7 EMERGENCY NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

7.1 OVERVIEW AND FUNCTION

Needs assessments are required during the first phases of an emergency in order to establish an understanding of the impact of the emergency on affected populations, the causes of any problems, which populations are most affected what their coping strategies are and which humanitarian interventions would aid the population.

According to its mandate based on its statute and resolutions passed by the UN General Assembly, UNHCR will coordinate and lead all aspects of humanitarian response in refugee emergencies, including joint, harmonized and coordinated needs assessments.

7.2 HOW-TO GUIDE

For the initial needs assessment in a new refugee emergency, UNHCR should lead a “joint” multi-sectoral needs assessment, which means that the needs assessment will cover multiple sectors and include the participation of multiple humanitarian actors. Joint assessments are useful to establish a common understanding of the situation between actors and to maximize the use of needs assessment resources.

As the emergency progresses, harmonized and coordinated multi-sectoral or sector-specific assessments may be utilized. The general principals described in this chapter apply to any type of emergency needs assessment, including an urban refugee emergency needs assessment except where otherwise specified.

Type of Needs Assessment	Definition	What Must Be Done	Output
Joint multi-sectoral needs assessment	Data collection, processing and analysis form one single process among agencies within and between sectors, and leads to the production of a single report. Joint needs assessments are sometimes also referred to as “common assessments”.	Establish a multi-organizational coalition to pool assessment resources in order to lead the design and undertaking of a joint needs assessment. Design and lead data collection and analysis. Agree on the interpretation of the results among all stakeholders.	A single report that represents the agreed interpretation of needs by several agencies or organizations.
Harmonized needs assessment	Collect, process and analyze data separately, but where the collected data is sufficiently comparable (because of the use of common operational data sets, key indicators, and geographical and temporal synchronization), to be compiled into a single database and used in a shared analysis.	Agree with partners on which geographic data, population classifications and indicators will be used across multiple needs assessments. Use the IASC Common Operational Datasets and UNHCR data standards in needs assessments. Share needs assessments to cross-analyze results.	Multiple needs assessments reports or databases that can be cross-analyzed and aggregated.

Coordinated needs assessment	Planned and carried out in partnership by humanitarian actors; results shared with the broader humanitarian community to identify the needs of affected populations.	Establish an interagency forum for coordinating needs assessments. Create an inventory of needs assessments by using the Excel template included here. Analyze the inventory for gaps, over-assessments or complementarities in needs assessments. Agree on the interpretation of the results among all stakeholders.	An "assessments registry" that gives an overview of all needs assessments that have been conducted by all organizations. A forum or mechanism for systematically disseminating, and analyzing needs assessment reports with humanitarian actors should be established.
Uncoordinated Assessments	Datasets are not interoperable, and results cannot be used to inform the overall analysis.	Avoid this situation using one of the three techniques above.	Multiple disconnected assessment reports that may or may not be available for distribution. Duplicated / redundant needs assessments. Thematic or geographic gaps in needs assessment information.

Note: Definitions used in the above chart are from the IASC Operational Guidance for Coordinated Assessment in Humanitarian Emergencies (March 2012).

7.2.1 Objectives of an emergency needs assessment

The key objectives of an emergency needs assessment are to work towards ensuring that:

- Humanitarian aid should be needs based;
- Humanitarian aid should promote and not undermine safe local coping mechanisms;
- The unique and respective needs of different populations have been identified and understood;
- Decisions regarding humanitarian aid should be based on verifiable information.

At the start of a needs assessment process, begin by asking these questions: What are the underlying causes of risk and vulnerability? Have these causes changed and, if so, how? How widespread is the problem – throughout the country (or countries) or in specific areas? How are the host communities coping with the situation? Which geographical area is the most impacted by the problems, and which affected group are the most at risk?

When preparing for an urban emergency needs assessment, keep in mind that urban refugees are often mobile and tend to cluster in the poorest areas of the city, and/or be dispersed over many locations throughout a city, making them difficult to identify. The added complexity of a possible lack of legal status may further inhibit urban refugees' access to basic services, with refugees afraid to identify themselves for fear of deportation, persecution or arbitrary detention. For these reasons refugee outreach, and utilizing existing urban refugee networks will both be critical steps in conducting a successful urban refugee emergency needs assessment.

