

This thematic report provides an overview of lessons learned while conducting humanitarian needs assessments following the 25 April and 12 May 2015 earthquakes in Nepal. This document aims to highlight some key issues faced by humanitarian agencies in the assessment process, to inform future assessments and strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations, aimed at the humanitarian system as a whole, are derived from conversations with 18 individuals from UN agencies and NGOs involved in assessment processes in Nepal. Many of the key lessons in assessments are not unique to the Nepal context and require further action at the global level.



Coordination

- Establish and promote the use of an assessment registry to avoid assessment duplication. Monitor information gaps across groups, sector and geographical areas to inform on-going and planned assessment activities. Highlight duplications of assessment efforts.
- Establish and support an assessment focal point within the relevant Ministries and district offices to coordinate with respective clusters and facilitate information sharing.
- Collectively decide on which key datasets to adopt, including P-codes and population figures. (p. 2)



Assessment design and methodology

- Develop simple standardised tools, at least by sector, specific to the Nepal context and ready for deployment for future disasters. In the absence of a common tool, develop a minimum checklist to ensure data quality, encouraging the use of P-codes and appropriate terminology.
- Coordinate with Protection Cluster and Cash WG to mainstream cross-cutting themes into assessments.
- Adapt assessment design and methodology to the dynamic information needs. This includes reviewing the administrative levels appropriate for that point in time and ensuring that results feed into the decision-making processes.
- Ensure adequate efforts are made to find a representative sample of the community. Despite collective efforts, not all vulnerable households, including marginalised groups, have been captured in assessments and were particularly lacking in the first phase of the emergency. (p. 3)



Use of secondary data

- Ensure key baseline datasets are easily accessible at the start of the crisis. Collate all secondary needs and contextual information into one publicly accessible site, such as the **Government** and/or **UN** preparedness portals. Provide regular analysis on available secondary data.
- Ensure data collected is compatible with data in any existing government information management systems by using the same codes in order to facilitate a comprehensive analysis. (p. 4)



Primary Data collection

- Make use of existing networks, such as student volunteer networks and the scouts, within Nepal and devote additional resources to training of enumerators. Maintain a contact list of enumerators so they can be called upon in emergencies.
- Use mobile data collection techniques to facilitate data entry and cleaning. (p. 4)



Analysis and dissemination

- Encourage all actors who conduct assessments to be transparent about their methodology and share data as soon as possible. The timely release of raw data, preliminary findings, and draft reports can bridge the gap between data collection and final publication of reports.
- The capacity to absorb assessment reports is limited, particularly in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. The use of visuals, presentations, bi-lateral discussions and one-pagers with key findings is crucial to disseminate needs based information. Provide feedback to the assessed communities by disseminating assessment information through radio and other often used communication channels. (p. 6)

INTRODUCTION

After the 25 April earthquake in Nepal, it was decided early on that there would be no roll-out of a comprehensive, coordinated multi-sectoral assessment. At least 70 agencies, including UN, INGOs, local NGOs, and Government carried out a number of rapid assessments to identify the immediate needs – mostly using mixed methodology focused around key informant interviews and purposive sampling.

As the focus of assessment shifts from emergency to early recovery, this document aims to provide an overview of lessons learned while designing and undertaking assessments thus far to inform future assessments in Nepal. This report is based on interviews with 18 individuals from UN agencies and NGOs involved in the assessment process, a desk review of inter-agency lessons learned from assessment reports, and a review of 214 assessments received by the Nepal Earthquake Assessment Unit (AU) in the first three months following the 25 April earthquake.

COORDINATION OF ASSESSMENTS

Preparedness: Despite extensive preparedness work at the national level regarding post-disaster assessments, two main factors were cited by key informants for why these efforts were not fully adopted in the aftermath of the earthquakes. First, most disaster preparedness scenarios had focused on planning a large urban response in Kathmandu Valley, however, the main impact of the earthquakes was concentrated in rural areas outside of the Valley. Second, the surge of international actors had not been considered in preparedness exercises.

