MALAYSIAN MEDICAL RELIEF SOCIETY

OPERATIONS MANUAL: VOLUME II – NEEDS ASSESSMENT	Document No:

Distribution:
All Holders

Summary of Changes:
First Issue

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Contents

Introduction to the Assessment Manual
Objectives

- To outline a standardized approach to conducting a reflective assessment in order to identify gaps and areas requiring MERCY Malaysia's intervention.
- To establish a Standard Operational Procedure (SOP) for pre, during and post assessment.
- To uphold prioritization of needs in MERCY Malaysia's response.

For whom

These guidelines are suited for any MERCY Malaysia staff or volunteers assigned to carry out any given assessment.

How to use the manual

These guidelines are divided into 6 chapters as listed below. The manual is paired with MERCY Malaysia's Assessment Checklist for quick reference during assessments. The checklist is attached as **Appendix 1**.

Chapter 1: Pre Assessment

Outlines the scope and requirements for an assessment as well roles and responsibilities for the assessment team.

Chapter 2: Guidelines for Conducting Assessments

Summary of the different types of assessments, in which context they can be applied and guidelines on how to conduct them.

Chapter 3: Sampling Methods and Data Collection

Details the sampling methods and data collection processes for assessments.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings Reporting

Outlines the data analyses processes on information collected from the assessments. It also discusses how to mitigate inconsistent information and reporting requirements.

Chapter 5: Tips for Effective Assessments

Includes the tips to effective assessments.

Chapter 6: Fieldwork principles

Outlines MERCY Malaysia's critical fieldwork principles that are required to be adhered to during assessments.

CHAPTER 1: Pre Assessment

Introduction to Assessments

An assessment can be defined as:

> An activity conducted with the aim of gathering information from various sources (e.g. community member, agencies, government institutions and/or private companies).

Assessments are used to:

- Holistically outlines a situation, identify needs and highlight gaps.
- Make informed decisions based on actual needs for further actions.

There are three types of assessments:

1. Rapid Assessment (Emergency)
2. Needs Assessment (Non – Emergency)
3. Continuous Assessment

The type of assessments to be carried out is subjected to the decision made by the Emergency Management Committee (EMC) or the MMHQ's management team. Further information will be detailed in Chapter 2: Guidelines for Conducting Assessments

Note that the different types of assessments can also be done concurrently or in close sequence depending on the urgency of the situation in the field and the resources at hand.

The types of assessment carried out would depend on whether it is a slow or rapid onset disaster.

> **Rapid onset** disasters are sudden in nature and usually occur without warning (e.g. earthquakes, typhoons, flash floods and tsunamis).
>
> **Slow onset** disasters occur gradually and over time (e.g. droughts, famine, conflicts and floods).

When Should an Assessment be Conducted?

Certain criteria or factors would have an effect on the deployment of an assessment team:

An assessment is required if any of the following reasons persists:

a) A crisis (natural or man-made) has occurred or an emergency is predicted to occur in the future (be it natural emergencies such as an earthquake, flood or complex emergencies such as a military offensive).
b) There is an indication that there are gaps and needs to be addressed but confirmation is required.
c) More information is needed about a situation both for emergencies or developmental intervention.

An assessment is NOT required should any of the following reasons persists:

a) Access to the affected area is impossible due to logistical or security reasons. (MERCY Malaysia will not enter a UNDSS Level 6 crisis area for security reasons).
b) Existing information (from other agency/partner organization reports) is adequate – i.e. when the assessment form can be completed using secondary data.

c) There is an abundance of assessments conducted in the area by other organizations area leading to a danger of "assessment fatigue" in the population.

> Within the humanitarian and development sector, "assessment fatigue" may obscure results presented in a report. "Assessment fatigue" is the process whereby subjects (mostly beneficiaries or people affected) are assessed by several agencies, repeatedly asked the same questions without any assistance provided afterwards. This can lead to frustration and aggression, whereby responses are obscured and results are misleading.

1. PLANNING FOR AN ASSESSMENT:

1.1 Desk Research:

The Desk Research is a document detailing the background data gathered through secondary information available at hand. This is the first step in deciding whether an intervention is required.

Such secondary information collected must be from sources that are reliable – such as UN agencies, INGOs, IFRC, ICRC and government agencies. Typical information gathered and analyzed based on the desk research is the:

a) Situation prior to emergency
b) Situation during crisis
c) Immediate needs
d) Gaps
e) Action of stakeholders (who/what/where/when)

Secondary information can also be in various forms, written (reports) or verbal (discussions). A lack of information available normally indicates to an area not yet assessed or accessed.

Some useful and reliable websites for desk research are:

- Virtual OSOCC - https://vosocc.unocha.org/
- Humanitarian Early Warning Service http://www.hewsweb.org/hp/
- Global Disaster Alert and Coordination System- http://www.gdacs.org/
- The Assessment Capacities Project-http://www.acaps.org/
- Specialized digital service of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). http://reliefweb.int/
- Central website for Information Management tools and services, enabling information exchange among operational responders during either a protracted or sudden onset emergency. https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/]
- International news agencies

As the information management system has evolved throughout the years, web application on smart phones can be utilized for secondary information. The Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS) has developed an application which can be downloaded and installed into the smart phone.

From the various sources consulted, the following three topics should be focused on:

a) The nature of the emergency (or possible emergency)
b) The urgency of the situation
c) The gaps in information about the situation

MERCY Malaysia has a "Desk Research" template which must be utilized and completed in full by the person in charge. The template is attached in **Appendix 2**.

Desk Research is the basis for decision making by the Emergency Management Committee (EMC) or MMHQ's management team in deploying an assessment team.

1.2 Baseline Data Collection

Baseline data is specific information with regards to a certain field or area before any intervention has been conducted. Examples include mortality rates or prevalence of a certain disease. The purpose of the baseline data is to measure any future outcomes or impacts of any proposed intervention.

Background data can also include general information on a given area or situation such as number of health centers/hospitals or political situation.

Both types of data are essential in assessments as the background data (Desk Research) provides an overview of the area whereas the baseline data provides information specific to an intervention.

Background data can sometimes be used as baseline data, but baseline data can not necessarily be used as background data.

