Pocketguide
Initial Assessment

Romanian Caritas Confederation

caritas

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1) What is Assessment?

What is the purpose of an assessment?

To understand the situation created by a disaster and to have all information necessary to plan and implement a humanitarian aid program responding to the uncovered needs of the affected population.

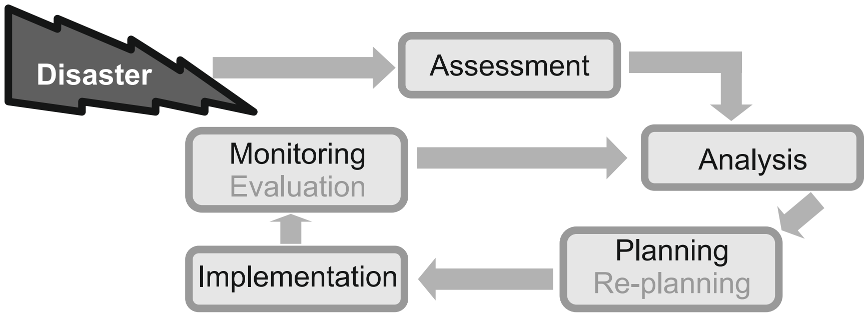
When a disaster strikes a community or a whole region, fast and efficient relief is needed. This relief has to answer to the real needs of the affected persons in order to allow them to survive the emergency situation in dignity, to recover and to return as fast as possible to what is called "normal life".
Support for disaster-affected persons has to be well planned. Planning is impossible without concrete information. We have to know what has happened, how people are affected, what their needs are and what they can do by themselves. A relief program, that is not based on knowledge of the real situation in the affected area, risks making things even worse than they are already.

Sphere – Core Standard 3:

The priority needs of the disaster-affected population are identified through a systematic assessment of the context, risks to life with dignity and the capacity of the affected people and relevant authorities to respond.

Taken from the Sphere Handbook
The Sphere Project is a voluntary initiative that brings a wide range of humanitarian agencies together around a common aim - to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance and the accountability of humanitarian actors to their constituents, donors and affected populations.
http://www.sphereproject.org/

Assessment is the first step in the project cycle:

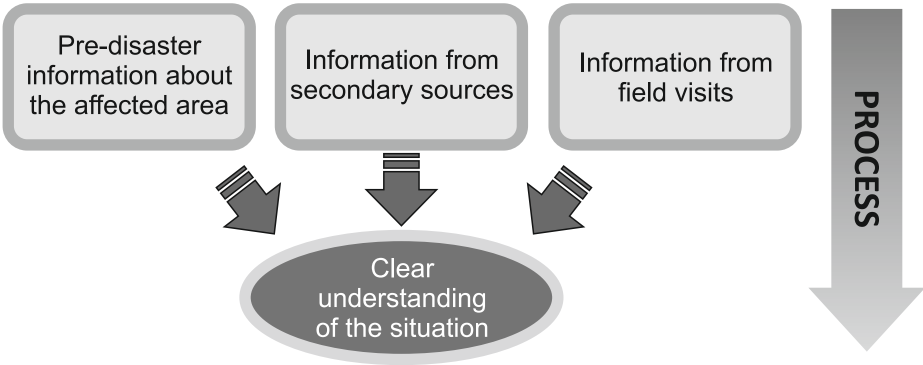


2) Information to be obtained during the assessment

About the disaster	• Description of the disaster (type, causes) • Affected area
Pre-disaster information	• Population (disaggregated by sex, age, etc.) • Geographic profile • Social situation • Economic profile • Political/administrative structures
Affected population and needs	• Situation of the population • Affected population (disaggregated by sex, age, etc.) • Needs: - WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) - food security, nutrition - shelter - non-food items - health and psychosocial support • Capacity of the population to cope with the situation and to recover (what can the affected people do by themselves?)
Response (Who is already supporting the affected population?)	• Local authorities • Civil protection, army • other NGOs • Coordination: Are there any coordination mechanisms in place (locally or on national level)? Who is involved?
Program implementation (Information needed to implement your programs)	• Access and infrastructure: How can we reach the area? Are there any storage facilities? • Local support: for example workforce for distributions, volunteers, representatives of local institutions accompanying a Caritas team • Security situation: Are there any security concerns when entering the affected area? This may include situations directly created by the disaster (flood water, destroyed roads, bridges, buildings), conflicts and tensions within the population, armed conflicts, etc.