Coordination: The existence of an Assessment Cell within the On-Site Operations and Coordination Centre was a novel arrangement in this response. In the absence of a multi-cluster initial rapid assessment (MIRA), secondary data products had an important role in helping actors understand the situation, as did supporting ongoing assessments.

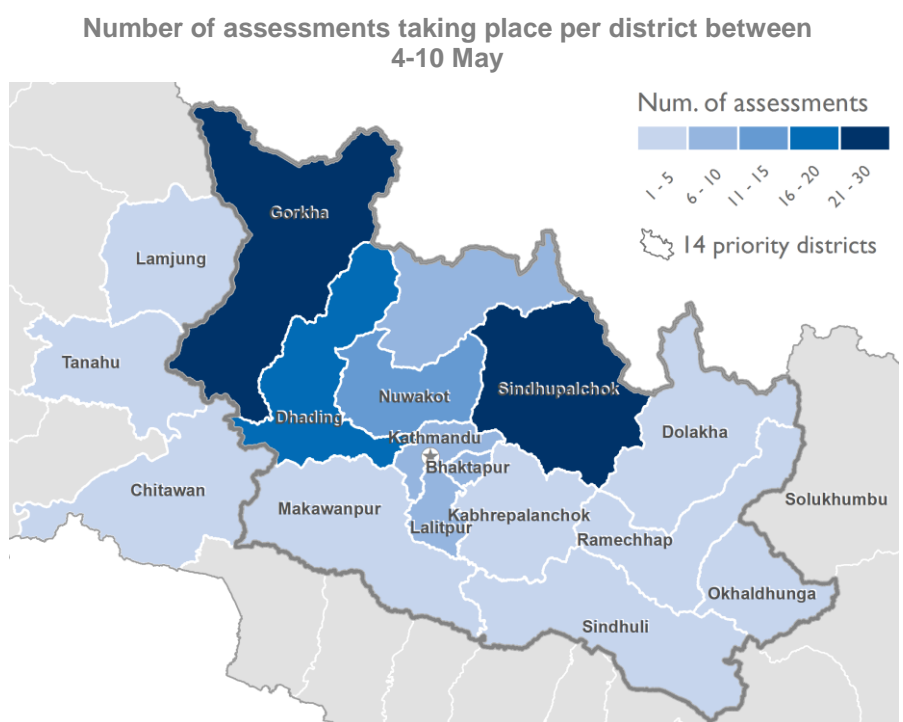
Despite collective efforts, no harmonised assessment tools were adopted in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, apart from a basic **Nepal Initial Rapid Assessment Tool** from WFP and a similar modified version promoted by the AU. One Cluster informant expressed that due to a lack of strong decision-making ability at the cluster-level, and subsequent lack of harmonised questions, they were not able to direct actors arriving in country on the type of information to collect. The lack of central level coordination on assessments led to district authorities using different templates for the initial rapid assessments.

There were multiple assessments carried out without coordination, which likely contributed to assessment fatigue. For example, field data collection for 70

assessments was taking place simultaneously between 4 to 10 May. As can be seen on the map, 30 separate data collection initiatives were taking place at the same time in Gorkha during this time period.

However, there are examples of successful inter-cluster coordination, such as the inclusion of WASH indicators into the Shelter Cluster assessment in May. After the initial weeks of the response, almost all assessments were initiated or endorsed by the Government. The Education Cluster School Structural Assessment is an example of close cooperation between the clusters and the Government, with the Department of Education (DoE) and the Cluster jointly designing and undertaking the survey.

Technical government staff (including engineers, health workers and environment experts) were mobilised immediately after the earthquake for ad hoc needs and damage assessments by the central Government. However, these assessments often lacked a humanitarian component. The humanitarian community could have harnessed the opportunity to complement government assessments with other information useful to the humanitarian community.



Language was frequently identified by key informants as an obstacle to coordination. Coordination meetings in Kathmandu and in the districts were initially undertaken in English. Although English is widely spoken in Nepal, national staff members were less likely to actively engage and provide input when meetings were run only in English.

