sphere unpacked

Sphere for Assessments

acaps

The Sphere Project

*Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards
in Humanitarian Response*

The "Sphere unpacked" guides

Integrating the Sphere approach into the humanitarian programme cycle

This document is the first of a planned series on how to integrate key elements of Sphere's people-centred approach into the humanitarian programme cycle. These guides indicate the relevant parts of the Sphere Handbook at different moments of the humanitarian programme cycle and should therefore be used together with the Handbook.

The primary audiences for *Sphere for Assessments* are managers, assessment staff, trainers and coordinators, as well as donors. It may also be useful for a wider range of staff in any agency dealing with humanitarian response.

These guidelines assume a good level of knowledge of designing and implementing assessment processes and access to the Sphere Handbook.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

CS	Core Standard	KA	Key action	PP	Protection Principle
GN	Guidance note	KI	Key indicator		
HB	Handbook	MS	Minimum standard		

Contents

Why Sphere for Assessments?

The Sphere Handbook

The Sphere Handbook, *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response* explains and lists what needs to be in place in four life-saving sectors of humanitarian response so that a population affected by disaster or conflict can survive and recover with dignity. Because the way to achieve standards and indicators varies according to context, the Sphere Handbook provides guidance on globally applicable aspects of humanitarian aid.

Figure 1: The relationships between the components of the Sphere Handbook

Core Standards and minimum standards: These are qualitative in nature and specify the minimum levels to be attained in humanitarian response across four technical areas. They always need to be understood within the context of the emergency.

Key actions: These are suggested activities and inputs to help meet the standards.

Key indicators: These are 'signals' that show whether a standard has been attained. They provide a way of measuring and communicating the processes and results of key actions. The key indicators relate directly to the minimum standard, not to the key action.

If the required key indicators and actions cannot be met, the resulting adverse implications for the affected population should be appraised and appropriate mitigating actions taken.

The key indicators are a mixture of qualitative and quantitative statements that describe a performance target. A group of these together outline the expectations to be met to achieve each Core Standard and each minimum standard. In many cases the specific metric – the aspect to be measured – is only implied in the Handbook, although some are described in detail in the appendices.

Guidance notes: These include specific points to consider when applying the minimum standards, key actions and key indicators in different situations. They provide guidance on tackling practical difficulties, benchmarks or advice on priority issues. They may also include critical issues relating to the standards, actions or indicators and describe dilemmas, controversies or gaps in current knowledge.

What can Sphere contribute to assessments?

Needs assessment is a critical part of humanitarian response; it is the starting point for successful programme implementation through the whole project cycle.

Because of global agreement on the Minimum standards across the humanitarian sector, the Sphere Handbook is a valuable resource for designing and implementing assessments, as well as providing a common basis for analysing and monitoring progress in meeting humanitarian needs. Sphere also adds value through the rights-based and participatory approach underlying the standards. As an articulation of humanitarian principles in practice, and as part of efforts to improve quality and accountability, the approach described in the Handbook should be incorporated as much as possible into needs assessments at every stage of the response.

The most obvious way to use the Sphere Handbook for assessments is through the **needs assessment checklists** included at the end of each Minimum standard. These offer practical support for designing assessments.

The Sphere Handbook also provides guidance on the aspects an assessor must consider in order to carry out a quality assessment which respects the capacities, voices and safety of the affected populations.

In particular the Sphere **Core Standards** and **Protection Principles** help carry out rights-based and participatory assessments. From this starting point, Sphere can provide a solid foundation for the entire project cycle, thereby

- Increasing the **efficiency** of individual agencies and of the humanitarian community as a whole

- Improving the **quality** of agency programming

- Increasing **accountability** to both affected populations and donors

Using Sphere indicators in assessments will help **monitor key issues over time** and enable assessors to

- Develop a **shared understanding** of what should be assessed

- **Compare** different sectors, assessments and projects

- Improve **coordination** and **collaboration,** with the indicators providing a common language for identifying and discussing critical issues during assessment and project implementation both inside and outside your organisation

- Create a framework for **data collection** over time, with increasing levels of detail

- Create the basis for **monitoring** and **evaluation**

Sphere is relevant to both **sudden onset** and **protracted crises,** but *Sphere for Assessments* focuses on sudden onset emergencies, particularly when discussing assessment implementation. However, good practice in assessments is the same no matter what the type of emergency, and so this guide may also be useful in protracted crises. A key factor is that there is more time to prepare, test and refine assessment processes in slow onset, enabling the good practice outlined here to be incorporated more easily.

How can Sphere support assessments?

The Sphere Handbook applies to all humanitarian actors and responses, whether related to natural disasters or conflict. The Handbook has a number of parts, each of which contributes in different ways to this guidance. The **Humanitarian Charter** is the cornerstone of the Handbook and provides the ethical and legal backdrop for humanitarian action.

➜ *The 12 clauses of the Humanitarian Charter can contribute to rights-based assessment.*

The **Protection Principles** provide a framework to ensure that the rights articulated in the Charter can be achieved, and how humanitarian agencies can contribute to the protection of those faced with the threat of violence or coercion. Again, these are factors that need to be assessed to ensure that programmes can react dynamically to events and that standards are maintained.

➜ *The Protection Principles help ensure that the assessment considers protection issues and that the assessment process itself does not compromise the protection needs of disaster-affected populations.*

There are six **Core Standards**, which are essential standards that are shared by all sectors. They provide a single reference point for approaches, and mostly relate to *agency processes,* covering participation, coordination, assessment, programming, monitoring and learning as well as staff competencies.

➜ *All six Core Standards should be well known by assessment teams since they ensure good practice during the entire programming cycle. Core Standard 3: Assessment is explicitly associated with the assessment function.*

The four technical chapters form the largest part of the Sphere Handbook. Each chapter covers a specific humanitarian sector and contains the minimum standards – which are always qualitative – and a set of key indicators, which are usually a mixture of qualitative and quantitative. These provide a strong basis for assessments. They relate to a mixture of agency processes and the intended results for the affected population.

➜ *Using the minimum standards as a basis for identifying and formulating assessment indicators will provide a solid foundation for measuring needs and for monitoring progress.*

➜ *Adaptation of the sectoral assessment checklists will provide a basis for developing questionnaires.*

Contextualisation of assessment guidance: Understanding the context of any emergency intervention is critical to its success. Context is multifaceted and dynamic, and must be continuously assessed; programme assumptions that relate to context should be reviewed on a regular basis.

