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Technical Brief:

Direct Observation and Key Informant Interview Techniques for primary data collection during rapid assessments

Technical Brief – Direct Observation and Key Informant Interview Techniques

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Direct observation and key informant techniques for primary data collection during rapid assessments

1. Introduction

Observation and assessment of external information are so fundamental to human nature that it is difficult to describe their application to data collection methods in disaster needs assessments. To successfully understand the roles that observation and communicated information play in data collection during rapid needs assessments, it helps to consider two distinctions: firstly, the difference between *data and information*; and secondly, the distinction between *'normal' and strategic interaction*.

Systematic observation and consultation of affected populations to elicit community knowledge and perceptions during the primary data collection aspect of rapid needs assessments produces *information*. Assessment team members, while observing an affected community, will ask questions directly *to* the affected population through interviews and group discussion and *of* the affected area through observation. Only by using tools such as check-lists do these information gathering processes generate *data*.

Assessment teams have limited control over who they interact with, and in what composition and sequence. The initial contact with an affected community is usually with community leaders. This first meeting establishes mutual trust and understanding between the assessment team and the community. It also communicates how the community leaders perceive and define the initial impact of the disaster upon their community.

Members of the affected community become *key informants (KIs)* and provide information on behalf of the community when the following expectations are operational:

- When the assessment team expects the KIs to know local conditions and have the authority to share this information.
- When the community expects the KIs to handle the contact with the assessment team for the benefit of the community.

These two sets of expectations are not identical and both the assessment team and the community will act and interact in ways that are *strategic*. The assessment team, by definition, will have limited time to spend with individual KIs and will need to verify or cross-check community input. A close-ended communication style is imposed by the team's goal to collect relevant disaster impact information rather than capture local narratives.

From the community and KI perspective, strategic concerns may be more complex. They will depend on political, cultural, gender, and other considerations impacting community organisation and leadership at the affected location. Their expectation and anticipation of potential humanitarian support will also affect the information they communicate¹. This may be further affected when one or more community members have an awareness of humanitarian agencies and emergency response processes.

¹ Even with the assessment team communicating that participation in a rapid needs assessment does not indicate preferential humanitarian assistance, during an emergency situation, affected populations will still hope that it might.

1.1 In practice

These observations outline a basic canvas for structured observation and the use of key informants. The practical consequences of this understanding for rapid needs assessments and their use of observation and key informants are threefold.

Firstly, because learning is an ongoing process for both assessment teams and the communities they are assessing, both parties may benefit from a two visit assessment process (it may happen in phase 1-2, or in phase 2-3). This enables both the assessment teams and the communities they are assessing to revise their initial messages and types, detail, and content of information they are sharing regarding priority needs resulting from the disaster in light of exposure to the assessment process.

Secondly, because conceptual learning for assessment teams occurs within a context of changing environment (both physical and human) during an assessment, team members may benefit from modifying data collection tools. They may also benefit from adjusting their communication style with communities as the assessment is ongoing and they are able to integrate positive, and negative, feedback from community leaders and assessment participants. Check lists should remain open for modification as should methods of communication with community leaders and types (and style) of data collected during KIs.

Finally, as the assessment process is ongoing, the need to collect general information on the affected population will continue to be contained by the need to capture that information in concise and comparable data formats. It is necessary to continue to collect qualitative information, which identifies the subjective nature of the disaster's impact. At the same time, certain disaster types have similar consequences wherever they happen and can more easily standardize data collection. Assessment teams will need to combine both general information and specific data to ensure a complete picture of affected persons and their communities.

Ultimately, the key to using direct observation and key informants most effectively during data collection in a rapid needs assessment is to maximize observation, comparing as much as possible as openly as possible, while restricting information gathering to those fundamental elements which can be used to inform decision makers on:

- who is most affected,
- where they are,
- what their key priority needs are.

2. Objectives

Effective information gathering and data collection during the initial stages of an emergency depend on the optimal and appropriate application of tools and methods. The use of the wrong tools at the wrong time results in useless and extraneous information which draws valuable time and effort from the assessment process and vice versa.

