How to assess needs that put lives and/or livelihood at risk

*Source: Household Economic Security (HES). Technical Guidelines for Assessment, Analysis & Programme design (Page 59 and Annex VI)*

This document contains two points:

* How to assess needs that put lives and/or livelihood at risk (definition-description)
* Using coping strategies to understand severity

**How to assess needs that put lives and/or livelihood at risk**

Analyze the data and analysis by answering the following **key questions** for each of the identified wealth/livelihood groups:

* Are basic needs for food and other essential (economic) items & services being adequately met?
* Do livelihoods need supporting? If so, in what way, and for how long?
* How effective and sustainable are current coping strategies? Are they damaging to livelihoods, health or dignity (i.e. socially/morally acceptable)?
* Who are most in need of assistance? What are the specific needs of different groups?
* When will the situation change? (taking into account seasonal factors & coping strategies)
* What is the severity of need?
* Are there any additional ongoing or future risks that may threaten lives and livelihoods?

A tabulated summary can be drafted using the questions listed below, see table

Table. Main questions to answer when assessing needs

| **Main question** | **Subsidiary questions** |
| --- | --- |
| **1. Are basic needs for food and other essential (economic) items & services being adequately met?** | 1. Has usual food supply from crops and local markets been impacted by the disaster and if so, how? How does this affect prices and hence ability to purchase food? Will traders be able to respond to any localised or regional deficits? (food availability). 2. Has usual access to food significantly changed and if so, how? What are the reasons for this? How long is this situation likely to last? 3. Are people eating less than normal? Are they eating fewer meals a day (minimum of two)? Are they eating inferior foods such as wild foods, poorer quality, less desirable foods? 4. Are people eating an adequate variety of different types of foods (including vegetable and fruit, meat/milk/beans/dairy) in their diets? (Dietary diversity and NutVal) 5. Have there been increases in wasting (acute malnutrition) since the outbreak of the disaster? 6. Are households able to prepare their food adequately and safely, e.g. sufficient access to clean water, fuel and cooking equipment? 7. Are more risky coping strategies being used to access food (e.g. begging, prostitution)? 8. Is there increasing reliance on food aid, gifts and/or credit? 9. Are communities highlighting food as a priority for support above other basic needs?   For example, if households are usually largely reliant on their own food production and crops have been destroyed, they are likely to struggle to access enough food unless sufficient food is available in the market and they have enough income to purchase it.  Comparing the cost of a food and non-food basket of essential needs with current available income will tell you whether households are able to meet their basic income needs or not. ***Don’t forget however, that households tend to prioritise expenditures to protect their livelihoods over food and other essential needs in an emergency and so it is useful to add essential livelihoods costs into this calculation***.  If these basic essential needs are not being met, households are likely to be food insecure and you should do further analysis to gain a better understanding of the severity of food insecurity and its underlying causes. Remember to understand the three components of food security - food availability, food access and food utilisation.  If households are unable to access sufficient quantity and quality of food they are likely to require emergency assistance to help them meet this basic need and reduce the risk and incidence of malnutrition. The public health situation should be assessed and supported where appropriate to prevent disease and malnutrition. |
| **2. Do livelihoods need supporting?** | Your discussions with the community will provide you with information on the impact of the disaster on livelihoods assets and strategies and in turn the implications of this on household economic security.  If essential livelihood assets have been lost, destroyed or people have lost access to them, and they do not have sufficient resources or capacities to recover, then support to help them recover their livelihoods needs to be considered.  Livelihoods will also be at risk if people do not have sufficient resources to maintain or protect assets in the future, for example insufficient fodder to keep livestock alive. Including additional costs for maintaining livelihoods in the essential food/non-food basket and comparing this to total household income will give you an indication whether households can afford to maintain their livelihoods or not. |
| **3. How effective and sustainable are coping strategies?** | If coping strategies are harmful or unsustainable, households are in crisis and may need assistance. |
| **4. Who are the most in need of assistance?** | We have already seen that households from different livelihood and wealth groups have different vulnerabilities and so are affected differently in a disaster. It is therefore important to identify which groups are most vulnerable and the reasons why in your analysis in order to allow decisions to be made on who receives assistance and what the support should involve.  The mandate of the RCRC is to alleviate suffering of the most vulnerable. Although the most vulnerable groups are usually targeted for emergency relief assistance, when planning recovery livelihood activities it is also important to consider the needs of some better off wealth groups, as the livelihoods of all groups interact and so by helping one group you can help another. In addition, the most vulnerable may also be destitute or lack sufficient capacities to engage in usual livelihood strategies. |
| **5. When will the situation change?** | Your analysis should involve assessing whether the situation is likely to get better or possibly worse? For example, when is flooding likely to subside? How long will it take for markets to function again, for people to be able to return to their homes and start to recover their livelihoods? When will the hunger period start and peak following a poor harvest?  Don’t forget that livelihood activities as well as the availability and price of food may vary over the year and hence will affect how the situation may develop over time. In addition, certain times of year are associated with increased climatic risk such as hurricanes or risk of flooding. Use a seasonal calendar to discuss with the community how they think the situation will develop over time both in terms of their ability to regain livelihoods and access sufficient food.  Also remember to check with the community whether the coping strategies they currently use can continue to effectively meet needs until the situation improves without becoming damaging. |
| **6. What is the severity of the needs?** | Emergency contexts differ in terms of how a shock impacts on a population and how well the affected population is able to cope. In this respect, the outcome situation of different groups of people experiencing a disaster can be classified according to the “severity” of their needs.  For livelihoods and economic security, severity is determined according to immediate risks to life, health, dignity and risks to livelihoods. Severity also involves a consideration of the scale of such needs, by understanding the numbers and/or proportion of the population affected, as well as the potential duration of the crisis.  Severity is important to understand when making decisions about responses and allocation of limited resources. |

**Using coping strategies to understand severity**

This analysis is one of the most useful tools for understanding severity in terms of livelihoods and economic security and is a key part of the HES (Household Economic Security) approach. It helps identify whether people have resorted to using unusual or harmful strategies only used in times of crisis when other strategies are no longer available, and hence as a last resort.

The box below illustrates how in a crisis people start using irreversible or risky strategies but that famine is the stage at which people’s coping strategies have been exhausted and there are high rates of mortality. This usually occurs when they have no remaining assets and are destitute.

Livelihoods (and Household Economic Security) assessment should therefore focus on:

* **Identifying different coping strategies** used by different livelihood/wealth groups
* **Determining the severity of the situation** by assessing how many people are using the different types of coping strategies



*Source: Oxfam GM*