7.2.2 UNHCR roles and responsibilities

The UNHCR Representative in the country of the emergency is responsible for leading and coordinating the overall refugee needs assessment by establishing the required sectoral coordination.

In an appropriate interagency forum, the Representative should request operational partners to nominate staff to participate in the Assessment Team for the needs assessment. A focal point should be pre-identified (the Information Management Officer) and on hand to follow-up and make contact with requisite focal points.

While sectoral leads and emergency coordinators will need to decide on the information required for a needs assessment in order to inform the operational strategy, the Information Management Officer will provide support with needs assessment methodology, design, data collection, analysis and coordination.

7.3 NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Needs assessments are often situation dependent, and the design of the needs assessment will be affected by numerous factors. These include the level of humanitarian access, whether population movements are stable or dynamic, the amount of time and resources available for the needs assessment, and the types of interventions that might be made as a result of the needs assessment, to name a few.

Here are the steps, in chronological order, for designing and conducting an emergency needs assessment:

- Establish basic situational awareness;
- Conduct a secondary data review, compile a 3W and identify remaining information gaps through a situational analysis;
- Identify purpose and types of decisions that require needs assessment information;
- Identify inter-agency stakeholders;
- Identify time and resources required for the needs assessment, including equipment, translators, data collectors and data entry personnel;
- Decide how communities will be sampled;
- Design the data collection forms;
- Train the data collection team;
- Undertake primary data collection;
- Collate, clean and analyze resulting data;
- Disseminate data and information products; and
- Begin monitoring.

Many needs assessment designers make the mistake of starting with designing the primary data collection form. But doing so ignores the preceding steps and diminishes the likelihood that the needs assessment will be successful and yield actionable information. **Do not start a needs assessment process with the design of a data-collection form** – that step comes in the middle of the process.

7.3.1 When not to collect primary data

Although a needs assessment should always be done in a refugee emergency, there are some situations in which primary data collection for needs assessments should not be conducted:

- When conducting a needs assessment will put data collectors or interviewees in harm’s way;
- When the results of a needs assessment will be incorrect or extremely biased, such as when interviewees do not feel secure enough to tell the truth or if external pressures are limiting the effectiveness of the needs assessment;
- When a population feels over-assessed and possibly hostile to additional needs assessments.

For the above situations conducting a needs assessment through a secondary data review only, without any new primary data collection, might be an alternative.

7.3.2 Secondary data review conducted, 3W compiled and situational analysis completed

As part of understanding the overall situational context, it is recommended that the Information Manager ensure that an “Assessment Registry” has been compiled. The aim here is to identify what has already been assessed and areas of existing coverage that may not need to be included in the first wave of priority needs assessment. A template for an assessment registry is included in the Information/Data Management Strategy section (Section 2) of this Toolkit. For country operations that have the UNHCR web portal, it may be possible to register needs assessments on an online "Needs Assessment Registry" rather than using the Excel template. See the Web Portal section of this Toolkit for additional information.

According to the *IASC Operational Guidance for Coordinated Assessments in Humanitarian Crises* (Oct 2011, pg. 13), secondary data will provide valuable pre-crisis baseline information and should derive a variety of types of information from a spectrum of sources, including the following:

- Pre-existing conditions, which may have aggravated the impact of the crisis;
- Underlying vulnerabilities and pre-existing vulnerable groups;
- Existing threats (epidemics, climate, etc.); and
- Lessons learned from past crises in the same area.
- In addition to soliciting secondary information from humanitarian partners already in situ, secondary data may be collected from or found through Relief Web, Alertnet, OCHA, Humanitarian Response, media, blogs, crowd-sourcing, meeting minutes, Government census data, etc.

As part of the secondary data review, the protection and programme officer should work with the Information Manager to compile a 3W for the operation. For additional references on compiling a 3W, refer to the Information/Data Management Strategy section (Section 2).

The output of a secondary data review and the compilation of an assessment registry should be a short situational analysis listing secondary data sources and major findings. Analysis of the gap between the findings of the secondary data review and the information required for decision-making should inform the design of the needs assessment data collection forms. In other words, information that was unobtainable through the secondary data review or earlier assessments should be collected through a primary data collection methodology. Primary data is any type of time-bound data that is collected through completion of the needs assessment form during the emergency needs assessment.