Experience from disaster affected communities shows that direct observation and key informant interviews are effective data collection methods for the initial phases of needs assessment. Direct observation provides a snapshot picture of an affected location while the tools for recording direct observation impressions enable the assessment team to make critical sense of those impressions. Likewise, key informant interviews provide the assessment team with the impressions given by a community spokesperson on their behalf.

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Information from key informant interviews can be combined to create a shared impression of community members as to the impact of a disaster upon their community.

Both direct observation and key informant interviews can be carried out quickly and with relatively few resources during an emergency. They are typically used together during primary field data collection (phases 1 and 2) for maximum impact.

This technical brief provides an overview of these two commonly used techniques for rapid primary data collection while recognizing the operational constraints of crisis situations. The brief outlines a detailed step-by-step approach on how to undertake **direct observation** and **key informant interviews**.

This technical brief is intended for use by assessment team members who aspire to improve their primary data collection techniques for **rapid coordinated assessments** as well as for training/briefing purposes.

3. Primary Data Collection

Phase 1 of an assessment is defined as a Preliminary Scenario Definition and is achieved through initial assessments where estimates of the scale and severity of the disaster's impact are determined to support initial response decisions. This phase is completed in the first days following a disaster. Phase 2 of assessment is defined as a multi-cluster/sector rapid assessment and completed within two weeks of a disaster.

Primary data is most generally understood as data collected directly from the information source itself and which has not undergone analysis before reaching the analytical phase of the needs assessment². Primary data is collected directly from members of the affected population by the assessment team through field work.

Primary data collection during rapid assessments can have different or multiple purposes. Box 1 below describes some reasons to undertake primary data collection.

Box 1: The purpose of primary data collection

- Gather information not available through review of secondary data.
- Confirm or refute information provided by secondary data.
- Provide a qualitative picture of the range of impacts of the disaster and identify risk factors.
- Identify priority groups and locations requiring immediate humanitarian response.
- Ensure that the affected population participates in identifying priorities.
- Identify key informants and priority sites for further data collection or monitoring.

² ACAPS 2011, Technical Brief on Qualitative and Quantitative Data.

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It is recommended that primary data collection during an initial and rapid needs assessment (phase 1 and 2 of assessment) take place at the **community level**³. Constraints of time, access and logistics mean that collecting meaningful quantities of data at the household or individual level is generally not possible at this stage. Moreover, the collection and recording of large sets of qualitative data have proven difficult to analyse within the tight timeframes required for phase 1 and 2 assessment and decision making.

4. Data Collection Techniques

This section describes both direct observation and key informant interview techniques and approaches.

4.1 Direct Observation

Observation is often underrated as a data collection method. Everyone collects direct observation information, knowingly or unknowingly. However, employing direct observation as an effective assessment tool requires consciously using, and recording, what is seen, heard, and smelled to help shape our understanding of a situation or a problem.

Observation is also a good way to cross-check people's answers to questions. Its use may generate questions for further investigation and help form future discussions or frame questions in case of inconsistency between what the interviewer or a key informant observes and what the respondents are saying.

There are two approaches to Direct Observation⁴. Firstly, during **structured observation**, the observer is **looking for** a specific behaviour, object or event. For example, when an observer looks to see if the population uses soap before and after meals, structured observation can help answer the question. Structured observation can also be used to detect the non-existence of a specific issue (e.g. to see if a population is not using soap before and after meals). To guide structured observation, a checklist is normally developed to function both as a reminder and a recording tool.

Secondly, during **unstructured observation**, the observer is **looking at** how things are done and what issues exist. For instance, if an observer is interested in knowing how people move in and out of a camp, unstructured observation is an appropriate method. To guide unstructured observation, a short set of open ended questions can be developed that will be answered based on observations.

4.1.1 Strengths and Limitations of Direct Observation

Direct observation can be used to rapidly collect different types of information in an emergency situation. It does not require costly resources, or detailed training, which makes it a quick data collection process that is easy to implement.

