

# Needs assessment lessons learned

## Lessons identified from assessing the humanitarian situation in Syria and countries hosting refugees

### Syria Needs Analysis Project

*This thematic report provides an overview of available lessons identified from assessments undertaken concerning the humanitarian situation in Syria as well as the situation for Syrian refugees in host-countries. This report is based on conversations with individuals from different organisations working in the region. The document does not intend to provide a comprehensive list of all the issues that should be taken into account while conducting an assessment, but rather provides a starting point for organisations planning an assessment in Syria or the host countries. For more guidance on how to conduct an assessment please see the key resources at the end of this report.*

*The Syria Needs Analysis Project welcomes all information that could complement this report. For additional information, comments or questions please email [SNAP@ACAPS.org](mailto:SNAP@ACAPS.org)*

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#### Key issues

- A large number of actors are undertaking assessments in the region and their activities are not always coordinated. Information is often not shared in a timely manner or, when shared, is not comparable. In addition, only a handful of joint assessments have taken place. As a result, countrywide pictures of needs do not exist, particularly affecting operations in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.
- Assessment fatigue is an issue both within Syria and in host-countries, especially where the organisation undertaking the assessment has provided no visible assistance. In Jordan, for instance, assessment fatigue has led to a significant number of refugees refusing to participate in certain assessments. However, relief actors indicated that there is a need to frequently assess the situation, not only to comply with donor requirements, but also because the situation is highly dynamic. Increased sharing of information, joint and inter-sectoral assessments and combining assessments with aid interventions were mentioned as possible ways to partly relieve the burden of assessments on the

affected population. In addition, it should be made very clear at the start of the assessment that the provision of aid to the assessed community is not guaranteed.

- Due to the nature of the crisis, Syrian communities are hesitant to share information. Therefore, any assessment undertaken should be clearly framed as a humanitarian assessment, and avoid, as far as possible, any political connotations. Designing the questionnaire in a way that does not elicit politically sensitive answers; training enumerators in the humanitarian code of conduct; and clearly introducing the assessment to the respondents will help minimise the perceived threat to respondents. For instance, organisations assessing protection concerns have avoided questions related to the perpetrator of a violation, so as to not jeopardise the security of the enumerator or respondent.
- While communities are hesitant to share personal information, the deteriorating humanitarian situation forces communities to increasingly seek assistance. Thus some respondents may exaggerate their vulnerability.

#### Key recommendations

This document contains many country specific recommendations, which should inform future and on-going assessments. While the multiplicity of actors, the variety of security constraints and continuously evolving humanitarian situation present many challenges, there are three overarching recommendations that can be drawn from the assessment experiences to date to improve assessment practice. These would then greatly enhance shared situational awareness while minimising assessment fatigue;

- Assessment Working Groups in each country actively encourage and foster a culture of coordination, by
  - Agreeing key indicators/information that should be included in any and every assessment.
  - Devising a method to maximise the sharing of assessment plans, data and findings, at least amongst participating organisations.
  - Encouraging and facilitating joint assessments wherever possible.
- When formulating questionnaires, training enumerators and analysing results careful attention should be paid to the nuances of Syrian Arabic.
- A further way to both contribute to a shared understanding and reduce assessment fatigue would be the establishment of country-wide monitoring systems.

## Assessing the Syrian population

Although the humanitarian situations in the different countries covered by this report vary significantly, there are issues that should be taken into account regardless of the location of the assessment. These include language, social conventions and traditionally sensitive topics.

### Language and definitions

- Translation of questionnaires and assessment methodology from English into Arabic was mentioned several times as a complicated and time-consuming issue. As the Arabic spoken in host-countries differs from the Syrian Arabic, a translator who is familiar with Syrian Arabic and the humanitarian vocabulary is required.
- Definitions of key terms as used within Syrian communities sometimes differ from definitions used by international organisations:
  - **Household:** Syrians often live together with not only their nuclear family but also part of their extended family (uncles, brothers, elderly). Hence, the word 'household' or 'family' should be clearly explained to the respondent at the start of the assessment.
  - **Orphan:** In the region, an orphan is culturally recognised as a child who has lost his father, not necessarily a child who has lost one or both parents.
  - **Child labour and child marriage** are common in Syria and families may not recognise these as an issue of concern. In addition, organisations assume that some families deny the occurrence of these issues for fear of losing assistance or embarrassment over not sending their children to school.
  - **Estimation of averages:** Multiple organisations mentioned that questions related to the average time or money spent on activities or goods were not always understood. It was advised that instead of working with 'on average', enumerators might introduce a specific timeframe such as 'this week'.