In addition to following the same secondary data review steps as noted above for an urban emergency needs assessment, the city will also need to be broken into smaller administrative units as agreed with partners, and discussed within the RIM WG and other coordination forum to enable coordinated decision-making surrounding immediate life-saving response and enable future monitoring and coordination.
The demarcation of the city into smaller admin units should be completed by the Information Manager working with the protection and programme officer and cross-checked through refugee focal points within the community who may be able to help identify the locations of other refugee groups within the city, including hidden or vulnerable groups of refugees. Information provided by the refugee community. Information may also be factored into the selection of minimum sectoral life-saving data, needs assessment form design and site selection for the emergency needs assessment.

Once the city has been broken down into smaller segments- districts, neighborhoods etc, this information should be shared widely with the government and operational partners, and referenced when reporting and coordinating services as the baseline from which to measure emergency interventions and activities.

Next, it will be important to understand, and map existing services and capacities of the Government, operational partners in order to inform an overview of needs, by type and location in a detailed 3W. To begin cataloguing services, needs and coverage by the agreed urban administrative unit this can be done through a traditional 3W or if time enables through a 3W map of the city; both of which will establish a baseline for each administrative unit, of the city, highlighting areas and service of coverage, and lack thereof, for prioritization and inclusion in the urban emergency multi-sectoral needs assessment.

To compile a 3W map of a city, please refer to the Mapping section (Section 15) of the Toolkit, Annex 5, 'UNHCR Addressing Guidance', for practical advice on how to set-up a geo-referenced database in order to establish a mapping system which may be used in an urban environment to map neighborhoods, districts, or whatever unit of measurement is deemed most appropriate, focusing on coverage of emergency life-saving services provided by operational partners or the government.

7.3.3 Who to involve

In the first phase of a refugee emergency, a range of humanitarian agencies, NGOs, Government counterparts and possibly donors could be involved in the initial emergency needs assessment planning process, depending on the specific emergency situation. However, partners involved in actually carrying out the assessment should only be key actors responsible for overseeing and providing assistance in the first phase of a refugee emergency. It is critical to involve WFP in conducting emergency needs assessments when the population to be assessed is over 5,000 persons.

Identifying key stakeholders for an urban context would follow the above mentioned methods, in addition to reaching out to refugee focal points within the community. Refugee focal points will be crucial in further identifying locations of refugees, population and demographic estimates, new points of influx, vulnerable groups, infrastructure and security issues, coping mechanisms and other pressing needs within the city which may change rapidly within an emergency urban context.

Given the emergency context, it is advisable to gather refugee focal point contact information, with the protection or community services officer checking in with refugee focal points to confirm or update information as appropriate.

7.3.4 RIM WG and Assessment Teams: coordination and shared decision-making

The Information Manager may be called upon to compile and track an assessment registry; 3W coordinate needs assessment methodologies, ensure needs assessment data set compatibility and facilitate needs assessment data sharing in the context of the RIM WG. Needs assessment coordination functions should be included in the RIM WG TORs, which are included in the Information/Data Management section (Section 2) of this Toolkit.

RIM WG is a place for coordinating multiple assessments and keeping track of data, keeping the assessment registry up-to-date etc.; but actually running a large-scale assessment will be done by a separate Assessment Team, which is made up of personnel beyond IMOs.

The Information Manager will also participate in the coordination and lead the design of the initial joint emergency needs assessment within an Assessment Team. An Assessment Team is a temporary working group of stakeholders who will manage a needs assessment. Members of this team include both operational leads who decide what information is required for decision-making, who interpret results of a needs assessment and who design interventions according to needs assessment results, as well as an Information Manager, who will design the needs assessment, select the sites to be assessed, compile the data and produce information products based on it.

The needs Assessment Team should undertake the following emergency needs assessment preparatory steps:

- Establishment of emergency referral system for urgent interventions needed that are uncovered during the needs assessment process;
- Agreement on minimum life-saving sectoral data;
- Finalization of assessment method and design;

- Site selection;
- Resources, training and logistics;
- Agreement on time frame, data collection methods, cleaning and analysis of data and sharing and dissemination of results.

