



# Learning from UNHCR/WFP Joint Needs Assessments June 2023



JOINT PROGRAMME EXCELLENCE AND TARGETING HUB

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Drawing on the experience of the [Joint UNHCR-WFP Programme Excellence and Targeting Hub](#) supporting 14 assessments conducted jointly by UNHCR and WFP, this document identifies challenges commonly faced and presents good practice. The aim is to support Country Operations when assessing the needs and capacities of refugees and other forcibly displaced people, to inform evidence-based programming and targeting for basic needs assistance.

Topics covered include: preparing for an assessment, timeline, roles and responsibilities, technical considerations for data collection and analysis, as well as validating and disseminating results.

*Copyright for cover page photo: Refugee woman selling onions in Maban Market, South Sudan, 2023. ©Cinzia Papavero/WFP*

## INTRODUCTION

UNHCR and WFP have made a joint commitment to adopting a people-centred, protection-focused, and evidence-based targeting approach to effectively support refugees and other forcibly displaced people. As stated in the [UNHCR-WFP Joint Guidance on Targeting of Assistance to Meet Basic Needs](#), when undertaken properly “targeting of assistance ensures that the right individuals receive the most appropriate support to address their needs and reinforce their capacities.”

As a key part of the programme cycle, joint needs assessments identify the levels and scale of vulnerability among the population of concern. The results inform, validate and/or monitor assistance delivery, including targeting and related processes, and hence guide programmatic decisions.

Since July 2020, the [Joint UNHCR-WFP Targeting and Programme Excellence Hub](#) (the Joint Hub) has led and coordinated 14 joint assessments with 9 joint country teams in refugee settings<sup>1</sup>. Drawing on this experience, this paper aims to document good practice and learning, in order to support other country operations that are embarking on joint assessments.

It should be noted that, based on this experience, the Joint Hub, UNHCR and WFP are also working together on a Joint Analytical Framework (JAF) which is designed to guide the process of future assessments and analysis, when delivering basic needs assistance in situations of forced displacement. The lessons learnt here are complementary to the forthcoming JAF, which will provide more comprehensive guidance (under development in 2023).

## PART 1: PREPARATION

*This section provides guidance on the key dimensions and strategic questions that should be considered at the beginning of a joint assessment. A timeline is provided as a guide to highlight the importance of allocating sufficient time for each step of the process to ensure the quality of the assessment.*

### 1.1 Who should be part of the joint assessment team?

Assessments and targeting are **processes embedded in the programme cycle** and delivery of assistance. Involvement of different staff profiles and functions within each agency is necessary to enable the joint team to align their assessment objectives with programmatic strategy and information needs at the country level.

The joint assessment team should therefore **involve and consult a range of staff** from each agency, including (but not limited to) those who work on the following areas: programme, assessment, monitoring, livelihoods and solutions, protection and accountability to affected people (AAP), registration, information management, as well as logistics, procurement and cross-

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<sup>1</sup> Till Jan.2023, the Hub has supported three Joint Post Distribution Monitoring and Vulnerability Assessments in Rwanda; one Joint Post Distribution Monitoring in South Sudan; four Joint Vulnerability Assessments in Democratic Republic of Congo; one census-based assessment in Mauritania; one Joint Vulnerability Assessment in Zambia; one Joint Assessment Mission (JAM) in Cameroun; one JAM in Niger; one JAM in Mozambique; and one Joint Mobile-based Assessment in Jordan.

cutting issues such as gender. The involvement of senior management and field colleagues is also crucial to ensuring a successful assessment process.

## 1.2 Assessment scope: what do the joint assessment team need to agree on?

**It is essential to define the scope and technical design** of the assessment to ensure a mutual understanding of each agency's strategic and programmatic priorities. The following key questions should be answered and agreed upon by both agencies:

- What are the **objectives** of the assessment? Why is information needed and to inform which programmatic activity?
- What **information gaps should** the assessment address to inform joint targeting/prioritization and programmatic/strategic decision making?
- What is the **geographical scope** of the assessment (rural/urban; in camp/host community, etc.)?
- For which **population** is information being sought?
- Are **statistically representative** results required? Is there a **sub-group within the population** of concern that the assessment will need to focus on and collect statistically representative results?
- What data already exists and what **essential data still needs to be collected?** To what extent can secondary literature, previous assessments, and surveys, etc. be used?