### Sensitivities

- Several topics are considered highly sensitive within Syrian communities and should be assessed with caution:
  - It is extremely challenging to discuss sexual and gender-based violence in one-on-one surveys with Syrians, particularly if an agency does not provide related services. One organisation recommended the following: when working on sensitive protection issues, agencies should consider

training service delivery staff and those with existing relationships with interviewees to conduct surveys, rather than training enumerators on protection issues, to maximise the quantity and quality of information shared.

- Hygiene related questions, including how many times hands are washed, number of times people take a shower per week etc. can be sensitive as such questioning infers that the enumerator suspects poor hygiene practice.
- Sources of information used; in Lebanon for instance, it was mentioned that families assumed that questions related to what sources of information refugees use to access services is an indirect way to discover their political or religious background. This is for the large part caused by the fact that many information sources used in Lebanon, including newspapers, television channels, local leaders, etc., are strongly linked to political and religious groupings.
- Specific vulnerabilities, including the lack of legal status in a host-country, the willingness to register with UNHCR or the relationship with host-communities are highly sensitive topics.

### Vulnerable groups

- Although Syrians do not seem to 'hide' disabled family members, they will speak on their behalf. Similarly, male household members would often talk on behalf of female members. Hence, mixed gender survey teams should be used.
- Syrian minorities, including Christians, Assyrians and Kurds, are difficult to identify and might not be willing to identify themselves as part of a minority group.

## Assessments per country

The different operational contexts within each country impact assessment exercises in a variety of ways. This chapter outlines some of the issues encountered by agencies conducting assessments in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

### Syria

**Context:** In April, an estimated 6.8 million people were in need in Syria while 4.25 million were internally displaced, most of them residing with host families. With significant constraints on humanitarian actors operating in the country, assessing the needs remains a major challenge in Syria.

#### Lessons identified

- **Methodology and planning:** It is very difficult to conduct household assessments in Syria because of Government restrictions and security constraints.
  - Assessments undertaken to date, made use of key informants and focus group discussions. Each of these data collection techniques has specific opportunities and limitations. When undertaking an assessment that involves talking to key informants, there is a need to take into account the knowledge level of key informants. For instance, the definition of nutrition differs between medical specialists and non-experts.
  - Several remote assessments have been successfully undertaken, by questioning new arrivals in host-countries on the situation in the area they recently fled.
- One source reported that it is very important to include a feedback section in questionnaires to allow respondents to freely discuss the issues that they are facing.
- A flexible assessment schedule is required as delays are common, including setbacks due to insecurity and destruction of infrastructure.
- One actor mentioned that assessments often focus solely on the situation of those displaced, while host communities are often equally or more vulnerable.
- **Enumerators:** Civil society actors in Syria have the capacity to undertake assessments and should be involved because they are aware of the context and they have access to different areas. The importance of empowering Syrian organisations by involving them in assessments was highlighted by multiple actors.
- Enumerator teams should preferably combine residents and non-residents of the area assessed. Locals will be better able to identify endemic socioeconomic problems and political dynamics that may not be immediately

evident (e.g. GBV) and will be able to access areas; non-locals will be able to ensure objectivity.

- Enumerators trained outside of the country can face security risks if, when returning to Syria with assessment tools such as trainer manuals in hard copy, it is suspected that they are cooperating with International Organisations.
- All assessments should, as much as is possible, consult, or even include, local authorities.
- People in Syria widely use Facebook, E-mail and Skype without being fully aware of the security risks related to these communication tools. International organisations should make sure that the appropriate security measures are in place when communicating with individuals inside Syria.
- Due to the volatile security situations, some enumerators have been accompanied by their families during the assessment.
- **Sensitivities:** Within Syria, the concept of rights, including human rights and child rights, is very sensitive because of the Syrian Government's restrictive approach towards human rights. The word 'rights' should therefore be avoided during any assessment so as to not endanger the enumerators and respondents.
- Most key informants in Syria are likely to be males. Hence, when assessing the situation through key informants, information on sensitivities, particularly those linked to gender (psychosocial problems, GBV, domestic violence etc.), is difficult to obtain.
- Other sensitive topics include areas of origin for IDPs and the power structures within IDP camps.
- Obtaining evidence of informed consent of respondents has proved to be difficult, as people are hesitant to sign a document with their personal details.

### Lebanon

**Context:** Lebanon hosts the largest number of registered Syrian refugees. Despite this large influx, no camps have been established and the estimated 1.2 million Syrians in the country are scattered across more than 1,400 municipalities. The security situation in some areas of Lebanon, specifically in the North and border regions, is volatile and security incidents regularly restrict access.

