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TECHNICAL BRIEF

Coordinated Assessments in emergencies

What we know now:

Key lessons from field experience

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Introduction

A coordinated assessment (CA) refers to a “*time-bound, multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data to assess needs and inform decisions on humanitarian and early recovery responses*”¹.

The IASC defines a coordinated assessment as one “*...planned and carried out in partnership by humanitarian actors, in order to document the impact of a particular crisis and to identify the needs of affected populations. The results of the assessment are shared with the broader humanitarian community.*” *Coordinated assessments can be joint or harmonised*².

Recent years have seen a growing emphasis on the importance of a coordinated approach to assessments in the early days and weeks following a disaster. It is now widely agreed that a multi-sector and multi-stakeholder assessment should be undertaken during the initial days and weeks of a major crisis to provide initial information on its humanitarian impact and to assist stakeholders in coming to a shared understanding of the key priorities for response. Achieving a high quality, timely assessment of humanitarian needs, however, remains a challenge for the humanitarian community.

One outcome of the interest in coordinated assessments has been the execution of large scale primary data collection exercises after natural disasters, as was the case in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake and Pakistan after the 2010 floods. While these exercises yielded a wealth of information about the crises, they were costly in terms of logistics and human resources, were challenged in terms of timeliness, and ultimately collected a lot of information that was not used for fund raising or response planning.

This document uses lessons learned from recent coordinated assessments to distil key points, advice, and pitfalls in carrying out a **Coordinated Assessment during the first weeks of a disaster**. It provides a general introduction to what has been learned about coordinated assessments in terms of what works and what does not. As such, it is aimed towards humanitarian personnel responding to or preparing for emergencies both at field and headquarters level³.

The acronym “CA” in this document is used to describe Coordinated Assessments undertaken in the initial days and weeks of a disaster.

¹ HPN, Common needs assessment and humanitarian action, Richard Garfield, 2011, p3. From the joint Myanmar/Pakistan workshop held in Bangkok in January 2009

² IASC, Operational Guidance for Coordinated Assessments in Humanitarian Crises, Provisional Version March 2012, p5

³ More detailed technical advice on specific aspects of carrying out multi sector multi stakeholder humanitarian assessments including guidance on preparing a secondary data review, developing scenarios, and data collection techniques such as the use of direct observation and key informant interviews can be found at www.acaps.org.

1. What we know now about coordinated assessments in general

1.1 Assessment is a process; not a one off event

A coordinated approach to assessments is a process of progressively collecting and analysing information. As information needs are refined over time, information should become more in depth, sector specific, and recovery oriented.

Assessment findings for each phase⁴ of an unfolding crisis should inform the design and focus of assessments that follow. Rather than thinking unrealistically in terms of one large scale assessment to fulfil all information needs, we should be thinking in terms of what we need to know when: *what do we (need to) know now, what do we need to know next*

1.2 To be useful, assessments must be linked to decision making

Too often an assessment, particularly a multi-sector one, becomes an end in itself. The content of the assessment is influenced by information needs and agendas from different agencies and sectors but in reality is disconnected from the decision making process for the particular phase of the crisis. There is often a lack of clarity about the key stakeholders who will be the end users of the information, and which decisions and documents the assessment should inform.

The primary function of a CA is to **provide information to inform decision making**. This implies that to be useful, a coordinated assessment process must provide relevant information to the right people at the right time throughout the course of a crisis.

Emergency decision makers (including Clusters, NGOs, HCT, Donors, Government, UN agencies) have tight timeframes with fixed milestones that govern key decisions, particularly during the early stages of an emergency. As a result, it is necessary to be realistic about how we obtain and communicate knowledge about the impact of a disaster during emergencies. The value of a CA needs to be in providing evidence to inform these decisions so that they are proportionate and appropriate to the scale of a crisis. **Understanding what those decisions are and the time frame in which they exist** is key for a successful coordinated assessment. Without a common understanding on the purpose of and limits to a CA that can be achieved in the initial days and weeks after a disaster, there may be pressure from stakeholders to use the assessment as a massive information collection exercise to amass *all* the information they might need to assist them in their detailed response planning.

The decisions that a Coordinated Assessments will inform are primarily **strategic decisions**. A lack of clarity on this has resulted in primary data collection tools, notably questionnaires, for CAs that are heavy, long (typically 12 pages or more) and overly detailed. This in turn has resulted in lengthy data collection processes and, due to insufficient time and resources to analyse the extensive data, the collection of information that was not used. Frequently,

⁴ See provisional version of the Operational guidance, NATF, March 2012, p 13 for the phases of an emergency.

criticism persists among stakeholders that information gathered during a CA is not sufficiently detailed and representative. This perception has its roots in common misconceptions about the real value and the purpose of a CA.

By definition, a coordinated rapid needs assessment is cross-sector, cross-cutting and multi-stakeholder; it aims to identify macro shared priorities for response and enable strategic decision making. It provides a big picture, macro level analysis about the impact of a disaster so that stakeholders can arrive at a shared understanding of the situation and how it is likely to unfold. The kinds of strategic decision that CAs will inform include consideration of and prioritisation on:

- **Sectors** that require urgent intervention
- Priority affected **groups** within an affected population who are most at risk and in need of humanitarian attention
- Geographic **areas** where the impact of a crisis has been greatest.