The Sphere minimum standards and key indicators are designed to apply to any context. The minimum standards are expressed in qualitative terms, and will always need to be interpreted and understood in the context of the emergency. There are some situations in which it may be necessary to adapt the target value of some of the key indicators to meet the local context. This adaptation process should be done with consideration and care, taking the key actions and guidance notes into account, and maintaining the spirit of the minimum standard. Adaptations of the indicators must be described and explained and efforts made to work towards meeting the indicators and to mitigate any negative effects on the affected population.

The adaptability of the Sphere standards and indicators means that they are useful regardless of the given assessment methodology. *Sphere for Assessments* is not a guide on how to carry out assessments,

but on how to incorporate the Sphere standards and indicators into the methodology used by your organisation.

Accordingly, *Sphere for Assessments* does not provide guidance on or make recommendations of specific assessment methodology. If you or your organisation require this kind of support, then you should refer to complementary resources such as the *Good Enough Guide to Needs Assessment* (ACAPS 2013, see also Appendix 5) or the Multi-Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment, MIRA (IASC 2012, see also Appendix 4).

Table 1: Sphere key actions contributing to the contextualisation of assessments

Many key actions and guidance notes will help you find the right questions to fully capture the context in which you carry out your assessment. Below are examples of key actions guiding you to formulate questions that cover the whole range of issues you must be aware of.

Example of key actions	Usefulness for assessments
"Maximise access and coverage through involvement of the population from the outset" *(Management of acute malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies standard 1, accompanied by GN2).*	Reminds assessment teams of basic principles, such as participation (noted within the technical chapters).
"Link the management of moderate acute malnutrition to... existing health services where possible" (Management of acute malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies standard 1 and accompanying GN5 and 6).	Emphasises links between different sectors.
"Use existing settlement patterns and topographical features to minimise adverse impact on the natural environment" *(Shelter and settlement standard 2 and GN5).*	Establishes links with cross-cutting themes (here environmental protection).
"Ensure that all water points and hand-washing facilities have effective drainage to prevent muddy conditions" *(Drainage standard 1, GN2).*	Highlights basic yet critical issues of which the assessment team may not have specialised knowledge.

The Sphere Core Standard 3: Assessment

The Sphere Core Standard 3 (Assessment) states that "The priority needs of the disaster-affected population are identified through a systematic assessment of the context, risks to life with dignity and the capacity of the affected people and relevant authorities to respond."

Core Standard 3 is a powerful tool for advocating that an assessment be carried out where none is planned, as a foundation for planning an assessment once this has been agreed or for improving an existing assessment. Agencies should respect existing assessment processes and forms, although they should check compatibility with the principles and practices in the Sphere Handbook.

Core Standard 3 describes 12 key actions which are the basis of this guide and included in Appendix 1, as well as six indicators which are listed below with explanations to help you apply them. These indicators help you design and evaluate your assessments.

Table 2: Key indicators of Core Standard 3: Assessment

Key indicator	Explanation
Assessed needs have been explicitly linked to the capacity of affected people and the state to respond. See *Assessment design* (p15 of this guide).	Communities have strategies for coping and recovery (see also Core Standard 1). Many coping mechanisms are sustainable and helpful, while others may be negative and harmful. Assessments should identify the positive strategies that increase resilience as well as the reasons for negative strategies (CS3 GN8). The state includes authorities at every level, from local to national.
Rapid and in-depth assessment reports contain views that are representative of all affected people, including members of vulnerable groups and those of the surrounding population. See *Assessment implementation: Inclusiveness and vulnerability* (p17).	Explicit efforts to listen to, consult and engage people at an early stage will increase quality and community management later (CS1 GN1). Understanding and addressing the barriers to participation faced by different people is critical to balanced participation (CS1 GN3).
Assessment reports contain data disaggregated by, at the very least, sex and age. See *Analysis* (p19).	Detailed disaggregation is rarely possible initially, but is of critical importance to identify the different needs and rights of children and adults of all ages. These groupings address age-related differences linked to a range of rights, social and cultural issues (CS3 GN4). As soon as possible, more disaggregated data should be collected to capture the needs of different groups such as those described in Box 2 (p20).

Table 2: Key indicators of Core Standard 3 on assessment (continued)

Key indicator	Explanation
In-depth assessment reports contain information and analysis of vulnerability, context and capacity. See *Assessment implementation: Protection issues* (p18 of this guide).	The risks faced by people following a disaster will vary for different groups and individuals. Some people may be vulnerable due to individual factors such as their age or illness, although individual factors alone do not automatically increase risk (CS3 GN6). You should also assess the coping capacity, skills, resources and recovery strategies of the affected people, and the response plans and capacity of the state (CS3 KA). The state includes authorities at every level, from local to national.
Where assessment formats have been agreed and widely supported, they are used. See *Assessment implementation: Coordination* (p17).	This should form part of a general commitment to coordination, preventing duplication through multiple agencies assessing the same location, and consequently avoiding assessment fatigue on the part of disaster-affected communities.
Rapid assessments have been followed by in-depth assessments of the populations selected for intervention. See *Assessment implementation* (p16).	Assessment is a process, not a single event. Initial and rapid assessments provide the basis for subsequent in-depth assessments that deepen (but do not repeat) earlier assessment findings (CS3 GN3).

Using Sphere key indicators for assessments

It is not possible to identify in advance what the most useful indicators will be. This will depend on the situation, and any Sphere indicator can be adapted for assessment as the context requires. Indicators may be measured with different levels of utility and accuracy at different phases of the response and depending on what resources are available for assessment.

Indicators should not be selected on the basis of your organisations' interests and capabilities, but on the basis of humanitarian needs on the ground in order to design the most appropriate intervention.

Your choice of indicators will affect the design of your assessment, since different types of indicators lend themselves to different types of assessment questions and approaches. Not all of the indicators are directly useable for assessments, and not every indicator will be relevant in every situation. The operational context – for example, available resources, time constraints and access – may limit the type and number of indicators that you can include. However, context should not be used as an excuse to overlook key humanitarian needs; nor should lack of baseline information be an excuse for not using related standards.

Types of key indicators

Sphere key indicators provide a means of measuring progress in meeting the minimum standards, primarily by providing reference values across a wide range of sectoral issues.

Tables 3a, 3b and 4 explain the distinction between different types of indicators and what they measure. Indicators can be classified as either direct or indirect (sometimes referred to as proxy indicators) and as qualitative or quantitative. This is shown in Tables 3a and 3b, with examples from the WASH chapter. Quantitative indicators are usually easier to measure, particularly for technical interventions, while data is easier to collect.

Qualitative data is vital to show how a technical intervention has affected the quality and dignity of life of affected communities.