#### Lessons identified

- **Methodology:** As the refugees are scattered around the country and within host communities, it is time consuming and costly to assess Syrian population. In addition, it has been proven difficult to identify vulnerable groups, including

those not registered with UNHCR, minority groups, vulnerable host communities and Iraqi refugees.

- The political, economic and social situation varies significantly between geographic districts. As a result, an assessment in one area is not representative of the situation in other regions.
- Both national and local authorities need to be consulted before the start of each assessment. Even if an assessment is approved on a national level, local municipalities are not always notified. It is important to visit local governance structures before assessments are undertaken.
- An educated workforce is available in Lebanon and it is relatively easy to find and train enumerators. There are several local institutions that could support assessments, including the Central Bureau of Statistics and the American University of Beirut. These bodies can not only provide enumerators, but also help with contextualising the assessment and analysing the results. However, it is important to keep in mind that most are not familiar with the humanitarian setting and need training in the humanitarian principles, jargon and the 'etiquette' of assessing – explaining to people why this assessment is being done, staying respectful, not entering someone's house unannounced, etc. In addition, Lebanese Arabic speaking enumerators may not completely convey the nuances of certain questions when interviewing Syrians.
- Smart-phones have been successfully used as a data collection tool in Lebanon. Some specific lessons learned on the use of smart phones as a tool include:
  - The use of smartphones for data collection can draw suspicion and the use of this tool should be clearly explained to all actors involved, including municipalities and respondents.
  - An extra battery is required for each device
  - The keyboard of the phone should be as large as possible while there is less need for a large screen.
  - The lack of wireless Internet poses problems in some areas.
  - It can be complicated to find a secure server for data storage and one organisation recommended the creation of a local server.
- Identification of Syrian key informants able to represent or speak directly on behalf of the refugee community has been identified as a challenge, partly because of the diffused displacement of refugees.
- One organisation mentioned that Syrians clearly feel more at ease and speak more freely when assessed within their homes rather than in public – for instance, at distribution sites.

- Borders between municipalities are unclear, and therefore cadastres have been recommended as the administrative unit.

## Jordan

**Context:** Jordan hosts over 500,000 refugees from Syria, with approximately three-quarters living in urban areas across the country and one-quarter living in refugee camps in the northern region. Despite this proportion, humanitarian organisations' and donors' attention and resources have largely focused on refugees in the camps.

### Lessons identified

- The GoJ requires all projects targeting refugees in host communities to be approved by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC). Although there is a lack of official guidance, generally, once a project is approved a related assessment can be undertaken to support project implementation. Unless a project has national coverage, it is difficult for humanitarian organisations to undertake large-scale assessments, thereby limiting evidence-based understanding of the needs of the most vulnerable at the national level.
- Refugees often use community-defined names of neighbourhoods rather than those utilised by humanitarian organisations.
- In protection-related assessments some respondents have been confused as to whether questions referred to experiences in Jordan or Syria. When interviewing refugees, enumerators need to be clear as to which country or context the question refers.
- **Urban areas:** To avoid security and administrative challenges, organisations should submit formal documentation to governorate officials informing them of any planned assessments and their purpose, particularly when it involves focus group discussions. Humanitarian organisations should ideally seek written consent from authorities and assessment teams should carry copies to show to local authorities, refugees or host communities as required.
- Large-scale assessments in urban or rural settings require significantly more time and logistical effort than those in camps. Refugees often do not know or use addresses so it is useful to initially meet at an agreed-upon landmark.
- Identifying vulnerable refugees and Jordanians in urban settings is very challenging. In addition, vulnerable Jordanians among host communities may refuse to participate being too proud to identify themselves as vulnerable. Organisations suggest working with key informants and local organisations to better identify the more vulnerable populations.
- **Camp-specific issues:** Refugees in Za'atari come primarily from an urban, middle class background and are not accustomed to living in harsh desert conditions or sharing communal facilities. This common socio-economic background should be considered when formulating questionnaires and

interpreting data as standardised tools are often designed for beneficiaries from poor, rural backgrounds.

- Enumerators often draw significant attention in a camp and security arrangements should be in place prior to any data collection. Some organisations only undertake assessments in public facilities, such as schools or health facilities, which have guards, rather than households due to possible security incidents and/or unrest. This, however, may limit the willingness of interviewees to speak openly.
- Questionnaires targeting camp-based refugees should be carefully phrased as there is reportedly a tendency to exaggerate needs in order to receive more assistance. It should be ensured that there are adequate and specific follow-up questions to determine vulnerability.
- Assessments of camp-based refugees often take more time than planned because refugees often share problems outside of the scope of the assessment questionnaire.

