ASSETS GUIDEBOOK

Assessment of Emergency and Transition Situations

Mercy Corps

Health Alliance International

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Terms and Vocabulary

Affected population - Groups of people affected directly or indirectly by a conflict, disaster or emergency.

Assessment area - The geographical location(s) targeted for assessment work.

ASSETS - Assessment for Emergency and Transition Situations. It is a collection of participatory instruments presented as a generic assessment continuum designed to promote high impact developmental relief programs in emergency situation as well as to examine the most critical sectors in a given emergency to learn where the agency can add the most value through developmental relief programs.

Components - The building blocks of the GAT (General Assessment Tool, defined below), considered versatile and essential, used at the start of an assessment.

Concentration Statements - Statements based on the information collected in the GAT describing what the assessment team wants to investigate further using the sector snap shots.

Expanded field notes - These are recopied field notes that capture all of the details recorded and/or remembered by the interviewer from an assessment activity.

Field Notes - Notes written by the interviewer during the assessment activity (defined above).

FIPP process - Familiarization, Identification, Prioritization, Planning. The process by which assessors work through sector concerns with the affected community, following a problem-solving model.

GAT - The General Assessment Tool; a set of six components used to gain an overall picture of the affected community and the emergency situation.

Informant - An informant is an individual from the affected community undertaking an assessment activity with an assessment team member or members. The activity undertaken may be an interview, community mapping or a group interview. A "good informant" will be articulate, reflective and willing to share with the interviewer.

Instrument summaries - Summaries of participatory instruments for use in the FIPP process. The summaries include a brief description of the instrument, a list of materials needed, guidelines and capture and processing information. Detailed protocols are included as .jpeg files on the accompanying CD.

Interviewer(s) - The assessment team member or members undertaking an assessment activity with an informant(s). Can be an individual, a pair or three interviewers working together.

Longer-term interventions - Interventions taking place during and after the transition from emergency.

Sector Snap Shots - An in-depth assessment of a specific sector. They act as bridge between conventional assessment tools and participatory assessment tools giving the team a variety of choices, information and resources to utilize.

How to Use This Guide

This manual is intended to provide a brief overview and introduction to ASSETS, a tool that has been designed by Mercy Corps to assist in conducting assessments. While originally developed for complex emergency situations, many of the manual's components are relevant and applicable to non-emergency settings. As such, Mercy Corps encourages country teams to apply ASSETS whenever an assessment is needed. This guide can serve as both an introduction to ASSETS, as well as a quick reference for those who are already familiar with its approach. The complete, in-depth ASSETS manual is on CD and can be obtained from headquarters in Portland. It is also available on the Digital Library.

This guide is divided into three sections and reflects the linear, step-by-step approach of ASSETS. The first section is a basic introduction to ASSETS and the philosophy behind the tools. It details when to use ASSETS, the necessary components of an effective ASSETS team and the two-part structure of the ASSETS model.

The second section gives an overview of the General Assessment Tool (GAT) and how to use its six components. It provides some guidelines about when, why, how and by whom the various assessment components should be used.

The third section focuses on sector snap shots, which can help an assessment team develop an in-depth assessment of one or more sectors, such as Civil Society, Economic Development, Food and Non-Food Resources, Health Behavior, Beliefs and Practices, Health Infrastructures, Staffing and Services, Health Status, Local Partnership Opportunities, Site and Shelter Planning and Water and Sanitation.

Part 1: An Introduction to ASSETS

What is ASSETS?

ASSETS stands for the Assessment for Emergency and Transition Situations. It is a collection of step-by-step, participatory tools designed to help move an assessment team from the "big picture overview" to an examination of the most critical sectors in a given environment. The goal is to help a team learn where Mercy Corps can add the most value by using its developmental relief approach to emergency response.

The ASSETS approach can help produce information that is useful and detailed enough for proposals, situation reports and donor advocacy. Use of ASSETS can help a community to develop an action plan that includes steps it can take without international assistance. By emphasizing a participatory method, the ASSETS model promotes Mercy Corps' civil society principles of participation, accountability and peaceful change.

ASSETS gathers qualitative information and focuses on relationship building and resource maximization within affected populations. It is important to note that the ASSETS tool is not designed to be used in isolation or in replacement of other complementary emergency response tools, such as the Sphere Guidelines.

How is ASSETS structured?

ASSETS consists of two parts: the General Assessment Tool (GAT) and the sector snap shots. The purpose of the GAT is to provide a broad picture of the emergency situation and to guide assessors to deeper assessment in target sector areas. It is composed of six components that are described in detail in Part II - Description of the General Assessment Tool. The six components of the GAT can be used separately or simultaneously and they have been designed for use in any geographical context.