Table 3a: Qualitative Sphere indicators

Direct	Indirect
There is a system in place for the management and maintenance of facilities as appropriate and different groups contribute equitably.	All users are satisfied that the design and implementation of the WASH programme have led to increased security and restoration of dignity.
(WASH Standard 1: programme design and implementation, p89.)	(WASH Standard 1: programme design and implementation, p89.)
WHY? This measures project success directly, but "appropriate" and "equitably" are qualitative measures.	**WHY?** User satisfaction is important, but security may not have increased when measured directly.

Table 3b: Quantitative Sphere indicators

Direct	Indirect
Average water use for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene in any household is at least 15 litres per person per day. (Water Supply Standard 1: Access and water quality, p97.) **WHY?** 15 litres has been judged to be the minimum necessary for basic household functions.	The population density of mosquitoes has been kept low to avoid the risk of excessive transmission levels and infection. (Vector control standard 2: Physical, environmental and chemical protection measures, p114.) **WHY?** Lower mosquito population density correlates with lower transmission, but is not a direct measure of infection.

A further distinction can be made between indicators that address inputs, outputs and outcomes. This is shown in Table 4, with examples from the Health chapter. Input and output indicators are usually quantitative indicators, and therefore much easier to measure than outcomes, since the latter are often the result of a wider and more complicated set of variables. As a result, input and output indicators only show the delivery of the service rather than the impact of the intervention and must be complemented with outcome indicators.

Table 4: Input, output and outcome indicators

Input	Output	Outcome
The resources going into provision of health services.	The level of health services provided to the population	The health status of a population over the span of the intervention.
There are an adequate number of health facilities to meet the essential health needs of all the disaster-affected population, e.g., one district or rural hospital/250,000 people. (Health systems standard 1: Health service delivery.)	Once routine EPI services have been re-established, at least 90 per cent of children aged 12 months have had 3 doses of DPT (diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus), which is the proxy indicator for fully immunised children. (Essential health services – child health standard 1: Prevention of vaccine-preventable diseases, p321.)	The crude mortality rate (CMR) is maintained at, or reduced to, less than double the baseline rate documented for the population prior to the disaster. (Essential health services standard 1: Prioritising health services, p310.)

Turning indicators into questions

In order to collect data on the indicators that you have selected, you must formulate questions that can capture that data. Below is an example that shows how a quantitative indicator can be turned into a question or questions.

Quantitative questions are quite easy to develop, but qualitative questions require more consideration of context and approach. For example, the meaning of terms such as "sufficient" must be clearly included in the question, otherwise the data will not be useful. In terms of approach, qualitative data-gathering requires more participation by and communication with affected communities. When accurate figures are difficult to collect (for example due to lack of population baseline or of time), more qualitative types of questions should be used.

Break-down into different steps

Indicator	→	Variable(s):	Review the indicator; identify the metric(s) which should be measured.
Variable(s)	→	Questions:	Ask yourself what question(s) will enable you to gather data on that indicator.
Questions	→	Modalities:	How can you present that question most effectively in an assessment?
Modalities	→	Method:	How will your assessment team deliver that question in the field?
			What data collection technique will your team use?

(Source: ACAPS 2012)

Table 5: From indicator to questions – Example 1

Indicator	Variable	Questions	Modalities	Method
% of the affected population with a living area of less than 3.5 m² per person, disaggregated by a) Non-displaced population; b) Displaced population.	IDPs with less than 3.5m²/p. Non-IDPs with less than 3.5m²/p.	Have you been displaced by the recent conflict? How many are you living in this room?	Multiple choice / 1 answer. • Old IDP • New IDP • Resident Multiple choice / 1 answer: • < 3.5m²/p • 3.5m²/p > X < 7m²/p • > 7m²/p	Household face-to-face interview. Direct observation.

(Source: ACAPS 2012)

Table 6: From indicator to questions – Example 2

Indicator	Variable	Questions	Modalities	Method
% of school-aged children unable to attend school as a result of the disaster, disaggregated by sex.	% of school aged children attending school before the disaster. % of school-aged children attending school after the disaster.	Approximately, what % of school aged children attended school: Before the disaster? After the disaster?	Multiple choice/1 answer: • 0% • 1% - 25% • 26% - 50% • 51% - 75% • 76% - 100% Multiple choice/1 answer: • 0% • 1% - 25% • 26% - 50% • 51% - 75% • 76% - 100%	Key informant interview with school teachers. Community group discussion. Direct observation in schools.

(Source: ACAPS 2012)

Box 1

Assessment in other humanitarian standards handbooks

Assessment guidance can be found in various handbooks and guidelines – see also the Appendices and the Reference section in this guide.

The four Sphere Companion standards are of particular relevance for Sphere, as they were developed in a Sphere-like manner and structured the same way. They are thus very compatible with the Sphere Handbook and among each other. This guide therefore also has relevance for the sectors covered by those standards.

The four Companion standards cover what are essentially two broad areas: Children (protection and education) and livelihoods (livestock management and economic recovery). Some specificities pertaining to each particular handbook are highlighted here:

Child protection and education are included in the Sphere Handbook as cross-cutting themes and supported by the Sphere Protection Principles.

- The **Minimum Standards for Child Protection** in Humanitarian Action (CPMS) provide a structure for agency-specific and inter-agency assessments. The inter-agency Child Protection Rapid Assessment tool touches on all the needs addressed in the CPMS and follows the same structure. It is actively being used in joint assessments. CPMS website: CPWG.net/minimum-standards

- The INEE **Minimum Standards for Education** can be used for designing and implementing education assessments by turning the key actions into measurable variables. The Standard on Assessment provides details on key issues such as analysis of the context, data validity and methods of data analysis. INEE supported the Joint Needs Assessment Toolkit for Education in Emergencies, which is widely used and builds upon the INEE Minimum Standards. INEE website: INEEsite.org

Livelihoods: All assessments should take livelihoods issues of the disaster-affected communities into account as much as possible. Sphere's guidance on livelihoods (essentially in the Food security chapter) is enhanced by guidance found in the MERS and LEGS handbooks. Both help assess key elements of disaster-affected communities' livelihoods, which should be a key component of humanitarian response.

