

WASH needs assessment in refugee emergencies

12 December 2023

Key points

- Conduct an initial rapid WASH assessment within the first 3 days from the onset of the emergency
- The initial rapid WASH assessment should be coordinated and supervised by an experienced WASH professional and jointly undertaken with WASH actors and local stakeholders already present in the area
- A multifunctional coordination team approach involving health, nutrition, shelter, site planning and WASH should be ensured at all levels as these sectors are interlinked

1. Overview

The main principle of an emergency WASH response is to ensure consideration of water supply, sanitation and hygiene at the site selection and planning stages while coordinating the response closely with physical planning, public health and environment.

Ideally following the [multi-cluster/sector initial rapid needs assessment \(MIRA\)](#) or [needs assessment for refugee emergencies \(NARE\)](#), a more detailed initial WASH rapid assessment of local WASH-related resources in relation to the needs/demand is essential. This includes assessment of water resources (quantity and quality) for water sources and distribution options, and assessment of soil conditions - in terms of infiltration rate and type of soil for sanitation options.

Assessments should be carried out by sectoral technical experts with appropriate qualifications and relevant experience. Involvement of local stakeholders to gather secondary data on water sources and sanitation is crucial.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

WASH services are fundamental/basic rights that contribute to the achievement of other personal and development goals. Access to adequate WASH services during emergencies is important to reduce disease transmission and public health outbreaks. Conducting an initial rapid WASH needs assessment paints a picture of the situation – needs, risks and resources needed. It is also important for immediate planning and as a baseline for monitoring of progress and further assessment.

3. Main guidance

An initial rapid WASH assessment should be carried out within the first three days of any refugee emergency / start of an emergency, to identify needs and resources. It should estimate the number of people affected, quantify immediate needs, the availability of local resources, and the need for external resources.

Depending on the scale of the emergency and the time and resources available, this exercise should be completed in a maximum of one day. Following the rapid WASH needs assessment, needs should be prioritized into those that are lifesaving and must be met on an emergency basis and those that need a medium or longer term approach.

The assessment should be coordinated and supervised by an experienced WASH officer. Assessing the water resources and soil conditions requires expertise in, water engineering, sanitation, hygiene, and in some cases environment as it involves identifying various options for supply system development on the basis of local physical features, topography and overall environment of the camp site. A joint assessment with site planning is recommended in order to integrate WASH/site planning intervention approach and agree on technical findings (i.e. flooded prone areas, drainage, and sanitation).

Objectives of an initial rapid WASH assessment

- To identify available water sources (yield estimation, flow, seasonal variations, recharge, taboos, water quality and potential pollution risks) and soil conditions in the affected area (primary data collection)
- To assess ground conditions and environmental factors (e.g. presence of rocky ground, high ground water table, etc) which may affect decisions on appropriate sanitation options.
- To assess key hygiene practices in terms of water needs and sanitation habits (secondary data, key informants)
- To identify cultural habits among the refugee population that might affect their hygiene / sanitation preferences, for example , sitting or squatting and - whether they would practice anal cleansing with water or with dry material (secondary data, key informants)
- To identify specific vulnerabilities, for example disabilities and people with specific diseases to tailor WASH services accordingly (secondary data, key informants).
- To assess national and local capacity to lead or support the response (key informants,

observation).

Methodology

Information should be collected by carrying out the following activities:

- Key informant interview(s)
- Focus group discussion(s)
- Observation walk(s)
- Assessment of existing WASH infrastructure conditions
- Assessment of existing WASH management arrangements

During the assessment information should be collected from as many different gender, diversity- and age balanced sources as possible, and the information should be triangulated.

