

Assessments in the cluster strategy

DRAFT Guidance Note

This guidance note introduces shelter cluster assessment strategies. It is intended for shelter cluster coordinators and IMOs who are in the process of establishing how assessments should and will be coordinated in the context in which they operate. The assessment strategy isn't meant to duplicate, but complement the Cluster strategy and IM strategy, taking the assessments component a few steps further and ensuring that the coordinated assessment process of the cluster is well planned out.

What is an assessment strategy?

An assessment strategy is a document developed by the cluster early in the response that outlines the way cluster-specific assessments will be coordinated throughout. The assessment strategy can be a standalone document or be embedded into the information management strategy or the cluster strategy. As with all strategic documents, the assessment strategy should be endorsed by all cluster members involved in assessments and other relevant stakeholders.

Why have an assessment strategy?

The end goal of an assessment strategy is to set-up a process that ensures that clusters have the information they need to make strategic and evidence-based decisions through the response, and in particular ahead of milestones and/or within emergencies in protracted responses or onset crises, while minimizing risks related to assessment fatigue and misuse of available resources.

By providing a structure to assessment coordination, the assessment strategy also allows for clusters to keep track of how information needs can be addressed, as well as provide quality control over data, for it to be usable and benefit all partners and other relevant stakeholders.

Last but not least, an assessment strategy also serves as a documented outline of ethical principles related to assessments in humanitarian interventions to which any partner conducting an assessment has to abide by.

What should be included in an assessment strategy?

Whichever the format of the assessment strategy (standalone document or embedded in other strategic documents), key content as outlined below should be covered.

I. Basic information

The following basic information should introduce the assessment strategy:

- **Objectives:** cluster objectives from the Cluster strategy linked to assessments
- **Scope:** what the strategy covers in terms of geographic areas, etc.
- **Timeframe:** until when does the strategy apply, when is information needed and therefore when should assessments be conducted
- **Contact information:** who is/are the person(s) of reference for assessments

II. Guiding principles

The assessment strategy should next outline the guiding principles which clusters, partners and relevant stakeholders coordinating or conducting assessments will apply throughout the implementation of the strategy.

- **Ethical considerations:** Do no harm principles have to be outlined in the assessment strategy, and put into context of assessments (having referral systems in place for assessments, limiting assessment fatigue, asking for consent, etc.) Other ethical considerations should be clearly stated in the assessment strategy as well, such as capturing diversity in how assessments are conducted, and other context-specific ones.
- **Transparency and sharing:** the strategy should also outline – for transparency purposes – how information collected through assessments will be shared among cluster partners, a process for which cluster coordination would take the lead.
- **Coordination and participation:** the assessment strategy should also explicit that assessments will be coordinated and be a participative process including all relevant stakeholders.
- **Secondary data reviews:** last but not least, the assessment strategy should also reiterate the importance of having a secondary data review (SDR) process in place. The first main purpose of having an SDR will be to continuously be able to track information gaps against the information needs outlined in the assessment strategy. The SDR can, as such, be used to monitor whether information needs are being addressed. The second main purpose of having an SDR is to contribute to informing the analysis of the information landscape (see the next point).

III. Analysis of the information landscape

By analyzing the information landscape, the assessment strategy will (1) outline information & analysis needs and gaps, and (2) assessment capacity in country/crisis. Overall, assessment capacity can be tracked through a “activity matrix for assessments” type of document.

- **Information & analysis needs:** first and foremost, the assessment strategy has to clearly state, in broad terms, the type and scope of information that the cluster needs to make evidence-based decision-making throughout the response, contingency planning, advocacy, and programmatic or operational decisions.
- **Information & analysis gaps:** once the needs are identified, the strategy can then identify, also in broad terms, the main information gaps that will need to be addressed throughout the implementation of the strategy, using the SDR will facilitate this process. However relevant, refer to the Cluster Strategy which also should identify information gaps.

Example on how to identify information gaps:

Example: in a protracted displacement crisis prone to flooding during rainy season, a key information need will be to identify risks for IDP living in critical shelter conditions. Through the SDR, two key pieces of information were identified: (1) when the floods tend to occur and (2) the areas where there are IDP formal and informal settlements. However, there is no information available on the type of shelter in those settlements and other characteristics related to safety hazards, which is therefore a key information gap.

- **Assessment capacity - resources:** the assessment strategy should outline assessment capacity in country/crisis, including technical one (are there any assessment-specialized partners in country? do partners have assessment specific resources? What is the cluster coordination platform? IM/assessment capacity?)
- **Assessment capacity – access:** Assessment capacity also takes into account the question of access and ability to conduct assessments in volatile and unpredictable environments. By anticipating access issues and possible logistical and administrative challenges, let alone security or safety risks, the assessment strategy sets the stage for conducting assessments, ahead of time.