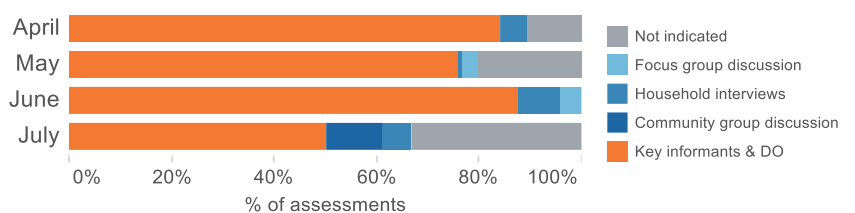
ASSESSMENT DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Geographic scope: In the days following the earthquake, 14 districts were classified as the ‘priority affected districts’ by the Government. Almost all data collection initiatives, as well as response, were focused in these areas. In the first weeks after the earthquake, information was primarily collected and aggregated on a district level. Lack of VDC level information in the early phase of the earthquake was highlighted as a gap by multiple key informants.

The majority of initial needs assessments were conducted using convenience sampling based on easy to access areas, namely, communities with road access that could be reached by vehicle. In line with the decision to focus resources on response instead of assessment, much of the initial data collection initiatives took place in parallel to response.

A review of all assessments received by the AU in the first three months of the response shows that the majority of assessments were qualitative in design. Only 25 assessments, or around 12% of assessments undertaken, had a quantitative component. Key informants and direct observation were the most commonly used data collection technique.

Main data collection techniques used in assessments available to the AU



Vulnerable groups: Groups considered vulnerable in Nepal include traditionally marginalised castes and indigenous ethnicities, women, elderly, people with disabilities, children, and single-headed households. The use of purposive sampling to get an inclusive picture of needs was used by some actors, such as conducting separate focus group discussions with low-caste community members. The fact that communities closest to the road were more likely to be assessed often meant that some of the most vulnerable groups were likely excluded from assistance. In most cases, there was no systematic way used to include people from vulnerable groups, though many organisations reported trying to interview people from different groups. An additional problem identified by key informants was reaching households during assessment and distribution who were unregistered in government records. Such households are not recognised by the government as potential beneficiaries, which creates a problem for inclusion and needs-based selection criteria.

Naming conventions: At least three different sets of official place names (or P-codes) for VDCs exist in Nepal: the Central Bureau of Statistics codes (used for the Health Management Information System); High Level Commission on Information Technology (HLCIT) codes (used by OCHA); and Department of Survey codes. Although significant time and resources were spent to harmonise the conventions, humanitarian actors continue to use different protocols.

Several clusters used Government code conventions. A School Structural Assessment undertaken by the DoE and the Education Cluster, for example, included pre-existing school codes. This allowed for a link between the assessment findings and baseline information about number of students and teachers for each school from the the Education Management Information System (EMIS).

Language of tools: Although English is widely understood in the Kathmandu Valley and larger population centres, Nepali and other local languages such as Newari, Magar, Tamang, Rai, Limbu and Gurung, among others, are commonly spoken in communities. The further north and the more remote the area, the more likely it is that a language other than Nepali is spoken. Vulnerable groups such as indigenous ethnic minorities, the elderly, women, and the poor, may not speak sufficient Nepali due to limited access to education in Nepali. It was difficult to find female translators in certain areas. Many key informants also reported that when assessment tools were translated into Nepali, it was often a direct translation that would be difficult to understand at the community level, due to translators not being familiar with the information desired.

The following concepts were specifically difficult to convey: *coping mechanisms*, *targeting*, *marginalised groups*, *vulnerability*. In addition, *contribution to the relief effort* was difficult to assess, with people not necessarily recognising support to neighbours and friends as supporting the response. Priority or severity scales provided limited usefulness for quantifying needs. A shorter scale (1-5), or use of proportions or ranges was found to be more informative by some people carrying out assessments. In addition, *problem* as opposed to *needs* was not straightforward in translation. In Nepali, the word for ‘problem’ makes more sense than the direct translation for ‘need’ in the humanitarian context.