- The **Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards** (LEGS) provide detailed guidance on assessment for livestock-related interventions. Linking with the Sphere Core Standards, LEGS Common Standard 2 focuses on participatory initial assessment in planning a livestock response. Chapter 2 on Assessment and Response planning covers initial assessment. Checklists help determine the 'normal times' baseline, the impact of the emergency and the context. Each of the six technical chapters contains an assessment checklist. LEGS website: Livestock-Emergency.net

- The **Minimum Economic Recovery Standards** (MERS) Assessment and Analysis Standards enable and guide users with continuous and ongoing analysis of market dynamics and livelihoods strategies of affected populations for ongoing programme monitoring, evaluation and dissemination of results. They provide guidance for designing household and market mapping looking at institutions and governance, power dynamics, gender and key market infrastructure. Timing guidelines cover seasonal calendars, labour trends and ongoing assessment updates to respond to rapidly changing environments. MERS website: SEEPnetwork.org/mers

Information on the Sphere Companionship: SphereProject.org/about/companionships

Sphere in the Assessment Cycle

The following sections are based on the Assessment Cycle, a conceptual tool to help understand the different stages of an assessment. You can follow the assessment process from start to finish, or use each section as you need it.
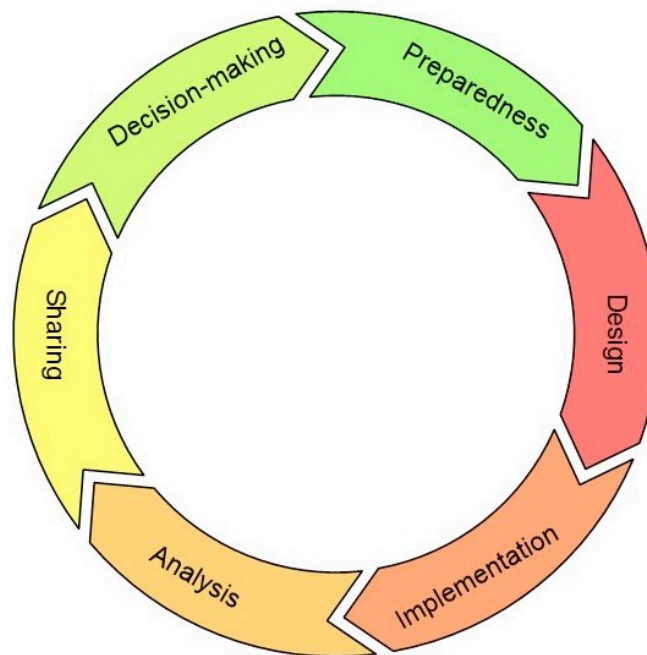
The Sphere Handbook covers the first five stages of the Assessment Cycle, since these will be the tasks that assessment teams will usually be responsible for.

Decision-making is usually the responsibility of a wider group than the assessment team and is often the responsibility of senior managers.

Assessments should be implemented in the context of the wider Project Cycle – the coordinated series of actions that are necessary for successful humanitarian response. As formulated by the UN, Needs Assessment & Analysis is the first step in Project Cycle Management, since without this information, it is not possible to effectively implement the following steps of Strategic Planning, Resource Mobilization, Implementation & Monitoring and Operational Review & Evaluation.

Assessment preparedness

Your organisation should prepare for assessments even before an emergency, usually through developing an Assessment Plan that fits into wider organisational processes, as shown in Table 7. To develop an Assessment Plan, an organisation will need to establish a policy on humanitarian needs assessment. Such a policy will outline the steps that your organisation must take in order to be ready to implement the Assessment Plan. Your policy and plan should be integrated with any Disaster Risk Reduction activities that your organisation undertakes.

Table 7: Preparing your organisation for assessment – per organisational area

Area	Sphere contribution
Management commitment	The organisation should make a commitment to the **Humanitarian Charter** at the level of senior management. Senior managers with a development background may be unfamiliar with Sphere, and you may have to work with them to demonstrate Sphere's relevance to their work in order to integrate it into agency processes.
Programme planning	**Core Standard 4: Design and response** describes how programmes should be designed "based on an impartial assessment of needs, context, risks and capacities of the affected population."
Staff development	All staff should be trained in how to apply the **Protection Principles, Core Standards** and relevant **technical standards.**
Human resources	**Core Standard 6: Aid worker performance** provides guidance on HR management.
Logistics planning	**Food security – food transfers standard 4** provides guidance on Supply Chain Management, which is essential to ensure that assessments are adequately resourced and supported.
Security plans	**Core Standard 3** emphasises the importance of assessing the current and potential safety concerns for the disaster-affected population and aid workers, including the potential for the response to exacerbate a conflict or create tension between the affected and host populations. Security concerns should not be limited to violence or the threat of violence, but should also include identifying any forms of coercion and denial of subsistence or basic human rights and the disaster's impact on the psychosocial well-being of individuals and communities (CS3 GN9).
Organisational learning	**Core Standard 5: Performance, transparency and learning** provides guidance on a range of means to improve agency performance. Incorporating Sphere specifically into needs assessment will provide a better foundation for monitoring and evaluation.

Assessment design

Assessment design methods will vary according to context. Therefore, the Sphere Handbook does not provide guidance on how to design assessments. For guidance on assessment methodologies see the *Good Enough Guide to Needs Assessment* and the IASC MIRA tool (Appendices 3 and 4 and Reference section). The Handbook does, however, state the **necessary design steps** in order to gather information systematically, suggesting that you "use a variety of methods, triangulate with information gathered from a number of sources and agencies and document the data as they are collected" (CS3 KA).

There are a wide variety of technical approaches to assessing humanitarian needs, and you must clarify your **objectives** and your methodology, using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods appropriate to the context (CS3 GN7). You should also understand the strengths and weaknesses of different assessment **approaches**, especially if your assessment is multi-sectoral. Each sector approaches assessment differently, reflecting different priorities and methodologies. Some approaches are quite sector-specific; others can be used in various contexts and sectors.
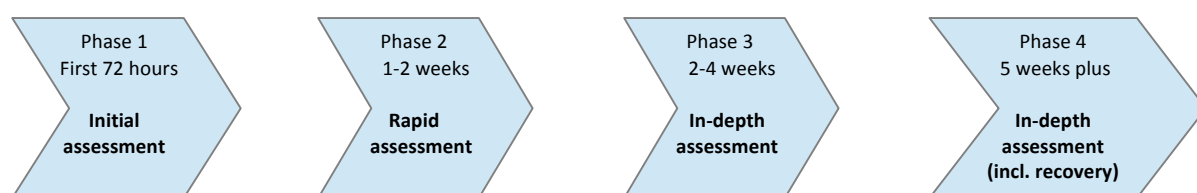
Assessment design must be **context and protection sensitive**. For example, you should consider that "speaking openly may be difficult or dangerous for some people" (CS3 GN5 on how to minimize this danger).

Assessment implementation

Core Standard 3 on assessment covers some of the most important issues that any assessment design and implementation must account for, starting with the need to be people-centred, context-sensitive and rights-based (see *The Sphere Core Standard 3: Assessment*, p8 of this guide). But there are other issues that also need consideration during implementation.

Core Standard 3 reminds us that "assessment is a process, not a single event" (GN3). The illustration below categorises different types of assessment for sudden onset emergencies, with varying levels of detail appropriate and feasible at different stages of a response. Each of these assessments should be started as early as circumstances allow and they should not be disconnected from each other. In practice, "the separation between different phases is not always clear, and timeframes will vary according to context" (IASC 2012 p12).