7.3.5 Emergency referral system

Prior to conducting the needs assessment, the protection staff should immediately establish for the Assessment Team a system for emergency referrals by sector, with focal points identified, see the Minimum Sectoral Data Protection section (Section 12) for additional information on how to set this system up. For example referrals may identify a location, such as a collective centre, in need of WASH intervention or may refer an individual for life-saving intervention, and anything in between. The emergency referral process should be separate from the needs assessment and made functional by the start of the needs assessment being undertaken in the field. Needs assessment field teams should be trained on the process of how to escalate life-saving issues and urgent interventions uncovered in the needs assessment to appropriate service providers.

Needs assessment teams should carry with them the *UNHCR Referral for Assistance* (included as an annex in the Registration in Emergencies section of this Toolkit) for cases encountered in need of emergency referral and support while the needs assessment is being conducted in the field. Doing so will avoid having the required reports of urgent action mixed in with needs assessment results that will go for data entry.

7.3.6 Agreement on minimum and life-saving sectoral data

The objective of the needs assessment questions should focus on gathering minimum emergency life-saving data, required to inform the first phase of the emergency response.

Minimum and sectoral data sets presented in the protection, HIS, WASH, nutrition, mortality, shelter, CRI, environment and livelihood sections of this Toolkit all include examples of the type and level of life-saving sectoral data to be included in the emergency needs assessment (please refer to these sections for datasets from which to build the emergency needs assessment survey). See the NARE, annex 3 for additional information on the types of data to collect as well as examples for the types of questions to ask.

For the urban emergency needs assessment, much like a rural emergency needs assessment the same minimum-sectroal emergency life-saving sectoral priorities would apply, with the actual data to collect would be context specific, informed by the secondary data review and the baseline established by the breakdown of the city into administrative units (neighborhoods, districts etc) mapping of the 3W over the city.

7.3.7 Assessment method and survey design

The unit of measurement for an initial emergency refugee needs assessment should be at the community level, which will save time and reduce the data volume gathered during primary data collection, rather than conducting an emergency needs assessment at the household or individual level. Data collection techniques for community level needs assessments include direct observation, key informant interviews and focus group discussions.

For initial emergency needs assessments, diversity driven purposive sampling is the preferred sampling method, as representative sampling is more time-consuming. Purposive sampling is recommended for rapid assessments; because this process ensures that the assessment captures different types and levels of impact. Purposive sampling is aimed at sampling as many types of sites as possible. Purposive sampling involves, first, defining which selection criteria are important to consider according to the assessment objectives and, second, visiting sites that represent a cross-section of these. Sites can be stratified using criteria such as urban/rural, in camps/outside camps, etc.).

When leading an Assessment Team in the prioritization of assessment questions, consider facilitating a group discussion using the Prioritization Graph, from Annex 2 of this section; which can assist with obtaining Assessment Team agreement on survey questions to include in the needs assessment. Data elements that have life-saving importance and that are easy to collect should be the priority for an initial needs assessment.

Where possible, existing assessment forms should be used and amended as necessary. Some country operations will have developed an emergency needs assessment form during the contingency planning process that may be adapted and used.

It is also recommended that Individual sectors test their data-collection forms for primary data prior to actually undertaking the needs assessment widely in the field. This may be as simple as sitting with local colleagues to ensure that the interpretation of assessment questions is clear and that the resulting answers will be analyzable.

Depending on time and resources, an urban emergency needs assessment may benefit from the use of crowd-sourcing technology and/or the establishment of refugee call-in lines to identify specific emergency needs throughout the city, either in the emergency phase or later monitoring of the situation.

The recommended unit of measurement for an urban emergency needs assessment is the: neighborhood, community or district. Assessments should break the city into smaller units and understand the demographics of affected areas.

7.3.8 Participatory and AGD approaches in emergency needs assessments

Assessments must also be designed and conducted using participatory approaches, which allow populations of concern to voice their opinions about their own needs, rather than humanitarian personnel simply deciding for them. It is also important that needs assessments reflect an age, gender and diversity (AGD) approach, as the emergency will affect different portions of the population differently. Assessment Team members need to be gender balanced, organized and trained on survey questions and participatory approaches prior to going to field locations to collect data.