There is a lack of a standard definition of what constitutes gender-based violence (GBV), and the GBV Sub-Cluster is concerned that different actors are using different definitions. For instance, in Nepal, domestic violence is commonly considered a family matter that does not fall under the category of GBV. Consequently there is a need to ensure that there is first a common understanding of terms that are used in assessments, so they yield accurate information.

USE OF SECONDARY DATA

Baseline: There is a large body of baseline information available on Nepal, including several portals, such as the [Nepal Food Security Monitoring System \(NeKSAP\)](#) and the [Nepal Disaster Risk Reduction Portal](#) providing a collation of the available information. However, not all baseline data is easily accessible to humanitarian actors. The data from the 2014 Multi-Cluster Indicator Survey for instance was not publicly available in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake.

Social media: Outside of formal assessments undertaken by the humanitarian community, there were a multitude of grassroots initiatives to capture and disseminate needs-based information. One example is Quakemap.org. Between 24 April and 22 June, over 1,200 actionable reports were filed through this portal. Response to these needs was reported in 30% of the cases. However, one key informant indicated that humanitarian organisations did not fully utilise this flow of information, as they were not accustomed to integrating this type of information into the response. Community feedback mechanisms are another way to gather information on needs, as well as perception of response.

Social media monitoring proved a useful source of information on detection of earthquake and landslide events. The first tweet about the earthquake on 25 April came out 10 minutes after the event occurred, 19 minutes before the main media outlets broke the news. ([RipJar 22/06/2015](#))

Collating data: In the aftermath of the earthquake, the impact on a household level was defined by the level of housing damage suffered. However, early on, conflicting numbers on affected people and the interpretation of household damage emerged from different sources and there were disputes on how authorities categorised damage. Geographic priorities were set by district-level government authorities, which informed where organisations responded.

Several key informants cited the usefulness of having a stream of secondary data flowing from the AU, including a survey of surveys to access information collected in respective agency assessments. Many agencies sought out information from other humanitarian partners, as well as pre-existing data, particularly for hard-to-reach areas that were inaccessible. Some key informants indicated being overwhelmed by the large amount of data, as they did not have a clear overview of which information was required when. The lack of analysis planning led to scouring for any and all data available from various sources, including pre-existing databases of baseline information. It then took a considerable amount of time to sift through to determine data credibility and quality.

PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION

Logistics: Access to earthquake-affected communities has been a key challenge in carrying out primary data collection exercises, and has significantly impacted the methodology used. The remote northern belt of the country is composed of rugged mountainous terrain, with many villages that are several days' walk from the nearest road. Landslides that have occurred with increased frequency since the earthquake and amidst the aftershocks have further impeded road and trail access. Efforts to repair or restore access in some areas were at times slow or non-existent. A 7.3 magnitude earthquake on 12 May compounded existing data collection challenges. Significant damage caused by this second earthquake meant that needs assessments conducted prior to 12 May were no longer as accurate, as needs were likely exacerbated in many areas. Second, ongoing assessments were hindered due to the quake. For example, both the Sindhupalchok joint assessment and the Education Cluster structural assessments were significantly delayed as enumerators dropped out. Furthermore, enumerator and staff safety was a major concern with further destabilised slopes increasing the risk of landslides.

Aerial assessments with helicopter flights were used to obtain an overview of the damage directly following the earthquake. The use of drones was piloted by several actors to collect information from inaccessible areas. However, the shortage of analytical capacity and low internet bandwidth, which is required to share the imagery, severely limited the usefulness of collected data. Contacting key informants by phone instead of through field visits was a commonly used method to obtain data from hard to reach areas.

