UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency | EMERGENCY HANDBOOK

Needs assessment for refugee emergencies (NARE)

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Key points

- The NARE is an easily customized rapid multi-sectoral needs assessment designed for refugee emergencies, that can also be used in other forced displacement contexts
- A needs assessment team decides what data collection methodologies should be used and which topics should be addressed. NARE users are not obliged to complete the entire assessment set out in the NARE Analytical Framework; they can pick and choose methods and themes depending on their circumstances (resources available, time, the purpose of the assessment, the types of interventions that are planned).
- Data collection questions in the NARE Analytical Framework may be customized to take account of the local situation. You can change or omit suggested questions, or add new questions
- The NARE Guidance Note contains considerations on how to implement the NARE

1. Overview

In refugee situations, UNHCR supports the coordination of a multi-sectoral response based on a joint assessment of the needs of the affected people. The Needs Assessment in Refugee Emergencies (NARE) is a multi-sector rapid assessment approach, designed to assist UNHCR operations in jointly assessing with partners the main unmet needs and concerns of refugees, host communities, and other forcibly displaced persons to inform immediate response planning. More specifically, the NARE answers the following question: What are the current priority concerns for refugees and their host community?

The key objectives of an emergency needs assessment are:

- To inform programme design and assistance priorities in the early stages of the response
- To ensure that humanitarian aid is based on need.
- To ensure that humanitarian aid promotes and does not undermine safe local coping mechanisms.
- To identify and understand the unique and respective needs of different populations.
- To make sure that decisions on humanitarian aid are based on facts.

Under its mandate, UNHCR coordinates and leads all aspects of humanitarian responses to refugee emergencies, including joint needs assessments.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

The NARE applies several methodologies to produce a rapid cross-sectoral analysis that provides a relatively complete description of needs in a refugee emergency.

3. Main guidance

Underlying process – how does this work?

The NARE is a community-level multi-sector rapid assessment, designed to obtain an initial understanding of the needs. Following the initial stages of the crisis, where a more detailed needs analysis is still required, an in-depth multi-sector or sector-specific assessment(s) can be conducted complementary to the NARE. The tool is intended to be a one-off activity and not a continuous monitoring system.

UNHCR's role and accountabilities

In an emergency, the UNHCR Representative in a country is responsible for leading and coordinating an overall refugee needs assessment, through sectoral coordination. In an appropriate inter-agency forum, the Representative should request operational partners to nominate staff to join a needs assessment. A needs assessment coordinator should be identified in UNHCR to contact sector or organizational focal points and follow up. Sectoral leads and emergency coordinators need to decide what information the operational strategy should receive from a needs assessment. An information management officer helps with assessment methodology, design, data collection, analysis and coordination. UNHCR should ensure that the assessment is coordinated with other data collection activities.

The following principles of NARE should be considered in all refugee emergency situations:

- A secondary data review should always take place, to determine what information is already available.
- Initial needs assessments should be multi-sectoral and coordinated across sectors. (Detailed sector-specific needs assessments can follow the initial multi-sectoral assessment.)
- Different types of information are best gathered by different data collection techniques, such as facility visits, observations, interviews with key informants and community/focus

group discussions.
- Assessments should always be coordinated to ensure data collection activities produce comparable data, are not redundant and generate a shared vision of the needs and situation.

For a needs assessment in a new refugee emergency, UNHCR should lead a joint multi-sectoral needs assessment that involves a range of sectors and humanitarian actors. Joint assessments help establish a common understanding of the situation and make good use of available resources. At the same time, all assessment activities should be harmonized, to ensure comparability of the data and the most efficient use of resources. This can be coordinated through an assessment working group, or equivalent forum.

Considerations for UNHCR's engagement at country level

Needs assessments are often situation dependent and many factors may influence their design. They include the level of humanitarian access, whether population movements are stable or dynamic, the amount of time and resources available for the assessment, and the types of interventions that the assessment should inform.

Emergency Needs Assessment Process:
Below are listed the basic steps for designing and conducting an emergency needs assessment. Note that, while they are broadly in order, many steps will run in parallel.