2. HEADQUARTERS RESPONSIBILITIES

2.1 Interdepartmental Coordination

For a rapid assessment, interdepartmental coordination is conducted through the establishment of an Emergency Management Committee* (EMC) which is chaired by the Executive Director (or a representative in his/her absence). The EMC will decide on whether a deployment of an assessment team is necessary.

For non – emergency assessments, the decision is made by MMHQ's management team.

Once the decision to carry out an assessment has been made, there are subsequent tasks that must be completed before a team can be deployed. This is done at MERCY Malaysia's Headquarters in Kuala Lumpur or any of MERCY Malaysia's field office if a team is being deployed from there; this is of course upon the approval of the ED or in accordance to the DAL.

EMC will organize meetings to plan office-based tasks. The tasks will include:

a.	Selecting the assessment team.
b.	Making preparations for the deployment of the team.
c.	Identifying the areas to be assessed.
d.	Making other related decisions.

2.2 To Select the Assessment Team Members

A team leader will be appointed by EMC or MMHQ's management team and the team structure will be decided. The ideal team consists of a maximum of 4 people with roles such as follows:

1	Sector specialist	One or more persons chosen because of their specific experience and skills (a medical or engineering background).
2	Programme design and implementation	One or two staff with experience in MERCY Malaysia's processes and programme design and implementation.
3	Administration, Logistic, Finance & Communications	Two or more staff whom are able to manage all the administrative, logistics, financial and communication needs of the team and to receive any future teams.

Prerequisites for Assessment Team
Each member of the team must have completed MERCY Malaysia's trainings (Volunteer Induction Programme, Basic Mission Training, Emergency Response Unit). Additional trainings such as (1) Basic Humanitarian Training; (2) Needs Assessment Training are highly recommended to have been completed as well. At the same time, it is vital that team members are familiar with the Humanitarian Architecture and UN Coordination Mechanism.

The team members must also understand protection policies, cultural appropriateness as well safety and security procedures.

For rapid onset disasters, as much as possible, the assessment team should only focus on the assessment rather than responding to the needs of the affected people. If there is already verified information before deployment that there is an urgent need of an intervention – then a separate team should be deployed at the same time as the assessment team or a day after so that the assessment team may identify the exact location in which the response team can work.

Choose the appropriate team structure based on the circumstances surrounding each assessment. Then consider the following:
   a. If possible, include people who speak language(s) spoken in the area to be assessed. If this is not possible, try to find interpreters (through local contacts) whom the team can immediately use when deployed to the area.
   b. Include both men and women in the team so that gender-sensitive issues are covered (especially in cultural sensitive areas).
   c. Include people who have previous experience in the geographical location.
   d. Select people who are able to be deployed for no less than a week.

People's perceptions are based on cultural background, previous experience, professional training and many other factors. Try to ensure that the perspectives of individual team members are balanced and as neutral as possible as these perceptions may affect assessment findings. Please refer to the code of conduct for more information about the importance of neutrality.

2.3 Identifying the Areas to Assess:

a.   Key locations should be identified based on the Desk Research.
b.   Priority is given to areas where populations are directly affected. However, if they are inaccessible, then visit areas where the affected populations are displaced to. If it is impossible to access these areas, then talk to people who have come from areas affected to get background information.
c.   If, after having started fieldwork, it becomes clear that certain important areas have been overlooked, then these can be added as permitted to parameters of assessment (timeframe, budget and resources).

2.4 Team Preparation

It is the MMHQ's' responsibility to ensure that the team is prepared before deployment. This is usually the case as the team may be made up of members, especially volunteers who are unfamiliar with the situation on the ground. If a deployment is done from the field, the field office will make the necessary arrangements.

2.4.1 Terms of Reference (TOR)

Before the assessment team can be deployed, the team leader must prepare the team's Terms of Reference (TOR). The TOR details the contextual objectives of their assessment, what questions must be answered and what activities must be carried out during the assessment.

MERCY Malaysia has a TOR template that can be referred to and used. Please refer to Appendix 2 for the template.

i.   The situation (can be extracted from the Desk Research)
     a) Information/Situation Reports on the disaster
     b) Field situation reports by other UN/international agencies
     c) Media reports
     d) MERCY Malaysia's operations in the area

ii.   Country information
     a) Country profile including any baseline information

iii.   Maps
     a) Map covering the whole country
     b) Map covering the affected area (large scale)

iv.   Expected outcome(s) of the assessment (also include if the team is authorized to give out deliverables)

v.   List of contacts
     a) Relevant personnel in MERCY headquarters
     b) Local counterparts or contacts
     c) Malaysian embassy and embassies of non-Malaysian team members, if any
     d) Possible contacts such as UN agencies, INGOs, Ministries, hotels, travel agents, etc.

vi.   Other relevant information
     a) Expected weather
     b) Local communication network (roaming availability)
     c) Logistical information

2.4.2 Team Briefing

A briefing must be given to the team. If the interpreter or other members will only join the team on site, the team leader must ensure that the briefing given in headquarters is communicated to those persons before any activities begin. The briefing should cover:

- A general overview of the situation (based on Desk Research as well as additional secondary information on the affected area)
- TOR

- Plan of action, including methodology to be used and timeframe
- Working relationships: responsibility of each team member, reporting lines etc.
- Logistical arrangements for the assessment (transport, accommodation, communications etc)
- Safety and security issues: existing situation and procedures during the assessment.
- Other issues relevant to the particular assessment (e.g. Code of Conduct).