After gathering information from the GAT, an assessment team will have a better idea which sectors need further assessment, and thus which sector snap shots, described in Part III, should be used. The sector snap shot model is a four-step approach that can be used to gather further information about the needs of one or more specific sectors. In the ASSETS manual the following sector snap shots are explored: Civil Society, Economic Development, Food and Non-Food Resources, Health Behavior, Beliefs and Practices, Health Infrastructure, Staffing and Services, Health Status, Local Partnership Opportunities, Site and Shelter Planning and Water and Sanitation.

How long does it take to implement ASSETS?

Part I:
An Intro to ASSETS

Step 1: How do you decide if you should use assets?

Step 2: How do you develop the assessment objective?

Step 3: What is an effective assets team?

Step 4: How do you train the assessment team?

Part II: General Assessment Tool (GAT)

Part III: Sector Snap Shots

ASSETS has been designed to assist you in conducting a quick assessment of an emergency situation. Depending on which components you choose to use, ASSETS can be used to gather information over a couple of days or even a couple of weeks. If there is little time available, you may opt to use only the first three components of the GAT tool. One model suggested timeline for training a team in the ASSETS approach can be found in Appendix E of the main ASSETS manual.

STEP 1: How do you decide if you should use ASSETS?

The following guidelines are intended to assist you and members of your response team in making the decision whether to use ASSETS. It is not necessary to meet all of the guidelines:

1. There is a perceived need in a disaster-affected community;
2. Mercy Corps has an in-country presence with administrative, financial and logistical staff and support structures in place;
3. Mercy Corps has a long-term programming strategy for the country or region;
4. There is a need or interest to develop transitional programming: relief to development;
5. There is a strategic organizational decision to invest in a needs assessment, even when

there is no certainty of obtaining funding for subsequent proposals;

6. There is clear donor interest in investing in a given geographical area or programmatic sector. ASSETS engages a community immediately and can bridge donor and community interests;
7. The security situation in the proposed area of assessment is deemed acceptable or manageable by the in-country or response team;
8. There are local partners to perform or aid in the implementation of the assessment and/or subsequent programs;
9. Mercy Corps has an ongoing response to an existing emergency and wishes to develop further follow-on programming or develop a programming strategy.

When shouldn't ASSETS be used?

1. In the acute phase of a rapid onset emergency;
2. If Mercy Corps is not present in a country and there is no long-term interest in building a relationship with an affected community;
3. Consideration of the security situation shows that staff and the affected communities would be put at undue risk or increased exposure to harm by undertaking or participating in the use of ASSETS;

4. If other organizations in the country or region have recently completed a similar qualitative assessment and the findings are readily available.

Step 2:
How do you develop the assessment objective?

When performing an assessment, the first critical step is to determine the overall objective of the assessment. It is important for team members to understand the goal of the assessment and to have the opportunity to discuss their expectations, fears, concerns and thoughts about the assessment process. Appendix E of the ASSETS manual offers suggestions and activities to assist an assessment team in the development and articulation of an assessment objective.

Step 3:
What is an effective ASSETS team?

Once an assessment objective is determined, it is important to decide who will take part in the assessment and what roles each team member will play. The most effective teams are those where each member, as an individual, has a specific technical, professional or local expertise that is relevant to the objectives of the assessment. Consider traditional and non-traditional backgrounds when assembling the team. Technical and/or professional expertise could include, but is not limited to the following areas: agronomists, water/sanitation specialists, health workers or care providers, construction workers, educators, carpenters, plumbers and community development specialists.

Looking to local NGOs (and possible implementing partners) for candidates can be very helpful for finding people who have been exposed to participatory techniques and are comfortable interacting with communities. Because Mercy Corps is committed to programming through local partners whenever possible, every effort should be made to draw qualified candidates from local NGOs or national government.

The following skills, knowledge and experience are essential in the collective assessment team (Note: It is not necessary for each member of the team to have all these skills):

- Fluency in the local language of the geographical area in which the assessment is taking place or the ethnic/national group that is being assessed. There must be individuals on the team who are also fully literate in the language in which the tool is written. The number of fluent speakers needed depends on the team structure;
- Leadership ability based upon experience or

local respect;

- Experience with participatory action planning, rapid rural appraisal or other similar participatory approaches;
- Assessment management and implementation experience;
- Experience with coordination at the international NGO and also local NGO and governmental level;
- Training and experience with Training of Trainers (ToT);
- Understanding of the political and cultural context of the assessment area;
- Experience managing an operational presence in an equivalent security environment;
- Experience with budget tracking and management.

