Assessment Cycle

> “A quick response to obviously urgent needs must never be delayed because a comprehensive assessment has not yet been completed” (UNHCR handbook for emergencies).

The assessment cycle is a conceptual tool that helps to better define the different stages of an assessment and at the same time emphasises the idea of a continual process. The final objective is to provide decision makers with reliable, accurate and valuable information to guide their decisions. The process is cyclical and responds to 5 phases.

1. Prepare
2. Design
3. Implement
4. Analyse
5. Share

Prepare

The preparedness phase ideally starts well before the emergency strikes by defining assessment procedures and policies that fit with the organisation’s contingency plans and programme planning. The assessment plan should explain how the organisation will carry out the assessment from start to finish, what the different parts of the organisation are responsible for, and how it will balance cost, speed and quality.

- Prior to the emergency: Review existing tools, mechanisms, and lessons learned. Update and trim tools if necessary, with enough time to reflect and adjust them appropriately.
- During and after the emergency: define how the organisation is going to intervene in and what value it will add to the response.

Planning an assessment involves:

- Identifying end users of the assessment information (i.e., program staff, donors, etc.) and their respective needs (i.e., budgets, programming, planning, etc.)
- Setting the objectives of the assessment.
- Establishing terms of reference for the logistics assessment team.
- Selecting team members.
- Identifying and/or preparing the assessment tools and pilot testing them.
- Mobilising resources to facilitate the assessment - staff, vehicles, computers, etc.
- Agreeing on reporting format.

Design

Assessment designs will vary in different contexts - a single methodology that meets every information need in every situation will not exist. Every design has to start with the basic facts, including information about; where (locations affected), who (groups in need) and what (sectors that require action), and should be designed in a way that enables organisations to make specific decisions.

An assessment design has to be realistic, manageable within the existing capacities, and balance the cost of data collection against the benefit of having that information. The first step in design is reviewing existing secondary data - If there are significant gaps or specific questions to be answered, an assessment may need to be launched to collect primary data.

The assessment process should not compromise the protection and privacy needs of the affected population. The [Sphere for Assessment guide] highlights two elements of the principle, based on the humanitarian core concept of do no harm:

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1. The form of humanitarian assistance and the environment in which it is provided do not further expose people to physical hazards, violence or other rights abuse.
2. Humanitarian agencies manage sensitive information in a way that does not jeopardise the security of the informants or those who may be identifiable from the information.

Implement

Assessment implementation requires keeping objectives and deliverables clear while measuring the assessment progress continuously. While it is important to follow a plan, several modifications to the assessment plan may occur due to context or internal developments. The process should be standardised, transparent and clearly documented process to recognise possible flaws.

The more qualified and experienced an assessment team is, the more accurate and reliable the assessment findings will be. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) should be agreed upon with key stakeholders, and in accordance with the plan. SOPs describe the roles and responsibilities of team members, the team's management lines and support functions, and clearly identify team leaders.

Analyse

Assessment analysis involves the combination of available information and its interpretation. An analysis should identify patterns, gaps and concrete facts, and provide solid arguments based on cross-checked evidence compiled through a specific methodology by a professional assessment team.

The complex and unpredictable nature of humanitarian emergencies, combined with the limited availability of data, makes precision and accuracy difficult. It is essential to clarify which data the analysis is based on and the source of that data. It is important to be honest about gaps in the data and seek explanations for those gaps, such as lack of access, resources, or others.

When possible, the analysis should also identify gaps in capacity: human resources, aid materials, logistics capabilities, coping strategies, and more. What resources exist to meet the needs identified, and what additional resources are still needed?

Sharing Results

Assessment findings, conclusions and data should be shared internally and externally.

- Internally, to allow decision-makers to guide their actions and other potentially interested colleagues.
- Externally, to assists others in their work, contribute to the overall baseline data available and increase the transparency of the response.

It is important to make the findings available to peers from other organisations, coordinators, government bodies, clusters, local and national authorities, and the affected communities.

Assessment findings are usually presented in the form of an “assessment report” that should fulfil the following criteria:

- Be clear, concise and relevant - as little writing as possible but as much as needed to communicate the findings.
- Enable users to identify priorities for action.
- Describe their methodology to demonstrate the reliability of data.
- Acknowledge assumptions, limitations, biases and gaps honestly.
- Enable a comparative analysis if required.
- Follow global humanitarian protocols which are technically compatible with other agencies’ data.
- The frequency of data-sharing is context-specific but should be as prompt as possible.

Every report includes basically three major components

1. Findings
2. Analysis of those findings
3. Methodology followed to collect and analysis the data.

However, reports are not the only way to communicate findings; different users will require different formats and details. Briefing notes, maps, slides presentations or other formats that could meet the target audience’s expectations may be required.

The findings should be shared widely and quickly where security and safety concerns permit. Once the information is made public, it can compromise the situation of the affected population, especially in conflict areas or tense situations. For these reasons, information products from an assessment (reports, maps or other outputs) should be prepared with sensitivity to protection issues.