2.4.3 Documents (Official, to be given in hard copy; have softcopy on hand)

- Deployment letter (listing team members' name, nationality, passport, position and the teams' objectives)
- Any letter provided by the affected country's official representatives (e.g. an official invitation by the country's consulate in Malaysia)
- List of items carried by team
- Custom papers for team equipment
- Any other relevant letters (e.g. Clearance Documents for team equipment
- Insurance for equipment
- Press pack (e.g. MERCY pamphlets, etc)
- Team member contracts (if applicable)

2.4.4 Reference Material (to be given in softcopy)

- The Sphere Handbook
- MERCY Malaysia's Policies and Manuals
- Any other relevant handbook

2.4.5 Finance

- Cash in local currency, USD or Euro
- Guidance note for Treasurer
- Financial reporting template
- Cash vouchers

2.4.6 Equipment

- Office equipment (computer notebook, thumb drive, digital camera, printer, etc)
- Office stationery and collaterals (letterheads and envelopes, MERCY banners, stickers and corporate CD, etc)
- Telecommunication equipment (ensure beforehand that satellite phones and radios can be brought into affected country)

2.4.7 Forms/Templates

- A flash drive containing all MERCY reporting templates, survey/assessments forms etc

2.4.8 Team gear

- MERCY ID tag
- MERCY vest
- Any other MERCY clothing (e.g. winter jacket if needed)
- Other items depending on the situation (winterized sleeping bags, mosquito nets, etc)

2.4.9 Team's first aid/trauma kit

3 FIELD OPERATIONAL TASKS

3.1 Arrival and First Steps

Once the team arrives in the affected country, the team will proceed through the necessary immigration procedures and customs clearance. Depending on the country, some equipment such as satellite phones and hand held radios may have to be declared upon entry.

3.2 Establishing Team Base

In most cases, headquarters will have made accommodation arrangements for the team, either at a hotel or with an organization known to MERCY. In some circumstances, this may not be possible hence the team will need to find a suitable hotel, office or other location by any means available to them upon arrival within MERCY Malaysia policy and security guidelines.

3.3 First Report

Immediately upon identifying the team base, the team is required to communicate its location to the assigned personnel in headquarters together with any preliminary information on the situation, team's movement and planned activities. This is usually done by sms/text (or if mobile network is available; an email or WhatsApp) or by satellite phone.

> Movement Updates ("check-ins")
> Frequency of "check-ins" are dependent on the level of security of the particular area; 2 times daily for levels 3 and below, frequent (every movement or two hours intervals) "check-ins" for securities levels 4 or above.

3.4 Establish Priorities

The team should revise its immediate priorities in light of information available on the ground and the options open to the team. The priorities should include:

I.   Site visits
   - If the team has arrived in the capital or outside the affected area, a decision should be made on how the team can proceed without delay to the affected area to commence its assessment. This will require the team to quickly obtain the most appropriate vehicle and someone who is able to act as a reliable guide and interpreter if no one on the team can speak the local language.
   - Depending on the location of the 'site visit', a second base camp may need to be established if the area is not within reasonable distance from the preliminary base camp.
   - Depending on the situation, the team may be required to split up, leaving at least two members at base camp to attend coordination efforts and receive the next team. Please refer to the safety and security manual for more info on personal safety.

II. Identify Key Contacts

   Key contacts include:
   a) The responsible Malaysian embassy or consulates, if any and the embassies of other nationalities on the team;
   b) The national authority in charge of emergency response;
   c) The national authority in charge of international relief
   d) Relevant UN agencies;

e)   Local Red Crescent or Red Cross Society; and
f)   Relevant national and international agencies/NGOs
g)   Identify the coordination body for relief work and register to be part of the coordination
h)   International SOS

3.5 Fieldwork Activities

Every day in the field is different and must be planned accordingly. Thus it is important that the assessment team has daily briefings to update on daily activities and to plan for the next day's activities. The briefing sessions are also a good time where the team can discuss any limitations or hurdles faced in carrying on the assessment on that day.

A typical day in the field may be carried out as follows. However activities need not be carried out in this order as some can be carried out at the same time if the assessment team is large enough.

Step 1 - Daily planning
Each day in the field should be carefully planned. The assessment team should make the following preparations (usually the evening before):

- Decide which location(s) should be visited.
- Draw up checklists of the main information required.
- Agree upon the interview types and informants.
- Define responsibilities (who will carry out which interview and where).
- Preparation of resources required for assessments.

Step 2 – Engagement with the local authorities/communities*

Step 2(a)
The team should primarily engage with the local authorities to establish connections, gain access to the local coordination system and fulfill the local operational requirements with the National Disaster Management Authorities/Organizations (NDMA/O).

Step 2 (b)
The team should also engage with other stakeholders on site such as the UN agencies, International Organizations, Civil Society Organizations (CSO), community leaders, or head of the institutions.

The team should explain the following:

- Introduction to MERCY Malaysia and our mandate and commitments.
- Objectives of the visit.
- Proposed data collection procedures (e.g. Key Informant Interviews, Focus Group Discussions).
- Movement plans (According to context: *refer to Safety & Security Manual*).

It is useful to provide a pre-prepared sheet with the details and contacts of MERCY (such as pamphlets) as part of the transparency and accountability practices.

In certain areas/countries, legal requirements (e.g. MoUs, logistics and registrations procedures and working permits) to run operations are stricter. Therefore, this information must be obtained and adhered to by MERCY Malaysia.

Step 2(c)
The team would then meet with the communities to conduct the assessment at ground level.
Refer to the Sphere Assessment Checklist (**Appendix 3**) as well as *Chapter 2: Guidelines for Conducting Assessments and Chapter 3: Methods and Sampling for Collecting Information.*

Step 3 – Attend coordination meetings*

The team should identify and attend related coordination meetings. In cases where the UN cluster system is active, a team member must register and attend the meetings of General Coordination and the relevant clusters (priority given to Health and WASH). If the local government is heading the coordination, identify the structure of the coordination and attend the meetings that are related to general coordination, health and WASH sector.

Step 4 - Initial information on security and logistics

Collect general information on local security as well as logistics related information such as customs and immigration requirements, type of transportation, telecommunication and infrastructures available to ensure response planning are properly carried out.

Please refer to the *Safety & Security Manual* for more details.

Step 5 - Team meetings*

During the assessment, the team should meet regularly (at midday and at the end of the day). This provides an opportunity to share ideas, record and consolidate information and agree on amendments in the schedule.

Step 6 – Final community meeting/Consultation*

By the end of the assessment, a meeting with the community representatives/authorities should be organized, explaining what the team has done and any conclusions that the team has drawn. Do not make any commitments or promises regarding assistance.

*Initially, information captured from meetings and engagements should be first transferred to MM's Minutes of Meeting Template (**Appendix 10**) before reproducing it onto its relevant forms (e.g. SitRep, Assessment Report). This is important as the information collected is needed to formulate a good proposal towards the end of the deployment.