Step 4: How do you train the assessment team?

After objectives are stated and team roles are defined, it is time to train your team in the methodology of ASSETS. Training is a good time to test cultural and language sensitivity of questions, surveys, individual instruments and to double-check previous assumptions about the amount of time and staff necessary to fulfill the assessment objective. In addition, training is an opportunity to set an example of good participatory practice. It also ensures consistency in the implementation of the tools between team members, and can provide an opportunity for the team members to revisit the assessment objective and key questions. It is always strongly recommended that the training allows for the team to work with the components in the field. The tools in the GAT are meant to be easy to use and/or train to use. Depending on the level of experience some staff may be able to be trained "on the job." A suggested timeline for how long it takes to train a team in the ASSETS approach can be found in Appendix E of the main ASSETS manual. You can always contact Mercy Corps HQ for assistance with training planning.

Part II: The General Assessment Tool (GAT)

Now that your assessment team is in place and trained, it is time to use the General Assessment Tool (GAT). This section provides a brief outline of GAT, which is a set of instruments used to help your assessment team gather broad information in an emergency environment. Each component focuses on developing a basic understanding of emergency situations and provides information to streamline assessment activity to best meet the assessment objective.

The six components of the General Assessment Tool

Part I: An Intro to ASSETS
Part II: General Assessment Tool (GAT)
Step 5: Six components of GAT
Step 6: How do you capture information from the GAT?
Part III: Sector Snap Shots

Step 5a:

Component I - Background and Context

Component II - Key Informant Interviews

Component III - Transect Walk

Decision point: Do you have the time, staff and money to continue with the GAT? Will you move on to the sector snap shots at this point? Etc.

Step 5b:

Component IV - Community Mapping

Component V - Household Surveys

Component VI - Group Interviews

Different situations and emergencies will necessitate different levels of assessment. There is no hard and fast rule regarding the assessment level undertaken. It is recommended that at minimum the assessment team uses GAT Components I, II and III. These three components provide the minimum information essential for making programming decisions with community input.

The following provides some general guidelines about when, why, how and by whom the various assessment components should be used.

Component I: Background and Context

page 17 of the ASSETS Manual

What? Statistical information can be valuable as the assessment team designs its approach and familiarizes itself with the country and locations containing the affected population. This component suggests a number of easy-to-access resources that can provide basic health, travel, cultural, civil society and economic data on the country where the affected population is situated and where they are from. Other sources may include contacts from Mercy Corps field offices, partner organizations, local government ministries and US government offices in the country.

Why? Background and context information gathering is necessary to understand country issues surrounding the present populations, regions and areas. The amount of information that is needed will vary depending on whether or not Mercy Corps has a presence in the country. Generally when Mercy Corps is on the ground, information for the component will be easily accessible from field representatives.

Who? People in the field or at HQ can gather this information. Selecting informants for this activity is of critical importance to maximize the information gathered. Issues of race, religion, ethnicity, nationality and socioeconomic status must be considered and dealt with sensitively.

When? Begin to use Component I when a crisis or crisis indicators become significant enough for the country or a headquarters office to undertake an assessment, and discussions begin on the objective and scope of the assessment. At this time, it is appropriate to begin researching recent statistics on the country and to develop a body of background knowledge on the emergency. Often, this type of information is critical for headquarters staff, which may not be as current on country details as a field office.

Component II: Key informant interviews

page 19 of the ASSETS Manual

What? A Key Informant Interview is an informal interview with community leaders of the affected population or the host population, a host government official, or any other person who has a stake in the assessment or project activities that may grow out of the assessment. Every effort should be made to speak with representatives from minority groups, including women and youth. Interviews are informal, and while the interviewer has a developed set of questions, the informant is allowed to lead the interview as much as possible. This is an essential tool for developing an understanding of the civil society environment.

Why? Key Informant Interviews are an important part of any assessment. They can be designed to provide a wide-variety of information covering a number of sectors or a specific sector.

Who? Team leaders or expatriates on the assessment team are often best positioned to conduct these interviews. This allows the team leader to represent the assessment activities to community leaders and seek their input directly. In some cases, having an expatriate approaching a community leader can lead to quicker access to a given leader. A potential pitfall of an expatriate or any non-local language speaker for this type of exercise is the need to work through a translator. Even the best translator acts as a filter for the information before it reaches the interviewer. This can result in incomplete responses for the interviewer.

