

Food security needs assessment

25 June 2025

Key points

- Define clear, practical objectives for the assessment and concentrate on these. Do not collect information for its own sake
- Your main objective is to understand the food security situation. Focus on the problems refugees have now, but also on how they lived before the crisis and how things have changed. If you concentrate only on problems, you may give the impression that you are looking for a shopping list of requirements
- Detail the groups most in need and then prioritize their needs: this can help to rank recommendations. This is particularly relevant for rapid assessments which define responses to immediate needs. Consider developing a prioritization table
- Before the assessment, agree how you will sign off on the assessment's results and findings. Include the government as required
- Debrief senior staff. Present the main findings and recommendations that emerge from the assessment: this will allow them to act immediately

1. Overview

Ideally conducted following the multi-sectoral Needs Assessment Refugee Emergencies (NARE), the emergency food security needs assessment (e.g. rapid JAM) aims to obtain a quick understanding of the food security situation in the first weeks after the start of a population displacement. It determines the number of persons of concern and their immediate food and nutrition needs and informs the design of food assistance and food security responses during the first 6 to 12 weeks following the onset of the emergency. In advance of the rapid food security assessment, an initial rapid assessment of needs will take place in the first few days following the start of the displacement, to assess the population's immediate food needs. A more detailed assessment (e.g. a Joint Assessment Mission, JAM) should occur in the following 6 to 12 months,

depending on the quality of the rapid food security needs assessment; it is led by a food security specialist and takes place in collaboration with WFP.

Assessments determine the form that food assistance takes (cash, voucher, food-in-kind, or a combination of these), its distribution modality, the composition of the food basket, ration size or value, the duration of assistance, and related non-food inputs. They also identify different levels of socio-economic capacity in population groups, and thereby inform targeting and guide the development of other food security and livelihood programmes from an early stage. Food security assessments may link with rapid nutrition assessments and nutrition surveys ([UNHCR Standardised Expanded Nutrition Survey, SENS](#)) or livelihood assessments.

In this entry, needs assessments are assumed to include a response analysis.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Emergency food security needs assessments play a pivotal role in quickly determining the food security situation in the first weeks of population displacement. These assessments enable humanitarian operations to promptly understand the scale of individuals in need and evaluate their urgent food and nutrition requirements, facilitating rapid response efforts. This data informs the design of effective food assistance and security programs during the critical initial 6 to 12 weeks of an emergency. Additionally, assessments provide vital insights for decision-making processes, guiding the determination of appropriate forms of food assistance, distribution methods, food basket composition, ration sizes, and duration of aid. Moreover, they shed light on varying socio-economic capacities among different population groups, facilitating targeted interventions and early development of livelihood programs. Linking food security assessments with rapid nutrition assessments and livelihood surveys creates a holistic understanding of the overall humanitarian situation.

3. Main guidance

Food security and nutrition: conceptual framework

Food security is based on three pillars, around which a food security assessment should be constructed: food access; food availability; and food use. It is essential to understand how the entitlement of displaced populations changes in relation to these pillars because any imbalance can lead to food insecurity.

Food security assessments also seek to understand the causes of undernutrition. Household food insecurity is just one of the underlying causes of malnutrition, along with inadequate care, inadequate feeding practices, unclean water, poor hygiene and sanitation, and poor access to health care. The conceptual framework of undernutrition is expanded upon below.

[Causes and consequences of undernutrition \(adapted from UNICEF framework by Black et al.: Maternal and child undernutrition: global and regional exposures and health consequences. The Lancet, 17 January 2008\)](#)

Objectives and timing of food security assessments

1. An initial rapid assessment is conducted a few days after the start of displacement. It is action-oriented and its main aim is to define immediate, initial food assistance needs and a response as well as the availability of local and external resources.
2. A rapid food security assessment is carried out in the first weeks of an emergency (e.g. Rapid JAM). It should be coordinated and supervised by an experienced food security professional and should collect secondary as well as primary data related to food security and nutrition. Its main aims are to:
 - Define immediate and short-term food assistance, food security, nutrition and related non-food assistance needs (of refugees and potentially the surrounding population), and how long assistance will be required.
 - Assess the need for in-depth assessment.
3. An in-depth assessment will be conducted in the first 6 to 12 months of an emergency, depending on the quality of the rapid assessment above and on how the situation evolves. Its generic objectives include:
 - To document the food security and nutritional situation of refugees.
 - To review the quality and appropriateness of ongoing interventions.
 - To identify new food security interventions and longer-term strategy for food security interventions.

Key questions typically asked in both rapid and standard JAMs can be found in [Joint Assessment Missions: Rapid JAM, Annex 1](#), and [Joint Assessment Missions - a Practical Guide to Planning and Implementation, Chapter 4.8](#).

Mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC) screening can be included in food security assessments or can be done during distributions, when people are gathered in one place. They provide a rapid indication of the nutritional situation and make it possible to refer malnourished individuals to appropriate care. Food security and livelihood (self-reliance) assessments can also be combined, thereby reducing assessment and survey fatigue among the population.