To note that the process of identifying assessment needs ahead of time is also linked to fundraising, allowing for clusters to anticipate requests for funds dedicated to assessments and also identifying where and to whom they can be allocated, and finally, the remaining gaps.

IV. Assessment coordination

- **Assessment coordination body:** This section states who is responsible for coordinating assessments, for example whether it is cluster coordinators and or a shelter assessment working group (AWG) tasked with implementing the assessment strategy and the assessments coordinated at the cluster level. In some cases, there might be an OCHA-chaired AWG as well for inter-sector assessments and analysis to which cluster-specific AWG should be aligned.
- **Data collection & role of cluster coordination:** Based on the assessment capacity that has been identified, the assessment strategy then outlines the different scenarios that can be activated for conducting assessments throughout the implementation of the strategy. The examples below are typical-case scenarios for sector large-scale needs assessments that would usually be conducted to have data for PiN calculations and strategic planning:
 - Large-scale needs assessments will be coordinated by the cluster coordination team, splitting data collection among partners in different areas of the country; or
 - There is no capacity to conduct nation-wide data collections so information needs will be addressed through the compilation of partner local assessments, who would however be using the same standard indicators, which would allow to compare information; or
 - Access prevents collection of primary data so information needs will be addressed through desk review of secondary data only.
- **Carrying out assessments:** the purpose of the assessment strategy is not necessarily to anticipate and list out all assessments that should be conducted throughout the implementation of the assessment strategy. However, it should lay out basic best practices related to data collection, analysis and dissemination, and link to useful documentation on assessments.

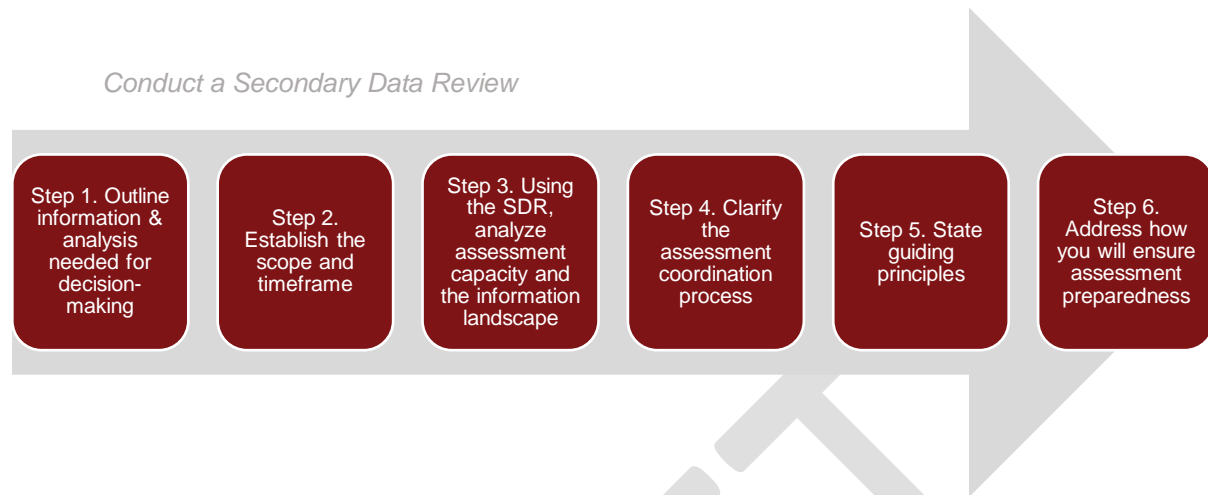
V. Assessment preparedness

Finally, the assessment strategy should include a section on assessment preparedness and contingency planning in the event of sudden onset disasters or need for rapid needs assessments. By keeping track of assessment capacity in country, the cluster coordination / AWG will be able to quickly know who has capacity and where. In addition to the who and where, there should also be an SOP for rapid assessments. Depending on the context, SOP content could significantly differ, especially in relation to local governments, access to emergency funds, etc.

How to develop an assessment strategy?

When developing an assessment strategy, the guiding question is: “*what information is needed to inform decision-making, who is going to collect it, how and when?*” In addition, you want to make sure that the assessment strategy – which could seem as a tedious document to initially develop, is both useful and used. For this reason, the assessment strategy should be circulated, presented and rolled-out to get endorsement from all partners and other relevant stakeholders.

The process below summarizes the main steps relating to planning out an assessment strategy. These should be clearly embedded within the broader [cluster strategy](#) development process and not be a duplication of it.



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