When? Key Informant Interviews should be looked at early in the GAT process, as it may be necessary to interview local officials, field offices or other agencies already working with the affected population. However, Key Informant Interviews can take place at any point in the GAT process. For example, they may be done to confirm preliminary information (i.e., early in the GAT process) or to expand knowledge and answer questions arising from existing information (i.e., mid to late in the GAT process) Please see page 19 for information on structuring interviews.

Component III: Transect walk (structured and deliberate observation of the environment)

page 24 of the ASSETS Manual

What? A Transect Walk is an observational tool that provides a "big picture" visual overview of the emergency setting, and lays the groundwork for the remaining components of the GAT. A Transect Walk can be done with or without a community member. There are costs and benefits to each method. Please see the Transect Walk resources included on the ASSETS CD for more information.

Why? A Transect Walk assists the assessment team to best reach the assessment objective by providing them with a physical sense of the environment and daily activities of the affected population. This information helps the team plan further use of the GAT to best fulfill the assessment objective.

Who? Time, staff members and geographic area targeted all affect the use of this component. How much time will be spent among a target population is a key decision shaping the use of this component.

When? It is very useful to conduct a Transect Walk upon arrival to an affected community or IDP/refugee settlement as it lays the contextual groundwork for other components of the General Assessment Tool.

Component IV: Community Mapping

page 28 of the ASSETS Manual

What? Community mapping provides information about a community's access and utilization of infrastructure and existing resources. Other physical characteristics of where the affected population lives may also appear on a map, as well as community demographics, resource flow and job opportunities.

Why? Because community mapping is an activity, it is able to draw out different information than speaking to an individual or a group or through observation.

Who? The number of people drawing a community map impacts the level of detail included in it as well as the time it will take to draw.

When? Because community mapping can be challenging to facilitate and requires the facilitator to have at least a limited understanding of the community, it is best implemented after using one or two other components of the GAT.

Component V: Household Survey

page 31 of the ASSETS Manual

Why? Household surveys provide a general overview of resources and needs across sectors in the affected community, and should be based on a convenience sample. The household survey offers a quantitative balance to the other qualitative components of the GAT, providing numbers, amounts or percentages (i.e., 7 out of 10 women surveyed indicated that they felt their children were not getting enough to eat).

What? The baseline questions provided extract essential, quantitative information.

Who? The assessment team should review the survey and remove or add questions that best meet their purpose in conducting the survey.

When? Undertaking a survey can be time consuming. The assessment team should carefully weigh the costs and benefits of undertaking a survey before committing to it. Due to the unique components of each emergency situation it should be understood that the format and content of the survey must be tailored for specific use. More information on tailoring the survey is included in Component V of the Assets manual.

Component VI: Group Interview
page 38 of the ASSETS Manual

What? A group interview is a discussion conducted with representatives from the affected community and is facilitated around general or particular issues.

Who? Working together, two assessment team members, a facilitator and a note taker conduct a group interview. Questions are developed in much the same way as they are for Key Information Interviews. In fact, it is often possible to use the same set of questions.

How? Interviews are informal. While the interviewer has a developed set of questions, the informants are allowed to lead the interview as much as possible.

When? Group interviews are useful as the final component of an assessment because question can be designed to explore more in-depth issues that have surfaced from using other GAT components.

Step 6: How do you capture the information from the GAT?

Perhaps the most critical process to the GAT is how the team captures, synthesizes and analyzes the data that is gathered in the field.

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An Intro to ASSETS

Part II: General Assessment Tool (GAT)

Step 5:
Six components of GAT

Step 6: How do you capture information from the GAT?

Part III:
Sector Snap Shots

It is highly recommended that the assessment team spend time and energy on this process each day. Lessons learned have shown that having a focused discussion as the end of each assessment day results in much richer and better quality information than a compilation of raw field notes from multiple staff/assessors. It is difficult to decipher or glean bigger themes from such compiled notes.

The assessment team leader is responsible for leading team capture sessions. The goals of working as a team to capture, categorize and synthesize the GAT information are:

- To develop concentration statements that describe and track critical and reoccurring themes uncovered by the assessment team;
- To integrate understanding of the relationships between issues and problems identified;
- To create written and visual clues for articulating a comprehensive description of the emergency environment or situation. This will be important when the team is making decisions around further assessment work.

See page 41 of the Assets Manual for details on team synthesis of assessment information.

Decision point: Do you go on from the GAT to the sector snap shots? Do you have the time, staff and money to move on? Are communities ready and willing to work further with the assessment team?

Part III: Sector Snap Shots

page 44 of the ASSETS Manual

Step 7: Does Your Team Have a Need to Further Assess One or More Specific Sector(s)?