Practical ways to include AGD and participatory approaches in needs assessments:

- Have separate focus group discussions for men, women, boys, girls, of different social strata; also, it can be advantageous to conduct these focus group discussions simultaneously (so, for example, men do not also infiltrate the women's discussion, etc.).
- For closed questionnaires or structured interviews, use key informants from different sections of society.
- When selecting villages or camps to be assessed, stratify the locations to reflect the diversity of their resident populations.
- Assess questions and themes that might be relevant to marginalized or less vocal segments of communities.
- To obtain needs assessment data, partner with specialized NGOs who work with hard-to-reach groups (such as NGOs that specialize in assistance for elderly persons, disabled persons, children, etc.).
- Engage with self-governance structures (youth committees, women's committees, etc.) as sources for needs assessment information.
- Conduct a participatory ranking of problems and solutions, during which community members carry out the prioritization.

- Triangulate data from multiple social classes to see how various types of people have different experiences during a humanitarian situation.

Ensuring community participation helps to minimize the potential of needs assessments and the resulting humanitarian interventions causing harm, such as undermining local coping mechanisms, neglecting marginalized social groups' needs, and wasting resources on aid that is not required.

Assessment teams will have to specifically ask interviewees for their consent to use the information they provide for the needs assessment. Personal information can never be disclosed or transferred for purposes other than those for which it was originally collected and for which consent was explicitly given

7.3.9 Site selection

Although desirable, statistically representative site selection may not be possible when choosing which sites to assess in the first weeks of an emergency. While considering geography and protection issues, attempt to select sites that represent the diversity of the situation, such as a mixture of urban and rural camps or sites, sites in the mountains and valleys, sites dominated by one social group versus another, etc. It is a good idea to stratify the locations according to criteria that highlight potential differences in the impact of the emergency or the community's ability to cope, as then the needs assessment will develop a more comprehensive picture of what has happened in diverse communities.

When selecting the geographic coverage, consider the following factors: displacement status, type of geography, urban versus rural, social grouping, displacement date, scale of displacement, major border crossings, fluidity of the displaced population, and others.

Site selection for an urban emergency needs assessment should focus on sites based on gaps in existing knowledge, severity of impact, geography and characteristics of the refugee community etc.

The point is to assess as broad of a representative sampling as possible, from slums, neighborhoods, community centers, places of worship (other infrastructure that refugees may be accessing); which is further informed by information compiled during the secondary data review and 3W.

7.3.10 Resources needed, training and logistics

The Assessment Team will need to identify the required resources to undertake the assessment in the field, based on the scale of the assessment to be conducted. Limitations on resources may affect the design of the assessment. The amount of resources spent on the needs assessment should never exceed 10 per cent of the value of the interventions that will be made on the basis of the needs assessment, and ideally the cost of an assessment will be much less than that.

Needs assessment field team members should be trained on the following:

- How to fill in the needs assessment data-collection forms;
- How to report problems with the needs assessments;
- Key informant selection;
- Observation techniques;
- How to facilitate focus group discussions (if needed);
- How to manage community expectations;
- Data confidentiality principles; and
- Basic principles of the UNHCR Code of Conduct.

7.3.11 Needs assessment logistics and equipment

While planning the assessment, it is vital that the logistical requirements of the Assessment Team are fully covered. Core equipment is essential, such as appropriate vehicles, first aid kits, computers, radio and/or satellite phones, GPS devices, cell phones and chargers with appropriate SIM cards and credit, along with flashlights, spare batteries for all equipment and physical maps. Ensure adequate food and water is provided for the Assessment Teams, particularly if supplies may be difficult to obtain in the areas to be visited. Also important are enough notebooks, pens, pencils and pencil sharpeners, as well as adequate copies of community interview guides with recording sheets, key informant guides and any materials required for participatory techniques (flip chart sheets, felt-tipped pens, seasonal calendars, etc.).

7.3.12 Reducing bias in needs assessment

A key consideration in the process of collecting primary data is the presence of bias. Bias refers to a systematic skewing of data collected. A biased estimator is one that systematically over- or under-estimates what is being measured. A biased sample refers to a sample in which all members of the population are not equally likely to be represented. Bias may occur because of under-coverage of some groups, large non-response rates among particular groups, or lack of access.