However, because direct observation as a data collection technique provides a snapshot of the situation, it has limited power in a rapidly changing situation or where there is substantial population movement. Furthermore, it provides limited information about capacities and

³ The Operational Guidance for Coordinated Assessments in Humanitarian crises (NATF, Feb 2011).

⁴ Child Protection Rapid Assessment Toolkit as of January 2011.

priorities of the people⁵. Finally, while specific training is not a prerequisite for effective direct observation, some preparation is necessary to ensure that the observers are aware that their own perceptions and expectations are subjective and impact upon how they report and interpret their observations. The gender, age, ethnicity and previous disaster response experience of the observer can all effect the interpretation of data collected during observation. Particular sector specializations (e.g. protection, WASH, shelter, etc.) of observers also may influence their observation findings, as observers may focus observation on their own area of specialization or misinterpret information outside of their specialization. The technical expertise required to answer particular observation questions should match the level of technical expertise of the observers.

4.1.2 Basic Principles of Direct Observation

This section outlines basic principles for direct observation before, during and after primary data collection.

Before the field assessment

Every data collection instrument (e.g. questionnaire, interview checklist) should make provision and space for direct observation comments and notes as they help add context and meaning to the data collected.

Table 1: Recording Observations⁶

Example of form for recording observations			
Location	Observation	Significance	Follow-up
Village X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor drainage around well; spilled water flowing back into the well Animals walking around the well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water contamination likely to lead to diarrheal disease, particularly among young children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate household water usage: do people boil and/or treat water?

Data collectors must be informed of the value of their observations through pre-field visit preparation, and understand how direct observation links with other data collection tools. There will be further benefit from instruction on why and how to systematically record direct observation in questionnaires or through separate checklists, while ensuring that their observations are separated from the respondents' comments or responses.

It can be useful to hire an interpreter to help make sense of local observations and clarify assumptions about issues raised during direct observation. However, as with the data collectors themselves, interpreters will have their own cultural prejudices and biases which need to be made overt when analysing information collected during direct observation. For example, an urban, educated translator from a differing ethnic group may have different perceptions about an affected population than someone with less education who is from a rural community and is of an ethnic group present in the assessment locality.

During the field assessment

Direct observation starts upon initial entry into an assessment site, much before an interview or discussion. Field assessors should observe conditions and particular features from **a range**

⁵ Adopted from the Guidance on Profiling Internally Displaced Persons, NRC's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and UN OCHA, April 2008 Edition.

⁶ Modified from the 2009 WFP EFSA Handbook.

of viewpoints and places to provide a representative view of the affected area. Often things seen on the drive into the area or upon entering the village on foot provide valuable contextual data. If there is a high point, such as a hill or a tall building, the site should be observed from above to get a sense of the conditions and variations across the site.

After an introduction to relevant community leaders, a community assessment should start with a **walk around the location**. Walking through the area with local people facilitates discussion and can be an excellent way to come across unexpected information.

Assessors should also spend time in communal or public places (cafés, tea shops, markets, religious buildings). Look around and talk to people. A local market is an excellent first stop in the observation process as it gives a useful picture of what is available, what people produce, buy and sell as well as what the prices are for basic commodities.

Observation provides immediate information for assessing the status of existing infrastructure. Driving along a road is a sure way of finding out if it is passable, but be careful in conflict areas where landmines and explosive remnants of war may pose security problems.

During the assessment, take the opportunity to **observe with an open mind, compare as much as possible, but restrict the information gathering to what can be processed, condensed and analysed** within the assessment time frame.

Observe:

- People's physical condition and activities
- Children, older persons, the chronically ill, and those persons with disabilities
- Housing, properties, livestock, assets, etc.
- Where appropriate, the daily lives of women (be aware that in some cultural settings, it is inappropriate and disrespectful for men to observe and/or interview women)
- The state of public services, sanitation systems, and infrastructure (e.g. schools, water points, health posts etc.)
- If possible, power relationships within the community and whether people from different groups have different coping mechanisms or access to aid.