3) Sources of Information

Assessment is not an one-off activity after an emergency, but an ongoing process bringing you - step by step - closer to a clear understanding of the situation.



During an assessment, three different types of sources of information have to be used:

a) Pre-disaster information about the affected area

Information about the political, social, economic and geographic context of the disaster affected area and communities as well as information about the people living in the area:

- Structure of the population (by age and sex, if relevant also by ethnic groups or religion)
- Education
- Health situation
- Cultural background, etc.

All this information helps you to understand, in which way the population is affected by a disaster, but also what the capacity is to cope and to recover. This will have a major impact on how you are going to respond to the emergency.

Sources of information:

- Online libraries, websites of institutes of statistics, government websites
- Census data
- Reports and articles and other publications

Have your sources of information ready before disaster strikes!

b) Information from secondary sources

When disaster strikes, secondary information will be available soon from different sources:

- Mass media: Newspapers, TV-stations, internet news sites are reporting about the disaster situations. Be aware that mass-media often exaggerates the situation.
- Reports from authorities (government, local administration, specialized institutions): press releases, situation reports posted on official websites, reports directly provided for Caritas.
- Information on websites of weather services, hydrological institutes, seismic institutes
- Reports and information from other NGOs.
- In case of larger disasters: http://reliefweb.int/

c) Direct information from the field

A field visit is essential for a successful assessment. Without seeing with your own eyes, collecting information direct at the place, where the disaster has happened, and verifying information from other sources, your assessment will not be complete.

During a field visit, information will be collected from:

- Direct observations
- Discussions with affected persons
- Discussions with local actors (authorities, civil protection, NGOs, etc.)

4) Preparing a field assessment

The field assessment is an essential part of every initial assessment. To be successful, the field assessment has to be well prepared.

a) Gather already available information

What do we already know? When planning a field assessment, we usually have at least some basic information available. The main sources of this information are:

- Mass media reports
- Information from parishes, Caritas centers, contact persons in the region
- Official information

This information is necessary to plan the field assessment: Which places should be visited by the team? Which specialists should be in the team? What can the team expect to meet on the field?

b) Preparing a plan and ToR for the field assessment

The following points should be defined clearly before any assessment team leaves for the area affected by the disaster:

- What are the objectives of the assessment?
- What is the output of the assessment? - Which information should be available after the assessment (Define clearly!)
- Which methods should be used during the assessment?
- Which resources are needed?
  - Team members
  - Equipments
  - Financial resources
  - Time
- Itinerary of the field visit (schedule and route)

All these questions can be answered using the template “Terms of Reference - Field Assessment Team.”

Necessary equipment for the team:

The necessary equipment depends very much on the local situation, the time the team is spending there and the purpose of the assessment. The following items may be useful during an assessment:

- Notebook
- Car (in certain situations 4WD may be necessary)
- Communication equipment (cell phones, radio sets, mobile internet connection)
- Laptop
- Photoequipment
- Flashlights
- Small electric generator and light equipment
- First aid kit
- Sleeping bags
- Proper clothes

c) Forming an assessment team

- The team will visit the affected areas in order to collect information according to the ToR.
- Team members should be from different areas of expertise with working experience in their area.
- All team members have to have the capacity to work for several days in difficult conditions - this refers also to their health and mental state.
- At least the team leader should be a person with experience in emergency programs and field work.
- All team members are informed about the purpose of the assessment and the ToR. Every team member receives a copy of the ToR.
- Roles in the team (who is the team leader, who is responsible for security, communication, etc.) are clarified.

> Important:
> Caritas-ID cards for all team members and a letter of mandate, signed by the director/president of the organization and explaining the purpose of the assessment, should be provided to the team.