Methodology and process

Assessment phases and activities

Phase	Key Activities
1 Planning and preparation	Develop terms of reference (ToR) for the assessment (including timing, resources and budget). Identify coordinators; develop a detailed timeline; identify the team; call for additional technical assistance if required.
2 Identification and organisation of information	Decide what information the assessment will collect (based on ToR). Organise information in terms of the assessment's objectives (use information matrix, example included in JAM guidance). Identify appropriate data collection methods and tools.
3 Data collection	Secondary data. Identify available secondary information. Review data and identify gaps in information. (Primary data collection may supply missing information.) Update information matrix. Primary data. Field visits. After training and preparation sessions, the assessment team conducts field visits to obtain first-hand information from refugees and the surrounding community. It triangulates secondary data and fills information gaps. In-depth assessments may be done as part of a food security assessment. (If they are available when the assessment starts, they are secondary data.)
4 Analysis and recommendations	Daily debriefings are conducted during field visits. At the end of field visits, all the information from secondary data review, in-depth assessments (if available), and field visits is reviewed, triangulated and discussed. The team develops key findings and recommendations.
5 Report and dissemination	A concise report presents the methods, limitations, key findings, and recommendations of the food security assessment.
6 Action plan	Based on the report's information and recommendations, a clear and concise action plan is developed. It should timetable actions and name those who are responsible for them.

The findings should be presented in line with the report and action plan templates included

in Joint Assessment Missions: Rapid JAM, and Joint Assessment Missions - a Practical Guide to Planning and Implementation, Chapters 4.11 and 4.12.

The tables below outline methods and participatory tools that are often used to collect primary data during field visits.

Method	Description
Household visits	Heads of households (or other relevant representatives, such as care givers, including single women or children) are asked a few pre-defined questions on specific issues identified in the ToR. Teams observe the living conditions of these households.
Transect walks	Team members walk through the area to observe the situation and local conditions.
Key informant interviews	The team holds semi-structured interviews on agreed issues with knowledgeable individuals familiar with locations, communities, needs, etc.
Focus group discussion	The team holds open discussions on selected themes or questions with a homogeneous group of individuals (usually 6-8 people) who have knowledge of the subjects discussed and can contribute a range of perspectives. The discussion may be structured.
Community group discussion	The team holds discussions with a diverse group of individuals from the community, representing different groups, household situations and characteristics. The aim is to gather a range of views.

Tool	Description
Mapping	Design a map with a group of individuals in the community to identify specific issues and needs.
Timeline/seasonal calendar	Design a timeline/seasonal calendar with a group of individuals in the community to identify events, seasonality of food, or other nutrition-related issues.
Diagrams (such as Venn diagram)	Design a diagram that shows specific linkages in the area, for example how the camp is linked to nearby markets and how those markets link with the surrounding economy.
Proportional piling	Individuals use small objects (beans, stones) to form piles that represent issues. Bigger piles represent bigger issues. This exercise helps to rank or prioritize information.
Pair-wise ranking	Individuals rank pairs of things, situations or options. This exercise provides information on what is most important to those participating.

Information should be collected from as many different gender, age and diversity-balanced sources as possible, and be triangulated.

Considerations for practical implementation

- Appoint a coordinator to be the focal point for food security. S/he should work in close collaboration with those responsible for nutrition and for livelihoods.
- Based on the initial rapid assessment, make the first deliveries and distributions of assistance, and submit preliminary requests to donors. The initial assessment must be very action-oriented.
- Seek to understand how the displaced population met their food needs before they were displaced and how their current situation compares. At the early stages of a new displacement, it is better to assume that all food assistance needs will need to be covered. When the situation stabilizes, a more detailed rapid assessment can be undertaken, making it possible to review the form food assistance takes, its duration, and the amount and type of food required.
- Consider seasonality in your assessment. Food security is not static and access to food, its availability, and use, are likely to fluctuate during the year. Awareness of the annual food cycle will help you to understand when food security is likely to improve or worsen.
- Include a rapid market assessment in the rapid assessment. This will indicate what forms of food assistance, and its content, are likely to be feasible and appropriate.
- Be efficient and realistic: do not collect information that is not relevant for assessment decisions. Give attention to the quality of information, rather than quantity. Compare primary and secondary information and speak to people who are different (in terms of gender, age, income, etc.) and compare their opinions.
- If field visits do not fill information gaps you identify, the rapid assessment team should recommend specific in-depth assessments. If the situation is continually changing, teams

- may recommend regular assessments until the situation stabilizes.
- Participation is essential. Involve local authorities, people from the affected population, NGOs, and other UN agencies in the different stages of the assessment.
- When reaching its food security recommendations, the assessment team should consider:
 - Who is in need, what the need is, and how long the need will last.
 - What displaced populations need now and in the future.
 - What are the priorities of the population.
 - Capacities and partnership: which partners wish to work with UNHCR (and WFP)?
 - What the practical links are between food security responses, nutrition and self-reliance.

Resources and partnerships

Rapid JAM assessments should involve several agencies and partners and are multi-sectoral. UNHCR and WFP always co-lead this process in refugee emergencies.

Staff

- An experienced UNHCR Senior Programme Officer or if available a UNHCR food security officer, will lead the food security assessment on behalf of UNHCR.
- An experienced WFP Programme or VAM Senior Officer, will lead the rapid JAM on behalf of WFP.

Partners

- Collaborate closely with WFP and the government.
- Partners to implement the assessment include line ministries and relevant NGOs and CBOs.
- Involve universities in assessments.

4. Policies, Guidelines and Useful Links

[Sphere, Food security and Nutrition](#)

[UNHCR, Global Strategy for Public Health 2014 - 2018](#)

[WFP-UNHCR, Global Memorandum of Understanding, January 2011](#)

5. Links

[WFP Emergency Food Security Assessment Handbook 2009](#) [Standardised Expanded Nutrition Surveys \(SENS\)](#) [Famine Early Warning Systems \(FEWS\)](#) [The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification System \(IPC\)](#) [Emergency Capacity Building Project, Emergency food security and livelihood 48h...](#)

6. Main contacts

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