Once these details are discussed and agreed they should be included in a comprehensive terms of reference document<sup>2</sup> that will guide the implementation of the assessment.

## 1.3 What is the timeline for the implementation of a joint assessment?

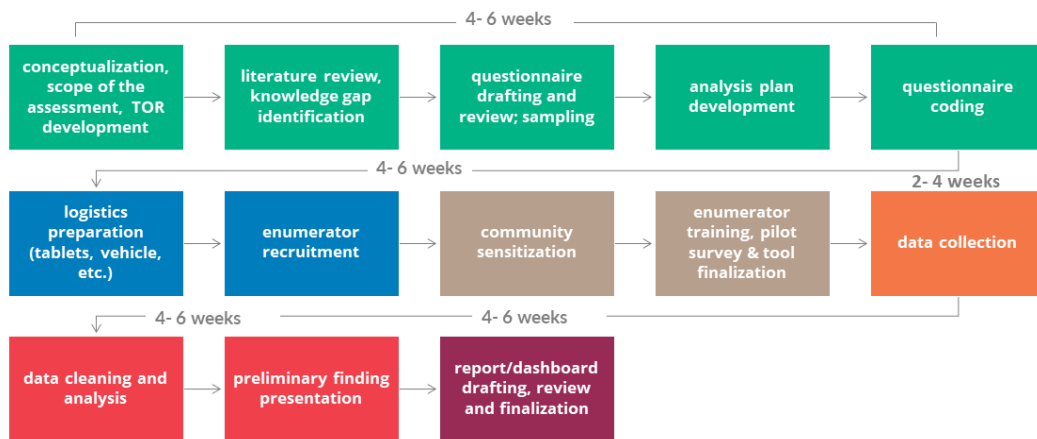
**There is a standardized process - or sequence of events** - that joint country teams are recommended to adhere to as much as possible when implementing a joint needs assessment. Beyond data collection, a joint assessment involves a series of technical and logistical preparatory tasks, as well as a range of responsibilities that help to ensure data quality control and timely analysis. Skipping any one of these steps may undermine the quality of the data collected and thus the utility of the final analysis in decision making.

**Conducting a reliable joint needs assessment can take up to 6 months** (from 18 to 26 weeks). The following diagram sets out how much time may need to be allocated to different steps in the assessment process. Upon completion of the assessment cycle, country teams also need time to develop evidence-based strategic and programmatic recommendations.

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<sup>2</sup> [A template for the terms of reference document can be found at this link.](#)





## 1.4 What are the roles and responsibilities of each agency?

The roles and responsibilities of each agency need to be defined and agreed upon from the outset. By taking stock of different in-house capacities and expertise regarding vulnerability assessments, as well as food security and protection-related matters, the members of the joint country team can capitalize on their comparative advantages and assign tasks accordingly. This approach deepens inter-agency knowledge transfer and accelerates capacity building.

It is recommended that the **Country Team identify focal points at Country Office (CO) and Regional Bureaux (RB) level** and prepare a well-organized, feasible timeline based on availability and capacity. At this early stage, indicating the support desired from the RB and/or Headquarters (HQ) (e.g. technical, financial, logistical, etc.) is important. Understanding which of these support needs can be met in the planning process will help the country team identify resources and allocate staff in a timely manner.

## PART 2: TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

*The second part of this paper looks at a range of technical issues that should be considered. These include i) identifying the most appropriate and feasible sampling strategy in each forced displaced context, ii) the importance of sensitizing the communities about the assessment before collecting any primary data, iii) good practices to ensure highest possible data quality, iv) the importance of developing an analysis plan before data collection, and v) the advantages of triangulating quantitative information with qualitative data.*

### 2.1 What are the key sampling considerations in contexts of forced displacement?

**Sampling** is the methodology by which specific individuals, households, and communities are selected to be surveyed ([CFSVA guidance](#)). A **representative sample** is a subset of the population that seeks to accurately reflect the characteristics of the larger group.

For a quantitative assessment, it is important for the sample design to be both representative and systematic<sup>3</sup>, for the results to be accurate and useful to make the necessary decisions.