- Identify key stakeholders and determine coordination arrangements.
- Identify the NARE's objectives, and decisions that require assessment information.
- Detail the information needs in a data analysis plan. What do we need to know to meet the objective? The list of possible information needs covering the most common information needs during a rapid assessment can be found in the NARE Analytical Framework.
- Define the level of measurement. The NARE is designed for community level measurement (not household or individual level, which can be done at a later stage).
- Define the timeframe for the pre influx and the post influx phase that will be measured, for example whether post influx data will be captured since the start of the crisis, or for the last 30 days.
- Conduct a secondary data review, compile an assessment registry, a 3W (who, what, where), and identify remaining information gaps. Use the NARE Primary data collection/ SDR template.
- Decide if primary data collection is required. If yes, design a methodology for primary data collection, including how communities will be sampled (see NARE Guidance Annex 2).
- Define data collection plan using the NARE Primary data collection/ SDR template.
- Design and test data collection forms. Translate if required.
- Train the data collection team(s).
- Undertake primary data collection.
- Collate, clean, and analyze the information produced. Use the NARE Primary data collection/ SDR template.
- Undertake joint analysis to identify key findings, priorities, and recommendations.
- Disseminate data and information products (including with communities).
- Begin monitoring.

Step 1. Who to involve

In the first phase of a refugee emergency, a wide range of humanitarian agencies, NGOs, government counterparts and possibly donors may be involved in the assessment planning process. Actors responsible for overseeing and providing assistance in the first phase of a response should be included within the assessment process. It is critical to involve WFP and other relevant partners when the population to be assessed is larger than 5,000 persons.

In urban contexts, refugees are often mobile and tend to cluster in the poorest areas of the city, or to disperse across many locations; as a result, they are difficult to identify. Refugee focal points can help the team to identify where refugees live, estimate the population and its demography, locate new points of influx, vulnerable groups, infrastructure and security issues, and identify coping mechanisms. Needs too may change rapidly in an urban context. Protection or community-based protection staff will usually compile the contact addresses of refugee focal points.

The Assessment Team and Refugee Information Management Working Group (RIM WG)

An assessment team is a temporary working group of stakeholders who manage a needs assessment. Members of this team include operational leads who decide what information is required for decision-making, interpret the results of the assessment, and design interventions based on those results; and an information manager, who designs the assessment, selects the sites that will be assessed, compiles the data, and produces final information products. The duties of the assessment team are to:

- Agree on a time frame, a methodology for data collection, a process for cleaning and analysing the results, and how the results will be shared and disseminated.
- Identify an emergency referral system to deal with urgent interventions that need to be made that are uncovered during the assessment process.
- Agree on minimum life-saving sectoral data.
- Finalize the assessment method and design.
- Select sites.
- Coordinate resources, training and logistics.

The assessment team will need to identify what resources will be required. If resources are limited, this may affect the assessment's design. It is important to ensure that the resources allocated to the needs assessment are proportionate and reasonable in relation to the anticipated value of the resulting interventions. Ideally, the cost of the assessment should be kept at a minimal and justifiable level.
The information manager may be tasked to: compile an assessment registry and do a 3W (Who, what, where); put together and coordinate needs assessment methodologies; make sure that data sets are compatible; and facilitate data sharing in the context of the Refugee Information Management Work Group (RIM WG). The RIM WG is a forum for coordinating multiple assessments, sharing and tracking available data, and keeping the assessment registry up-to-date. Needs assessment coordination functions should be included in the RIM WG terms of reference, please see assessment working group TOR template.

Step 2. What to assess

Identify clear and precise objectives and a focus for the needs assessment. Following the NARE Guidance Note, detail the information needs. The NARE Analytical Framework is a worksheet covering key questions by thematic area and possible data collection methods that can be customized according to information needs, the context, and available resources. Users are guided through a list of possible areas of information according to the NARE analytical framework and can select questions relevant to the situation. For each thematic area of information, data collection methods are suggested as well as standard questions to be used. Users can filter by topic, sector, data collection methods and phase, to allow decision making to be based on available resources.

Expected outcomes
At the start of the needs assessment process, ask several questions. What are the underlying causes of risk and vulnerability? Have these causes changed and, if so, how? How widespread is the problem (throughout the country or countries, or in specific areas)? How are host communities coping? Which geographical area is most affected, and which affected groups are the most at risk? How do we expect the situation to develop in the next three months? A crucial first step is to agree what operational information will be most relevant to intervention and programme planners.

Note. Do not start a needs assessment process by designing a data-collection form. Begin by identifying the questions that need to be answered, not the ones that will be asked. If you start with the form, your assessment is much less likely to yield actionable information.

Step 3. Secondary data review
The secondary data review provides valuable information. It should consider a range of issues, including:

- Conditions before the crisis (and whether they aggravated the impact of the crisis).
- Underlying vulnerabilities. Which groups were already at risk before the crisis?
- Threats (epidemics, climate, etc.).
- Current conditions (what is already known about the scope and scale of the crisis and the humanitarian consequences)?
- Lessons that can be learned from past crises or refugee operations in the same area.