Box 2: Key sites for observation

Water collection points, latrines, communal washing areas, schools, storage facilities, grave sites, markets, health facilities and religious centres.

Record both **what was expected to be evident in the community as well as what was not observed**. The absence of people in the market, of children in the schools, of men or women in displaced population groups is as important as their presence.

Where culturally acceptable and the security situation permits, take pictures. Photos, video footage and even sketches can be useful in communicating to others the reality of the situation⁷. When photographing individuals or photographing when physically in an affected community, always ask permission before taking pictures. Be sensitive to the fact that taking photographs of affected persons can both endanger them (in conflict settings) or be highly inappropriate (such as men photographing women). Do not endanger the assessment team by attempting to take photos where they are prohibited, e.g. in military installations.

⁷ Modified from 2000 IFRC Disaster assessment guideline.

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Cross-check information. If discussing water, ask to see the water source. If people describe unfamiliar foods or building methods, ask to see them. Direct observation can be used for on the spot triangulation for the responses, discussion, and explanations given by affected persons. However, there is only so much that a team can do in a day, in terms of trying out different methods and integrating information across them. Fatigue, as the day lengthens, interferes with the team members' capacity for note-taking, mental review and comparing, and sensible further questioning of KIs. It is often more productive to have fewer observations and meetings, but to conduct these more slowly, with careful note-taking and opportunities for both the team and the community to make revisions and then actually use the precious information.

Meet with the whole assessment team at least once during the fieldwork day at each site to review progress and decide which important places still need attention before leaving the site. This helps avoid gaps in gathering essential data about important points.

At the end of the field assessment visit, meet with community representatives. Explain what has been done and seen, share the initial conclusions, and inform the community how this information will be used. Be sure not to make commitments or promises regarding assistance.

After the field assessment

A debrief between assessment team members should be organised by the team leader to collect observations from the team, triangulate information and wrap up final conclusions of the field visit. Direct observations must be transferred from individual checklists to a data summary sheet where necessary.

Highlight areas where team observations and population responses do not match to enable further analysis of discrepancies and identify triangulation needs.

4.1.3 Do's and Don'ts of Direct Observation

Box 3: Do's and Don'ts of Direct Observation

Do:

- Enter the observation process without pre-conceived notions and fixed expectations.
- Note observations made and information volunteered that are related to subjects beyond *formal assessment* concerns. Be prepared to follow advice from people met in the locations, and use the opportunity to observe things which were not planned.
- Walk across the community outside of predefined routes such as roads, paths or natural boundaries to obtain a cross-section of points for observation and provide a balanced view of conditions.
- Record information which is contradictory or surprising to expectations⁸.
- Keep focused to make useful comparisons.
- Be active and curious in the observation process. Observation is not just about seeing, but also about hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and touching.
- Be aware of what was not seen. Note the absence of services and infrastructure.
- Respect local culture. Community members are observing you just as much as you are observing them. Follow local rules of behaviour, e.g. do not smoke during interviews. Be aware of gender dynamics and ensure that the teams reflect this. Be sensitive to local concerns, e.g. if there is a shortage of food and water, do not consume food in front of affected community members.

Don't:

- Begin the observation process with a set of expectations or seek to record data primarily to prove a pre-existing hypothesis.
- Rely on remembering information. Record observations on a checklist.
- Focus solely on misery and destitution. Be aware of capacities, opportunities, and social capital within the affected community.
- Be intrusive. Take steps to be as sensitive and respectful as possible⁹.
- Take a photograph without asking prior permission.

⁸ Roberto, Michael, 2010, Principles for effective observation.

⁹ Oxfam, Food Security Assessment Guidelines, 2003.

4.2 Key Informant interviews

In addition to direct observation, KI interviews are a commonly used data collection technique for rapid assessments. A KI interview is one where an individual with prior knowledge of the affected community is questioned to gather key information on the impact of the disaster and on priority community needs. The crucial element of a KI interview is that the informant is well versed in information about his/her community, its inhabitants¹⁰, the site visited, or the emergency¹¹ either because of his professional background, leadership role or personal experience. Typically a KI is a local leader whether civil, government or religious.

