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Guidance Note: Rapid Assessment and Analysis

Purpose

Humanitarian assessments and related analysis provide the foundation for ACT Alliance humanitarian projects. Assessment and analysis are the first critical step in ACT Alliance humanitarian projects and provide the evidence base required for effective humanitarian response decision-making. As such, during and immediately following the issuance of an ACT Alert, the Requesting Members and/or Forum should prioritise conducting needs assessments, analysis, and other relevant information gathering. Rapid needs assessments of disaster-affected populations determine the magnitude of unmet needs and ultimately inform priorities for ACT Alliance humanitarian assistance. Assessments inform decisions regarding budget, response objectives, technical sector priorities, and targeting. Collect sex, age and disability disaggregated data to inform context-specific intersectional analyses and guide humanitarian planning, implementation, and monitoring processes.

Needs assessment is the best way to answer the question: **"What assistance do disaster-affected population need that our organisation can provide?"**

Assistance in most cases pertains to the urgent needs of the affected population to cope with the impact of a disaster or ongoing crisis. Addressing these needs requires an assessment of the system and an analysis of the best way to help. In some cases, direct delivery of services may not be the best option since these have been provided by the primary duty bearer, often the government, or other humanitarian actors in the affected areas.

Additionally, there are recurring sub questions to this main question where you think specifically how the answer varies for certain groups (e.g. women, adolescent girls, young children, older persons, gender, and persons with disabilities)?

- What are the most severely affected areas?
- Who are the most severely affected population?
- Which groups of people amongst the affected lack the capacity to cope with the disaster or at most risk and vulnerable?
- How and why are these vulnerable groups affected?
- What is the magnitude of unmet needs that has not been served by other response actors?
- Is the area safe and secure?
- What are the barriers people face accessing services or assistance?
- What are the barriers organisations face in giving services or assistance?

To effectively account for the complexity of impacts of crises on women, girls, men and boys in all their diversity, humanitarian action needs to include the gender dimension in analysis and assessment. The response should meaningfully include crisis affected persons with diverse gender identity including women and girls, and the organisations representing them in the coordination on decision-making processes. ACT Alliance responses should also promote their inclusion in conflict prevention, resilience, and peacebuilding efforts.

Assessment Principles and Commitments

Planning & Scope

Ensure appropriate planning and scope of the assessment. Before conducting an assessment, the ACT Alliance (led by the Requesting Member with support from the Forum and ACT Secretariat) will thoughtfully plan out the assessment.

Organisation and Forum Emergency Preparedness and Response Plans (EPRP) can provide information on certain areas that have been already identified as high risks or prone to disasters. Specifically, in the planning process preferably before a disaster strikes, ACT Members will identify existing data gaps, the specific decisions that the assessment can assist with informing and the methods to be used in conducting the assessment. Assessments should be scaled and scoped to reflect the disaster size, context and operating environment. Assessments should be wide enough to indicate the full situation but narrow enough to be manageable.

Accountability

ACT Alliance assessments should be designed, planned, and implemented to give the communities an active and participatory voice in all stages of the assessment. Consideration should be given to vulnerable and underserved populations throughout the assessment process and in the selection of assessment teams. Vulnerable populations are those with lack of capacity to recover from a disaster with dignity or inaccessibility and shortage of humanitarian assistance. ACT Alliance will incorporate cross-cutting issues (particularly protection and security) into all its assessments.

Humanitarian standards

Assessments should be conducted in compliance with the humanitarian standards, specifically Core Humanitarian Standard, and Sphere Standards. This acknowledges that an effective response addresses the unmet needs of disaster-affected people and is based on continual reappraisal of vulnerability and capacity in a changing context.

Timing

To be successful, humanitarian assistance should be timely. Given that a response should be based on assessments, it is therefore critical that assessments are also timely and current. Initial assessments should be conducted as soon as possible after the disaster and/or when actors can first gain humanitarian access. It is important to seek the right balance, based on the context, between the quality of the assessment data to be collected, the level of detail and the timeliness of the assessment results. An assessment is not a one-time occurrence. Assessments should take place on a recurring basis with additional data collected in increasing detail. Assessments should be refined over time with findings updated to reflect situational changes.

ACT Alliance conducts assessments as the basis for good project decisions. Keys to successful field assessments include:

- Aim for timely assessments. The earlier assessments can be done, usually the better, but timeline should also take into consideration security constraints, coordination with other humanitarian actors (to avoid duplication), and effective assessment design and planning (see Steps #2 and #3 below).
- Review existing secondary data before conducting field assessments for new primary data.
- Seek pre-disaster baselines, noting chronic needs existing pre-disaster, as well as emergency post-disaster needs.
- Identify information needed for the specific decisions to be made.
- Do not overextend an assessment—make it wide enough to reveal the situation but narrow enough to be manageable.
- Liaise with all technical sectors, through the UN cluster system or national coordination platforms, relevant to the disaster type.
- Identify the best sources of information and triangulate that information with other sources.
- Collect data disaggregated as much as possible by geography, age, and gender.
- Use recognized standards, terminology, and procedures (see Sphere, the Humanitarian Standards Partnership and the Good Enough Guide).
- Manage community expectations to avoid creating unrealistic expectations of service delivery as well as assessment fatigue.
- Consider format/reporting requirements of assessment end users and distribute findings quickly to support decision-making and follow-up assessment.

When conducting assessments there are six essential steps.

