



ASSESSMENT



Guidance on Emergency Assessment

Cover photo: Kajol Rari (left) meets with Caritas Bangladesh community outreach worker Mithu Rani Das as they discuss her next steps in creating a more resilient home. Photo by Jennifer Hardy for CRS

GUIDANCE ON EMERGENCY ASSESSMENT

This document gives guidance on **when and how to conduct assessments during emergencies**.

Given the need to make early programming decisions in a fluid environment and with imperfect information, emergency assessments need to be iterative. In most cases, two or three stages of assessment may be required, sometimes many more if the situation keeps changing and requires reassessment of needs. This guidance focuses on the early assessments at the initial stages of the response, which typically consist of two or three stages over time. Their timing principally depends on access factors but usually the preliminary stage is initiated in the first day or two after the emergency; the second stage (first field assessment) takes place during the first few days to a week; and more in-depth sectoral assessments take place over the next few weeks to a month. The different stages of assessment vary not only in time but also in their purpose, methods, approach, etc.

All assessments should be focused and time-bound: the process is iterative, not continuous. However, once a program starts, a process of light contextual assessment¹ should be built into ongoing monitoring of the response, and may trigger renewed assessments if the situation changes.

The table below provides a summary of the guidance, with more details provided in the following pages.

	RAPID ASSESSMENT		MORE IN-DEPTH
	First stage	Second stage	Third stage
Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To understand the scale of a disaster and whether there is a need to respond To determine WHERE to conduct initial field assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To determine WHAT the priority needs for our immediate response are 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To collect more in-depth information for sectoral planning on HOW to respond
Information needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Type of damage/impact Rough estimated numbers of affected families/people. Geographic areas (least and worst affected) Trends in population movements, where applicable Accessibility of beneficiary population Political and security implications of assistance (Do No Harm considerations) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Type and scale of damage within villages (qualitative) Household and individual coping strategies and main difficulties faced. Focus on the “who, where, what, how, and why” Protection and vulnerability issues: are some social groups more affected/ less able to cope than others? Who is doing (or planning to do) what? Political and security implications of assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-disaster information (e.g. sanitation practices) Local resource availability (labor, skills, materials) Trends in recovery Gaps and remaining needs Appropriate ways of communicating and soliciting feedback at local levels
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open-ended key informant interviews, often by phone Secondary sources If a rapid field visit is possible, secondary sources can be complemented with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anecdotal direct observation Informal interviews with a few affected people and key informants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open-ended interviews with key informants and affected people (often semi-structured) Direct observation Some participatory methods, e.g. transect walk and focus group discussions (FGDs), as appropriate Review of secondary sources (e.g. local government data) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mix qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g. structured or semi-structured interviews, water quality tests, etc) Direct observation Consultations with key local stakeholders FGDs, transect walk, maps Review of secondary sources

1. In countries which experience slow onset emergencies (e.g. drought), it is assumed that CRS has an established assessment process to monitor the food security situation of the most vulnerable groups, with specific agreed-upon triggers that will initiate a specific type of emergency response.

Key informants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media • Local government • Local partners, staff and other contact people in affected areas • Other agencies present in affected areas and/or planning to respond 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Village leaders and other local key informants • Specific groups of affected people likely to be worst affected / least able to cope • Government officials • Other responders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Line departments and other sector specialists • Affected households and individuals (talk to women and men separately) • Community groups • Other coordination structures
Use of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Go” / “no-go” decision • Decision on where to send team(s) for initial field assessments • First situation report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm “go” decision • Immediate emergency response planning (life-saving, immediate relief) • Decide what additional assessment is needed • <i>Emergency Proposal</i> for immediate response • <i>Concept Note</i> for donors or broader response if needed • Situation reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate and longer term response planning - design of sectoral intervention strategies • Develop <i>emergency response strategy</i> • Prepare concept note and proposals • Determine community mobilization mechanisms • Provide information to local people on what you will do

RAPID ASSESSMENTS

In practice, rapid assessment includes several different stages. The first stage in an emergency assessment relies on secondary sources, phone calls to local partners or other stakeholders to confirm media and government information and if possible a quick visit to the field to confirm what you are hearing. The first assessment aims to inform the key management decision of “**go**” / “**no go**”, but also the key decision on where to deploy your assessment teams for more structured rapid assessments.