Enumerators: Organisations that had pre-existing pools of enumerators had a distinct advantage while recruiting and retaining people for post-earthquake needs assessments. For example, one NGO informant mentioned they maintain a pool of trained data collectors for regular programme evaluation exercises, who were easy to mobilise after the earthquake. WFP's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) unit, through the establishment of the NeKSAP network, had access to enumerators trained and equipped with tablets in all affected areas which eliminated the problem of access and enabled rapid data collection and analysis. Other organisations

recruited university students, who required more training to ensure they fully understood the type of information desired from assessment. Key informants mentioned that significant trade-offs were made between the necessity to urgently collect data and the time spent training enumerators, which had a subsequent impact on data quality.

The limited use of female enumerators was mentioned by multiple key informants. Having female enumerators and interviewers is important in gathering information from female community members. Most key informants made an effort to ensure assessment teams were gender-balanced, and reported that this was a critical part of ensuring interviewees felt comfortable, particularly when collecting information about safety perceptions, menstrual hygiene, and protection issues. One key informant shared an example of how women in focus group discussions did not raise GBV or menstruation-related needs unless a female interviewer shared an example from her own post-earthquake experience. While hiring female enumerators was possible in smaller rapid assessments, particularly where agencies hired local translators for focus group discussions, it proved a challenge for larger joint assessments requiring multiple days and long travel distances for enumerators. The joint assessment of northern Gorkha, which involved helicopter transport and walking for several days over rough terrain, involved only male enumerators. The remoteness of locations to be assessed, safety concerns, and the lack of appropriate accommodations were the main challenges to hiring female enumerators.

Opinions varied on whether to assign enumerators to their areas of origin or residence. On the one hand, they are familiar with the area, which facilitates data collection and contextualisation of findings. On the other hand, there is a significant risk of bias.

Several key informants highlighted the need for capturing additional information from enumerators to convey observations that did not directly fit into assessment forms, whether through open ended notes or in a verbal debriefing. Communities in Nepal have been conditioned by many years of development programmes to 'say the right things' and enumerator observations can complement or challenge the assessment results. One key informant gave the example of verbally expressed needs not seeming to match the physical observations of interviewers during post-earthquake focus groups to assess needs.

Mobile phones and tablets: Humanitarian actors relied heavily on use of phone calls to gather information on the situation at district and VDC levels in the initial days following the earthquake. The Health Cluster was for instance able to communicate via daily phone calls from the Health Emergency Operations Centre to District Health Officers and health facilities in charge at the VDC level.

Tablets and mobile phones were used by various agencies and clusters for assessments in this response. Many enumerators and translators were university students largely familiar with smart phones and tablets, reducing the need for extensive training on the use of the technology. The main challenge for the use of tablets and mobile phones in the Nepal context are availability of power for charging the devices, as well as network accessibility in some remote areas where there is no mobile coverage. However, the use of battery packs and solar chargers, as well as availability of generators in many larger towns, in addition to paper backups, make electronic data collection feasible even in remote areas. In locations that had mobile networks, enumerators were able to directly upload data using tablets with wifi or SIM cards. In other cases, the data was transferred from the devices after enumerators returned.

Another challenge noted by one key informant was the importation of hardware. Soon after the earthquake, hundreds of phones arrived for use in assessments, but were not deemed tax exempt by the government, causing them to sit in customs for months while various actors negotiated with different Ministries. Valuable time was wasted while advocacy for importation of devices without a fee was carried out. The role of mobile devices in humanitarian activities should be clarified for easier importation in emergency.

Assessment fatigue: Some enumerators faced tensions when visiting the population to be assessed, particularly in areas where assessments had taken place without subsequent response. Combining assessments with assistance was one way to mitigate these tensions. Another strategy adopted to prevent raising community expectations was to initially assess needs as discretely as possible, with low visibility (no agency vests, t-shirts, or marked vehicles).

Key informants: The District Disaster Relief Committees (DDRC) and Chief District Officer (CDO) were often the first point of contact for organisations to identify VDCs for both assessment and distribution. At the VDC level, the VDC secretary, where present, was the source of information regarding information about the population in their areas. Other key informants who provided useful information on a VDC level included the police, social workers, civil society organisations, traders, and journalists.