By its very nature, and time frame, a CA in emergencies is *not* intended to provide detailed and precise information. It does not collect the kind of in depth sector information required to inform design of specific projects and should not be expected to. Nor is it intended to replace cluster/sector specific assessments. It should in fact inform them by identifying gaps in knowledge about the impact of the disaster.

One key implication of this is that when multi-sector, multi-stakeholder field level data collection takes place (i.e. what is referred to as a Joint Needs Assessment-JNA) the questionnaires appropriate for primary data collection during phases 1 and 2 of a disaster are NOT the sum of all rapid assessment forms from all different sectors.

Key learning points:

Understand, adapt to, and anticipate, information needs: Awareness of, and operating within, the decision making framework helps achieve an appropriate balance between timeliness, detail and rigour. A successful CA requires a clear understanding of what decision makers need to know when in order to shape the assessment design and time frame. Remember that rapid CAs are a small part of a wider data collection and analysis process: there will be opportunity later to collect more in depth information.

Have clear and specific objectives: Objectives of the assessment must be clear and agreed by as many stakeholders as possible. Typically, they will include specific reference to a timeframe, geographic area to be covered, the key documents and decisions the assessment will inform, and the sectors to be assessed and they will be based on what is known about the context and the disaster itself.

Make sure **stakeholders are clear about the goal and the expected output** of the CA, including the kinds of decisions and documents a CA is likely to inform.

CAs do not replace Cluster/sector rapid assessments, but rather complement them and inform their design.

Examples of decisions being informed by CA include:

- The need for response
- Definition of key priorities by HCTs
- Definition and selection of standard programs (surveillance, vaccination campaign, Food for Work, registration, etc.)
- Needs analysis and background in funding documents such as ERF, CERF, Flash Appeal
- Development of common advocacy messages
- Design of subsequent in depth assessments

1.3 One size does not fit all

Access to and availability of information will vary from one situation to another. In some cases, there will be a wealth of pre-crisis and in-crisis secondary data available for use in understanding how the situation is likely to unfold and what interventions may be required. In other cases there will be far less information available. Sometimes the appropriate assessment approach will be to focus on harmonizing existing information to generate an overall picture of the impact. Other times there will be a need for a well-designed field data collection exercise to address information gaps in existing secondary data. Other factors such as accessibility to affected areas, security, national capacity and availability of (skilled) human resources will also influence assessment approach and design.

Therefore, there is not a single standard CA package that can be rolled out at each disaster. Rather best practices about good assessment approaches need to be adapted to meet information needs specific to each crisis.

Key learning points:

CA methodologies need to be fine-tuned and adapted to each disaster. Even the best assessment preparedness mechanisms demand some level of adaptation and revision post disaster

There is no universal assessment tool that will meet *all* information needs in *all* situations. Rather, a simple, flexible, and robust approach that can be adapted to different disaster contexts is needed.

1.4 An assessment is not the same as a survey

A survey is the process of estimating characteristics of a population based on a generalisable sample from that population. High quality surveys typically seek precise measurement, use rigorous sampling methods, and aim to quantify and confirm hypotheses through use of quantitative research methods. When household members are informants, the questionnaire is the primary data collection instrument. Typically the questionnaire is extensively tested before a survey commences. Data collectors having received appropriate training should be

used and results can be generalised to the whole population of interest. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) carried out collaboratively by government statistics bureaus and UNICEF is an example of such a survey.

Conditions for a normal household survey do not exist during an emergency. Many people are not in their homes, population data has suddenly become outdated, and the variables of interest may evolve quickly, making the information collected rapidly obsolete. Often survey is not an option for initial understanding of a situation, because not enough is known to prepare the questionnaire.

In contrast, a CA approach in emergencies recommends the initial use of secondary data to determine what is already known about the crisis itself and how it is anticipated to unfold and impact the affected populations. The secondary data review should inform a community level assessment⁵ that will fill gaps in understanding how people have been impacted by the disaster, validate or contradict the assumptions made based on existing information and lessons learned and give voice to affected communities.

It will usually employ primarily qualitative research methods⁶, sometimes mixed with quantitative techniques. Primary data is analysed using inductive reasoning and involves a systematic and iterative process of collecting, consolidating – with secondary data - and interpreting data. The assessment team is the core element in both the observation of the problem and in the analysis.

The main distinction between a survey and the kind of rapid assessments appropriate for the initial phases of a disaster is that rapid assessments do not seek statistical significance and thus, findings or numbers cannot be quantitatively extrapolated to the entire population of an affected area. Extrapolations generated during rapid CAs and based on a small number of purposely selected sites will inevitably be general and based on assumptions about the homogeneity or otherwise of the affected area, and not on statistics. Moreover, the verification of their accuracy cannot be performed in the rapidly changing environment.

One direct consequence of this is that affected population figures will not emerge from the field data collection during a Coordinated Assessment in emergency. These need to be estimated using other techniques and/or by referring to secondary data sources.

Key learning points:

It is more important for emergency CAs to be rapid than it is for them to be detailed. Timely information that identifies major needs and trends is more important than use of rigorous and detailed methodologies.