The first step is for the assessment team to agree on what **level of detail** is required for decision-making, as this will affect the design and size of the sample. For example, we may need assessment findings to tell us about the situation of specific groups within the population, such as women, men, people over 60, people with specific needs, households with children, etc. The sample design should therefore ensure that enough people from this specific group are surveyed, i.e., that the sampling generates results that are statistically representative of these groups, thereby providing the country teams with the information necessary to make certain programmatic decisions for these groups.

A **rigorous sampling method** helps ensure that all households are equally likely, from a statistical perspective, to be interviewed. However, to ensure that households selected for the sample are found during data collection, a series of additional steps are necessary, to complement the sample design. The answers to the questions below (non-exhaustive list) will guide the assessment team in refining the sample design:

- Does the **population of concern reside** in camps only or with the host community too? Is there any mapping available which shows the locations of shelters/settlements in the geographical area to be surveyed?
- Is there an updated **household list** or census of the population that can be used as a sample frame (i.e., a complete list of households from which a sample could be drawn)?
- How **mobile** is the population of concern, in general, and in each camp, city or settlement? Are sampled households likely to be physically present during the data collection exercise? Will the sampling be skewed towards households of certain characteristics when the survey hours overlap with typical working hours?
- Will any **relocation, repatriation** or other organized movement take place before or during the assessment?

Lastly, it is essential to have a sufficiently long list of potential **replacement households** for the sample, which can be surveyed if the initially selected households are absent or there are last-minute withdrawals. Having a replacement list ensures that an adequate total number of households are interviewed for the survey.

## 2.2 Why is it important to inform the community in advance about the assessment?

It is essential that the people who will participate in the survey are **well informed about the assessment prior to and during its implementation**. Reaching out to the community before the assessment to communicate its objective, scope and timeline helps to avoid a low response rate due to response fatigue or misunderstandings. Communication with the community also identifies community members' attitudes, perceptions and questions related to the assessment - issues that should be addressed before it is conducted.

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<sup>3</sup> Systematic sampling is a probability sampling method in which researchers select members of the population at a regular interval determined in advance.

In camps/settlements which are spread over a large geographical area, or where the rate of mobility is high, **multiple communication exercises may be required.**

Together with the communication exercise, **enumerators and field office colleagues need to be properly trained** and prepared so that they can explain, in clear language, the purpose and objective of the assessment during the communication activities and data collection.

One immediate output of the communication exercise is a higher level of understanding among refugees and other forcibly displaced people and hence a higher level of participation or show-up rate during data collection. In summary, before conducting the assessment it is important to communicate with the people we serve and to **use clear language** so that they can understand why the assessment is being conducted and are more likely to participate in the survey.

## 2.3 How can data quality be best assured throughout the assessment process?

There are several tasks during the assessment process that are essential to ensure the highest possible quality of data collected for analyses.

### Tasks to ensure data quality before data collection:

- **Develop an analysis plan<sup>4</sup>** that serves as a framework for identifying information needs and for structuring subsequent analyses. The analysis plan ensures that the most relevant data is captured and explains how that data will be analysed and used.
- **Ensure the household questionnaire contains concise and neutral questions** that allow for unbiased responses and focus on collecting the necessary information. Leading questions that encourage or guide the respondent towards a desired answer should be avoided at all costs.
- **Design the household questionnaire** using commonly data collection toolkits such as Kobo and include skip logic for specific questions to avoid data entry error and enhance data quality. This technical oversight will help ensure the adequacy of data collected during household visits.
- **Recruit experienced, well-trained enumerators** with local language skills, context-specific knowledge, and strong communication capacity. It is important to have a diverse group of enumerators (in terms of gender, origin, language, etc.) in order to minimise bias in data collection.
- **Provide high-quality, well-designed training programmes for enumerators** before data collection, allocating sufficient time for them to familiarize themselves with the assessment's purpose and objectives and the data collection tools.
- **Implement a pilot survey with all enumerators and supervisors** to review and evaluate the data collection tools with the view to identifying and addressing any problems, inconsistencies, etc. This will help correct and improve the tools before their finalization and usage in the actual assessment. Problems may range from questionnaire design errors to challenges in the sampling implementation, among others.