Collect Existing Secondary Data

In the initial days and weeks after a disaster, secondary data are the main source of information. A secondary data review is a rigorous process of data collation and analysis. As a part of the secondary data collection process, pre-existing baseline country data is usually available in global datasets compiled by UN agencies, donor governments, and private sector institutions. These datasets are commonly published annually online. Keeping an EPRP updated is a good practice where an organisation or forum already have the secondary data at hand and can start the planning process for a response.

Design the Field Assessment

A field assessment should be conducted if there are information gaps from the EPRPs. Once a decision is made to conduct a field assessment to collect primary data, it is essential to take a deliberate approach to assessment design. Assessment design can be done rapidly during a response but ensuring that time is taken to consider the appropriate assessment design is critical to a successful field assessment.

To design a field assessment, assessors should take the following sub-steps:

- Establishment of the assessment team. An assessment team can consist of anywhere from one person to several people depending on the circumstances and expertise required. Consider training community volunteers also in gathering information recognizing that they have a deep understanding of the context in the areas where they are also residents. Social norms that should be considered to avoid limiting the scope of the assessment, including gender norms. The team composition should be adapted to match the circumstances and the personnel resources available but at a minimum one person needs to be designated as the assessment lead responsible for conducting the assessment in whichever disaster locations are selected.

- Identify the overarching assessment questions that need to be answered.
- Determine the best and most appropriate methods to answer the assessment questions. In most cases, use a method that is most practical and triangulate the information that you have gathered when doing the analysis. There are four common methods used in an assessment:
    - Direct observation (site visits, transect walks, and flyovers)
    - Key informant interviews (e.g. with community members, community leaders, local authorities, or partners)
    - Focus Group Discussion

Prepare for Field Assessment

Preparation for a field assessment involves trip planning and assessment planning.
Step 3.1 Field Assessment Trip Planning
When preparing for a field assessment trip, consider the following:

- Selection of the areas to be assessed. The locations selected are based on the likelihood of a response.
- Security update, travel restrictions.
- Travellers, to include translators.
- Destination and waypoint GPS coordinates.
- Routes, to include primary and alternate routes.
- Timetable (estimated time of departure, estimated time of arrival).
- Communications Plan (primary communication channels and alternate communications channels).
- Medical evacuation process.
- Team briefing.
- Key contacts list with work and personal contact details.
- Local maps of areas to be assessed.
- Identify and pack data gathering templates and instruments for data capture (e.g. paper/pen, digital collection data tools) as well as tools for conducting the assessment.

Analysis

During the assessment and following the assessment, the essential next step is to conduct a thorough analysis of the assessment data collected per the guidance offered in Analysis section below.

Reporting

Once the assessment and analysis are complete, the final step in the assessment process is to produce a report based on the template provided.

This assessment report should then be shared within the ACT Alliance both in writing and verbally. The assessment report should then be filed electronically so that it is accessible to all ACT Alliance response personnel.

Analysis Purpose

Analysis is the critical step between assessment data collection and informed decision-making. Analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the assessment data collected. When doing assessment analysis, the ACT Alliance seeks to identify patterns, trends and relationships in assessment data. Analysis involves understanding what the data collected means and then presenting that understanding in a useful way (with clear observations, conclusions and recommendations) to support better decision-making based on data.

Analysis is taking place continuously throughout a humanitarian crisis. When conducting analysis of assessments, we seek to:

- Compare the severity of the conditions between various affected groups and locations
- Explain association and underlying factors
- Forecast the evolution of the impact of the disaster
- Prioritise the most important humanitarian needs and target groups
- Help to define and select the appropriate and proportionate response interventions and modalities

Analysis Guidance

Define Analysis Questions

The first step in the assessment analysis process is to identify the questions to be answered by the analysis of the data. Sample questions include:

- Which pre-existing vulnerabilities might have been exacerbated by the current situation?
- Who/what was affected and to what extent? Identify the people and resources affected by the disaster.
- What is the scope and scale of the impact?
- What resources and capacities already exist?
- What are the humanitarian needs and gaps?
- How might the disaster (impact of the disaster) develop? Highlight special concerns about existing or emerging risks/threats, how they might unfold in the future positively (opportunities) or negatively (risks) and impact the current situation.
- What are the priorities for action and required resources of the communities impacted by the disaster?

Analysis Step 2: Organise and Summarise Observations

Organising the data involves gathering the assessment data, forms and observations into one place (such as a shared online folder).

Analysis Step 3: Compare by Identifying Patterns and Relationships in the Data

Once the observations are organised and summarised, this data needs to be compared against other data (usually pre-disaster baseline data). Comparison is essential to the analysis process. Comparison can be made to humanitarian standards (e.g. Sphere), other comparable geographic areas (e.g. province A as compared to province B), social group comparisons that identify different levels of needs between different population groups (e.g. agro pastoralists vs. farmers, host populations vs. IDPs etc.) and time (e.g. pre vs. post disaster).

Analysis Step 4: Interpret
Following the process of organising assessment observations and comparison, it is essential to then interpret the assessment data. As the assessment data is tested, refined and retested against new assessment data, explanations can become more consistent, triangulated and defendable. Context is essential in the interpretation process. Assessment data alone will rarely provide the answers to the questions. Looking at data alone without ascribing the proper context can yield imperfect and misleading conclusions that are to be avoided. Good interpretation recognizes that the context is as important as the data itself.

The ACT Alliance draws on individual and collective knowledge using experience, logic and expertise to interpret conclusions and recommendations. Conclusions are the analytical answers to the questions originally posed. Recommendations are based on the observations and conclusions. Recommendations usually take three forms:

- Most severe problems and key priorities
- Action that should be taken
- Further information should be gathered.

References and Templates

Rapid Needs Assessment Tool