction rate for **encouraging collaboration**.

- **90%** satisfaction rate for **responding to customer support requests.**

- **84%** satisfaction rate for **technical support and guidance.**

User satisfaction rating for ETC coordination activities

Feedback on ETC coordination activities

Suggestions to improve the quality of ETC coordination included:

- ***Provide or facilitate more ICT training*** is a common area of feedback.

  The ETC in Syria is working to address this need. Although planning for several training sessions has been subject to postponement due to challenges related to COVID-19, the ETC was able to deliver a capacity building workshop in Latakia from 8-10 November which was attended by 21 ICT personnel from 10 UN agencies in Syria (WFP, UNFPA, UN-HABITAT, UNRWA, UNDSS, UNDP, WHO, UNDSS, UNICEF, and OCHA) to develop staff capacity in the delivery of ETC services as well as in Telecommunications Security Standards (TESS+). The ETC is also planning to deliver the delayed advanced VHF training with ICOM France in 2022.

- ***Provide more regular inter-agency updates*** to encourage collaboration and information sharing with agency focal points.

  The ETC is part of the national WFP-led inter-agency ICT Working Group which holds regular meetings every two months, and which organizes additional *ad hoc* meetings as needed. The ETC acknowledges the need for a decentralized platform for ICT professionals throughout Syria to share challenges, planning, and collaboration, which could be delivered via regular local ETC Working Group meetings.

- ***Increase the number of missions to inter-agency hubs to assess the status of ETC services*** was suggested by respondents.

In 2021, the ETC carried out a series of needs assessments in five common operational areas – Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor, Homs, Tartous and Qamishli – to assess requirements to improve its services. The main concern raised by users is the availability of power, which is critical to enable communications services. In response to the mission findings, the ETC is purchasing back-up solar power solutions and equipment to install in two UN hubs – Aleppo and Qamishli – to support data connectivity services. Equipment for the remaining sites will follow.

- *Technical support and guidance provided* was highlighted as an area of ETC coordination which is working well for some respondents. Several respondents in Aleppo and Qamishli reported being very satisfied with the level and availability of technical support received.

## ETC Information Management (IM) activities

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the quality of ETC IM products in terms of supporting operational decision making and information sharing. All IM products and operational updates are available on the Syria emergency page of the ETC website here.

In response, participants reported an **88%** user satisfaction rate for ETC IM activities.

The survey highlighted:

- **90%** satisfaction rate for the **Syria emergency page** on the ETC website.
- **89%** satisfaction rate for **Situation Reports** (SitReps).
- **88%** satisfaction rate for **dashboards**.
- **86%** satisfaction rate for **infographics**.
- **91%** satisfaction rate for **factsheets**.
- **86%** satisfaction rate for **meeting minutes**.

User satisfaction rating for ETC IM activities
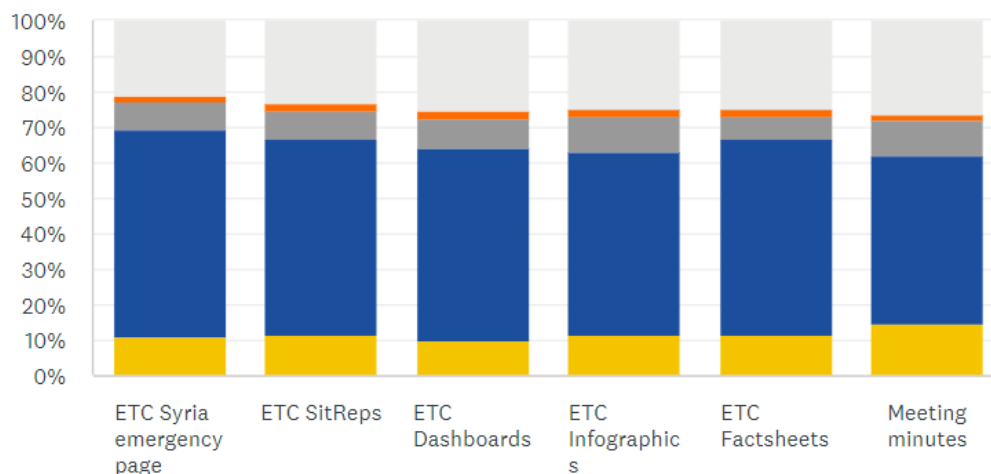
Feedback on ETC IM activities

Suggestions to improve the quality of ETC IM activities included:

- ***Expand the IM products mailing list*** to include all users.