CHAPTER 2 : *Guidelines for Conducting Assessments*

1.   TYPES OF ASSESSMENTS

1.1   Rapid Assessments

Rapid assessments are carried out during rapid onset disasters or emergency phases where a lot of information is needed within a short period of time. The information collected in the rapid assessment is the basis for determining the impact of a disaster. It highlights what kind of urgent intervention is required and estimated amount of assistance needed for immediate response. It allows the action plan to be prioritized based on the identified needs. Rapid assessment will usually cover large areas involving different groups in the community.

> The Rapid Assessment Team (RAT) is usually deployed within 48 hours of the onset of disaster. Other documents to be submitted are the (1) Field Assessment Report (**Appendix 4**) and (2) Emergency Proposal (**Appendix 5**) due in 72 hours from the time of arrival. Situation Report (Attachment 6) should be submitted within the initial 24 hours of team's arrival. In order to keep HQ constantly updated on the situation on the ground, SITREPs are submitted daily.

In general the information reflected in the rapid assessment includes:

   a.   What has happened as a result of the disaster?

b. What is needed to save lives and alleviate suffering?

In length, a rapid assessment identifies the following:

a. Access and security to area affected by the disaster;
b. Potential constraints or roadblocks to relief efforts;
c. The impacts of a disaster on the society (such as mortality rate, morbidity rates);
d. Damages to infrastructure and critical facilities especially those that are medical related, damage to health centers and equipment and the resources they have functioning in such places as a hospital, evacuation centers that are still available or can be used;
e. Demographics of the population affected
   Types of injuries and illnesses;
f. Demographics of the people with special needs (PWSN) such as women, children, elderly and the disabled;
g. The most urgent relief needs of the population and potential methods of providing these in the most effective and equitable manner;
h. The level of response of the affected country or populations and its internal capacities to cope with the situation, especially direct assistance to the affected population;
i. The priorities of the affected populations and their preferred strategies for meeting those priorities;
j. The level of response from the international community

Method of data collection in Rapid assessments
a. Surveys
b. Focus/Community Group Discussions (F/C GD)
c. Household and Individual interviews
d. Observations

1.2   Needs Assessment

A "Needs Assessment" is the systematic approach to identifying the needs and gaps within a situation. The Needs Assessment assesses a situation in detail. It is conducted during the post-emergency and recovery phase to plan for interventions in the medium or long-term. The Needs Assessment also looks into the resources and requirements in order to establish or initiate services in the affected areas.

During rapid onset disasters, a needs assessment team will be deployed after the situation stabilizes or after the initial 1-2 weeks of disaster.

The needs assessment usually combines two of the three following aspects:

1.   Technical assessment

     This is usually done by a specialist (either staff or volunteer) of the area or topic being assessed. For an example, if the suitability of an operating room is being assessed for a surgery, then a doctor must conduct the assessment. Similarly, if there is a clearly observed gap of shelter during the rapid assessment, then an engineer/architect should be deployed to conduct the shelter needs assessment. Specialists have the technical knowledge to identify needs, gaps and possible responses. They are also vital in providing information for the planning and design of a project, such as estimated cost of building materials for a temporary shelter.

     MERCY Malaysia adopts the "Assessment Checklist" listed in *Sphere Handbook* as the data collection framework. The checklists are divided according to sectors in **Appendix 3**. The checklists can be a reference point in conducting data collection as further explained in this chapter.

     For infrastructure damage assessment, MERCY Malaysia has a form that can be utilized. The form, Damage Needs Assessment (DINAS) form is attached in **Appendix 8**. For hospitals or other health facilities, the form in **Appendix 9** can be used.

2.   Situation assessment

     This aspect provides an overview of all the known causes and effects of an identified problem. It allows an in-depth understanding of the root cause of the problem to facilitate the formulation of a solution.

3.   Vulnerability and Capacity assessment (VCA)

     VCA is a basic process used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of households, communities, different population groups and across multiple stakeholders (e.g. Local government units, public hospitals, schools and private sectors). It assesses areas that are at higher risks for disasters. Refer to MERCY Malaysia's Building Resilient Communities Toolkit for MERCY Malaysia's VCA framework.

1.3   Continuous Assessment

Continuous assessment is a practice done throughout the implementation of the programmes whereby contextual information is continually collected by implementers on the ground. The information can be used to adapt or justify any project changes based on any evolving needs. The information can then be captured and communicated to HQ via Programme and Progress Report. Refer to Chapter 3 on methods of collecting data.

CHAPTER 3: Data Collection and Sampling Methods

1. DATA COLLECTION METHODS:

Information is usually collected through a mixture of observation, structured, and semi-structured interviews.

It is necessary to distinguish between the terms "data" or "information". Data is the collection of words, numbers and other characters with a structure. Information on the other hand is "useful or applicable data". Data only becomes useful when it is meaningful, relevant and understandable.

1.1 Observation

Observations can be an effective means of gathering an enormous amount of information very quickly. Essentially, an observation is the act of noticing or perceiving the surroundings that gives a "feel" for the situation – sounds, smells and visual impressions – the very purpose of going to the field.

a) It may be a good idea to begin the assessment with a walk around the location. While doing so, take the opportunity to observe as much as you can. If you are assessing availability of water, ask to see the water source. If people describe a food item that you do not know, ask to see it. Everything must be noted down.

b) Observation is useful for cross-checking. For example, you are told that there are no health facilities in the area but soon afterwards you see a mobile clinic. This does not necessarily contradict the earlier information – as many explanations are possible – but it does provide a basis for the next line of questions: "Are there organizations providing health services?", "How often is the village visited by the mobile clinic?" and so on.

c) Walking through the area with local people facilitates discussion. The atmosphere can be informal and questions are prompted by what you see. This is more natural than referring to a prepared checklist. Most of all, walking and observing are useful ways to come upon unexpected information (issues that were never predicted).

d) Observation is also the most straightforward approach to assessing infrastructure and logistics. Driving through a road is a definite way of knowing if it is passable (but in conflict areas, beware of landmines).

e) Most of all: be curious but respectful of the local context

1.2 Interviews

Interviews are the backbone of field assessments. Refer to **Appendix 3** for sectoral checklists that provide basis for the interviews. This section covers the following aspects of interviews:

- Structure of Interviews
- Types of Interviews
- Interview Contents
- Interview Participant Selection
- How to Conduct An Interview

Throughout this section, certain tips on conducting interviews would be shared for the benefit of the user.