Ensure stakeholders understand that an emergency **CA will rarely use a representative sampling strategy**. This means that, for example, If 63% of the interviewed key informants

⁵ The community level assessment will usually be a combination of key informant interviews, direct observation and may include community group discussion.

⁶ The O.G and the MIRA refer to this as a “Community Level Assessment” CLA.

report not having access to water and there are 100,000 people affected, it is not possible to directly conclude that 63,000 people are without access to water.

Estimates of affected population figures will not come from primary data collection. Secondary data, government estimates, satellite imagery and/or other sources of information will need to be used to determine the scale of the disaster and the numbers of affected persons.

1.5 Quality and timeliness of a CA is enhanced by preparedness

In the aftermath of a disaster, there is little that can be done about an absence of preparedness. Implementing a CA in an emergency without some level of assessment preparedness has consistently proven challenging.

Consideration for the steps involved in a CA should be an integral part of any country level contingency planning process. Assessment preparedness involves agreeing in advance on both the assessment content, structure and processes. This includes defining roles and responsibilities, coordination structures, and what information will be collected, as well as how it will be collected, analysed and shared.

Lessons learned from past CA initiatives are also key for reflecting on and improving practices. Clear documentation of how an assessment took place, how roles and responsibilities were divided, steps that were taken, and timeframes followed all contribute to better preparedness for next time.

Key learning points:

All aspects of CAs benefit from preparedness. Ensure that a coordinated approach to assessment is part of national contingency planning processes wherever possible. Lessons learned from previous assessments should be recorded and reviewed to enhance future assessments.

When a disaster strikes, **always review the plans and preparations already in place** and consider how to make the best of use of these mechanisms.

Involve decision makers in the assessment preparedness process: once a disaster occurs, decision makers will not have time to absorb the details of the assessment process, they will just need the information. However, involving them in assessment preparedness can help create clear and realistic expectations about the information the assessment will deliver.

The lower the level of assessment preparedness between stakeholders, the simpler a CA should be.

2. What we know now about coordinating assessments

2.1 Coordinated assessment mechanisms should be activated as soon as possible

A coordinated approach to assessment needs to be promoted and implemented **as soon as possible** following the onset of a disaster. From the moment information about the impact of a disaster is sought and compiled, it should be inclusive of multiple stakeholders and multiple sectors; ideally, preparedness for coordinated assessments will have taken place and a coordinated approach will be anticipated by stakeholders.

Key learning point:

The earlier coordinated assessment planning starts after a disaster, the better. Operational stakeholders will not wait to start their own assessments. **The window of opportunity for CAs is extremely short** and requires rapid action.

2.2 There are different approaches to coordinated assessments

Coordinated assessment can be *harmonised* or *joint*.⁷

- **Harmonised assessments** occur when stakeholders carry out data collection, processing and analysis separately but where the collected data is able to be compared and harmonised. This implies similarity in methodology, key indicators and the use of common operational data sets so that the results produced are shared and are comparable and joint analysis can be performed. Preparedness and coordination is key between actors to optimize the geographical areas and the sectors covered by the multiple assessments.
- **Joint assessments**⁸ are carried out with a single tool, methodology and sampling strategy, often with mixed, multi-stakeholder field teams. The final outcome is a single consolidated report.

Harmonised and joint assessments can have greater applicability depending on time frame, context, in country capacity, type of crisis and decisions/documents they will inform. They need to be chosen accordingly. In the initial days and weeks of a crisis, the level of coordination to ensure that separate assessment can be harmonised should not be underestimated. The harmonisation process itself adds another layer to the overall assessment and thus adds to the time taken to produce a shared analysis. A joint assessment should result in less assessment fatigue to affected communities.

⁷ See Operational Guidance, p6.

⁸ Also called “common” assessments.

However, when there is significant information already available on the impact of a crisis and where agencies and clusters have begun their own assessments or plans for field level data collection, the most valuable role an assessment coordinator may provide is to ensure that data collection methods used and information collected by the different organisations allow for some level of joint analysis and interpretation. Ensuring comparability of findings between geographical areas, sectors/sub sectors and affected groups will allow for filtering or grouping results adequately.

Key learning points:

Rapid does not mean rushed; the way in which assessments are coordinated must be carefully thought through and adapted each time. **Consider the specific nature of the crisis** situation, the already available information and the current evolution of the crisis to determine the best approaches to coordinating an assessment that will meet the desired objectives.

The cornerstone of any CA is **information sharing**. Where there is no will to share information among stakeholders, a coordinated assessment will not be possible.

Harmonised assessments can offer greater flexibility to NGOs and other humanitarian actors who may find it difficult to spare scarce resources to carry out their own assessment during an emergency.

2.3 Coordinating assessments requires dedicated resources

As with other aspects of coordination, coordination of assessments doesn't just happen, it needs specific human resources tasked to the coordination role as well as commitment from stakeholders to actively engage in the assessment process.

Participation of key actors at different steps of the assessment (design, data collation and collection, analysis, and dissemination) will ensure ownership and appropriateness of the results of the assessments to the decision they need to inform.