Bias can arise from many sources including the Assessment Team, the community, Government sources, interpreters (if used), key informants, ethnic groups and both genders. The greatest limitation of any key informant interview is that it provides a subjective perspective on the crisis. Individual responses provide important information, but this will have both an individual and a cultural bias that needs to be considered when analyzing the information.

Throughout the assessment process, consider whether the biases of the interviewer or informant may be influencing results, and adjust training or assessment methodologies accordingly.

To reduce the bias of any assessment, there are a number of things to remember. Communities are not homogeneous, and information should be gathered from sources that represent different interest groups, including marginalized persons. It's important to define the different characteristics of people who are being consulted (e.g. those most affected by the crisis, internally displaced persons, minority ethnic groups, etc.) and record this when collecting data, including those groups that may not be represented. Ensure that the affected population is consulted directly and that all demographics within this population (women, children, older persons, the disabled, and ethnic or religious minorities) are consulted. Particular attention needs to be paid to the poorest and most socially excluded people, as these are likely to be worst hit by a crisis.

Information gathered needs to be evaluated for its validity and relevance, the reliability of its source(s), and whether it corroborates other information.

Any evidence or suspicion of fraud, including falsely reporting needs assessment results to either attract or deny aid to a particular location or segment of the population, must be reported to senior management.

7.3.13 Data cleaned, jointly analyzed and agreed

It is important for members of the Assessment Team to agree on the process for cleaning, analyzing and interpreting the assessment data – using a simple spreadsheet format is recommended. Where possible, data should be broken down by UNHCR standard sex and age groups. Data should be cleaned and entered into a spreadsheet at the end of each day by the needs assessment team members.

The results of an emergency needs assessment will need to be considered against any pre-existing emergency contingency plans. Assessment results should be shared at least at the unit of analysis, unless there are protection concerns. The assessment results should be shared in a format that can be easily re-used by others and adheres to disaggregated data standards whenever possible. Emergency priorities, protection concerns and analysis produced by the needs assessment will provide the foundation for the emergency operations plan and will influence registration planning.

The Information Manager will want to ensure that any links between the assessment and ongoing monitoring needs are taken into consideration by the RIM WG and operational leads. For example, needs assessment information that shows severe problems with a particular sector in a particular type of community can be used as a trigger to establish an ongoing monitoring system for those problems in those types of communities. The accuracy of an assessment report should also be verified by the Assessment Team, with assessment limitations acknowledged in the final results.

In addition to the assessment report, the initial rapid assessment will contribute to camp profiles, SitReps and funding appeals, as well as other information products. A "refugee dashboard" – a one- or two-page visualization of key needs assessment information – may be produced to show the results.

A shared communication strategy for the results will need to be discussed and agreed upon within the Assessment Team. In some situations, two versions of the assessment report – one for internal audiences and one for external audiences – may need to be produced.

7.4 POST EMERGENCY NEEDS ASSESSMENT: MONITORING AND ADDITIONAL ASSESSMENTS

Monitoring should continue on a regular basis following the assessment results, with the resulting analysis included in camp profiles, mapping and other information products. The needs assessment will set a new baseline against which the situation may be compared in the coming weeks and months.

7.5 A TEMPLATES

- Annex 1: Minimum Sectoral Data Tracking Tool
- Annex 2: Prioritization Graph
- Annex 3: Draft UNHCR NARE Full Version
- Annex 4: Draft UNHCR NARE Pocket Version
- Annex 5: Draft UNHCR Focus Group Discussion Quick Instructions

7.6 B EXAMPLES

- Annex 6: South Sudan Indicators Monitoring Sheet
- Annex 7: Sector Lead Indicator Reporting Form
- Annex 8: Example Dollo Ado Assessment Inventory
- Annex 9: Example Upper Nile Unity Basic Indicators and Standards

7.7 C REFERENCE DOCUMENTS AND LINKS

- For more information on conducting an Emergency Needs Assessment, see IASC, *Operational Guidance for Coordinated Assessments in Humanitarian Crises,* October 2011.
- Detailed guidance on the cluster approach is provided in the, IASC Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response, 24 November 2006.