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<sup>4</sup>[This link contains an example in excel that can be adapted for any context.](#)

### Tasks to ensure data quality during data collection:

- **Appoint a designated focal point responsible for data quality checks** during the data collection exercise. Real-time data quality assurance measures (including regular communication between the data quality focal point(s) and the team of enumerators and supervisors) substantially improves the completeness, coherence and overall quality of the data collected.
- **Conduct frequent and regular quality checks** during the data collection process: quality checks of incoming data can be conducted daily, or at an interval of every 2 to 3 days, to spot any anomalous data or trends, misinterpretations, contradictions, etc. Errors need to be shared with the supervisor(s) of enumerators for verification and follow-up.

#### Country example: Data Quality and the Joint Mobile-Based Needs Assessment in Jordan, 2021

The UNHCR and WFP Country Offices and the Joint Hub each assigned a data quality focal point who used statistical software for frequent and regular quality checks during data collection. Any data points identified by the data quality focal points as abnormal were communicated with the lead enumerators who then double-checked and made necessary corrections with the data collection team.

Most of the challenges with question administration and problems with the questionnaire design were identified in the period between conducting the pilot survey and the first three days of proper data collection. These issues could therefore be resolved very early on in the data collection process, enhancing the overall quality of data.

## 2.4 Why is an analysis plan necessary?

A jointly developed and agreed upon analysis plan – which captures the key questions to be answered and highlights the knowledge gap that the assessment is meant to fill - **ensures a common understanding between the two agencies** of the selected indicators to be assessed and the methodology to be used.

An analysis plan also defines a **realistic picture of the workload and time required** to undertake the analytical work ahead. The plan usually lists all the variables and indicators (name, disaggregation by location, sex of household head, etc.) that are relevant to inform the analysis and expected programmatic interventions. In addition, analysis timelines and focal points for different sections can be identified. A well-organized excel sheet can be a convenient and efficient working format for an analysis plan. It may be helpful to build the analysis plan and corresponding data collection tools from previously conducted assessments. However, it is crucial to adjust the plan and the tools to any contextual changes and they should also be customized to the information needs and objectives of the assessment in question.

## 2.5 Should qualitative data be collected during joint assessments?

For triangulation purposes, it is recommended that assessments include both quantitative data (based on statistically representative samples), and qualitative information (based on key informant interviews and focus group discussions).



**Qualitative data** provides in-depth information on a specific topic (e.g., protection, gender issues) from different groups in the community, that quantitative data cannot deliver. For example, the collection of qualitative data could provide insights into the population’s perception of what constitutes vulnerability, who in the community is more or less vulnerable and why.

The joint assessment team should also evaluate the most suitable **data collection method** for each indicator/question. When the question seeks information on issues that affect a particular group, such as availability of services or protection and safety issues, qualitative rather than quantitative modules may be more appropriate and should be applied.

To ensure that the analysis is accurate and of a high quality, the triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative data is necessary to provide a holistic understanding of the situation.

#### **Country example: 3rd Refugees Joint Post Distribution Monitoring, Rwanda, 2022**

In April 2022, UNHCR and WFP conducted the 3rd Joint Post Distribution Monitoring exercise to monitor the impact of the targeted approach for food assistance for refugees. In order to gain a better understanding of how targeting has impacted the community since its implementation in April 2021, and how refugees have coped with different levels of assistance, the joint assessment team decided to introduce qualitative interviews, in addition to the more quantitative household surveys they were used to conducting.

The qualitative interviews provided invaluable data, such as information about the adequacy of targeting eligibility criteria, their impact on protection as well as refugees’ remaining questions around targeting implementation. Through qualitative data collection and analysis, the agencies were better able to understand the areas for improvement, both in terms of targeting design and implementation.

## **PART 3. VALIDATING AND DISSEMINATING RESULTS**

*The last section covers key lessons learnt with regard to validating and disseminating the results of joint assessments. To enable the assessment findings to generate useful information and inform programming and targeting, it is important that analysis is shared, refined, and validated early on (with both communities and a wider group of decision-makers within UNHCR and WFP) and that final results are generated within two-three months after data collection.*

### **3.1 What should be the timeframe for disseminating results?**

To ensure that results reflect the contextual reality and remain relevant to inform programming, the joint assessment team should endeavour to **generate the assessment results within two to three months** upon the completion of the data collection exercise.