A CA requires appropriate logistical and administrative planning and support to be completed properly and safely. As with any other emergency activity, a CA costs money. While in-kind donations, voluntary participation and logistical and administrative support should be encouraged; small cash envelopes readily available during the crisis period can save an enormous amount of time.

The **minimum coordination structure** for a CA includes an Assessment Coordinator and an Information Analyst. These key roles need to be dedicated for the full duration of the CA and not expected to fulfil additional (non-assessment) tasks, responsibilities or roles. Additional human and material resources required to support the assessment at different steps will need to be decided on depending on the context and the scale of the disaster as well as the scope and nature of the assessment.

Key learning points:

Be clear during the planning phase of the assessment as to **who is responsible for providing which logistic, human resource, financial and administrative support** for all aspects of the assessment including; secondary data review, community level assessment, data processing, analysis, preparation of findings and dissemination of findings.

If financial arrangements are planned, make sure they are formalised on paper.

2.4 Assessment coordination should include all relevant national actors

Governments are responsible for addressing the needs of their citizens in emergencies and wherever possible should have the lead role in an assessment however often there is insufficient capacity for a government to take responsibility for a high quality, coordinated assessment of needs. National actors such as the Emergency Management Authorities or National Disaster Management Authorities, Civil Protection, national NGOs, and the national Red Cross/Red Crescent society have important information and a field level presence that is vital in times of disaster. Information from these national stakeholders must be a part of the coordinated assessment. The buy-in of these actors to the overall assessment approach and output is an important factor in its credibility and usefulness. Ideally, the national government should lead the disaster response, but even when they cannot, it does not mean they lack the capacity to make a valuable contribution to a coordinated assessment.

Key learning points:

CAs do not occur in a vacuum. Map existing national information mechanisms (monitoring systems, civil protection, militaries, peacekeeping forces, RC/RC, etc.) and ensure all relevant actors are involved in the CA.

Invite key national actors to join the CA coordination team. This will allow the CA to benefit from existing network and information channels and access a range of in country experts for troubleshooting and data analysis. It also ensures that the CA process **builds on existing resources and mechanisms and is likely to be used in government decision making.**

Ensure regular updates are shared with stakeholders communicating achieved results, progress and upcoming deadlines.

Implementing a **Survey of surveys**⁹ will aid initial mapping and analysis of existing information and initiatives, including national stakeholder activities.

⁹The Survey of Surveys is defined as...*a country-specific repository of information on assessments which provides a comprehensive picture of those both undertaken and planned, NATF 2011.*

2.5 Generating buy in and managing expectations

Coordinated assessment takes place in an environment of highly competitive agendas, when agencies and organisations experience simultaneous and cumulative pressure on how to address the crisis programmatically and identify new funding to support responses.

Some sectors are better coordinated than others, and some have greater existing capacity to do assessments well. The immediate added value of a coordinated assessment is not always obvious, and some stakeholders may even assume they will lose out on fulfilling their own response needs by committing to a coordinated assessment. Generating buy-in and ownership of a coordinated approach, by communicating the benefits, as well as ensuring that the approach is sufficiently flexible to take into consideration the needs and capacities of stakeholders, is key.

While stakeholder participation is desirable and necessary for ownership of the overall assessment, this needs to be balanced with realistic understanding of what is achievable and desirable in the initial phases of a disaster and what has been learned from recent assessment experience. Some issues to consider are:

- Methodologies that will be used (e.g. secondary data review, key informant interviews, community group discussions, direct observation).
- The degree to which the information can be extrapolated in terms of statistical representativeness and rigour.
- How the number of affected population will be determined and who will be responsible for this.
- The difference between quantitative and qualitative information and where they intersect analytically.
- The level of detail and accuracy that can reasonably be expected and the type of decisions to be informed.
- The unit of measurement or granularity of the assessment (e.g. community vs. household level).
- The format in which information from the assessment will be shared and the release frequency; a traditional report may not be the most appropriate way to share information generated from a CA and the assessment approach should be on-going.

Key learning points:

Do not assume that all stakeholders understand the limits of a CA and buy into the added value of a coordinated approach to rapid needs assessments.

Manage expectations from the beginning of the CA design. Limitations to a CA should be clear even before the decision to undertake it is made.

Listen to stakeholders and **do not force them into a CA**. In case of reluctance, aim to reach agreement that the cornerstone of a coordinated approach is information sharing.

Remind stakeholders that the more people involved in the CA, the better the joint analysis is likely to be, the more agreed and shared the identified priorities will be and the more likely that subsequent humanitarian response will be coordinated.

Remember that all stakeholders have an agenda, and inclusion of more stakeholders will demand greater coordination of the CA process.

3. What we know about the data used in coordinated assessments

3.1 There has been an over focus on primary data

It is often *incorrectly* assumed that a CA automatically implies a large scale, resource intensive field data collection exercise. Recent assessment experiences have shown that primary data collected in the field after a crisis is only one source of information that needs to be used in understanding the impact of a disaster. An assessment is more than a primary data collection exercise. It is a process that includes secondary as well as primary data, the collation of this information, joint analysis and sharing of findings.