IASC classification of emergency phases

| Phase 1 First 72 hours **Initial assessment** | Phase 2 1-2 weeks **Rapid assessment** | Phase 3 2-4 weeks **In-depth assessment** | Phase 4 5 weeks plus **In-depth assessment (incl. recovery)** |

Initial assessments are essential to establish a pre-disaster baseline in order to assess the impact of the disaster and identify any factors that may contribute to vulnerability. Initial assessments are "typically carried out in the first hours following a disaster... [and] are essential to inform immediate relief needs and should be carried out and shared immediately." (CS3 GN2) However, aid organisations are often too eager to collect their own primary data in the field. As a result, some needs assessments have been criticised for attempting to collect too much information at an early stage, leading to three common pitfalls for assessments: information overload, failure to deliver that information in a timely manner and wasted resources.

For initial assessments, you should start using mostly secondary data from various sources[1], including pre-disaster information about local humanitarian capacity, the affected and wider population, context and other pre-existing factors that may increase people's susceptibility to the disaster (CS3 KA and GN2); then decide if primary data collection is needed (direct observation, focus group discussions, surveys and discussions with as wide a range of people and groups as possible — CS3 GN5).[2]

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[1] Sources can include government ministries, academic or research institutions, community-based organisations and

[2] For more details about how to carry out these approaches, please refer to ECB/ACAPS 2012.

The assessment checklists in the appendices of each of the Sphere Handbook technical chapters can be particularly useful resources for initial assessments.

You should follow up the initial assessment with further in-depth assessments as the operating environment, the time available and resources allow (CS3 KA). While "initial and rapid assessments provide the basis for subsequent in-depth assessments that deepen (but do not repeat) earlier assessment findings" (CS3 GN3), a rule of thumb is that "in-depth assessment should be conducted following the initial and rapid assessment only where information gaps have been identified and where further information is needed to inform programme decision-making, to measure programme outcomes or for advocacy purposes" (Food security and nutrition assessment standard 2: Nutrition, GN2).

Key characteristics of an effective assessment team: Assessment teams should, as far as possible, be composed in the following way: a mix of women and men; a mix of generalists and specialists; skills in gender-sensitive data collection and communication with children; familiarity with languages and locations; able to communicate in culturally acceptable ways (CS3 GN7).

Coordination: Aid organisations have a responsibility to coordinate assessments in the same way as they coordinate aid delivery (CS2). They should participate in any government or IASC systems set up to coordinate assessments; where these do not exist, agencies should make cluster or sector meetings aware of their assessment plans and establish bilateral coordination with other agencies working in the same locations or sectors. Working through national and local government is preferable where it is possible and appropriate.

Agencies should "participate in multi-sectoral, joint or inter-agency assessments wherever possible". Common Needs Assessments are increasingly frequent, with the most prominent being the Multi-Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA), developed by the IASC Task Force. If a common inter-agency assessment format has been developed prior to a disaster or agreed during the response, agencies should use these formats (and any accompanying processes). The broadly agreed Sphere indicators and assessment checklists facilitate joint assessment.

Where "multi-sectoral assessments are not initially possible, [agencies should] pay extra attention to linkages with other individual sectors, protection and cross-cutting assessments" (CS3 GN7).

Inclusiveness and vulnerability: You should be as inclusive as possible, as soon as possible. You must listen to a broad range of people from all disaster-affected populations, to achieve the most representative possible assessment of individuals or communities (CS3 KA). Indicators signalling participation should be selected according to context and represent all those affected (CS1 GN1).

Needs-based assessments cover all disaster-affected populations (CS1 and CS3):

- women and men of all ages, girls, boys (as is possible at this early stage);

- other vulnerable people affected by the disaster;

- the wider population;

- multiple livelihoods categories and different wealth groups (see Table 8 for more detail).

Special efforts are needed to ensure that vulnerable and hard-to reach people are included, taking into account the social and contextual factors that contribute to vulnerability (Table 8). This includes people in hard-to-reach locations (not in camps, in host families or in less accessible geographical areas); and people less easily accessed but often at risk, such as persons with disabilities, older people,

housebound individuals, children and youths who may be targeted as child soldiers or subjected to gender-based violence.

It will not be possible to immediately assess all those affected: excluded areas or groups should be clearly noted in the assessment report and returned to at the earliest opportunity (CS3 GN5). In-depth assessments should identify potential future hazards, such as changing risk patterns due to environmental degradation (e.g., soil erosion or deforestation) and climate change and geology (e.g., cyclones, floods, droughts, landslides and sea-level rise) (CS3 GN6).

Table 8: Issues contributing to vulnerability

Issue	Example groups
Discrimination / marginalisation	Women and girls
Social isolation	Older people and persons with disabilities
Environmental degradation	People on marginal land
Climate variability	People living in coastal areas
Poverty	Low-income groups
Lack of land tenure	Displaced communities, slum residents
Ethnicity, class or caste	Minority groups
Religious or political affiliation	Minority groups

Protection issues: The Protection Principles provide guidance to ensure that assessments include protection issues and that the assessment process itself does not compromise the protection needs of disaster-affected populations. The work of the South Sudan Protection Cluster (2011) provides an example of how to develop principles into indicators based on local context;[3] however, different indicators are likely to be required in different locations, according to specific protection issues.

Inclusion of **rights-related issues** in assessments provides a foundation for future protection activities, including advocating for the rights of affected populations with relevant authorities and actors. Assessments should therefore incorporate rights-related issues, since the success of advocacy "generally depends on access to reliable evidence, stakeholder analysis and thorough context analysis" (Sphere HB p32). However, information products from an assessment (reports, maps or other outputs) should be prepared with sensitivity to protection issues; dissemination should be managed carefully to ensure that it does not increase vulnerability of populations covered by the assessment.

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[3] More detail of this can be found in the South Sudan Protection Cluster Rapid Needs Assessment Data Analysis (2011), available at http://southsudanprotectioncluster.org/protection-assessment

Neglecting protection aspects can have implications for all initial and subsequent assessments. Protection Principle 1 has particular relevance to assessments, based on the concept of Do No Harm.[4] The Principle includes two overarching elements which link to assessment guidance in the Core Standards:

a) *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.*

- In conflict or post-conflict situations, a poorly designed assessment may expose individuals or communities to potential retaliation, especially if information from an assessment "could be misused and place people at further risk; [those] engaged in the collection of systematic information from people who have been abused or violated should have the necessary skills and systems to do so safely and appropriately" (CS3 GN5).