This initial group of KIs may be highly diverse in perspective and competency. Their personal knowledge of the disaster situation may also greatly vary as well as their expectations of what relief and reconstruction agencies will do for their community. KIs may know surprisingly little or may contradict each other's response. KIs may further retract their initial descriptions of the impact of the disaster when a more powerful individual joins the discussion and offers a different assessment.

The heterogeneity of KIs and strategic interaction of both assessment team members and KI respondents needs to be considered. In theory, the community would need more time than the one day assessment to agree on and harmonize key community messages. Follow-up meetings in short order would be desirable. However, this is not practical under the time pressure of phase 1 and 2 assessments. Therefore, the one-point information exchange tends to focus on areas of ready agreement. For example, in coastal cyclones in Bangladesh, assessment teams and KIs may emphasize the destruction of homes and public buildings. By contrast, the problem of salinity in rice paddies filled with sea water, and therefore the issue of resuming traditional farming vs. converting to shrimp ponds (where poor people regularly lose out), may take much longer time to rise to proper attention.

Second, the sophistication of communities in working with assessment teams varies greatly, and sometimes inversely with needs (because communities with more sophisticated key informants are probably those which even in normal times have greater diversified human and social capital, and thus should be more resilient to disasters). Under time pressure, teams visiting sophisticated communities may be happy to accept an already widely elaborated self-assessment wholesale, with some of the most vocal key informants literally looking over the shoulders of team members and directing them how to fill out check lists.

In less sophisticated communities, assessment teams (particularly locally hired enumerators) may studiously work with community leaders on plausible scenarios until a "cognitive consensus" is reached. For example, claimed measles vaccination coverage of 80 percent before the disaster may reflect favourably on the village, but may be sufficiently problematic in the current circumstances to attract assistance. In other words, from a traditional survey quality perspective, measurement error may be major, yet is socially accepted.

¹⁰ Adopted from the Guidance on Profiling Internally Displaced Persons, NRC's Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and UN OCHA, April 2008 Edition.

¹¹ 2009 WFP EFSA Handbook.

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In communities least tuned into administrative discourse, observation of physical events including destruction, illness symptoms may be favoured by teams who cannot find key informants speaking a language they can understand themselves or through translation. Alternatively, influential persons from neighbouring communities may accompany teams to such sites, e.g. teachers from a central village with students from an outlying village to serve as interpreters. They would interpret for teams linguistically as well as substantively, by helping define impacts and needs. In northern Iraq in 2003, landmine survey teams elevated multiple villages to new survey targets after visiting the central villages and taking guidance as to where to delineate distinct settlements¹².

However, *regular* citizens can also be valuable KIs because they can share their representative and personal experience. For example, a young female household head may be able to highlight priority needs from the perspective of a mother; likewise a person who is unable to walk without assistance may be able to highlight challenges that certain strata of the community face in accessing aid due to mobility challenges. While not traditionally considered to be KIs, these individuals can provide a unique perspective of the experience of *typical* members of the affected community.

Key informant interviews may be used to:

- Obtain technical information from people representing specific professions, such as health workers or school teachers
- Gain specific knowledge about a specific topic or sector (e.g. interviewing a water committee representative)
- Delve into sensitive and protection issues that may not be appropriate for group discussion.

4.2.1 Strengths and Limitations of Key Informant Interviews

KI interviews can be organised quickly and carried out with few resources. They have particular value in gaining a perspective of the impact of the disaster on a community where access to affected populations has been compromised or is difficult. They also provide a holistic and qualitative overview of the impact of a disaster on community members.

The greatest limitation of a KI interview is that it provides a subjective perspective on the impact of a disaster. As with all individual responses, information will have both an individual and a cultural bias which needs to be considered when analysing KI interview responses.