Structure of Interviews

There is two types of interviews that are generally used during assessments:

1) Structured:
   - Pre-established questions that are answered in sequence.
   - Strict guidelines on interviewer's behavior.
2) Semi-structured:
   - A list of questions that can be asked and answered in any order. The specific wording of questions may be altered.
   - Further questions can arise from the process itself.

Types of Interview

1) **Individual Interview**

This type of interview is conducted for the following reasons:

I. To look for technical information that can only be provided by professional people for assessing sectors. Also called sector interview.
II. To search for sensitive information on protection issues

In the process of assessing a specific sector, and gather technical information, key informants will be interviewed in relevant sectors (e.g., the staff of health clinics).

The process is as follows:

i. Find key informants in health, nutrition, water and sanitation sectors – health being the priority as it is the focus of MERCY's relief efforts. In rapid assessments, focus only on health. Only carry out assessments on nutrition and water and sanitation if it has direct relevance to health issues that MERCY may need to respond to.
ii. Ask key informants questions that are relevant to their sector. Do not worry if they cannot answer all the questions for all the sectors. Encourage key informants to give additional information that they consider to be important.
iii. Sector specialists can use the information to judge the severity of the situation and whether a detailed sector assessment is required (in extreme circumstances, it may be necessary to start a program on the basis of the sector information, but this should always be accompanied by a full sector assessment).
iv. Sector specialists can use the information to judge the severity of the situation and whether a detailed sector assessment is required (in extreme circumstances, it may be necessary to start a program on the basis of the sector information, but this should always be accompanied by a full sector assessment).

2) **Household interview**

This type of interview is conducted for the following reasons:

i. To communicate with members of the vulnerable groups
ii. To witness the living conditions of the beneficiaries
iii. To understand the community health and nutrition situation

Household visits are extremely important during rapid assessments. It is essential to visit people living in makeshift accommodation (e.g., camps) or in houses damaged by recent events (e.g., floods, earthquake).

Household interview should reflect on the family situation or more general situation.

Interview Tips

Wherever possible, interviewers should be women who speak the local language unless deemed culturally unacceptable. Team members should be dressed appropriately if the area is culturally sensitive. Be focused, but keep the conversation informal and look out for the unexpected.

- Seek local advice about appropriate topics of conversation. Do not insist on talking about issues that are sensitive or inappropriate.

- Visits of this kind can be intrusive. You are in someone's home. Accept offers of hospitality (e.g., tea). Be sensitive about the way you ask questions. Respect and politeness are essential. Keep the conversation as informal as possible. Do not rush.

- Observe. Look around. See what food is being prepared. Note the household items, their condition and what seems to be missing (based on the norms for that society).

- Ask general questions about lives and livelihoods and the changes that are taking place. Ask specific questions about the things you see around you: "What is that vegetable?", "When do you eat it?" and so on.

- Try. Taste food if it is offered to you. This helps build trust and is a good entry point for a discussion about food. If however the team members consist of Muslims and the food is not halal or are vegetarians and the food is meat (or other reasons) – get the translator to explain politely why the food is not being consumed so that it does not cause offence.

- If you are talking to a woman, ask if it is possible to meet some of her friends, relatives or neighbors. If so, convene a small discussion group (three to five people) in the home.

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3) **Focus group**

Group interviews allow interaction between people. By encouraging an atmosphere of constructive debate, you can cross-check information and probe issues. For example, one person may say that the most serious problems relate to the quality of health services, but others may not agree. A debate, even if it is inconclusive, will give the team an impression of the diversity of problems that affect the community.

When carrying out group interviews, be aware that some people are naturally more outgoing than others, some people are confident within a group because of their status in local society. Conversely, people from marginalized groups may be reluctant to speak openly, particularly if their views are controversial. Try to encourage a relaxed, informal atmosphere; seek the opinions of those who are reluctant to speak. Manage the more outspoken people so they do not dominate the discussion.

It is important to promote interaction by showing respect to all participants' thoughts and ideas.

Questions are usually semi-structured around a specific topic. The main topic should be introduced to the participants at the beginning. Make it clear to the participants that there is no right or wrong answer.

When conducting this kind of interview, never ask leading or dichotomous questions. Questions must be open ended. Encourage participation of all by giving examples or sharing personal reflections.

Note: The information been collected during FGD is usually applied to that particular group and cannot be applied to other groups. It also cannot give information on individuals.

Examples of when to use group interviews

In your preliminary collection of secondary information, you discover that the rate of maternal death during birth in the location is very high. You would like to verify this information and find out whether the IDP camp is in need of an emergency obstetric care unit, or other reproductive healthcare services. You could thus conduct a group interview with the women of the IDP camp to find out whether they face problems during their pregnancy and childbirth.

One or more focus groups can be held, depending on your availability and time. Base the interview(s) on the VCA framework.

Interview Contents

In addition to assessment sectoral checklist in **Appendix 3**, the assessment team should also consider the following for more general ideas of the situation.

The team should try to determine different issues according to objectives of the interview:

- What are the main problems affecting the community?
- What are the related issues to the problems discussed?
- How do people cope with these problems?
- Do people receive any assistance?
- Was the assistance provided able to address and solve the problems?
- What is a better mitigation solution?
- How can the community support and participate to solve the problem?

In addition, consider the following:

- Events that have caused the emergency. These may be quick impact (e.g., an earthquake) or a series of events taking place over a long period of time (e.g., political changes).
- Predictions for the future. What do people expect?
- Social structure. What is the impact of the recent (or ongoing) emergency on the communities affected (organization of the community, marginalization, interaction between social groups, etc.)?
- Population movement. Have some people left the area or have new people arrived? Is this a seasonal effect (e.g., they have moved to find pasture for herds), a long-term arrangement (migration for work) or a traumatic displacement (forced movement of people into or out of the area)?