Secondary data are any information that originates from outside the needs assessment, such as data from the Government, monitoring data, etc. It includes data that is owned by UNHCR, such as registration or ProGres data. Primary data are any kind of time-bound information that is collected by completing an assessment form during an emergency needs assessment. In addition to information from humanitarian partners already in situ, secondary data may be collected from or found through ReliefWeb, Alertnet, ACAPS, OCHA, media, blogs, crowd-sourcing, coordination meeting minutes, census data, etc. The NARE primary data collection/ SDR analysis template supports assessment teams to collect and structure the secondary data review.

Compiling an assessment registry
To help understand the overall situational context, the information manager should ensure that an ‘assessment registry' is compiled. This lists the coverage of current and planned assessments and helps the assessment team to decide where to focus subsequent assessment activities.

Compiling a 3W
To obtain an overview of needs, it is important to understand and map existing services, by type and location, and the capacities of the Government and operational partners, in a detailed 3W (Who, what, when). As part of the secondary data review, protection and programme staff should work with the information manager to compile or expand a 3W for the operation. This can be done through a traditional 3W spreadsheet, which may be used to establish a profile of each administrative unit, highlight service coverage (or its absence), and signal areas that should be included or prioritized in the needs assessment.

For additional information on compiling a 3W, see the Entry on the Who does what where (3W).

Step 4: Primary data collection?
While a needs assessment should always be undertaken when there is a refugee emergency, in some situations primary data should not be collected. Do not collect primary data:

- When collecting data will put collectors or interviewees in danger.
- When the results of an assessment will be incorrect or biased (for example, because interviewees are too afraid to tell the truth or external factors will distort data collection).
- When a population feels over-assessed and may be hostile to additional needs assessments.
- When programmatic decisions have already been made, and the assessment results will have no operational relevance.

In the above situations, it may be appropriate to assess needs by means of a secondary data review only (without collecting primary data).

Emergency referral system
Before collecting primary data, protection staff should arrange an emergency referrals system for the assessment team, by sector, with focal points identified. When field data collection teams come across life-saving issues or cases requiring urgent intervention (a collective centre in need of a water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) intervention, an individual who needs urgent protection), they should know how to refer them to appropriate service providers. To this end, teams should carry with information on UNHCR's referral mechanisms for assistance. In this manner, the emergency referral process and needs assessment fieldwork can be kept separate, and urgent action reports will not be mixed with assessment information for data entry. The emergency referral system needs to be operational when the field assessment occurs.

Needs assessment logistics and equipment
When planning an assessment, it is essential to cover the logistical requirements of the teams that will collect data. Core equipment includes appropriate vehicles, first aid kits, computers or tablets, radio or satellite phones, GPS devices, cell phones and chargers with appropriate SIM cards and credit, flashlights, spare batteries for all equipment, physical maps, and stationery. They will also need interview guides. Ensure that teams carry adequate food and water, particularly if supplies are difficult to obtain in the areas they visit.

Assessment method and survey design
The unit of measurement for an emergency needs assessment should be the community rather

than the household or individual. This saves time and reduces the volume of primary data that needs to be gathered. Techniques of data collection at community level include direct observation, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions.

The recommended unit of measurement for an urban needs assessment is a neighbourhood or district. In addition to the above techniques, an urban needs assessment might gather information using crowd-sourcing technology or refugee call-in lines (either at the start or later on).

Participatory and AGD approaches

Assessments must be designed and conducted to allow the people for whom UNHCR works to voice their opinions about their own needs.

Needs assessments must adopt an **age, gender and diversity (AGD) approach**, because the emergency will affect sub-groups in different ways. Field data collection teams need to be gender-balanced and to have had training in participatory approaches and conducting survey questionnaires before they collect primary data.

Community participation helps to build on a community's capacities. It also reduces the risk that needs assessments, and the humanitarian interventions to which they give rise, will undermine local coping mechanisms, neglect the needs of marginalized social groups, or waste resources on aid that is not required.

Data collection teams must explicitly request permission from interviewees to use the information they provide (informed consent). Personal information can never be disclosed or transferred for purposes other than those for which it was originally collected and for which consent was explicitly given.

Site selection

As the unit of measurement is at the community level, it may be possible to select key informants for each community (such as a site) in the first weeks of an emergency. When not possible, diversity-driven purposive sampling is the preferred sampling method. Purposive sampling aims to sample as many types of site as possible. For more information on sampling, refer to the NARE Guidance Note Annex 2: Selecting the NARE Sampling Approach.