4.2.2 Choosing Semi-structured or Structured Interviews

This section provides an overview of how to undertake a KI interview and which issues need to be taken into account. A KI interview can be semi-structured or structured.

¹² Even if chiefly for the purpose of lengthening their employment.

Semi-structured interview (checklist):

A semi-structured interview is a guided interview in which a limited set of questions are decided ahead of time¹³. The questions are open ended, with the aim of stimulating discussion on a given topic. Box 4 describes open and closed ended questions. When conducting a semi-structured interview, the interviewer uses a checklist or question outline instead of a questionnaire and tries to build a relaxed and constructive relationship with the KI through a conversational approach. This requires the interviewer to be familiar with general cultural considerations, be sensitive to the interviewee, and not be judgmental or too set in their pre conceived ideas. While understanding the language can be an advantage¹⁴, the more important concern is to cross-check translation to ensure that the concerns of the interviewee rather than those of the translator are being captured.

Analysing findings from semi-structured interviews entails a labour-intensive process given that there is often a greater range of answers and responses than in other forms of information collection. One way to do this is to try to summarize answers by main points raised and then create a limited number of sub categories. This will help determine how interviewees prioritised or de-prioritised certain issues. Another option is to summarise the interview into a single summary sheet listing the sectors and sub sectors affected as well as the concerns and priorities expressed by the population. When comparing different interviews across affected communities, the findings of the different summary sheets can be aggregated into one and information analysed to identify patterns and areas of concern.

Box 4: Types of questions

Close ended questions have specific answers, which are normally short, with yes/no or categorical answers. They are generally easy to aggregate and analyse as they do not required complex recoding operations.

Open ended questions have no fixed set of responses allowing the respondent to answer as s/he sees fit. They allow the respondent to think and reflect, and give the respondent a chance to voice their answers in their own words¹. Analysis demands the ability to rank priorities and compare qualitative responses holistically.

Structured interview (questionnaire):

In its simplest form, a structured interview involves one person asking another person a list of pre-determined questions about selected topics using a questionnaire. The aim of a structured interview is to ensure that each KI is asked exactly the same questions preferably in the same order. This ensures that answers can be accurately aggregated and that comparisons can be made with confidence between sample sub-groups or between different assessment periods.

A list of predicted options for answers to the questions can be included so that assessors simply need to *tick the box*. This saves time and increases accuracy in the field. However, the assessment teams need to take care not to lead respondents by reading out the options. The questionnaire must also always have a space for assessors to include options other than those which have been pre-defined.

Design of a good questionnaire demands technical expertise, experience and a good understanding of the context. Structured interviews are recommended for phase 2

¹³ 2006 UNDAC Handbook

¹⁴ World Food Program, EFSA, 2009

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assessments when findings of phase 1 assessment provide practical recommendations on information needs and areas requiring further investigation¹⁵.

Structured interviews can be time consuming and care should be taken to keep them focused and limit the number of questions asked. Experience from post disaster responses indicates that spending roughly an hour per interview and selecting a cross-section of KIs maximises the range and quality of information gathered.

4.2.3 How to select Key Informants

During rapid assessments, KIs are selected to provide general information about population profiles and movement trends, security, and sector issues (water, environment and sanitation, food security/nutrition, shelter, health, protection, environment, education, etc.).

The number and type of KIs selected per location will depend on the range of expertise or perspective available from the pool of KIs, the nature of the disaster, the availability of people and the time that can be spent at the site. When identifying the KIs, remember to arrange interviews with individuals of different genders, ages, and religious and/or ethnic minorities to ensure a full picture of the affected community. It is important that the assessors take into account power dynamics within a community and that opposing social groups (strata) do not speak for one another.

As noted in section 4.2, a KI can also be an individual who represents certain aspects of the community and can provide meaningful indications about access, risks, priorities, vulnerabilities and capacities at the community level.

Box 5. Useful resource persons for rapid assessment in emergencies may include

At district/local level, representative(s) of:

Government authorities, local leaders, village elders, police, army, fire service, rescue services, NGOs, civil defence, IFRC/ICRC, international and national relief teams/organizations officers, religious leaders, UN national staff, doctors, nurses, TBAs, evacuation centre focal point, teachers, etc.