5) Methods used during a field assessment

Direct observations

Your own direct observations are one of the most important sources of understanding about the local situation. Walk through the affected communities and areas - at least where it is possible. It can be useful to invite somebody from the local community to join you and to explain the situation (but be also aware, that you may be intentionally guided to certain areas and away from others).

During a walk through a disaster-affected community you have the possibility to observe the impact of the disaster (damage), but also the community´s structures and the way of life of the community members.

Mapping

Maps about the affected community or area can be drawn by the members of the assessment team or in a participatory process together with members of the community. Start with drawing the basic geographic features of the community or area: roads, rivers, bridges, important buildings and institutions and different types of landuse. Then add important information related to the disaster: affected areas, damages, places of shelters, possible distribution points and storage facilities, access roads, etc.

Information from local institutions and stakeholders

The following institutions and organizations may provide important information:

- Local authorities (mayor or other representatives)
- Religious leaders (parish priests, leaders of other religious communities)
- Civil protection personnel present on the field
- Local NGOs and other NGOs already responding to the disaster
- Local medical institutions
- Schools

Household surveys/"Family assessment"

In certain cases more detailed information about the situation of the households of a community is needed. Usually this information is gathered by applying standardized questionnaires by (trained) interviewers. In smaller communities it is possible to do interviews with all affected families or households. In this case the data collected can be used also for selection and registration of program beneficiaries.

In larger communities (or if a larger project area has to be covered) instead of doing standardized interviews, a survey may be applied. This means that the interviews are taken from a certain number of families covering different areas of the affected community, but also different social groups living in the community.

Photos taken during assessment

A photo-camera is an important equipment for every assessment team. Pictures taken during an assessment are serving at least two different purposes:

- Documentation of assessment findings: this includes pictures about the impact of the disaster, damages to houses, infrastructure and economic assets, activities of the population, situation in a temporary shelter, etc.

- Pictures for PR and fundraising: In order to collect the necessary funds for a relief program, your organization and donor organizations will need pictures about the disaster, its impact, the situation of the people and relief activities. The purpose of these pictures is to inform a larger public and to motivate people to donate.

If possible, one person in the assessment team should be responsible for taking pictures. This person should have a minimum knowledge about photography, adequate equipment and should be aware about the purpose of the pictures to be taken.

Always think of the personal dignity of those whom you are photographing!

6) Interviews

In emergency situations, interviews are one of the most useful methods to find information about the impact of the disaster and the needs of the affected communities.

Interviews can be realized with affected peoples and families, but also with other key persons from the community: representatives of local administration, civil protection, community priests, doctors or specialized personnel from the medical field, etc. These are a few examples, but you can talk with any other person who has an opinion and wishes to express it. Sometimes it is quite surprising how much information you can obtain from the people that you expect least from.

Before going to the field, the team leader must ensure that all team members are fully informed regarding the responsibilities of every team member and what to expect to learn after the interviews.

It is recommended:

- To form interview teams of two persons
- To have prepared a list of questions for victims and also for other community actors
- The list of questions should include all important aspects
- The list of questions should be the same for all staff who conduct the interviews
- Every interview team should have a notebook and a pen to note the gathered information even if sometimes it is not considered relevant.

Important topics for the questions list:

The aspects to be followed during the interview may include topics such as: description of the event, material damages, people affected, outbreaks of diseases, water quality, the number of deaths after the event, active organizations from the area, taken or planned interventions, etc.

> The list of questions should not be treated as an interview questionnaire. These questions should be seen as a support or guide for the person conducting the interview. During the interviews, the interviewers will use this list to verify and ensure that they cover all important topics. The list will remain open to new questions that may appear during the interview, depending on the responses and information received. The interview is not an interrogation!

Interview duration:

Commonly, experts recommend that an interview´s duration should not be shorter than 30 minutes and not longer than 60 minutes, but this depends very much on the environment in which the interview is made. For example, you can meet persons who are busy with saving or recovering remaining assets after the disaster and they don't have time to talk to you more than 10-15 minutes or not at all. In this case, you can talk to that person as long as he/she is available, and/or you can ask if he/she agrees for you to come back later for more information.

