7 NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

7.1 OVERVIEW AND FUNCTION

Needs assessments are data-collection and analysis exercises conducted at a single point in time, providing a **snapshot of the condition** of the affected population, including protection issues, availability of resources, the context as well as the sources of problems and their impact on the affected population. Their purpose is to identify protection needs, risks, and solutions in order to inform programme interventions and response activities complementary with positive community coping mechanisms and existing resources.

To be effective, assessments **must be joint or harmonised** and engage all relevant actors in a sustained multi-stakeholder collaboration, from planning to analysis to dissemination. In addition, they must **build on existing knowledge and data** to avoid duplication and reduce the risks and burdens to those involved.

Needs assessments are key to ensuring:

- Humanitarian assistance and protection is both rights-based and needs-based.
- Humanitarian assistance and protection promotes and does not undermine safe local coping mechanisms and capacities.
- The respective needs of different population groups are identified and understood (for example: age, sex to socio-economic factors and other issues).
- Decisions regarding humanitarian assistance and protection are based on verifiable information.

Although information and data may be complementary, needs assessments are different from monitoring systems as these are intended to continuously collect information on affected areas and people to track changes and trends over time.

Needs assessments gather and analyse both quantitative and qualitative information on the condition of the affected population (protection threats, capacity, vulnerabilities) **at a specific time and place** (as defined by the scope and scale of the assessment) and provide info on:

- Protection risks, threats, and vulnerabilities.
- Needs related to the condition of the affected populations.
- Existing capacities and coping strategies.
- Severity of conditions faced by different groups within the population.

7.2 HOW-TO GUIDE

Detailed information and guidance on conducting and coordinating needs assessments is available in the UNHCR Needs Assessment Handbook (August 2017) and the supporting toolkit (available at: needsassesment.unhcr. org).

The Handbook describes **UNHCR's roles** in the coordination of humanitarian needs assessments and offers **practical guidance** on how to conduct needs assessments and analysis for informed decision-making and needs-based response planning.[1] The Needs Assessment Handbook is structured in two parts. The first - recommended for all audiences - provides guidance on different types of assessments, outlines the principles guiding all assessment activities, sets out UNHCR's roles and responsibilities in different situations, and provides an overview of the steps to conduct needs assessments.

[1] UNHCR, Programme Manual (Chapter 4), 2016.

The second part of the Handbook provides detailed practical guidance on how to conduct needs assessments in the field. It can be used as a reference text, with readers referring to specific steps and sections as needed based on their role in the operation or the needs assessment, and the type of situation.

7.2.1 When to conduct a needs assessment

Needs assessments are appropriate and recommended when:

- A new crisis has emerged.
- A sudden and/or substantial change happens in an existing crisis.
- Contingency planning is being undertaken.
- Change in policy, political environment or funding provides new opportunities and additional information is required.

There are three different degrees of coordination for assessments: joint, harmonized or uncoordinated as detailed in the chart below:

Table 1 Coordinated assessment modalities

Type	Definition	Output	Implementation
Joint Needs Assessment JOINT ✓Single assessment form ✓Single methodology ✓Single report	Data collection, processing, and analysis form a single process among agencies. All agencies and organizations involved in planning and design follow the same methodology and use the same tools.	A single report representing the agreed interpretation and analysis of needs by several agencies or organizations.	• Establish a multi-organization coalition through which to pool resources to support the assessment. • Agree with partners on common methodologies and data collection tools including internationally recognized best practices for researching, documenting, and monitoring protection concerns. • Conduct a joint analysis to agree on the interpretation of findings
Harmonized Needs Assessment HARMONIZED ✓Multiple assessments with common indicators ✓Standardized approach ✓Joint analysis	Data collection, processing, and analysis are conducted separately, adhering to shared standards such as the use of key indicators and common operational datasets, including geographical standards.	Multiple needs assessments reports or databases that can be cross-analysed, aggregated, and used for a shared or joint analysis.	• Agree with partners on which population classifications and indicators will be used across multiple needs assessments. • Use the IASC Common Operational Datasets and UNHCR data standards. • Share needs assessments to cross-analyse results.
Uncoordinated Assessments UNCOORDINATED ✓Multiple Assessments ✓Multiple Methodologies ✓Multiple Reports	Datasets are not interoperable, and results cannot be used to inform the overall analysis.	'Over-assessment' leads to risks and harms that outweigh benefits for individuals and communities. Avoid this situation using one of the two techniques outlined above.	• Multiple disconnected assessment reports that may or may not be available for distribution. Duplicated or 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).

Needs assessment should be carried out periodically and after substantial changes in the context[2].