### General constraints within the humanitarian sector

#### Capacities to undertake assessments

- A multitude of actors are operational in the region and coordination of assessment activities is inconsistent. Furthermore, not all assessments undertaken follow international standards. As a result, the information available is often patchy, incomparable and does not provide or even contribute to a country- or region-wide picture of the needs.
- Analysis of existing information sources is seldom part of the assessment exercise.
- One agency suggested that UNHCR coordination of assessments should be more comprehensive, particularly at the field level. NGO staff in Jordan report that they regularly provide information and reports to sectoral coordination mechanisms but the information is not always consolidated or fed back to the working groups for analysis and/or action.
- The rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation and operational constraints in the region make response difficult consuming many resources. As a result, allocating resources to assessment of needs is not always prioritised. The lack of willingness of organisations to commit time and resources has, for instance, hampered some joint assessments as well as the establishment of a comprehensive monitoring system.

- The primary reason many NGOs undertake assessments is to win donor funding for specific interventions. There are few organisations willing to invest resources in large-scale joint assessments. One source mentioned that of the organisations initially involved during the planning stages of a joint assessment, only half contributed to the actual undertaking of the assessment (analysis, data collection). While a contributory factor may have been staff turnover and a perceived lack of capacity in analysis, the lack of a direct link between such joint assessments and funding for specific projects makes them a lower priority for many organisations.
- Timeliness of the sharing of assessment reports has also been mentioned as a key issue. This is partly caused by the fact that some of the larger operational agencies are unwilling to share assessment reports until they have been thoroughly reviewed. It is suggested that preliminary findings and draft version of reports should be shared as soon as possible, so as to ensure the relevance of the data.
- Although the availability of qualified staff has significantly improved over time, there remains a lack of dedicated assessment experts in the region which, hampers cooperation and the sharing of information as well as harmonisation of assessments.

#### Standards and methodology

There are a number of global tools and assessment methodologies available, which have been successfully adapted for implementation in the region.

However, several issues remain:

- There is no standardised MUAC for the MENA region, making it more difficult to analyse results of MUAC assessments.
- Identifying vulnerable groups, including unregistered refugees, is complex and there is no accepted methodology to identify and sample these, often invisible, families.
- In Lebanon, the Government and UNHCR use different unique identifiers for an administrative area. Work is on-going to match both sets of codes.
- There is no consensus among international organizations concerning what forms of work constitutes child labour as it depends on different variables and varies from country to country. This needs to be clearly indicated in any assessment
- Protection terminology is often difficult to translate between Arabic and English. In Jordan, terms also depend on the national legal system and religious interpretations. The Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence sub-working groups have examined the terms used in Jordan and have drafted

standard operating procedures to delineate how each fits with standardised terms used by humanitarian agencies. Despite these efforts, aid agencies should expect some misinterpretation as there is continued debate among Arabic speakers on the meaning of terms.

## Key resources for undertaking an assessment

- ACAPS, *Coordinated Assessments in Emergencies. What we know – key lessons from field experience*, November 2012, <http://www.acaps.org/en/resources>
- CARE (2009) *CARE Emergency Toolkit: Assessment*. CARE International. Geneva, Switzerland. <http://careemergencytoolkit.org/>
- Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) *Operational Guidance Note for Coordinated Assessments in Humanitarian Crises*, 2012, [https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/CAP/ops\\_guidance\\_finalversion2012.pdf](https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/CAP/ops_guidance_finalversion2012.pdf)
- ICRC, *Professional Standards for Protection Work*, 2013 <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/icrc-002-0999.pdf>
- ECB/ACAPS, *The Good Enough Guide to Assessments (Draft)*, January 2013 [http://www.acaps.org/resourcescats/downloader/gega\\_draft\\_1\\_0/148](http://www.acaps.org/resourcescats/downloader/gega_draft_1_0/148)
- IFRC 2008. *Guidelines for emergency assessment*, <http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/guidelines/guidelines-emergency.pdf>
- The Sphere handbook, 2011 edition <http://www.sphereproject.org/handbook/>
- World Food Programme (WFP), *Emergency Food Security Assessment Handbook (Second edition)*. <http://www.wfp.org/content/emergency-food-security-assessment-handbook>
- World Vision International, Emergency Capacity Building Project (2007) *Impact measurement and accountability in emergencies: The good enough guide*. ECB Project. [www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/aid/2007/0209goodenough.pdf](http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/aid/2007/0209goodenough.pdf)