At capital level, representative(s) of:

National authorities, UNDAC and UN agencies members, geographical institutes, departments of meteorology/hydrology, agencies, NGOs, embassies, OCHA staff, etc.

Where an affected community includes different population groups, such as a host population and a displaced population, key informants should be selected from all groups of interest¹⁶. Groups should be divided based on heterogeneity of experience: if one group is likely to experience the humanitarian crisis in a significantly different way than another group, each group should have its own key informant. Box 5 provides examples of people who can be useful key informants.

4.2.4 Basic Principles of Key Informant Interviews¹⁷

Before the assessment

Involve experts in the design and planning of the assessment, especially for the sampling, the site selection process, the design and translation of the questionnaire.

¹⁵ Phase 1 assessment will support the design of an appropriate and adapted questionnaire as well as to guide the site selection process in phase 2 of assessment.

¹⁶ 2009 Initial Rapid Assessment Guidance Notes.

¹⁷ 2007 Initial Rapid Assessment Guidance Notes.

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Field test the data collection instrument and refine it as necessary. A field test will provide a good indication of the complexity of the data collection instrument and the time required to complete it. Questions which KIs have difficulty understanding or which make them feel uncomfortable or prone to providing false answers should be re-worded, replaced or removed following the field test.

Plan the field data collection carefully. Ensure that there is enough time to carry out KI interviews. Remember to inform the authorities of the assessment itinerary and bring credential letters to the assessment locations which explain the assessment objectives.

Choose an appropriate and experienced assessment team. Ensure gender and age balance within the team(s) as well as translators if necessary. Divide tasks according to the expertise of team members.

Ensure team members are properly trained to achieve accurate and precise assessments. Team members should be briefed on and understand the objectives, methodology and principles of the rapid assessment and the possible interventions that could be implemented as a result of it. Each interviewer should be thoroughly familiar with the data collection process and the information being elicited by each question. Provide field notes that explain and define key terminology and outline site sampling.

During the assessment

Select the identified KI (see box 6¹⁸). Be aware of the KI's situation, what activities they are engaged in, and what their surroundings are. Interview people in a safe place that is convenient to them and adapt to their needs.

Make sure people understand why they were asked to participate as a KI and what will be done with the information they share. Do not raise expectations.

Ensure good communication and informed consent. Participants must understand that they are not required to participate in the interview. Make sure they understand that a lack of participation will not negatively impact them.

Box 6: Reduce bias while selecting respondents

Remember that communities are not homogeneous. Gather and weigh information from local sources that represent different interest groups, including marginalised persons. For example, select informants from both host and displaced populations, where present.

Define the different characteristics of people to consult (e.g. those most affected by the crisis, IDPs, minority ethnic groups, etc). When conducting key informant interviews, check who is present against this criteria. Note groups that are not represented.

Wherever possible, **consult the affected population directly**, including women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and ethnic or religious minorities. The poorest and most socially excluded people in the affected community are likely to be worst hit by the crisis. Do not rely only on information from official sources and those in power as they do not always represent excluded groups in their communities.

The full list of questions may not necessarily be covered during the interview. The order in which questions are asked may change according to which KI is interviewed first. However,

¹⁸ Source: 2010 UNICEF JENA.

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consistency in the order of question asked does make data compilation and analysis easier. Nevertheless, it is important to be flexible and adapt according to specific situations. Be aware that the more difference there is between the way information is collected at different sites, the more challenging and time consuming it will be to build an overall picture of the humanitarian impact in the affected area during the analysis phase.

Start the interview with general questions about the situation and allow the interviewee to raise issues of concern to them before guiding the conversation to the subjects of interest to the assessment team. Ask questions that are factual and relatively straightforward to answer first, and move on to more sensitive issues only when the KI is more at ease (build trust before asking intimate, private or potentially endangering questions).