Step 5: Designing and implementing tools

Data collection questions in the NARE may be further customized, suggested questions may be changed or omitted, and new questions inserted. The NARE primary data collection/ SDR analysis template supports assessment teams to collect and structure the primary data collection following a secondary data review. The final product from this template will support the discussions during an assessment joint analysis workshop.

Primary data-collection forms must be tested before starting a full needs assessment in the field. Testing may be done with local colleagues: what matters is to be sure that the questions are clear and that answers can be analysed. Design of the questionnaire in the appropriate language is the preferred option. Translation is costly, time-consuming and, if done inappropriately, can greatly reduce data quality and accuracy. Plan and budget for translation at an early stage.

Agreement on minimum life-saving sectoral data
Needs assessment questions should focus on gathering the core emergency life-saving data that are required for the first phase of an emergency response. All questions should relate directly to operational information that has been prioritized by the assessment team.
When prioritizing assessment questions, consider using a prioritization graph to facilitate a group discussion of questions to include in the assessment. Prioritize data elements that have life-saving importance and are easy to collect.

Step 6: Data cleaned, jointly analysed and agreed upon
Analysis should be done as much as possible jointly with the team involved, including partners, and other subject matter and geographic experts. Pooling existing expertise ensures that the analysis is likely to be more comprehensive, robust and accurate. Analysis by staff from different backgrounds can help to mitigate biases, while joint analytical processes can go a long way to create a common understanding of the situation and buy-in for the results.

In order for a needs assessment to have operational impact for the benefit of affected populations, analysis results must be communicated quickly and in an effective manner for key audiences. A dissemination plan should be developed to help facilitate this.

The report should be as short as possible, and the outline should be developed at the outset of the needs assessment initiative in order for stakeholders to agree on expectations and anticipated results. The NARE package includes a report template specifically for the NARE.

The results of an emergency needs assessment need to be set against any existing contingency plans. The information gathered should also be evaluated, for validity and relevance, the reliability of source(s), and the degree to which it corroborates other information. Any evidence or suspicion of fraud, misconduct, or falsely reported needs (to attract or deny aid to a place or group) must be reported to senior management.

People affected by the crisis deserve to know the findings of the needs assessment. This transparency enables them to hold the humanitarian efforts accountable for their actions, and use the evidence to plan their own response strategies. However, it is crucial to be honest and clear about the limitations of interventions (ongoing and planned) and avoid making false promises or raising unrealistic expectations. Throughout the assessment process, communication with affected people should be respectful and transparent, utilizing community-preferred and trusted communication channels.

The assessment coordinator should ensure that links between the assessment and monitoring needs are taken into consideration by the RIM WG and operational leads. For example, if the needs assessment shows there are severe problems in a particular sector or in one community, this information should be used to trigger monitoring of those problems. The assessment team should themselves verify the accuracy of the report and acknowledge any weaknesses of documentation or method in the final results.

In addition to the assessment report, the NARE contributes to camp profiles, updates, and funding appeals, as well as other information products. A ‘refugee dashboard' (a one- or two-page visualization of key needs) may be produced to show the results. UNHCR colleagues can refer to the CORE Guidance on creating and releasing public information products in the first weeks of newly declared refugee emergencies.

NARE Package

- NARE Guidance Note
- NARE Analytical framework
- NARE primary data collection/ SDR template
- NARE report template

Checklist

- Establish an assessment working group with operational leads and an information manager.
- Compile an assessment registry.
- Clearly define assessment goals and expected outcomes.
- Use the NARE Analytical Framework to define information needs.
- Review existing data and identify gaps.
- Assess necessity for primary data based on safety, accuracy, and operational relevance.
- Select target population group(s), define what a community is as a unit of measurement, and if necessary, use diversity-driven purposive sampling, adopting an Age, Gender, and Diversity (AGD) approach when selecting respondents.
- Customize NARE questions, test forms before deployment.
- Establish a mechanism for urgent interventions during data collection.

- Evaluate validity, relevance, and reliability of gathered information.

- Conduct joint analysis involving diverse team members.

- Develop a plan for quick and effective communication using NARE report template.

- Communicate findings quickly and transparently via people's preferred channels, clearly stating intervention limitations.

- Integrate results into relevant products, consider a 'refugee dashboard'.

4. Links

UNHCR Assessment and Monitoring Resource Centre UNHCR Needs Assessment Handbook Data and Information Management

5. Main contacts

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