- Current and potential safety concerns for the disaster-affected population and aid workers should be assessed, including the potential for the response to exacerbate a conflict or create tension between the affected and host populations (CS3 KAs).

- An assessment of the safety and security of disaster-affected and host populations should be carried out, identifying threats of violence and any forms of coercion and denial of subsistence or basic human rights (see also PP3) (CS3 GN9).

b) *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.*

- It is important to talk with children separately as they are unlikely to speak in front of adults and doing so may put the children at risk (CS3 GN5).

- In most cases, women and girls should be consulted in separate spaces (CS3 GN5).

- Only share information with other humanitarian agencies or relevant organisations about an individual with their informed consent (CS3 GN5).

- Take account of the impact of the disaster on the psychosocial well-being of individuals and communities (CS3 KA10).

- Make sure that the aid workers engaged in the collection of information from people who have been abused or violated have the necessary skills and systems to do so safely and appropriately (CS3, GN5).

- Repeated assessments of sensitive protection concerns such as gender-based violence can be more harmful than beneficial to communities and individuals (CS3 GN3).

Analysis

Analysis is the process of turning the data gathered during an assessment into useful information for decision-making. The following steps should be taken:

- Cross-check and validate as much of your data as possible, noting your data sources and levels of disaggregation (CS3 GN7).

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[4] Further detail about the Do No Harm approach can be found in CDA 2004 – full reference in the bibliography.

- Use sectoral checklists (Appendix 1 of each technical chapter in the Sphere Handbook) during analysis to enhance the coherence and accessibility of data to other agencies, to ensure that all key areas have been examined and to reduce organisational or individual bias (CS3 GN7).

- Disaggregate population data at minimum by sex and age. Although detailed disaggregation may not be possible (CS3 GN4; CS3 KA4), some disaggregation will help account for the needs and risks for different groups and individuals in the context of wider social and economic factors (CS3 GN6).

- Record the mortality and morbidity rates of children under 5 from the start (CS3 GN7).

Context analysis: Organisations working in conflict-affected areas should apply a conflict-sensitive approach in order "to understand the context it operates in, understand the interaction between its intervention and that context and act upon this understanding in order to minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on conflict" (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium 2012, p2). A contextual analysis must include an analysis of the security concerns of disaster-affected communities. These

Box 2

Data disaggregation: an example from Bangladesh

Disaggregation of data is necessary to divide a large body of data into smaller units relevant to your analysis plan – for example, dividing an affected population into different categories. You should disaggregate to a level which is easy to collect and analyse in terms of sample size, but be careful not to disaggregate to a level which provides too much detail. Here is an example of a data collection plan that was implemented in Bangladesh following Tropical Storm Mahasen:
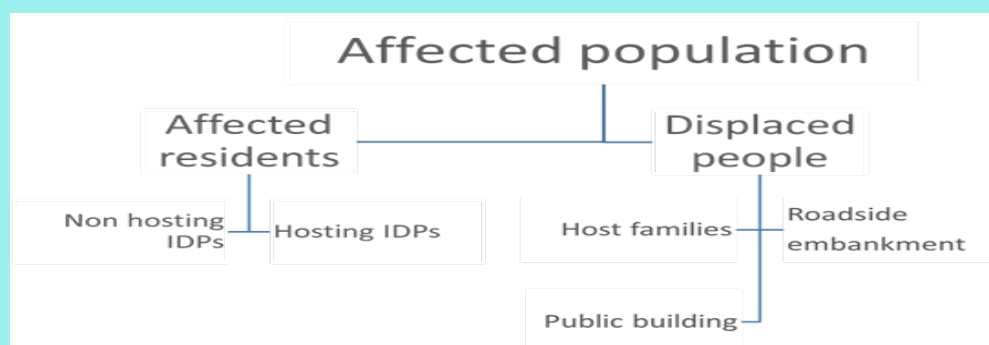
Other possible ways to disaggregate data are:

Geographic: hierarchy of administrative levels from state to village/settlement;

Date: hierarchy of year > quarter > month > week;

Sector: e.g. WASH, which may include water supply, sanitation, hygiene, waste management and vector control;

Group: e.g. IDPs, composed of several types of affected sub-groups, for instance: IDPs in self-settled camps; IDPs in public buildings; and IDPs in host families, etc.;

Socio-economic circumstances and livelihoods: farmers, pastoralists, traders, etc.;

Settings and context: e.g. urban vs. rural.   (Source: ACAPS, 2013)

include: a) violence or the threat of violence; b) "any forms of coercion and denial of subsistence or basic human rights"; and c) "the impact of the disaster on the psychosocial well-being of individuals and communities" (CS3 GN9).

Sharing

One of the key indicators for Core Standard 2 (Coordination and collaboration) is that "Assessment reports and information about programme plans and progress are regularly submitted to the relevant coordinating groups." Once an assessment has been carried out, agencies should "share assessment information with the relevant coordination groups in a timely manner and in a format that can be readily used by other humanitarian agencies." (CS3 KA; see also CS2 GN4).

Sharing assessments assists other humanitarian agencies in their work, contributes to the overall baseline data available to the humanitarian community and increases the transparency of the response.

Information should also be shared with the assessed population, who have a right to accurate and updated information about actions taken on their behalf, using appropriate language and a variety of media so that it is accessible (CS1 GN4).

There are different ways of sharing, depending on the situation:

An inter-agency assessment working group clearing house for assessments;

Any cluster meetings dedicated to assessments; common websites on which assessments may be posted (If such a website does not exist, agencies should lobby co-ordinating bodies to create one).

According to CS3 GN10 and CS2 GN4, assessment reports and other data should fulfil the following criteria:

- Be clear, concise and relevant;
- Enable users to identify priorities for action;
- Describe their methodology to demonstrate the reliability of data;
- 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.

Sharing sensitive assessment information: Sharing personal assessment information with other organisations may only be done with an individual's consent.

Guidance notes 8-12 of Protection Principle 1 can give you guidance on how to manage sensitive information, which is a complicated area in its own right.[5] Where agencies are not able to engage fully with these issues, at minimum they must recognise that "protection-related data may be sensitive" (Sphere HB p35) and respond accordingly.

Information products from an assessment (reports, maps or other outputs) should be prepared with sensitivity to protection issues; dissemination should be managed carefully to ensure that it does not increase vulnerability of populations covered by the assessment.

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[5] The International Organisation for Migration has produced a manual on data protection (IOM 2010).

The Sphere Core Standard 3: Assessment

Core Standard 3: The priority needs of the disaster-affected population are identified through a systematic assessment of the context, risks to life with dignity and the capacity of the affected people and relevant authorities to respond.