A preliminary analysis of key indicators, as per the agreed analysis plan, can usually be completed within two weeks, by one or two dedicated analysts, depending on workload.

The **presentation and validation of the preliminary analysis with the country team** and management are critical. The sharing of early results will facilitate collective feedback - including contextual factors not yet accounted for - and identify any potential gaps that may need to be addressed with other available literature or field-level knowledge and expertise.

Furthermore, by disseminating analysis and results as a 'work in progress', it accelerates the process of **building a shared understanding** of needs and vulnerability which contributes to effective decision-making and programmatic response.

### 3.2 Should results be shared with the community?

In principle and wherever feasible, as a matter of best practice and accountability to affected communities, key **assessment findings should be shared with the surveyed community** in question.

After preliminary results are finalized, community dissemination should take place with the aim of achieving **transparency of the results and increasing the credibility** of the assessment, while also collecting community feedback, observations, and insights.

**Community feedback** is crucial to adjust and finalize the analysis thus generating more reliable and people-centred analysis and hence better-adapted and responsive decision-making. This process serves to strengthen community participation in decision-making, trust and interest in participating in future assessments. Any key decisions that are taken based on the final assessment findings should also be shared with community members in a timely fashion.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Joint needs assessments to inform targeting and evidence-based decision making are an essential part of the programme cycle for both UNHCR and WFP.

The lessons learnt thus far and suggested practices shared here are intended as a reference for country teams, to support them in developing a model for collaboration and coordination that best fits the context in which they are working.

Based on the Hub's experience to date, of supporting 14 joint assessments in 9 different countries, the following lessons learnt, and good practices are considered important (list is non-exhaustive):

<b>STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>Assessment team:</b> ensure the involvement of different staff profiles from both agencies</li> <li>– <b>Scope:</b> define and agree on the scope of the assessment</li> <li>– <b>Timeline:</b> ensure adequate time to prepare and conduct the joint assessment (up to 6 months)</li> <li>– <b>Roles and responsibilities:</b> important to clarify each agency's involvement in the assessment and helpful for each agency to identify focal points at country and regional level.</li> </ul>
<b>TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>Questionnaire:</b> ensure that the data collection tools contain neutral questions that are designed to collect the precise information required.</li> <li>– <b>Analysis plan:</b> take time to develop and agree on a joint analysis plan, before collecting any data.</li> <li>– <b>Sampling:</b> ensure that the sampling method is appropriate for your information needs and decision-making and have a back-up list to ensure that enough households are sampled in the survey.</li> <li>– <b>Communication:</b> before conducting the assessment, it is important to communicate with the people who will be surveyed and to use clear language so that they can understand why the assessment is being conducted and are more likely to participate.</li> <li>– <b>Data quality:</b> based on the objectives, design and pilot (and refine) the questionnaire, to ensure a high quality of data.</li> <li>– <b>Qualitative data:</b> it is recommended that quantitative assessments are supported by qualitative analysis based on key informant interviews and focus group discussions.</li> </ul>
<b>VALIDATING AND DISSEMINATING RESULTS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <b>Getting buy-in</b> share analysis of key indicators early on (within two to three weeks) to refine and validate findings and get buy-in from a wider group of decision-makers.</li> <li>– <b>Generating evidence:</b> aim to disseminate the assessment results within two to three months (after completion of data collection) to ensure that results reflect the current situation and can inform programming in a timely manner.</li> <li>– <b>Sharing results with the community:</b> best practice is to share key assessment findings with the surveyed community, to refine and validate findings with them. Transparency contributes to building trust.</li> </ul>



WFP and UNHCR colleagues discuss plans to collaborate in Maban refugee camp, South Sudan. ©Cinzia Papavero/WFP

*The Joint Hub continues to collaborate with UNHCR and WFP country offices and looks forward to enriching and updating this document with learning from ongoing and future joint approaches. For further information please contact: Cinzia Papavero, Senior Targeting Advisor, [cinzia.papavero@wfp.org](mailto:cinzia.papavero@wfp.org)*

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*For more information visit: [www.wfp-unhcr-hub.org](http://www.wfp-unhcr-hub.org)*