It is recommended that the duration of the interview will be mentioned at the beginning of the discussion. For the interviewers, this may be helpful if they have to deal with some "talkative" persons, while for the interviewed person it is a clear determination of some limits and available time.

Important rules to follow during the interview:

- Introduce yourself and the organization you are working for.
- Ask the person/family if he/she wants to speak with you.
- Ask the person/family if you may take notes.
- Listen carefully to the persons being interviewed without forcing them to speak.
- Accept all the answers, without personal reactions, judgments or prejudices, verbal or non-verbal.
- Avoid giving clues, verbal or non-verbal, which might affect the answers of the interviewed person.
- Conclude by thanking person interviewed for the time and information.

Attention

Before doing an individual interview, make sure that this discussion will not put the person in a difficult situation. Whenever possible, explain clearly why you want to speak with that person and on what topic.

When you go on the field to do the interviews, remember that you meet and talk with survivors of a disaster who have suffered a trauma and that they can be of all ages and from all social and economic classes. Even though most of the people have normal reactions to the impact of a disaster and they are trying to save their lives and assets, the damage caused by the disaster can be aggravated by human factors, such as the staff of response teams. Therefore, when you are on the field and you are talking with the victims of the disaster, be careful to what you MUST and MUST NOT say:

SAY	DON'T SAY
It's normal to feel these things.	I know how you feel.
It wasn't your fault, you did what you could.	It could have been worse.
These reactions are normal for a person who passed through this kind of traumatic experiences.	Life must be resume where it was left off.
It is possible that things will never be the same, but it will be better and you will feel better	You can always have another animal, another car, another house.

7) Issues to keep in mind during the field assessment

Take notes!

Write down all observations and information immediately in a notebook. During a day of assessment you will gather much and sometimes contradictory information. It will be difficult later (even in the evening) to recall all this information.

Distortion of information

Be aware that everybody presenting information to you has his own subjective point of view and often also specific interests: Local authorities sometimes distend the real situation in order to receive more support from government or from donors. There are also cases when authorities do not admit the real extent of a disaster, because they want to prove that they can handle the situation by themselves or because they are not so much interested in the affected areas (for example if minorities are living in the area, the mayor did not get sufficient votes in the area, etc.). Also all other sources of information may (deliberate or unconsciously) distort their information.

Representative assessment

Try to keep your assessment representative. Collect information from as many sources as possible and try to identify all groups and areas affected by the disaster. This includes the population of isolated settlements, minority groups and sometimes persons/families who had to leave their houses and are staying now in host families (and not in shelters provided by the authorities or other institutions).

Speaking for your organization

When doing a field assessment, you are always representing your organisation. Make always clear to everybody, who you are and what is the purpose of your activity - to get to a better understanding what has happened. During the assessment you are not in the position to promise anything to the people or authorities, unless you have the firm confirmation about a certain program from your headquarters.

Security!

Take care of your own security! If something happens to you, rescue forces will be occupied saving you instead of working for the people affected by the disaster.

8) Psycho-social support for the team

Disasters have severe psycho-social consequences for the response teams. The team members may be witnessing human tragedies and serious physical injury, depending on the nature of the disasters, facing various stressful situations that lead to burnout.

If disasters involve a high degree of exposure to human suffering, injuries and deaths, then providing psychological support to an response team is a very important aspect of the response.

Most people, who try to cope with the consequences of a disaster, think they do not need psycho-social services. This approach applies equally to the affected population and members of the response teams. But one should not underestimate the impact of disasters on our psycho-social wellbeing.

No witness of a disaster remains unaffected!

As far as the response team is concerned, besides the effects of the disasters there are other stress factors which should be taken into consideration:

- Big volume of work
- Degree of exposure
- Age/experience
- Lack of support
- Lack of basic comfort
- Frustration regarding the capacity to perform the tasks
- Frustration regarding the satisfaction of beneficiaries´ needs

It is recommended that all organizations and institutions, that respond to disasters, have a permanently available psycho-social rehabilitation program for the response teams in place.