After an assessment team gathers information from the General Assessment Tool (See Part II), you should have a good idea which sectors to further assess and whether you have the time, money and resources to do so. The sector snap shots can help your team assess community needs in any of the following areas: Civil Society, Economic Development, Food and Non-Food Resources, Health Behavior, Beliefs and Practices, Health Infrastructure, Staffing and Services, Health Status, Local Partnership Opportunities, Site and Shelter Planning and Water and Sanitation.

There are three goals to the sector snap shot approach:

1. to identify, articulate and prioritize problems within a particular sector;
2. to design ways to address these problems while maximizing resources; and
3. to provide information for proposals, grants

and updates to assessment stakeholders (without raising expectations) including potential donors.

These goals are achieved through a four-step approach called FIPP - Familiarization, Identification, Prioritization, Planning, which is described in more detail on pages 45-47 of the Assets manual. Each step of FIPP has a series of instruments that can be used to obtain information about a community's resources, needs and capacities. These instruments are explained in more detail in the ASSETS manual.

The Snap Shot Approach - Familiarization, Identification, Prioritization, Planning (FIPP)

Step 8a: Familiarization

Familiarization instruments facilitate definition of a community's view of its resources, needs and capacities around the assessment objective and concentration statements developed from the GAT. This leads to an understanding of how the affected population perceives its current needs and opportunities.

The familiarization section of each snap shot lists standards, guidelines and critical questions that should be kept in mind when assessing a particular sector. This step is heavily dependent upon Sphere Guidelines and ties each snap shot back into a community-based approach to intervention.

Instruments include: access matrix ; community mapping; freelisting; group interview; key informant interview; seasonal calendar; timeline; transect walk; and Venn diagram. All instruments are summarized at the end of the complete ASSETS manual, starting on page 133. Detailed protocols for each instrument are available as .jpeg files on the accompanying CD.

Step 8b: Identification

The Identification process examines why the issues that arose during familiarization are problems and the main causes of the problems. Identification instruments can provide community analyses of the causes and effects of root problems. The assessment team works with the community to articulate problem statements reflective of root causes as well as the effects of problems uncovered during the familiarization process. These problem statements can be incorporated into proposals, grants and field reports.

Instruments include: body mapping; community mapping; freelisting; group interview; income/expenditure analysis, key informant interviews, pile sorting, problem tree, SWOT, timeline and Venn diagram. Note that there are instruments that can do both Familiarization and Identification, and a situation may present itself where these phases can be combined. All instruments are summarized at the end of the complete ASSETS manual. Detailed protocols for each instrument are available as .jpeg files on the accompanying CD.

Step 8c: Prioritization

Prioritization is a facilitated process where communities select the top problems expressed during the identification phase. Prioritization instruments provide a transparent process for establishing priorities and opportunities to integrate underrepresented groups into the decision-making process. They focus on the opinions and perceptions of the community. Thus, it is important to let the community define the criteria for prioritizing problems.

Instruments include: appreciative inquiry; pair-wise ranking; pile sorting; problem tree; solution ranking matrix; SWOT. Much like the other phases there are instruments that overlap, thus a team may find it useful to combine Identification and Prioritization in their choice of instruments. All instruments are summarized at the end of the complete

ASSETS manual. Detailed protocols for each instrument are available as .jpeg files on the accompanying CD.

Step 8d: Planning (project design)

The Planning process takes the prioritized problems developed in the previous phases and facilitates the development of action plans to address those issues. Planning instruments generate community action planning that reflects available resources and empowers the community to meet its needs with or without the involvement of an international NGO. They can lead to a schedule for program implementation, coordination of resources both within and outside the affected community and provide a process for follow-up. Information gathered can be used for proposals, grants and field reports.

Instruments include: key informant interviews; problem tree; solution ranking matrix; appreciative inquiry; group interview; freelisting. All instruments are summarized at the end of the complete ASSETS manual. Detailed protocols for each instrument are available as .jpeg files on the accompanying CD.

Step 9: Community Feedback

Community feedback takes place throughout the assessment. It is essential to facilitate a community feedback session at the close of the assessment. During a community feedback session, the assessment team presents all assessment findings to the community and solicits feedback. These sessions are an opportunity to close out the assessment experience with the community.

Mercy Corps is an international relief and development agency that exists to alleviate suffering, poverty and oppression by helping people build secure, productive and just communities. Since 1979, Mercy Corps has been assisting people afflicted by conflict or disaster by implementing programs that increase food security, economic opportunity and the development of civil society.

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