Joint Rapid Needs Assessments Guidance Note

Background
In an increasingly complex operating environment, stronger coordination around humanitarian needs assessments is critical to enable effective assessment of multi-dimensional needs; optimise available resources (including use of trained enumerators); reduce the burden on key informants; and capitalise on a sometimes brief window of access. Under the direction of the humanitarian leadership group and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), members of the Inter-Cluster Coordination Team (ICCT) and Humanitarian Access Group (HAG) were tasked with developing a joint assessment form and note to support effective coordination for inter-agency joint rapid needs assessments.

This guidance note identifies enabling conditions, shares best practices and overarching guiding principles for joint rapid needs assessments.

Purpose and scope
The purpose of this exercise is to ensure that aid agencies engaged in the humanitarian response in Afghanistan agree to a common structure, template form and a minimum set of enabling conditions necessary to carry out the independent and impartial, multi-sector assessments that form the basis for the delivery of humanitarian aid. These enabling conditions are grounded in the imperative to build a robust evidence-base from which partners can implement a needs-based response.

Guiding principles
The four humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence underpin all joint assessments. This guidance note is also informed by the Joint Operating Principles (JOPs), the HCT Data Sharing Protocol as well as the joint UN-Government Standard Operating Principles for IDP verification ("the IDP SOP").

Single multi-sector assessment form
One common rapid multi-sector needs assessments form (annexed to this guidance note) will be used by all agencies participating in either joint assessments in areas affected by escalating conflict, or as an initial assessment for areas that become more easily accessible following a peace agreement. The assessment form is aimed at ensuring that the humanitarian response is informed and adapts to the views, experiences and preferences of crisis-affected people and is drawn from indicators within the existing HCT-endorsed Household Emergency Assessment Tool (HEAT) and the JIAF indicators used for the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO). This condensed common form will ensure speed in assessing multi-sector needs, enable humanitarian actors to mount an initial response and identify areas in need of further sector-specific assessments. In many cases, questions have been collapsed to reduce the length of each interview, often using a single question as a proxy indicator for other assumed needs. All partners commit to use this form for rapid multi-sector needs assessments.

Triggers for assessment
As per the process outlined in the IDP SOP, an alert system will be used to trigger assessments. The alert can come from multiple sources including: contact centres at the community level, humanitarian and development organisations, community leaders, security organisations, the Government, affected people, including through the inter-agency call centre (AWAAZ), and other service centres. In the event of a peace agreement or sustained cease-fire, the agreement itself will be the trigger for the initiation of assessments.

Coordination structure and assessment participation
As per current practice, the existing multi-sectoral Operational Coordination Teams (OCTs) in the different provinces will continue to be the coordination and decision-making platforms for assessments. OCTs are chaired by OCHA where OCHA is present. In provinces where OCHA does not have presence, an alternative lead is in place to support coordination of assessments and response planning. Wherever possible, at least one cluster lead/co-lead agency should join each assessment.

In line with the principle of independence, joint assessments aim to limit the role of local leaders to facilitation of access.

Members of the assessment team should meet minimum requirements including, but not limited to:

- Familiarity and agreement with the Code of Conduct for International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (1992), UN General Assembly Resolutions (1991 and 2003), the Sphere Standards (1999), and the Core Humanitarian Standard (2015)
- Familiarity and agreement with the JOPs, HCT Data Sharing Protocol, IDP SOPs
- Familiarity with engaging with community leadership to negotiate principled access for the assessment team

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1 This form does not necessarily replace the HEAT or other sector assessment tools. Where time allows, these forms remain relevant. However, in cases where rapid results are required or time/access to conduct the assessment is limited, this form is the agreed minimum expectation for data collection from assessment teams.
• Independence from active enlistment in any armed group or militia
• Familiarity and agreement with all necessary safeguarding protocols, including PSEA
• Experience with humanitarian assessment methodology and training on common multi-sector assessment form

Minimum enabling conditions for assessments
• Humanitarians require direct engagement with affected communities to assess their needs and vulnerabilities at the household levels.
• Humanitarians require safe and unimpeded access to all affected areas to conduct assessments. This will require either directly or indirectly engaging with parties to the conflict to gain principled access to the assessment area.
• Humanitarians require both female and male enumerators to ensure the needs of different population groups (such as women and children, people with disabilities, the elderly) are fully represented in the results of assessments and response planning. There must not be restrictions on assessment teams speaking directly to women about their needs.
• Humanitarians require safety and security of affected people be maintained throughout. Among other things, this will require that all parties ensure that any media presence, and any photographs or interviews collected during the assessment, are consented to by affected people and assessment teams in advance.
• Humanitarians require staff safety and security during assessments, and that staff are left free from interference.
• Selection of humanitarian assessment teams must be free from interference by local leaders; requests and demands to select members of the assessment team by parties to the conflict will not be entertained.
• No one participating in an assessment is permitted to carry a weapon.

Facilitation of access
The humanitarian agency which is best placed and experienced in negotiating principled access in this location should lead on negotiations for joint assessments, making the most of local relationships. It is essential for the safety and security of the assessment team, that parties to the conflict are engaged for access prior to the assessment. In practice, this has been done on a location basis. It is critical that humanitarian partners engaging in access negotiations commit to negotiating a multi-sector assessment that may go beyond their individual agency’s mandate. This includes systematically negotiating for protection components to remain in multi-sector assessment forms.

Transparency and expectation management are critical during access negotiations as well as during assessments. The negotiation of access to carry out assessments can never be tied to promises of assistance to be delivered or other commitments outside of the humanitarian remit. Clear communications must be used with community leaders, parties to the conflict and affected people to reiterate that assessments will only result in assistance for those people with confirmed needs.

Information sharing and monitoring
To build confidence in the assessment process, sharing of assessment methodology and anonymised information on needs with local stakeholders is critical. Assessment teams will reiterate, however, that the data gathered by humanitarians is principally owned by the affected people from whom it was gathered and can only be shared with their consent. Affected people have the first and final say in how their data is handled, stored, shared, and destroyed. Once collected data has been processed, information will only be shared with those outside the assessment team in an anonymised manner, without personal and identifying information, to mitigate against any risks of exploitation or harm to people. The HCT Data Sharing Protocol provides the framework for the sharing of assessment data, including with community leaders.

A summary of joint needs assessment findings will be shared through OCTs at the provincial level. Information on needs by sector and assistance delivered will also continue be reflected in the common data tracking (via ReportHub, IDP dashboard and other tools) regularly produced by the humanitarian community.

Preparedness activities
The following preparedness activities must be taken on as a priority:

• **Training of enumerators** on how to administer the new common multi-sector rapid needs assessments form and to guide enumerators’ observations during assessments. Processes for debriefing of enumerators should also be in place at the agency level. Training capacity for humanitarian partners is being made available through the REACH Initiative.

• **Staff safety and security risk assessments** carried out before deployment of needs assessments teams. Risk indicators to be monitored should include non-compliance of community stakeholders and parties to the conflict with the JOPs and IHL; patterns of increasing interference in assistance; and protection issues such as exclusion of women and girls in existing assessments and responses.
• Maintaining a detailed contact list of organisations in all areas, especially those affected by heavy conflict. This will enable rapid identification of sub-national focal points and counterparts trained in coordinating sudden onset emergencies, including joint needs assessments. Such contact lists should be maintained by the OCTs.