12 Key actions

- Find and use pre-disaster information about local humanitarian capacity, the affected and wider population, context and other pre-existing factors that may increase people's susceptibility to the disaster (see guidance note 1).

- Carry out an initial assessment immediately, building on pre-disaster information to assess changes in the context caused by the disaster, identifying any new factors that create or increase vulnerability (see guidance note 2).

- Carry out a rapid assessment as soon as possible, following up with subsequent in-depth assessments as time and the situation allow (see guidance note 3).

- Disaggregate population data by, at the very least, sex and age (see guidance note 4).

- Listen to an inclusive range of people in the assessment – women and men of all ages, girls, boys and other vulnerable people affected by the disaster as well as the wider population (see Core Standard 1 and guidance notes 5–6).

- Participate in multisectoral, joint or inter-agency assessments wherever possible.

- Gather information systematically, using a variety of methods, triangulate with information gathered from a number of sources and agencies and document the data as they are collected (see guidance note 7).

- Assess the coping capacity, skills, resources and recovery strategies of the affected people (see guidance note 8).

- Assess the response plans and capacity of the state.

- Assess the impact of the disaster on the psychosocial well-being of individuals and communities.

- Assess current and potential safety concerns for the disaster-affected population and aid workers, including the potential for the response to exacerbate a conflict or create tension between the affected and host populations (see guidance note 9).

- Share assessment data in a timely manner and in a format that is accessible to other humanitarian agencies (see Core Standard 2 and guidance note 10).

6 Key indicators

- Assessed needs have been explicitly linked to the capacity of affected people and the state to respond.

- Rapid and in-depth assessment reports contain views that are representative of all affected people, including members of vulnerable groups and those of the surrounding population.

- Assessment reports contain data disaggregated by, at the very least, sex and age.

- In-depth assessment reports contain information and analysis of vulnerability, context and capacity.

- Where assessment formats have been agreed and widely supported, they have been used.

- Rapid assessments have been followed by in-depth assessments of the populations selected for intervention.

Guidance notes cover the following issues

- Pre-disaster information;

- Initial assessments;

- Phased assessments;

- Data disaggregation;

- Representative assessments;

- Assessing vulnerability;

- Data-gathering and checklists;

- Assessing capacities;

- Assessing security;

- Sharing assessments.

(Source: Sphere Handbook, p61-65)

Best practice in assessments, based on Sphere Core Standards

- Cross-check, validate and reference as many sources as possible, noting data sources and levels of disaggregation (CS3 GN7);

- Clarify your objectives and methodology, using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods appropriate to the context (CS3 GN7);

- Create assessment teams mixing women and men, generalists and specialists, with specialists in gender-sensitive data collection and communicating with children, and familiar with languages and locations who can communicate in culturally acceptable ways (CS3 GN7);

- Use checklists to enhance the coherence and accessibility of data to other agencies, ensuring that all key areas have been examined and reducing organisational or individual bias (CS3 GN7);

- Assess the capacity and plans of both the community and the state to cope and recover from disaster, with the understanding that "explicit efforts to listen to, consult and engage people at an early stage will increase quality and community management later" (CS1 GN1);

- Disaggregate population data; although detailed disaggregation may not be possible (CS3 GN4), Table 1 below describes a minimum initial breakdown by sex and age (CS3 KA4). Disaggregation enables analysis of the different needs of different groups, accounting for vulnerability based on the different risks faced by different groups and individuals in the context of wider social and economic factors (CS3 GN6);

- Listen to an inclusive range of people in order to achieve the most representative possible assessment (CS3 GN5). Table 1 below gives examples of individuals or communities that may be less socially or geographically accessible, and therefore require additional effort to cover. While acknowledging that "it will not be possible to immediately assess all those affected... excluded areas or groups should be clearly noted in the assessment report and returned to at the earliest opportunity" (CS3 GN7);

- Include security concerns of disaster-affected and host populations in contextual analysis. This should not be limited to violence or the threat of violence, but also include identifying "any forms of coercion and denial of subsistence or basic human rights" (CS3 GN9) and "assessing the impact of the disaster on the psychosocial well-being of individuals and communities" (CS3 KA10).

Quick references to assessment in the Sphere Handbook

Chapter	Minimum standard	Reference	Page
Water, sanitation and hygiene promotion	Standard 1: WASH programme design and implementation	KA	89
	Hygiene promotion standard 1: Hygiene promotion implementation	GN1	92
	Hygiene promotion standard 2: identification and use of hygiene items	KA3, KA4	94
	Water supply standard 2: Water quality	GN1, GN8	101-2
	Vector control standard 1: Individual and family protection	GN1	
	Solid waste management standard 1: Collection and disposal	GN3	119
	Initial needs assessment checklist		124
Food security and nutrition	Assessment standards for food security		150
	Assessment standards for nutrition		154
	Appendix 1: Assessment checklist (food security and livelihoods) Appendix 2: Assessment checklist (seed security) Appendix 3: Assessment checklist (nutrition)		214-19
Shelter, settlement and non-food items	Shelter standard 1: Strategic planning	GNs	249-52
	Shelter Standard 2: Settlement planning	GN1	265
	NFI Standard 1: Individual, general household and shelter support items	GN1	269
	Appendix 1: Assessment checklist		278
Health action	Health systems Standard 5: Health Information Management	GN1-4	305-7
	Appendix 1: Assessment checklist		338

Sphere and MIRA

The Multi-Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment or MIRA manual outlines an approach to undertake a joint multi-sector assessment in the earliest days of a crisis or change in the context, and guides subsequent in-depth sectoral assessments.

Using the best primary and secondary information available, MIRA helps identify strategic humanitarian priorities, based on a Preliminary Scenario Definition issued 72 hours after a disaster's onset, and a MIRA report released after two weeks.

The MIRA is the first step in the humanitarian country team's response to an emergency. Based on its findings, humanitarian actors can develop a joint strategic plan, mobilize resources and monitor the situation and the response. However, the MIRA should not be expected to provide detailed information for the design of localized response projects.

The MIRA is consistent with the IASC Operational Guidance for Coordinated Assessments in Humanitarian Crises, which calls for the implementation of a joint assessment during the first two phases of an emergency and, thereafter, for the coordination of in-depth agency and cluster assessments.

The Sphere Handbook contains key elements to support MIRA: assessment checklists, Protection Principles, Core Standards, technical standards and indicators. The Sphere Handbook identifies needs assessment as a key element of humanitarian response and as the critical starting point of any programme implementation, with a strong focus on the rights of the affected people.

The Sphere Handbook can therefore be used as a key tool for the MIRA approach. It helps determine whether a minimum standard has been reached or not, identify humanitarian gaps and propose ways to overcome them.