Ensure that the translator understands the subject and vocabulary of the interview and is able to forge a respectful relationship with interviewees.

Take notes throughout the interview; ensure that the information is transferred safely and without distortion.

Combine interviews with observation to verify information and correct inconsistencies¹⁹.

Consult the people affected and not only their *official* representative. Consider the needs of different groups and individuals, seek out marginalised groups and ensure their interests are taken into account.

When an interview does not yield the overall perspective needed, politely bring the discussion to an end, thank the interviewees for their time, and seek other KIs to talk with²⁰.

Structure the interview with each KI informant with care. Make sure KIs know that their time and participation is valued. Do not end the interview too abruptly.

Give KIs the opportunity to ask questions or share their thoughts on issues that have not yet been discussed. Be careful not to raise unrealistic expectations of aid.

Record metadata (such as date, location of interview, social role of interviewee, group represented by the interviewee, etc.) for each KI, as this information will be used in the interpretation of the data.

After the assessment

Conduct a debriefing at the end of the assessment day to give assessment team members the opportunity to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the interviews and the interview process. Compare findings, views and impressions. Gather observational information, anecdotes, or concerns not captured in the data collection form. Consider the reliability of the key informants as well as the team bias. All of this information should be considered and included in the final report.

¹⁹ 2007 Initial Rapid Assessment Guidance Notes.

²⁰ 2009 Initial Rapid Assessment Guidance Notes.

Endeavour to maintain communication with the visited communities and inform KIs about how the information they provided is being used and what follow up actions are being taken. Share the final report with them if possible.

4.2.5 Do's and Don'ts for Key Informant Interviews²¹

Box 7 – Do's and Don'ts for Key Informant Interviews

Do:

- Introduce the assessment team and ask permission to carry out the interview. Build trust with the KIs, give them time to talk about their priorities or express grief.
- Ask to take notes or use a PDA to record the interview. With a PDA, explain what it is and how it works.
- Be sensitive to the time needed to complete the interview. Be aware that the KI may have pressing obligations or may have no obligations and just needs to talk.
- Make sure the data collection instrument has space for capturing direct observation comments and notes. Keep the data collection instrument brief.
- Avoid/limit open ended questions in the data collection instrument for phase 2.
- Choose your key informants well. Know the information gap and identify the KI best able to finding the missing information.
- Choose a limited number of critical topics to discuss the KI.
- Be alert to non-verbal signs and behaviours which indicate how comfortable the KI is with the interview. If the KI is uncomfortable with the questions, do not insist they answer.
- Be consistent. Use the same methods in each community visited. Record data consistently to ease comparisons and highlight obvious differences that stand out.
- Record access routes, time taken and other logistical tips to help future plans.
- Give voice to all vulnerable groups, specifically women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities and religious and ethnic minorities.

Don't:

- Waste time talking as a whole team to one KI (apart from initial introduction to authorities or other *gatekeepers*).
- Substitute direct observation for the KI's answer or explanation to a question²². Where direct observation differs from a respondent's answer, note this and try to determine potential reasons why this may be the case.

²¹ 2008 and 2009 Initial Rapid Assessment Guidance Notes

- Put the KI in a compromising situation by conducting an individual interview. Explain to community observers why the specific KI was chosen and what topic you want to discuss.
- Interrogate respondents as an extractive process.
- Create expectations about future humanitarian support.
- Monopolise the time of individual interviewees. Especially during times of crisis, people have their own priorities.
- Limit information to one KI's response. Triangulate by asking other KIs until you are confident that there is consensus on this point
- Induce particular answers by helping an interviewee to respond.
- Ask questions that may stigmatise people or endanger them.
- Use people's names when collecting information. Ensure the anonymity of the data collected, but if key protection risks are observed, refer them confidentially to Protection Cluster colleagues for appropriate and confidential follow up.
- Prevent KIs from asking you questions at the end of the interview.
- Let a translator answer a question for the interviewee or dominate the interview process.

5. Reference documents and further reading

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²² 2005 IMAS Data collection and needs assessment.

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