Relevant secondary data is often available and can be complemented by interviewing key informants. Key sources of secondary data include:

- Water/Energy/Environmental Ministries & Local Authorities
- Global satellite images providers (UNITAR/UNOSAT)
- UNHCR's databases and reports
- Other UN agencies, notably UN-Habitat and UNICEF
- NGOs that work in the area
- Key informants working in the above areas
- Knowledgeable refugees & host villagers
- The UNHCR borehole database

A typical checklist of secondary data to be retrieved when carrying out initial rapid WASH assessments would include:

- Procurement and studying of local maps, aerial photos, satellite imagery etc. to determine topography, geological context, hydrogeological features and water sources
- Consolidation of regional details on land use (urban, industrial, agricultural, protected areas), climate, security, access roads, etc.
- Details of main actors and agencies working in the area and local government structures and policy
- Current typical water consumption and sanitation practices in the area
- Logistics and supply possibilities in the area (including availability of local building material)
- Legal issues in the area as well as ownership rights etc.
- Costs and operations and maintenance requirements and opportunities in the area

Additional examples and considerations can also be found in the chapter "Assessment" of the [UNHCR WASH manual](#).

Assessment of existing WASH infrastructure conditions

Calculate the water requirement based on the designed planned population size of the site and

organize an immediate assessment of water supply possibilities; the calculation should be based on a total of 20 litres per person per day (excluding leakage) and must also include the communal building needs.

Assessment of the condition and service ability of existing toilet infrastructure is an essential part of any needs assessment especially in contexts where there is insufficient or aging infrastructure (for example in urban areas). In some contexts, the assessment of existing sanitary infrastructure will be minimal, especially if toilet infrastructure has not yet been constructed (e.g. new refugee camps).

When assessing existing waste management infrastructure, it is essential to describe how each separate waste stream is treated, starting at the point of waste creation and moving through each stage in the process (including collection, storage, handling, and processing) until final disposal or reuse. At each step, the key characteristics and condition of the infrastructure and resources (including any transportation and labour) should be noted, along with risks to public health, and corrective actions to bring the system back into serviceability. Some large-scale waste infrastructure can be complex to assess and may require specialized expertise.

Presentation of results

The findings of the initial rapid WASH assessment should be reported using the approach in [Rapid Methods for Assessing WASH services in Emergency Settings](#) – and should be systematically filed to ensure that such data will be available for future reference.

Post emergency phase

- The findings of an initial rapid WASH assessment should guide the level and type of WASH intervention that are offered in transit centres and where refugees finally settle.
- An initial rapid WASH assessment is a preliminary estimate. It should be succeeded by a more comprehensive rapid household survey as soon as the situation allows, and no later than 3-6 months after an emergency starts. A KAP (Knowledge, Attitude and Practice) survey is afterwards needed (at least once a year) to assess and adjust the WASH intervention strategy and should be based on the [Global WASH KAP tools](#) (accessible to UNHCR staff only) (global, but adaptable questionnaire; WASH KAP analyser; WASH KAP mapper; WASH KAP report template). WASH related key informant questions & suggestions for Focus Group Discussions can be found in the UNHCR WASH Assessment Primer Questions (2015) on the UNHCR WASH website.

WASH Needs Assessment in refugee emergencies checklist

- Experienced UNHCR and Partner organization WASH Officers
- Community outreach workers from immediate users and host community

- Key technical stakeholders such as line ministries (water, health, regional development) local authorities, International and national NGOs, as well as UN agencies such as UNICEF, IOM, WHO UNFPA etc.
- Relevant materials and equipment including but not limited to GPS, Camera, distometer, bucket of known capacity, rapid assessment WASH questionnaire.

Annexes

[UNHCR WASH Manual - 7th Edition, 2020](#)

[UNHCR WASH Assessment for primer questions for key informant interviews and focus groups, 2015](#)

4. Links

[UNHCR WASH Manual UNHCR, Rapid Methods for Assessing Water, Sanitation and Hygiene \(WASH\) Service... Sphere Handbook 2018 Needs Assessment for Refugee Emergencies \(NARE\)](#)
[UNHCR, Urban WASH Planning Guidance and Case Studies UNHCR, Hygiene Promotion Guidelines](#)
[UNHCR, Good practices on cash-based interventions and water, sanitation and hyg...](#)

5. Main contacts

Contact Division of Resilience and Solutions (DRS)/Technical Support Section (TSS)
at: hqsl00@unhcr.org