Lesson learned from large scale field level data collection for multi-sector assessments are:

- Attempting to collect information that is too detailed for the phase of the crisis, or methods being used, is not useful.
- These exercises use extensive resources and time. Time spent on data collection is disproportionate to, and does not allow for sufficient focus on data analysis and interpretation.
- The nature of the information that can and should be collected from the field is often as usefully and meaningfully collected from less extensive information gathering exercises (e.g. fewer assessment teams going to fewer sites) thereby allowing more time and more resources for analysis.
- These exercises often collect information that was available through other avenues, specifically from secondary data sources.
- These exercises have assumed a sense of quantitative rigour that is actually not statistically possible given the sample size and strategy, creating misleading information and interpretation.
- The methodology used is often not suitable for collecting the type of information sought..
- The resource and organisational intensity of these exercises gives them a profile that has created an impression that primary data is *the key* to understanding the global impact of a crisis. This misconception has resulted in under the emphasis, and underuse, of pre- and in-crisis information, including lessons learned from past events.

The purpose of a CA is to identify how people have been affected by a crisis, what the most pressing needs are in terms of life-saving sectors, where the most affected areas are, and what the likely needs will be as the crisis unfolds. Using all information available, including pre- and in-crisis information, to allow the formulation of sound assumptions is key to

understanding the extent and impact of a crisis. Therefore, CAs should combine a range of information sources, including, but not limited to:

- Pre-crisis information such as census figures, demographic data, food and agriculture information, development ranking, weather and climatic information, baseline data of existing vulnerabilities within the population;
- Any in crisis assessments carried out by stakeholders including government, NGOs, RC movement, clusters;
- In crisis information from other sources including satellite imagery and media reports;
- Past disaster experiences, sector expertise, and lessons learned
- Primary data collection

Data used in coordinated assessments will change over time both in terms of the quantity and nature of the data. The volume of primary data collected from one phase to the next will likely increase and the emphasis on primary data will usually also increase over time.¹⁰

The detail that can be expected in assessments also increases over time. It is important to maintain a key list of core issues or measurements that can be continuously updated and monitored across phases. This should continue beyond phase 2 (first 2 weeks) and into phases 3 and 4 where clusters/sectors will carry out their own assessments. Wherever possible it is advantageous to ensure reasonable comparability in terms of methods and approaches with the data from previous assessments so that changes, patterns and trends can be identified, monitored and addressed. Even when clusters carry out their own assessments and collect their own data, a harmonised approach should be attempted to bring key information together to enable a multi-sector overview.

Key learning points:

Primary data during CA in emergencies is not the main source of information. **Secondary data is the key information source during the initial days and weeks after a disaster.**

Primary data becomes more important over time as access to impacted areas and populations increases. Until it becomes the main source of information by the end of phase 2, **primary data is used to validate and complement the secondary data**, and not the contrary.

Considering the importance of secondary data, **information sharing between stakeholders** should be systematically strengthened and promoted during emergencies and during preparedness.

¹⁰ This may not be the case if security is a key factor limiting access as in the case of a conflict situation.

3.2 Collection of household survey data drawn from a representative sample is seldom possible in an emergency

Given time, access and logistical constraints, collecting meaningful information from households or individuals is neither feasible nor useful in the initial days and weeks after a disaster. Similarly, asking individuals to comment on issues particular to their household (such as the number of children they have) has limited usefulness in the early phases of a crisis. Rather, community level data (village or site level data) is more appropriate for use in assessing needs during the initial weeks of a crisis. This implies using techniques such as interviews with key informants who can present the situation for a particular community, direct observations by assessment teams (both structured and unstructured) and community group discussions.

Constraints faced by assessment teams when visiting the field include:

- Difficulty in accessing affected areas and affected populations because of time available, distance, transportation (inaccessible roads and lack of available vehicles or boats), and security.
- Difficulty in communicating with people in affected areas because of breakdown in telecommunications and lack of translation.
- Poorly organised pre-crisis information making it time consuming to attempt to gather baseline information about an affected area including population size and demographic breakdown.
- Limited skilled, trained, and readily deployable personnel available to be part of assessment teams.
- Lack of clarity in terms of sampling and site selection, choosing appropriate key informants and working with community groups.

Constraints to accessing affected communities also mean that the sampling strategy for primary data collection needs to be appropriate and that the number of sites to be visited will be limited. Global good practice has shown that using a purposive sampling is more likely to provide timely useful information and is the most appropriate sampling method in the initial days and weeks after a crisis.

Purposive sampling has proven useful when there is a need to quickly reach a specific segment of the population and where sampling for proportionality is not the primary concern. In purposive sampling, sites are selected with a *purpose* or with one or more specific predefined groups in mind.

When using purposive sampling, it is important to seek sites that will provide an understanding of the situation of a wider group of affected people. The sample is a cross-section of diverse affected groups, such as displaced persons, host communities, returnees, etc. that are thought to be affected by the disaster. Groups could be defined in terms of the geography of an affected area, the livelihood groups present, displacement profile and other context specific characteristics. This technique enables to identify and differentiate the needs of one or more relevant affected groups.

Key learning points:

During the first weeks following a major emergency, CA primary data can only realistically capture conditions of populations at the **community level**.

Using a purposive sampling is the most appropriate sampling method in the initial days and weeks after a crisis, when time and field access constraints normally not allow for random or statistically representative sampling.