The second stage of assessment is often the first actually conducted in the field. It aims to confirm initial information gathered from secondary sources or rapid field observations and to gather primary data to determine **what type of emergency response** may be needed. Once the “go” decision is confirmed and the type of response(s) is preliminarily decided, some level of **immediate relief assistance** (e.g. Non-food item distribution) is usually initiated at this stage. Meanwhile more in-depth assessment(s) are usually conducted to confirm what intervention strategies and approaches (beyond relief assistance) may be most appropriate in the context (HOW to respond).

This staged assessment process is **most appropriate for rapid onset natural disasters**. It may need to be adapted for human-made disasters or conflict situations where access to populations and the mobility of staff are often limited.

WHY

- The aim is to confirm the magnitude and impact of the disaster, the urgency of needs, the groups most affected, and whether a CRS/partners response is required: field assessments should trigger a **decision on whether and what type of immediate emergency response to start**.
- If life-saving action is required, rapid assessment findings can serve to mobilize immediate funding for emergency interventions.
- The assessment should provide information on **where** to conduct an initial response and **what** it should consist of.

WHEN

- The assessment should take place as soon as possible after the disaster, with a review of secondary information immediately and fieldwork as soon as access becomes possible.
- The fieldwork should start 48 to 72 hours following the disaster or sooner if possible.
- The rapid assessment should last no more than **two to three days**. If more information is required for project design, plan additional assessments to collect any additional information needed (See *More in-depth assessment*).

WHERE

- Focus on locations where the greatest number of the worst-affected people is: this can be in villages of origin or areas of temporary displacement. Damage assessment in empty villages is unnecessary.
- Villages assessed should typically be the worst-affected villages in the worst-affected districts or areas. Where some villages or locations remain inaccessible, the focus should be on the worst-affected among villages that remain accessible. Plan to assess initially inaccessible villages as soon as feasible.

WHAT

- The assessment should focus not on the level of damage incurred but on who has been affected and how they are coping with the situation. This includes understanding how different types of people are coping, which groups of people are the most severely affected and their most pressing needs.

WHO

- CRS should deploy senior staff with prior emergency response experience for rapid assessments.
- CRS staff should wherever possible join partner field teams.
- CRS may perform joint assessments with other agencies, e.g. Emergency Capacity Building partner agencies, as long as this does not delay the initial rapid assessment.
- Assessment teams should be comprised of generalists (or be multidisciplinary) and be gender balanced.
- If needed, each team going to the field should include a good local translator.

HOW

- Teams should gather secondary data (e.g. from government declarations, media reports, interviews with key officials/informants) to collect information on the scale of damage and to identify target areas for further fieldwork.
- The fieldwork should be guided by open-ended questions, such as the Sphere² checklists or a semi-structured interview template, to ensure that a broad range of information is collected. There is no need for quantitative data collection in the field at this point.
- Select methods that are appropriate for affected people and the context. *For example, if people have just been displaced from their homes and suffered some level of trauma, it may be insensitive or inappropriate to attempt to complete written forms with multiple questions. Engage in conversations that allow people to speak openly.*
- To reduce risk of bias, information should be cross-checked by talking to several informants and by including **observation** as a key data collection method.
- Information should be gathered directly from women and from any other vulnerable groups (e.g. typically marginalized social or ethnic groups; landless farmers; the elderly; etc.).
- Assessments are best conducted in teams, including at least one woman who can talk openly with women. Group and household interviews should be conducted separately with men and with women.

ANALYSIS AND DOCUMENTATION

- Assessment information should be discussed among the assessment team on a daily basis, with daily debriefs with managers to support key decision-making.
- An analysis of results that involves all assessment teams, including partner staff, should be organized once the assessment is complete, to inform the design of the first phase response.
- A very brief report (bullet points) noting main findings should be drafted and whenever possible results shared with partners, communities where the data was collected, local government, and other agencies responding.

2. Minimum standards in core areas of humanitarian response

(MORE) IN-DEPTH (SECTORAL) ASSESSMENTS

WHY

- These may be required to inform strategy design for the immediate response, for more in-depth understanding of a sector or to trigger decisions about subsequent phases of interventions. The aim is to collect information on **how to** (continue to) respond. *For example, the rapid assessment may help you decide that safe water is an urgent issue, with high risks of water-borne diseases, but you may not have sufficient information to decide what kind of intervention may be most appropriate to address this need.*

WHEN

- If life-saving assistance is required, the priority has to be to deliver that assistance. Once the systems are set up, in-depth assessments can run parallel to those activities. *For example, the monitoring of relief distributions can be combined with further more focused assessments; or sectoral assessments aiming to define transitional shelter strategies can be conducted while NFI distributions of emergency shelter items are under way .*
- As the emergency situation may still be fluid, plan to conduct further assessments when data indicate that the situation is changing.