- Service provision. How extensive and effective is the coverage of services: health (human and animal), water and education? What has been the impact of recent events?
- Other. Any other issues that is significant in this emergency.

Interview Participant Selection

The participants of the group should be selected with care. Ideally, the group should have five to ten people from different backgrounds. Try to get an even balance between men and women, and old and young people, unless it is culturally inappropriate or if the issues are gender-specific. Then, depending on time you may conduct several focus groups with different participants.

There are three ways to select participants:

i) **Nomination by community leaders.**
   This may be effective in small communities or where there is little incentive to manipulate information. In general, however, this approach should be avoided as it is biased towards those who hold power.

ii) **Ad hoc.**
   A discussion starts and people join in of their own accord. This can be effective if time is short and in small communities. Be careful however as numbers of participants can become unmanageable.

iii) **Nomination by key informants.**
   This approach is the most preferred if time allows. Local community organizations and other people who know the community well (perhaps teachers or religious leaders) would assist the team to identify the participants. If possible, include people from marginalized groups.

How to conduct an interview

Most interviews (household, group and individual) better be based on the vulnerability and capacity of the community. The team needs to understand the problems that people face and the ways in which they cope with them. Some problems are obvious – houses destroyed by floods, for example; others, such as the abuse of civilians during war, are less obvious. Even seemingly straightforward issues may be complicated when you examine them closely. When conducting a semi-structured interview you should try to make the interviewee(s) feel relaxed. Address the questions on your checklist but look out for new information. Ask questions in different ways in order to cross-check the information you receive. Interviewees will not reveal sensitive (but often pertinent) information unless they trust you. Building rapport is key.

Start with a general conversation about life in the area, things you see around you, what you have read about the local community etc. Do not lead straight into direct questions about problems because:

ii. This sets the wrong tone. You want to hear about positive as well as negative aspects of life in this community.

iii. Concentrating on problems gives the impression that your objective is to find out what "MERCY can give". This encourages people to present "shopping lists" of material requirements.

People will, inevitably, bring up problems without prompting. When this happens, encourage them to explain their concerns and the ways they cope with problems in their own way. It is normal for people to find it difficult or to be reluctant to explain all components of their coping strategies because:

Some components are so integrated into their lifestyles that they do not see them as specific "strategies". For example, sharing resources between households.

Individual components of the coping strategies may contribute very little and people do not think it important to discuss them.

- Activities may be illegal, for example, selling medical drugs without a license, and people are reluctant to divulge details to strangers.
- People may purposefully withhold information in order to make their situation seem worse than it actually is in the hope that this will encourage MERCY to help them.

This emphasizes the need for a subtle approach. Direct questions can be inappropriate. Instead it is better to probe the issues carefully by asking questions in different ways and looking for complementarities and contradictions in the information you receive. Be sensitive; if people are uncomfortable with your questions, do not insist.

2. SAMPLING METHODS

2.1 Random sampling

Use random sampling if there are no significant differences between the households in the location.

Step 1 – Decide how many households to interview.
This will depend on the time available and the size of the community. Carry out a minimum of three household interviews in each location, but do more if you have time.
Allow one hour for each interview, with 30 minutes between each of them.

Step 2 – Identify the households to be interviewed.
Stand in the centre of the location. Spin a bottle on the ground or throw a pen in the air and see where it lands.

Walk in the direction indicated by the end of the bottle or pen until you reach the edge of the location, counting the number of houses that you pass. Divide this number by the number of households that you wish to interview; this gives the interval between houses.

An example is as follows:

i. You want to interview three households.
ii. You walk in the direction indicated and count 15 houses on your walk.
iii. The interval between sample houses is therefore 15/3 = 5 (15 houses counted, 3 sample houses required).
iv. Choose a number at random between one and five; this is the first house that you will visit.
After this house, walk in the same direction and count another five houses; this is the second household to be interviewed. Finally carry out the same procedure to choose the last household.
Alternative approaches to random sampling:
i. If houses are arranged in streets, pick a street at random and then count off houses as explained in Step 2 above.
ii. If accurate population data are available, households can be picked at random from a list.

2.2 Purposive sampling

Use purposive sampling if households differ significantly. For example, you may want to interview some households because they are socially marginalized or because they have distinct livelihoods.

There are two ways to take the sample:

i. Groups are concentrated in particular sections of the village or town.

Carry out random sampling, as described above, for each section.

ii. Households are scattered across the village or town.

If you can identify the households in which you are interested from a village or town census, pick the appropriate number at random from this census. If census data are not available, ask local people to help you identify the required number of households from each group.

CHAPTER 4: Data Analysis and Findings Reporting

1. ANALYSIS

Analysis is the process whereby information from all the different sources is synthesized to enable the assessment team to identify the needs and gaps and provide their recommendation. Below are some questions that should be answered during the analysis.

     i. What are the "problems"?
    ii. What is the main problem?
   iii. Who is affected by these problems?
   iv. What is the capacity of the affected population? How well can they cope with the problems?
    v. Any other assistance currently available to the affected population?
   vi. Is there a need for MERCY to intervene? If so, what type of intervention is required?

NOTE
Keep in mind that information should be analyzed continuously, throughout the assessment. The analysis should not be left at the end of the assessment

The one exception to the key point above concerns analysis of sector information. If the team does not include a sector specialist, this information should be analyzed after the assessment by the relevant specialist.

Non-specialists should, therefore not attempt to analyze sector information during fieldwork, unless there is a very obvious inconsistency in the information.

1.1 Triangulate information

This process is to cross check data collected from the various sources and methods to validate the information. Refer to the chart below for the conceptualization of the process.