Information collected through purposive sample cannot be statistically extrapolated to the wider population of interest from which the sample came without relying on judgment. Make sure end users of the information understand the limitations of the findings.

3.3 Data collection should focus on *good enough* information, not perfection

For years, emergency assessments have been described as *quick and dirty*. Recent efforts at improving humanitarian needs assessments have been aimed at making them more quick and less dirty.

One problem with recent assessments has been that too many detailed, sector specific questions have been included in questionnaires, but the data from these never fully analysed and used. Much of the information collected is not needed for the key (strategic) multi-sector decisions that need to be made in the early days of a crisis.

The over-complex questionnaires that have been used in recent disasters have been the outcome of sector participation segueing into a “battle of questions” where the perception has evolved that a large, one off data collection exercise is/will be the *only* chance clusters and agencies have at getting information from the field. Thus the CA questionnaire becomes, unrealistically, the sum of all sector assessments.

Coordinated assessments in the initial phases of a crisis should focus on turning data into information that is “good enough” for the informed decision-making needed at these points in the crisis. They should not attempt to provide more detail or precision than is required. Two criteria are crucial when selecting information to be included in initial and rapid assessments:

The strategic importance of the information:

- How widely used is the information going to be? Is it needed by multiple stakeholders?
- How will it be used (e.g. CERF, Flash Appeal), which decisions will it inform?
- Does the information relate to the objectives defined for the assessment?
- Does it relate to lifesaving interventions?

The time and effort required to get the information:

- Is the information available from other sources?
- Is the time necessary to obtain this information with the assessment timeframe?

Key learning points:

Do not seek more detail than necessary; Focus on what is really needed and avoid entering the “war of the questions”.

Restrain the number of questions asked at the field level and do not collect information that cannot be collated and analysed within the desired time frame or that is available from other sources. Remember, assessment is an on-going process, not a one off event. There will be other opportunities to collect more in depth information.

Aim for questions and information that will be **indicative of a problem** and help sectors/clusters determine if more detailed assessments are required.

Only ask what is likely to be understood and answered transparently. Other ways to get the information should be explored if asking at community level is not likely to work.

3.4 Data collection should focus on the human dimension

One of the most significant aspects that field level data collection can bring to an assessment in the initial days of a disaster is the opportunity to **give a voice to the affected people**. The assessment design should consider the most useful way to do this so that the information can be analysed in a meaningful way. Considerations include:

- Selecting appropriate key informants, not just sector specialists, government official and community leaders, but also those more representative of the general population;
- Through use of a community group approach, ensuring the views of men and women of differing ages, abilities, and experiences are represented;
- Seeking out information on vulnerable groups and from vulnerable groups, including religious and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and older people;
- Structuring the assessment to enable the identification of priorities as seen by the affected population, whose priorities may not be the same as those seen by experts. Give informants and community groups the opportunity to express their needs and concerns outside the constraints of the questionnaire; e.g. “is there anything else you would like people to know about the way the flood has affected your community that we have not yet asked about?”

Field activities require the use of appropriate and skilled assessment team members and leaders. The essence of the qualitative approach lies in the knowledge and experience of field assessors to explore complex realities, cross-check information and know what question comes next. Here, the main data collection instrument is the assessor (and not the “questionnaire”) and using trained people increases the ability to collect and analyse information effectively in order to influence key decisions. It is now considered good assessment practise to use a fewer number of teams made up with more experienced people to collect and analyse primary data from a limited number of sites.

Remember that information collected as part of phase 1 and 2 humanitarian needs assessments is neither scientific, nor academically neutral. It is collected by people who come to the emergency situation with their own background, experiences and sensibilities. Whether these people are from the affected population or from outside it, and no matter how well trained they are, they will bring their own bias to the assessment. This is unavoidable and it should be acknowledged in training and methodology.

Key learning points:

Covering fewer sites with more qualified people has been proven to result in more reliable and useful information than covering more sites with an army of enumerators unfamiliar with humanitarian response. A CA without experienced field assessors should be seriously reconsidered.

Consistently and systematically **asking the affected population about their priorities** and comparing to those identified by the assessment team is important; both views count.

Triangulation of data obtained, between methodologies used, and across different teams is necessary to challenge conclusions and findings so bias can be minimised. Other strategies aiming at enhancing the accuracy and the credibility of findings include feedback from the affected population and review by peers and experts.

3.5 Data collection should attempt appropriate use of new technology

Information and communication technology is evolving rapidly, changing the way we interact with affected communities. In recent years, advances in mobile phone penetration and other new technologies in low-income and disaster-affected countries have created a growing interest from assessment practitioners as to how technology can serve better data collection and communication. Digital data capture applications allow assessment and other monitoring data to be collected directly into mobile phones or handheld devices rather than on paper forms, for near real-time upload to a data management system. These emerging technological solutions are being used by agencies seeking to improve the accuracy, efficiency and effectiveness of assessment activities.

With appropriate planning and the right choice of tools, agencies adopting digital data gathering technology have seen significant gains in the speed and efficiency of data collection and analysis, with potential for cost savings over time and increased impact. In some cases, however, inadequate planning, use and preparation have led to technical difficulties endangering the assessment.