Together with the contextual information provided by MIRA, the Sphere Handbook can contribute to developing MIRA's two key products: the Preliminary Scenario Definition and the MIRA report.

Appendix 5

Sphere for Assessments and the *Good Enough Guide to Humanitarian Needs Assessment*

The *Good Enough Guide to Humanitarian Needs Assessment* (GEGA) has been developed by the ECB Project and ACAPS. It provides a comprehensive framework for needs assessment, accompanied by a set of practical tools. It is primarily targeted at field staff tasked with carrying out assessments, specifically project staff and their managers, with a secondary audience of senior staff to understand the requirements of assessments.

Sphere for Assessments has been developed by the Sphere Project and ACAPS. It is a short guide to help staff identify and implement sections of the Sphere Handbook most relevant to assessment. It is geared at assessment teams in the field, managers implementing organisation-wide assessment strategy, and coordinators developing and implementing joint assessments.

Similarities

Both guides agree that the use of commonly agreed indicators in humanitarian needs assessment will contribute to better coherence and coordination at the national level and in the humanitarian sector overall.

Both guides follow the assessment cycle from assessment preparedness through to information sharing and learning. The GEGA provides an overall framework and practical tools to manage the assessment cycle, while *Sphere for Assessments* provides more detailed guidance on how to ensure that standards and indicators are incorporated into the assessment process.

Both guides strive to improve the sector's competence in assessments and are based on best practice. The GEGA provides a practical framework for this, while *Sphere for Assessments* provides more detailed guidance in the area of standards and indicators.

Both of these resources are platform-neutral and will be useful for staff in any organisation, regardless of the specific assessment approach used by that organisation.

Complementarities

Sphere for Assessments complements the GEGA in three ways:

- The GEGA is targeted at assessment staff with limited or no assessment experience, while *Sphere for Assessments* addresses a higher level of competence and provides targeted guidance on how to work with Sphere.

- The GEGA describes various assessment techniques and tools, *Sphere for Assessments* provides specific content to work within the area of standards and indicators.

- *Sphere for Assessments* is relevant for in-house guidance on the use of assessment indicators, regardless of how much of the GEGA resource is incorporated into an agency assessment.

A case study from Pakistan

The use of Sphere minimum standards in assessment for a food security project in Besham, Shangla District, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan.

(Source: Church World Service – Pakistan/Afghanistan)

Since 2009, the Shangla district has been affected by military operations, which have disrupted the lives and livelihoods of its residents. In 2010, the area also faced massive floods, which further aggravated the humanitarian operation. The floods destroyed communication infrastructure such as roads and bridges, making access to markets, schools, health facilities and people's houses difficult. Shops, agricultural land and other livelihoods sources were destroyed. The double disaster within a year pushed the affected population in Shangla into a highly vulnerable and hazardous situation, which required humanitarian assistance from not only the national authorities but also the international community.

Church World Service-Pakistan/Afghanistan (CWS-P/A) has been working in Shangla since 2010 in agricultural and livestock rehabilitation activities with financial support from DANIDA. CWS carried out a detailed baseline study in all target villages to assess the priority needs of the disaster-affected population (Sphere Core Standard 3: Assessment).

The following two tables present ways to identify the priority needs of affected populations. Table A shows a systematic assessment of the context, risks to life with dignity and the capacity of the affected people and relevant authorities to respond.

Table B looks at a situation of increased risk of food insecurity, in which the needs assessment uses accepted methods to understand the type, degree and extent of food insecurity, in order to identify those most affected and define the most appropriate response (Food security and nutrition assessment standard 1).

Table A: Context assessment

Key actions	Key indicators	Compliance (By DANIDA Food Security Team)
• Disaggregate population data by, at the very least, sex and age. • Listen to an inclusive range of people in the assessment – women and men of all ages, girls, boys and other vulnerable people affected by the disaster as well as the wider population. • Assess the coping capacity, skills, resources and recovery strategies of the affected people. • Assess the impact of the disaster on the psychosocial well-being of individuals and communities.	• Rapid and in-depth assessment reports contain views that are representative of all affected people, including members of vulnerable groups and those of the surrounding population. • Assessment reports contain data disaggregated by, at the very least, sex and age. • In-depth assessment reports contain information and analysis of vulnerability, context and capacity. • Where assessment formats have been agreed and widely supported, they have been used. • Rapid assessments have been followed by in-depth assessments of the populations selected for intervention.	• Completed a baseline survey for emergency livelihood and food security project in the project area. The study population was 4,550 households to be covered by the project. • 180 heads of households (100 men and 80 women) were interviewed for the baseline study. Focus group discussions were conducted in 12 villages – 11 discussions with men, and 10 with women. Those groups included representatives from almost all the segments of community. • Different surrounding hamlets were also included in the focus group discussions. • Two questionnaires were drafted and circulated to the relevant project staff and other stakeholders. One was for the focus group discussions, the other for the household survey. • The questionnaire was coded in a way which was user-friendly both for data collection and data entry. For the quality control and trouble shooting, senior management was part of the baseline survey throughout the process. • In a one-day workshop, the field data collection team was trained and the roles and responsibilities among male and female interviewers established.

Table B: Food insecurity assessment

Key action	Key indicator	Compliance (By DANIDA Food Security Team)
• Use a methodology which adheres to widely accepted principles and describe it comprehensively in the assessment report. • Collect and analyse information at the initial stage of the assessment. • Analyse the impact of food insecurity on the population's nutritional status. • Build the assessment upon local capacities, including formal and informal institutions, wherever possible.	• Food security and livelihoods of individuals, households and communities are investigated to guide interventions. • Assessment findings are synthesised in an analytical report including clear recommendations of actions targeting the most vulnerable individuals and groups. • The response is based on people's immediate food needs but will also consider the protection and promotion of livelihood strategies.	• Conducted a systematic baseline survey for emergency livelihood and food security project in Besham. • Respecting local norms and culture, 11 village committees for men and 11 for women were formed to facilitate smooth project implementation. • Food security-related needs were identified during FGDs with men's and women's groups and individual household surveys from 100 men and 80 women (head of households). Special emphasis was laid on including most vulnerable segments of the area during the project interventions. • Communities were enabled to take the lead in setting selection criteria for project interventions thus ensuring community empowerment and sustainability. • Assessments for project interventions were conducted in line with set and agreed standard operating procedures for each intervention. Upon sharing those procedures in a general community meeting, beneficiaries were nominated by members of the village organization/committee. • Based on the assessment analysis findings, priorities were given to most vulnerable households and associated groups in target villages. • The list of beneficiaries was reviewed and a final beneficiary list agreed and approved. Details of the intervention package were shared with the beneficiaries. • A brief baseline analysis report was shared with relevant project staff.

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