7.3 UNHCR roles and responsibilities

The Needs Assessment Handbook provides guidance on the core coordination models by context, along with guidance on the specific roles of UNHCR staff in preparation for, during or after an assessment as outlined in brief below.

7.3.1 UNHCR Representative

The UNHCR Representative should assume overall responsibility for assessments and take appropriate measures to demonstrate effective leadership in coordinated assessments:

- have a comprehensive cross-sectoral assessment strategy;
- dedicate resources (financial and staff, including: Protection, Programme and IM colleagues) to strengthen needs assessment planning and response;
- coordinate with the government and local authorities;
- focus on conducting intra and inter-agency joint and/or harmonized assessments where possible;
- actively participate in assessment coordination fora chaired by OCHA in IDP situations;
- host inter-agency assessment coordination working groups in refugee situations.

7.3.2 UNHCR Protection staff

UNHCR Protection staff have a key role to play in assessments:

- working with Programme, and IM colleagues to undertake a comprehensive desk review and the development of an assessment strategy for their operation; including making use of existing data to avoid over-assessment and duplication;
- identifying what data and information is sensitive in the operation context, and promoting appropriate measures to adhere to Protection Information Management and data protection principles;
- leading specific assessments, including protection assessments in IDP and refugee settings and specific, protection-focused participatory assessment exercises, including those relating to sensitive issues such as child protection, SGBV, and vulnerable groups;
- training and sensitizing data collectors and stakeholders on safe and ethical protection principles and good practices;
- participating in conducting intra and inter-agency joint and/or harmonized assessments where possible; including in assessment coordination fora chaired by OCHA in IDP situations;
- identifying protection proxy indicators in other sectors' assessment data;
- advocating for the systematic inclusion of protection-related questions (including coping mechanisms and community capacities) into needs assessment methodologies.

7.3.3 UNHCR Programme staff

UNHCR Programme staff have the most important role in the assessment process, particularly when they are part of the regular programme cycle. Core tasks should include:

- initiating and managing joint assessment processes to support annual (and multi-year) programme processes;
- working with protection, technical and information and data management colleagues in the

[2] Protection Information Management (PIM), PIM Matrix, 2017, available online here.

development of a comprehensive assessment strategy and an analytical framework to support assessment processes;
- coordinating with technical staff to ensure efficient use of resources, information and timing with specific sectoral assessments;
- ensuring assessment results and data are shared between staff and with partners and affected populations;
- providing response and programme monitoring data for secondary data reviews, including making use of other organization's secondary data to avoid duplication and identify gaps;
- linking assessment results and findings to budget prioritization, response planning, and programming.

7.3.4 UNHCR Information Management Officers

UNHCR information and data management staff are essential to improved needs assessments, providing technical and practical support.