Triangulation Analysis
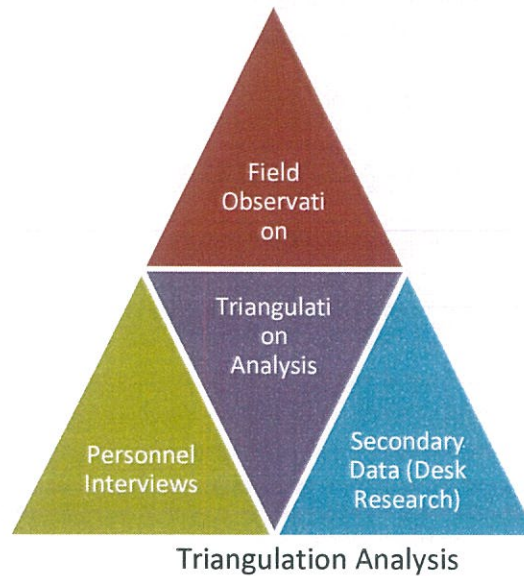
1.2 Identify gaps

Gaps could be identified by analyzing the obtained data with established standards. Such standard in the humanitarian sector is the Sphere Standard. The Sphere standards outline the minimum value for indicators of each sector in humanitarian response. The variance of the data collected against the Sphere standards helps to identify the gaps. Refer to **Appendix 10** for Sphere Handbook quantitative minimum standard.

1.3 Inconsistent information

During an assessment, a team is often faced with the problem of inconsistent information. This occurs when informants provide different answers to the same question. For example:

I. One source tells you that there have been 2000 families displaced as a result of a disaster, while another sources announces 3000 families have been displaced.
II. One person tells you that there is not enough medical supplies for the hospital as there are too many patients. Another person tells you that there are not enough medical supplies because they have been stolen.

This section provides some steps to follow in order to minimize and resolve inconsistencies.

A) The first step is to think about the information *as it is collected*. This helps team members identify inconsistencies. Team members should ask themselves the following questions:

i. Does the new information support or contradict secondary information?
ii. Does information gathered from one informant support or contradict information from another?
iii. Is the information collected by different members of the assessment team consistent?
iv. Does the information "make sense"? For example, if someone tells you that women only deliver at home, yet you see pregnant women at health centers, there may be an inconsistency.

B) The second step is to discuss findings regularly with other members of the team:

    i.   During fieldwork

        Meet at least once a day in the field (normally at midday). Compare information, discuss inconsistencies and agree on modifications to the schedule of interviews.

    ii.   At the end of each day

        After each day in the field, discuss the information that has been gathered and the conclusions you have drawn.

    iii.   After the fieldwork

        At the end of the fieldwork, the team meets to agree upon final conclusions.

C) The third step is to consider the reasons for the inconsistencies. There are three common possibilities:

    i.   Perception

        There is not always a "correct" answer. People's interpretation of events depends upon their own circumstances.

    ii.   Access to information

        Some people are better informed about a particular subject than others.

    iii.   Misrepresentation

        Sometimes people purposefully provide misleading information.

Decide whether the inconsistency will affect the assessment conclusions and the proposals for future programs. If the discrepancy is not critical to future programs, try to resolve it but do not spend too much time on this. If you cannot resolve it, you should include a note explaining this in the final report.

If the inconsistency *does* significantly affect final conclusions, try to resolve it by:

- Deciding which of the three reasons (or combination of reasons) is relevant.
- Considering why the information differs.
- Estimating the confidence you have in each of the sources. Perhaps one source has more credibility than another.
- Checking the information. Either talk again to the original informants or identify new informants who might be able to clarify the issue.

If these steps do not resolve the discrepancy, you will have to make a judgment. In this case the team leader decides upon the conclusion, based on discussions with the team and consideration of all the available information. It is essential that:

- Conclusions based on judgments are clearly identified in the assessment report, together with details of the assumptions made in reaching these conclusions.
- Recommendations for follow-up are made.

2. NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORTS

Team members will collect information from many different sources and all the information should be made meaningful through analysis. Both the findings and the analysis should be included in the Needs Assessment Report. The template for the needs assessment report is included in **Appendix 11**.

All type of assessment requires the team to prepare a final needs assessment report at the end of the assessment. The report is due within 2 weeks from the end of assessment period. The report will be the basis in preparation of proposals after the assessment.

3. PROPOSAL DEVELOPMENT

Areas and types of intervention can be identified from an assessment. The next step is the development of a proposal. For more information on proposal please refer to PCM volume.

CHAPTER 5 : Key Points to a Successful Assessment

Several factors can contribute to the design of a successful and accurate assessment:

1. Identify information that is useful for the users

The users of MERCY assessments would be EXCO/headquarters decision makers who have to decide on whether or not to respond to a disaster and how best to do so. Poorly conducted assessments very often collect information that is incomplete or of little value for planning relief programs or specific interventions. In many cases, information is anecdotal rather than substantive; in others, valuable time is wasted collecting detailed information when representative data would be just as useful. The team therefore needs to determine what information is vital in the particular circumstances, what method is best to obtain this information and how much detail is necessary for the information to be useful. There is a basic level of detail that is required for any assessment in order to make a justifiable decision.

2. Consider the Format

It is important to collect, organize, and present the data in a format useful to program planners. Use MERCY's reporting format in these guidelines (and adapt it if necessary) so that the results of the assessment can be presented in a way that makes implications very clear so that priorities can be set quickly. Try as much as possible to apply baselines and standards to the presentation so key relationships can be quickly noted (use Sphere standards as attached in **Appendix 10** as a guideline).

3. Distinction between emergency and chronic needs

Almost all developing countries have longstanding chronic needs in most, if not all, sectors. It is important to design an assessment that will distinguish between chronic and emergency needs. Try to acquire baseline data, reference data, and/or recognized and accepted standards in each sector. For example, if TB is prevalent in a certain area of a country, a health survey of incoming DPs will almost certainly reflect poor health status. The surveyors must differentiate between what is normal for the location and what is occurring as a result of the disaster, so that health care or other appropriate assistance can be provided to those most in need. Baseline data can help compare vulnerability before and after the disaster and to differentiate between chronic and emergency needs.

4. Assess needs and vulnerability in relation to capacity

Needs are immediate requirements for survival. Vulnerabilities are potential areas for harm and include factors that increase the risks to the affected population. Vulnerabilities create unequal levels of risk between groups. Needs are assessed after an emergency has occurred, whereas vulnerabilities can be assessed both before and during the emergency. Needs are expressed in terms of requirements (food, water, shelter, etc.); vulnerabilities are expressed in terms of their origins (physical/material, social/organizational, or motivational/attitudinal).