The decision to use new technology should depend on the context, the specific needs of the assessment teams, their mobility and the access to technical support for troubleshooting.

Adopting a new technological solution in the midst of a humanitarian emergency with no prior preparedness creates difficulties and is likely to decrease rather than enhance CA performance.

Key learning points:

New technologies can enhance data collection logistics, however requires preparedness. **A crisis is not the appropriate time to begin using** new technologies and tools.

Training and support should be provided in advance of the crisis to ensure that assessment teams can use the technology appropriately during emergency times. Humanitarian agencies should establish pre-agreements with service providers as part of assessment preparedness.

Have the technology working for you and not against you and definitely not guiding the assessment approach. Design of the technology aspects needs to follow the function required of the assessment; do not let gadgets take over the necessary flexibility inherent to CAs. Paper and pencil remains a valid and reliable option.

4. What we know about the importance of analysis in coordinated assessments

4.1 Analysis is iterative and should start immediately

Too much focus on the data collection gives little time for analysis. Preparing, prior to its collection, how data will be analysed is critical to making sure the CA produces more than just descriptive information about what has happened as a result of the disaster. Unless it is built in to the assessment process there is a risk findings will be presented without analysis, interpretation and making sense of the change in people's lives as a result of the disaster and how this is likely to evolve over time. This involves developing an analysis plan based on the purpose and objectives of the assessment and to begin mapping out what the final product, or the report, should look like as soon as possible.

Analysis should start as soon as sufficient secondary and primary data is available to allow consolidation, and feed into regular updates on what is known about the situation.

CAs are led by an inductive approach. Patterns, themes, and theories emerge from the data and should be tested, refined, and retested against new information from various sources until explanations become repetitive and prove accurate. Thus, iterative analysis is used to spark insights and developing meaning.

Key learning points:

Ensure there is enough time to turn *data* into information. Prepare for it by developing an analysis plan at the outset and making analysis of the data an on-going process.

Do not wait until all the data is available to begin looking at it and seeing what it means; begin immediately and share findings, and keep updating. Always being clear about what the interpretation is based on at that point in time.

The assessment should present an **on-going and developing analysis of the situation** rather than a one off, static, detailed analysis on a specific point in time.

The key is to make sense, not generate data.

4.2 Analysis should consider how a disaster's impact may change over time

Rather than simply presenting the evidence, data, or information, a coordinated assessment should explore what the information indicates about the present impact of a crisis and how the situation is likely to unfold. Neglecting to build scenarios has been a shortcoming of recent assessments.

This element of analysis is in fact the real value that a coordinated assessment should bring. It involves making assumptions about what might happen and building scenarios¹¹ that can assist planning by answering questions such as:

- How are pre-crisis vulnerabilities likely to be impacted by the disaster?
- What coping strategies are in place that can be enhanced to mitigate the situation?
- What factors or drivers could contribute to worsening conditions?
- What is known about similar past disasters or crisis in the region and what does this tell us about the potential evolution of the disaster?

Analysis and interpretation of data is what gives it meaning. Field level data collection presents a snapshot, a moment in time, but the skill of analysis is to combine this with existing knowledge, baselines, pre-crisis information and secondary sources to tell the story of the impact of the crisis.

Key learning points:

CA data analysis accepts and acknowledges the imperfection of the data, but puts the data into context and uses what is known to build assumptions and scenarios that can assist in decision making and planning.

Analysis should be done by a group that is multi-stakeholder, familiar with the context, and has expertise in multiple sectors and emergency programming.

Involve field assessment teams in the data analysis phase.

¹¹See ACAPS Technical Brief on Scenario Development, http://www.acaps.org/resourcescats/downloader/scenario_building/44

4.3 Analysis should identify information gaps

In addition to telling a story based on what is known, analysis should also highlight what is not known about the impact of a crisis or about the situation itself. There has often been a tendency to over-emphasise what is known about a crisis and overlook what is missing. This focus has obscured the fact that sometimes what is *not* known about the impact of a crisis is just as important as what is known.

A geographical area on which no in-crisis information exists may indicate:

- An absence of problems in the given area;
- A lack of access to the area which may be affected
- An area that is of little concern to the authorities (for political, ethnic or other reasons) and/or had no pre-crisis humanitarian presence but may be affected and is being neglected.

There is a difference between not knowing if there is a problem and knowing that there is no problem. Too often, assessment reports fail to differentiate these situations.

Key learning point:

Identifying information gaps, or **known unknowns**, are important in guiding future assessments and helping users understand the constraints to the reliability of assumptions and scenarios.

4.4 Analysis should consider existing capacity

Ultimately, a humanitarian needs assessment is about identifying the gaps in present capacity to respond to the impact of a crisis. By implication, the needs and priorities that an assessment identifies are in the sectors where present in-country capacity is insufficient to meet all the needs, or to identify the geographic areas that present interventions are unable to reach. It is impossible for the assessment to identify gaps without taking into consideration the capacity in terms of human resources, materials and logistics that exist already at the country level.

Key learning point:

A CA should aim to identify overall needs and priorities, the proportion of these that can be covered by existing resources, and the proportion that will require additional resourcing.