  Most respondents who reported being 'dissatisfied' with ETC IM products did so because they have not received any updates. All participants who received the user satisfaction survey in 2021 have now been added to the ETC's mailing list and will receive all the above-mentioned IM products going forwards.

  To provide strengthened IM capacity, the ETC in Syria is engaging in pathways to onboard an ETC IMO in-country (IM support currently provided remotely by the Global ETC).

- In general, participants would like to receive ***more detailed updates on ETC projects and missions***.

Additional Feedback

The ETC asked survey respondents to identify the main strengths and areas of improvement for the ETC in Syria and the surrounding countries. A total of 24 respondents provided the following feedback:

Strengths

- ***ETC staff*** were commended for the reliable support and technical ICT expertise provided to UN agencies across Syria. Continuing efforts made by ETC staff to mitigate challenges of obtaining government approvals to import telecommunications equipment, deploy, and carry out activities was also acknowledged.

- ***Provision of equipment/services*** is appreciated by some respondents. Highlights included good network coverage across multiple locations in Syria and Turkey, 24/7 services, continuing improvement to services, and implementing ICT solutions in challenging environments, particularly in the north-east of the country.

- ***Circulation of information*** and updates on projects was reported by some respondents as a strength of the ETC in Syria.

Areas of improvement

- The ***delayed importation of equipment*** into Syria is an ongoing issue which impacts on all ETC services and activities.

  All equipment importation, training sessions, deployments, missions, and installations must be approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) in Syria, which can take months to obtain. In 2021, to expedite the delivery of several delayed shipments of communications equipment to Syria, the ETC met with the transporter to better understand some of the import challenges. The transporter is working to expedite the release of equipment held at the border and to speed up the customs clearance process in the future.

- *Additional ETC staff* needed to provide the required level of support. It was highlighted by several respondents that there is only one technical specialist implementing all ETC activities in Syria. This impacts on critical maintenance activities to keep services running smoothly.

  To mitigate this issue, the ETC has recently assigned an additional staff member to provide back-up assistance and support services. As above, all ETC field missions require prior approval from MoFA, especially when moving communications equipment between locations within Syria.

- *Internet connectivity services* – as addressed under 'feedback on ETC services', respondents across inter-agency hubs in the field are facing a number of issues including poor network coverage, slow internet speeds, unreliable connectivity, and in the case of Deir Ez-Zor, services ceasing altogether.

  The ETC is aware of the issues with connectivity and is planning to implement back-up solutions.

- The *installation of more repeaters* in some field locations would ensure better continuity of services while humanitarians are on mission.

  In 2022, the ETC is planning to install an additional two repeaters in Idleb and Hama to improve the services.

- The ETC is requested to *share coverage assessments* with all relevant UN agency staff and field offices.

- The *provision or facilitation of more ICT training* is addressed under 'feedback on ETC coordination activities' above.

Next Steps

The ETC is taking all feedback received into consideration to improve the existing services in Syria and to provide an improved response to emerging challenges. The gaps reported by respondents will be analysed and included in the ETC workplan for Syria as appropriate, including the urgent need for improved internet connectivity services, further enhancements to the security communications network, more training opportunities, and the need for additional ETC staff support to cover all activities.

This report will be shared with users and partners of ETC services in Syria, the Global ETC partnership network, World Food Programme (WFP) Syria (as local lead of the ETC), and the ICT Working Group in Syria. It will also be published on the ETC website, which is accessible to the wider public.

All information related to the ETC operation in Syria can be found on the ETC website: www.etcluster.org/emergencies/syria-conflict

For more information, or to be added or deleted from the mailing list, please contact: Syria.ETC@wfp.org