Needs and vulnerabilities can be mitigated by capacities. Capacities are means and resources that can be mobilized by the affected population to meet their own needs and reduce vulnerability. Assessing vulnerabilities and capacities as well as needs provides a way of:

o   Preventing a widening of the emergency in which today's vulnerabilities become tomorrow's needs.

o   Targeting assistance to the most vulnerable groups.

o   Affecting a sustainable recovery, based on local resources and institutions.

Very often externally provided assistance can actually slow recovery and impede a return to development if it is not given in a way that supports the efforts of the local populations to secure their own means of long-term survival.

5. Use recognized terminologies, standards and procedures

Assessments will invariably be carried out by a variety of people with different backgrounds and skills be it MERCY staff, EXCO or volunteers. To provide a basis for evaluating the information, generally accepted terminology and classifications in the humanitarian field should be used in classifying and reporting.

6. Consider country-specific sensitivities

The assessment team must be sensitive to the situation in the affected country. The team needs to structure its assessment questions so that expectations are not created. It should be clear to the authorities and to the community what the role of MERCY is. The assessment team must also be aware of the pressures it will feel from the affected population to "identify needs." A recommendation of "no additional assistance is required," may be a valid response, if an on-site visit reveals that the disaster is not so severe as indicated in third-hand reports and media coverage, or if the assessment team finds that the local authorities and the community has the capacity to handle the disaster.

CHAPTER 6: Fieldwork Principles

It is important to follow the below principles while carrying out an assessment in the field:

These guidelines or principles are adapted and followed from the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS). The CHS sets out nine commitments for individuals or organisations dealing with humanitarian response to provide quality and effective assistance. More information on the CHS and its nine commitments can be found at their official website: www.corehumanitarianstandard.org

1.   Consultation with affected people is always essential.

People – be they men, women or children of all ages, directly affected by the disaster should be encouraged to explain the situation and their needs in their own words. Even in rapid-onset emergencies, it is always possible to include local opinion.

2.   Consider the particular needs of different groups and individuals.

This includes men, women, children, elderly, HIV/Aids, etc

3.   Ensure that consultations include briefings about the complaints response mechanism.

The assessment should capture the best method for the beneficiaries to provide feedback or to make complaints. This is important as different beneficiaries have different methods of providing feedback and the needs assessment report must indicate what the most comfortable method is for the particular group of beneficiaries we are assisting.

A table as the one below should be utilized to capture the most appropriate ways to complain among the different groups of beneficiaries. This table will then be added on to the needs assessment report.

Beneficiary Group	Methods to complain	Additional notes
Men		
Women		
Children		
Elderly		
Sick/Handicapped		

Consultations should include briefings about the complaints response mechanism – beneficiaries should understand the rationale behind the complaints mechanism. Beneficiaries should be told that the mechanism is to help MERCY Malaysia improve it accountability to beneficiaries and improve on its current services.

The beneficiaries also need to understand that:

     (i)   It is safe for them to make a complaint and that neither they nor the project will suffer any repercussions if they choose to complain.

     (ii)   Their complaints will be kept confidential.

Should the organization decide to embark upon the project, then the results of the consultations on the most appropriate way to handle the complaints response mechanism (CRM) should be included in the project proposal. For more information on CRM, refer to Complaint Response Mechanism Policy.

4.   Use standard procedures and checklists.

Information should be gathered using MERCY's standard format for clarity and to allow for transparent decision making. It is also useful to use checklists to ensure that key areas have been examined.

5.   Consider the reliability of information.

Information may be "fact" (definitely true), "opinion" (depends on the perspective of the person giving the information) or rumor ("based on unverified information").

6.   Consider bias.

Everybody is biased may it be religious or political or others. Take into account the perspectives of informants and those carrying out the assessment.

7.   Look for marginalized groups and ensure that their interests are considered.

Who is in the more powerful position and whose voice is not being heard? Marginalization may be based on gender, social status and/or other characteristics.

8.   Look for changes and trends that affect society.

Try to understand what is causing the changes.

9.   Look out for the unexpected.

Be prepared to have assumptions challenged. Be alert and try to find out what issues are most important to the people with who are being spoken to.

10.   Consider the impact of issues on society as a whole.

For example a drought is not only a malnutrition issue. In may also have devastating social and economic impact.

Throughout the assessment, think about how the information will be used. What sort of program would be appropriate? Consider whether MERCY has the capacity – financially and human to respond adequately and for the appropriate length of time? Consider that the positive and negative effects a program might have.

11.   Think about the timing of field visits.

If the assessment is not an emergency related assessment – try to avoid times when people are particularly busy or when there is a holiday or celebration. Also consider the season. For example, some areas may be inaccessible due to the rainy season. In other cases, some people may be absent during particular seasons. Find out when the local weekend/working period is should the assessment include visits to government or UN officials.

12.   Consider how to collect sensitive information.

Team members should be aware that some information that they wish to collect may be sensitive. Some individuals or groups may not be able to speak openly and therefore special arrangements may need to be made to collect the information. Any information collected must also be treated with the utmost care and confidentiality must be ensured.

13.   Consider how to share information in a manner that is appropriate for the different beneficiaries groups.

Information sharing about who we are, why we are in that particular area and what are the services that we are providing will be an important factor should MERCY Malaysia decide to take on a particular project.

Although this procedure is technically carried out at the onset of the project (and is part of the field manual), the needs assessment team may also consider consulting with the beneficiaries on what is the best way to share information among the different beneficiaries groups (ie women, elderly, sick and handicapped, children etc).

References

- *Humanitarian charter and minimum standards in humanitarian response*. (2011). Geneva: Sphere Project.
- *Humanitarian needs assessment: The good enough guide: The Assessment Capacities Project and Emergency Capacity Building Project*. (n.d.).
- *Guidelines for assessment in emergencies* [PDF]. (2008). Geneva: ICRC and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.
- *Sphere for Assessments* [PDF]. (2014, February). Geneva: Sphere Project.

Appendices

1. MERCY Malaysia's Assessment Checklist
2. Desk Research
3. Terms of Reference (TOR)
4. Sphere Assessment Checklist
5. Field Assessment Report
6. Emergency Proposal
7. Situation Report
8. Damage Needs Assessment (DINAS)
9. Hospital Damage Form
10. Sphere minimum standards
11. Need Assessment Report