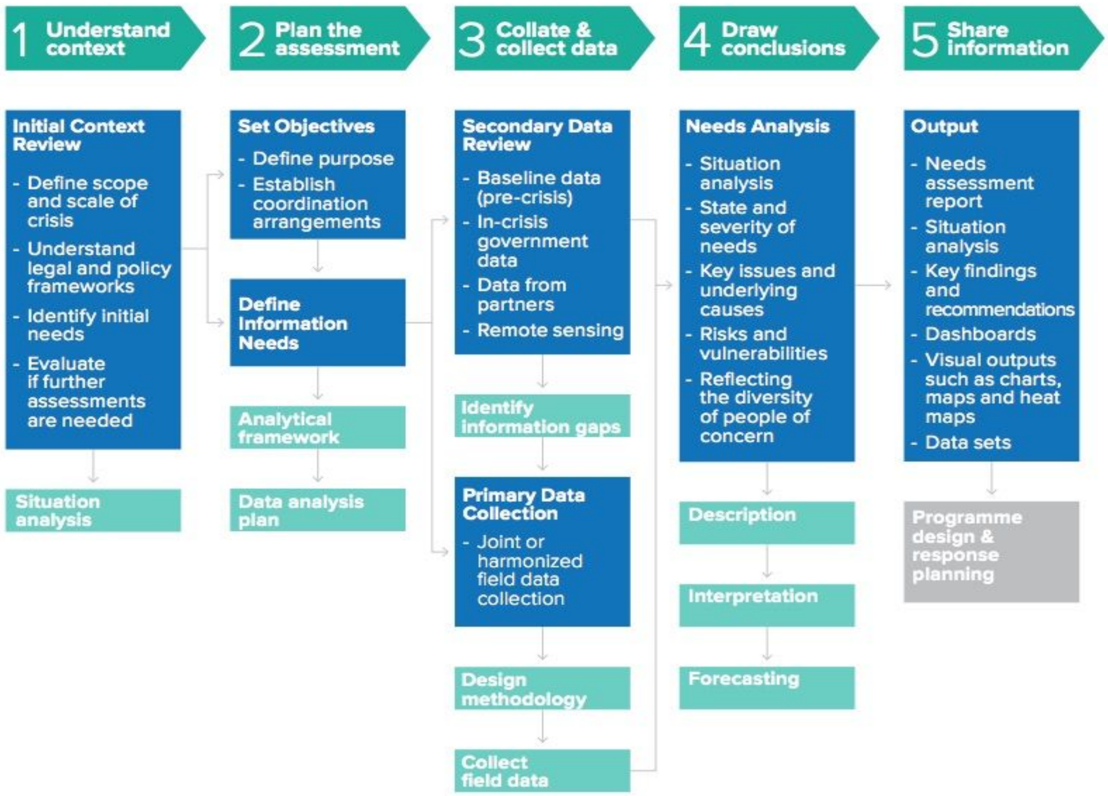
- collaborating with Programme and Protection colleagues in the development of a comprehensive assessment strategy;.Facilitating the consolidation of existing data sources to avoid over-assessment and duplication;
- providing technical standardization and information management support, particularly on how needs assessments should be designed and undertaken to respect protection information management principles;
- supporting the design of data collation, collection tools, sampling frameworks, data storage systems, and joint analysis;
- generating data visualization products, including dashboards, infographics, and maps;
- coordinating with other agencies' or clusters' information management officers around assessments;
- facilitate the development of an analytical framework to help organize the operation for analysis;
- supporting intra- and inter-agency joint and/or harmonized assessments where possible;
- actively participating in technical assessment coordination fora chaired by OCHA in IDP situations;
- training the data collectors/enumerators on data management practices and responsibilities;
- sharing needs assessment data as appropriate (UNHCR web portal at http://data.unhcr.org (for refugee situations), www.humanitarianresponse.org (for cluster situations); when possible, collecting primary data for needs assessments on mobile devices instead of paper, using UNHCR's dedicated Kobo server (at http://kobo.unhcr.org).

7.4 NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The design of an assessment will be affected by numerous factors. These may 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.

For in depth guidance on how to conduct a needs assessment, along with other details on the below process, please refer to the UNHCR Needs Assessment Handbook.

Illustrated below is the process for designing and conducting a needs assessment:



A few specific protection IM considerations for needs assessments in emergencies have been highlighted below, which Protection and IM colleagues should be aware of.

7.4.1 Emergencies: Emergency referral system

Needs assessment field teams should be trained on how to escalate life-saving issues and urgent interventions uncovered in the needs assessment to appropriate service providers. Prior to conducting the needs assessment, protection staff need to establish a system for referrals to the relevant sectors; with identified focal points identified and functioning by the start of field needs assessment activities.

Referrals may identify a location, such as a collective centre, in need of WASH intervention or may refer an individual for life-saving intervention, or counseling session. The information collected in referrals should be processed and stored separate from the needs assessment data - doing so will avoid having the required reports of urgent action mixed in with needs assessment results that will go for data entry. See the UNHCR Referral for Assistance for as an example, and the section of the ToolKit on Protection Monitoring for additional information on how to set up such a system.

7.4.2 Emergencies: Assessment method and survey design

In practice there are different assessment tools and methods which can be used. A good comprehensive assessment strategy will employ various assessment tools and methods, but should always be guided by the needs of each sector and based on the level and type of operational data required to achieve the identified purpose. This said, the logical 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. 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.

For initial emergency needs assessments, diversity driven purposive sampling is the preferred sampling method over representative sampling. Purposive sampling is recommended for rapid assessments because it ensures that the assessment captures different types and levels of impact and 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 criteria. 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 (available for download here); this can assist with obtaining agreement on questions to include in the assessment. Data elements that have life-saving importance and that are easy to collect should be the priority for an initial 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 crowdsourcing 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.

7.4.3 Reducing bias in emergency assessments

Bias is a key concern in primary data collection. Bias refers to a systematic skewing of data which usually impacts the results, and may occur because of under-coverage of some groups, large non-response rates among particular groups, or lack of access. A “biased estimator” is one that systematically over- or underestimates 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 can arise from many sources: the assessment team, the community, Government sources, interpreters (if used), key informants, ethnic or gender groups. Individual responses provide important information, but these too 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 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.

7.5 TEMPLATES, REFERENCE DOCUMENTS AND LINKS

- All templates, examples, tools and access to field support are available on the Needs Assessment Handbook website, available online at: needsassessments.unhcr.org