WHERE

- An in-depth assessment may be conducted in sample villages, selected strategically to represent the diversity of the target population and focused on areas where the needs are greatest. The size of the sample should be decided based on the information that is required and the diversity of the area.
- Triangulation is a basic rule of thumb, so it is advisable to select two or three groups or locations to more widely understand the context and situation. *For example, if a population has been displaced by the disaster and is living in both formal and spontaneous camps, you may need to talk to two or three men and women's groups in two or three formal and two or three spontaneous camps.*

WHAT

- The assessment should focus on one or more sectors selected for intervention, to help **inform the implementation strategies** within the sector. Sometimes, it may be necessary to conduct separate in-depth assessments for each sector, although all efforts should be made to minimize time requirements on affected people.
- Collect **only information that will be useful for decision-making**, including information to help decide about prioritization and targeting of activities, communicating effectively with communities, and on setting up complaints-handling mechanisms.
- The assessment should aim to identify **available resources** (labor, skills, materials) and **locally appropriate solutions** that can support affected populations in addressing their priority needs. *For instance, after an earthquake, a shelter assessment might investigate traditional construction practices; availability of skilled labor; familiarity with earthquake resistance principles; local and cultural considerations (e.g. privacy, space, layout) that may inform design; market availability of materials; whether (and how) affected populations have started rebuilding their homes, etc.*

WHO

- Teams should be multidisciplinary to look at both social and technical issues within target areas and triangulate information; they should include experts for the sector(s), but also include generalists or social workers. *For example, if it is clear that a water intervention is needed, water engineers may be best suited to assess feasible technical options. They may join a team that is comprised of social mobilizers or hygiene promoters who have a solid understanding of pre-disaster water treatment practices.*
- Assessment teams should be gender balanced and include members who speak the local language.

HOW

- More in-depth assessments can include a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. This choice depends on time and resource availability.
- Assessments can be conducted using a range of methods – direct observation during transect walks, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, household-level interviews (either random during transect walk or systematic for a household survey), participatory mapping, seasonal calendars, etc.

- If quantitative data is collected, the sample does NOT need to yield statistically representative results as this is not a baseline survey. The chosen data collection and sampling methods do however need to be clearly documented.
- More in-depth assessments are structured using data collection tools (e.g. FGD guide with five to eight questions; template for village mapping; structured interview questions). These tools need to be developed (or adapted) to meet the specific information needs of the assessment. It is best to field test the tools before finalizing.

ANALYSIS AND DOCUMENTATION

- Assessment information should be compiled and discussed among the assessment team on a daily basis.
- Data entry (if required) should take place as soon as possible following data collection.
- A joint analysis of results by the assessment teams, including partner staff, should be organized as soon as the data is available to interpret results and explain numbers using qualitative information.
- A summary of the findings should be drafted noting the methods used. Keep the report brief (bullet points) and easy to use for those designing and implementing the program. Whenever possible share results with partners, communities where the data was collected, local government, and agencies.

PRACTICAL ASSESSMENT TIPS

- Be intentional about who you talk to; seek out women and other vulnerable groups.
- Ensure the assessment process follows “Do No Harm” principles (see principles of data collection).
- Focus less on numbers, more on qualitative information that answers WHO, HOW, WHY questions.
- Talk to multiple stakeholders so as to triangulate information.
- Vary your methods but keep it simple.
- Develop (or adapt) tools based on the situation and your information needs.
- Document your sampling choices and methodology.
- Analyze preliminary findings on-site (the same or next day).
- Collect **ONLY** information that you will use for planning, communicating, and decision-making.
- Keep the assessment to a well-defined period (maximum three days).
- Communicate trends and urgent needs verbally to decision-makers, before writing any reports.
- If possible, combine assessments with other activities.
- Recognize and adapt to the evolving situation.
- Continually reassess the situation as the response unfolds.

KEY MESSAGE

Any single assessment should be **focused** and **time-bound** – one tool or approach should be developed/used within a limited period of time to meet specific information needs. If gaps in information emerge, plan to reassess (typically, using a different tool or approach).

REFERENCES

While emergency assessments are specific due to their iterative nature, some of the guidance and tips in the [Guidance on Participatory Assessments](#) may be useful in all contexts. See in particular the discussion of assessment methods and tools, conducting an assessment, as well as analysis of assessment findings.

Please refer to the guidance and tips provided in the [Guidance on Monitoring and Evaluation](#), in particular those related to: Qualitative tool development, purposeful sampling, training and field testing, collecting qualitative data, and data analysis and interpretation.