Some suggestions to pass easily over the stress situations

- Talk about your experience with a colleague, superior or any other trusted person in the limits of confidentiality.
- Accept what you did well, what did not work well and the limits of what you could do in these circumstances.
- Focus on the resources and on actions that can be taken to satisfy the needs of survivors and not on the losses.
- You are not responsible for resolving all the victims´ problems.
- Make sure that you have enough time to eat and rest even if for a short period.

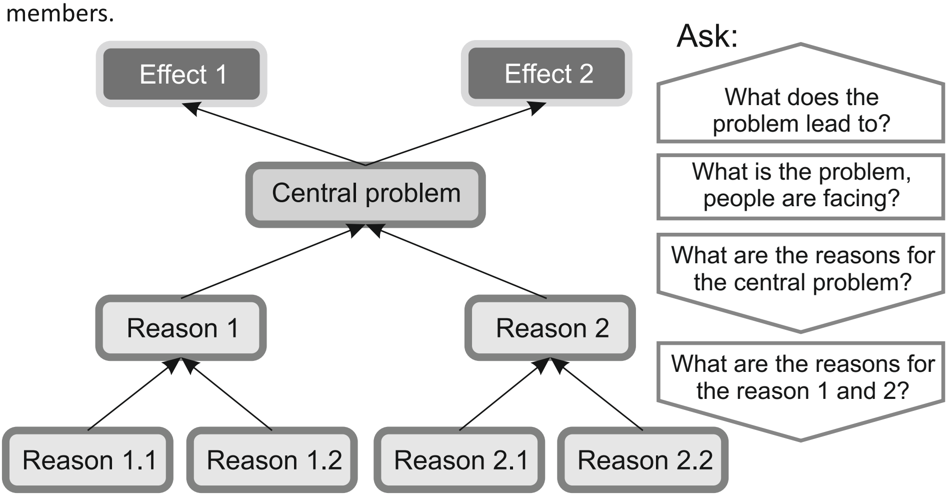
9) Analysing the information

After the field assessment team, but also the team working in office, have finished their work, information from all three categories will be available: pre-disaster information, information from the field and secondary information.

All information has to be cross-checked in order to identify possible contradictions. In particular statistical information (number of affected persons, damages, etc.) needs to be verified. Try to get an overview about the situation created by the disaster, the affected population and their needs, but also about the possibilities for Caritas to respond to the situation.

In a next step, identify the central problems, the population is facing and to which Caritas has the capacity to respond.

A problem tree is an useful tool for further analyzing the central problems using the information from the assessment. Problem trees are best elaborated in team work. It is also possible to do a problem tree in the field with the participation of community members.



Steps to do a problem tree:

1. Write the central problem in the middle of a flip-chart paper
2. Identify reasons and effects. Write every reason/effect on a separate post-it note
3. Attache all notes to the flip chart and use arrows to show clear relations of causes and effects.

In many cases, the problem tree offers already a strategy for a response program: The goal of the program is to solve the central problem. Reasons on the first level are transformed to purpose and outputs of the project are addressing the reasons at the bottom.

10) Assessment Report

The findings of the assessment, including an analysis of the situation and of the needs of the affected population and proposals for a Caritas response are presented in a written assessment report. This report serves as a foundation for a possible project proposal which will be submitted to donor organisations.

An efficient response to a disaster is based on a coordinated approach of all involved agencies. An important aspect of coordination is the sharing of information. Assessment reports should be made available for other important actors as fast as possible, whereas reports published by other agencies are important sources of information for our own assessment.

> **The Sphere-Handbook on sharing assessments:**
>
> Assessment reports provide invaluable information to other humanitarian agencies, create baseline data and increase the transparency of response decisions. Regardless of variations in individual agency design, assessment reports should be clear and concise, enable users to identify priorities for action and describe their methodology to demonstrate the reliability of data and enable a comparative analysis if required.

In case of major emergencies, reports of important organizations and also state authorities can be found at: http://reliefweb.int/

Literature

- The Sphere Project - Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, Edition 2011. (http://www.spherehandbook.org/)
- Emergency Assessment Manual - Catholic Relief Services, edited by Kari Egge, 2003 (available online at: http://oneresponse.info/resources/NeedsAssessment/publicdocuments/Needs%20Assessment%20Manual.pdf)
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