4.5 Analysis builds on comparison and convergence of evidence

Comparison and use of **convergence of evidence** are at the core of the analysis process.

Differences or similarities provide important insights into how the situation differs from one element of interest to another and, accordingly, how different the type and level of response required might be. The following non-exhaustive types of comparisons are recommended for CA analysis:

- Between locations (e.g. rural and urban, province A and Province B);
- Between sectors;
- Between types of livelihoods (e.g. agro pastoralist, farmers, and fisher folk);
- Between types of population (e.g. residents and IDPs);
- Between types of setting (e.g. camps, host families, spontaneous settlements, and collective centres);
- Between types of respondents (male and female, younger and older persons)
- Over time (pre and post-disaster).

The complex nature of humanitarian crises and the lack of predictability around the type, quality, and availability of secondary and primary data challenge the detail and accuracy of analysis and interpretation. Convergence of evidence can be used to overcome this difficulty by reconciling potentially contradictory information and the need to interpret the likely severity of the impact suggested by the (available) information.

Bringing together key stakeholders during the analysis process (joint analysis) will ensure that relevant expertise is available to undertake the interpretation of the results. The less data is available, the more the use of expert judgment and a consensus building approach among partners will be necessary to overcome the lack of evidence and ensure agreements around the findings.

Key learning points:

Every assessment has limitations, acknowledging and presenting them helps others better understand how conclusions were drawn. The type, accuracy, and limitations of available data should be clearly outlined in assessment methodology.

A joint analysis requires involvement from all interested stakeholders. It may take more time but should result in a better analysis and greater ownership of the results.

5. What we know now about disseminating the findings of coordinated assessments

5.1 The goal of shared findings is creating a shared situation awareness

Reporting on the CA should not be seen as a one-off event. Historically, there has been a tendency on the part of those managing an assessment to hold off on releasing information until:

- Information is available from all areas affected by the crisis
- Data can be rigorously verified
- All data is processed and analysed
- A comprehensive report has been written and checked, by all stakeholders involved in the assessment.

When an assessment is viewed in this light, a significant amount of effort and resources go into collecting and assembling data, this data is worked on until the last possible minute and not shared until it is final, a report is then launched and the assessment process is seen as over, often with the assessment team departing or being dismantled. However, the final goal of a CA is not an academically rigorous monograph of 100 pages. Rather, it seeks to create a shared situational awareness around problems and priorities generated by the disaster. Moreover, information gathered during CA in emergencies is both time bound and of time-limited validity. **It is more important to be approximately right than precisely wrong or out of date.**

Therefore, it is far more useful to share CA findings through an iterative process, one that is on-going and updated regularly. This way there is less emphasis on perfect information and more emphasis on developing a shared understanding of the impact of the disaster. This, however, does not negate the need for some type of publically available report detailing key findings, and summarising the assessment aims, limitations and methodology and where more information can be found.

Key learning points:

Share CA information and findings as soon as possible. Call for regular meetings with key stakeholders to discuss (new) findings, update the analysis, agree on key priorities and reach a common understanding of the situation.

Make information available online where possible so all stakeholders can access it.

To create shared situation awareness from the outset, a **series of interim reports or meeting presentations** may be appropriate and user friendly. However, it is good practice to make available a full report detailing key findings, tools, limitations and methodology of the assessment.

5.2 Sharing the findings should be appropriate to different audiences

Different users, and audiences of, the information from a coordinated assessment will need different levels of detail. It may be useful to be ready with different formats for the information to suit these different needs. These formats could include key summary points, sector specific sections, presentations as well as a more traditional, all-inclusive report.

Emergency responders often have a limited data absorption capacity during an emergency. Most will not have time to consider reports longer than five pages.

Key learning points:

Identify what end-users are expecting from the assessment at the outset. Ask what do stakeholders want to see? What is the most useful form the information could take? How often they would like to receive updates?

Structure reporting mechanism and outputs around user needs. Adapting the analysis plan to accommodate this is crucial.

Data management systems should allow for quick extraction of information, feeding into different formats and based on different user expectations.

Make findings as user friendly as possible. Use visual attributes such as maps, photos, graphs and charts. Keep reports brief and bullet findings for ease of absorption.

Share findings with affected communities and national authorities to ensure accountability.

5.3 Be transparent on methods, terminology and assumptions used

All aspects of the assessment methodology need to be clearly articulated and openly shared. This includes the way the assessment was carried out, the information sources used, sites selected, time frame, the personnel involved, and decisions made about the level of information collected. It also includes the assumptions made in developing scenarios and how conclusions were reached.

There are often multiple staff changes in the early days and weeks after a disaster and having this information documented will help ensure all stakeholders are on the same page in their understanding of the assessment's purpose and reliability.

Key learning points:

Share the methodology process with end users to strengthen the credibility of the CA process and findings.

Give credit to participating stakeholders, in ways that highlight the networked approach, not as a substitute for methodological accountability.

Make the assessment questionnaires, tools, checklists, and other documentation publicly available, explaining how they were used during the CA.

Key terms used in the assessment products should be clearly defined to avoid misunderstanding and different interpretations. For example, what does *affected* mean? What does *damaged* mean? What is meant by *site*?