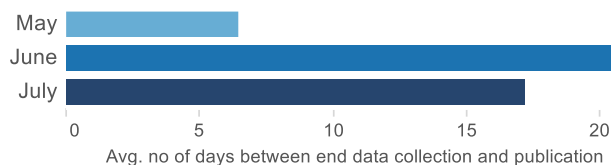
ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION

Analysis: A lack of standard assessment tools, sampling methodology, and naming conventions led to difficulty comparing data across different assessments, sectors, and geographic areas. Some key informants mentioned a shortage of cross-sectoral analysis in assessments, with the exception of the Government-led joint

assessments in Sindhupalchok and Gorkha. The lack of a sector specific analysis framework was mentioned by multiple key informants as an obstacle to finding, processing and analysing the relevant information from the large amount of data available.

Timeliness: Another issue identified was the time delay between the collection of information, cleaning of the data, and dissemination of findings. A review of the 214 assessments received by the AU in the first three months after the 25 April earthquake shows that, on average, it took 13 days between the end of field data collection and publication of results. The average delay ranged from three days in April to 20 days in June.

Number of days between end data collection and publication



In some cases, partners had data but did not have sufficient capacity to analyse and report on the findings. In other cases, the Government did not have ownership over assessments initiated by partners, resulting in considerable delays in releasing the data.

Dissemination: Having assessment reports posted on HumanitarianResponse.info was cited as a useful way for agencies to validate their own findings as well as share their own assessments. Many agencies shared their assessment reports with the AU, which allowed the geographic and sectoral coverage of the assessments to be mapped in an effort to prevent duplication. The AU was also a source of information for organisations planning further assessments or programming in particular areas.

Key informants indicated that the timely sharing of raw data and methodology could have been greatly improved in this response. Organisations that shared assessment tools and raw data include the Nepal Red Cross, REACH and IOM, which allowed different clusters to do analysis of relevant portions of the data for their own needs.

Dissemination of assessment findings through several channels, including reports, presentations, and bilateral discussions in English and Nepali, is required to reach the target audience. This dissemination should take place both at Kathmandu level and within the relevant districts. Some clusters (for instance WASH) included assessments in their 4W monitoring, to facilitate the analysis of gaps between needs and response.

Ensuring accountability to assessed communities was a frequently mentioned concern among key informants. Radio and community sign boards were effective channels to inform communities of assessment results.

KEY RESOURCES FOR UNDERTAKING AN ASSESSMENT

- ACAPS and the Emergency Capacity Building Project, *The Good Enough Guide to Assessments*. December, 2014. <http://reliefweb.int/report/world/humanitarian-needs-assessment-good-enough-guide-0>
- ACAPS, *Coordinated Assessments in Emergencies. What we know – key lessons from field experience*. November, 2012. <http://www.acaps.org/en/resources>
- CARE, *CARE Emergency Toolkit: Assessment*. CARE International. Geneva, 2009. <http://careemergencytoolkit.org/>
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), *Operational Guidance Note for Coordinated Assessments in Humanitarian Crises*, 2012. https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/CAP/ops_guidance_finalversion2012.pdf
- ICRC, *Professional Standards for Protection Work*, 2013. <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/icrc-002-0999.pdf>
- IFRC, *Guidelines for emergency assessment*, 2008. <http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/guidelines/guidelines-emergency.pdf>
- The Sphere handbook, 2011 edition. <http://www.sphereproject.org/handbook/>
- UNHCR, *The UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations*, 2006. <http://www.unhcr.org/450e963f2.html>
- World Food Programme (WFP), *Emergency Food Security Assessment Handbook (Second edition)*. <http://www.wfp.org/content/emergency-food-security-assessment-handbook>
- World Vision International Emergency Capacity Building Project, *Impact measurement and accountability in emergencies: The good enough guide*. 2007. www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/aid/2007/0209goodenough.pdf

The Assessment Unit welcomes all information that could complement this report. For more information, comments or questions please email nepalassessments@humanitarianresponse.info



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