# A common approach to understanding needs across crisis-affected populations
How it could work in practice

**Context**

In an increasingly resource constrained environment, it is vital that we ensure humanitarian funding reaches where it is needed most. This requires being able to identify where humanitarian assistance and protection needs are most severe within and across contexts, and also demands that we find efficiencies in our ways of working.

Currently, needs assessment and analysis methodologies differ for refugee and non-refugee populations. While this is a natural reflection of our two different interagency coordination systems, it also has significant drawbacks: most critically, it limits our ability to identify how needs compare across contexts and population groups, potentially obscuring or skewing understandings of where – and for whom – needs are most severe. Further, processes that use different or duplicative methodologies and tools create a strain on responders (especially those in contexts with both refugees and other crisis-affected populations) and result in inefficiencies that we cannot afford.

Given the current upheaval facing our system and momentum towards reform, we believe now is the right moment to address this challenge. In April, NRC and IMPACT Initiatives shared a [joint note](#) calling for the adoption of a standardized approach to understanding the severity of refugees' needs,[1] and encouraged "alignment of this methodology with the approach used to reprioritize within and across OCHA-led responses." This note aims to go one step further by outlining how this could be taken forward.

**A proposed common approach**

As response tools are revised following the funding crisis and Humanitarian Reset, and in line with the need for greater synergies identified in the UN@80 process, we propose the adoption of a common framework for understanding the severity of humanitarian assistance and protection needs of refugees and other crisis-affected population groups.

The good news is we would not be starting from scratch. The Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) system developed and refined a Joint and Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF) tool (now on version 2.0) that offers a standardized methodology for understanding the severity of humanitarian assistance and protection needs within and across contexts. And for refugee responses, UNHCR has developed strong methods of participatory assessment that offer an important tool in understanding displaced persons' priorities and preferences.

With some adjustments, we believe these two sets of tools could be brought together and serve as an ideal complement to one another: JIAF 2.0 could help identify *where* humanitarian responses are most urgently needed, and UNHCR's participatory tools could help define *how* humanitarians respond. The result could be an integrated tool that could be used across crises and population groups.

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[1] While individual refugee responses have developed tools for understanding needs *within* responses, there is not yet a standardized methodology for understanding needs *across* refugee responses.

**How would the systems need to change?**

While some adjustments would be needed to JIAF 2.0 and UNHCR's participatory assessment frameworks, the methodological changes may be less extensive than one might think. Both sets of tools focus on individual experiences of risk and need. As such, while the external environments differ between crises and population groups (even within the same context), the questions can often be largely the same.

> For example, to assess the severity of education needs, the JIAF 2.0 tool asks whether school-aged children can access education, and whether population groups are facing systemic barriers to doing so. This could apply equally to IDPs or refugees, even if the reasons for the access challenges and barriers may differ.

As is already the case, the final Response Plan products could then include additional narrative pieces that unpack the drivers of need and draw upon the participatory assessments to add further depth on people's priorities and preferences and assist in determining the most appropriate response modalities.

There are, however, some changes that will be needed to the tools themselves – particularly the JIAF 2.0:

- Firstly, the framework itself would need to be adapted to account for refugee-specific issues. This includes, for example, additional questions that would need to be added to the protection section to address refugee-specific risks and support needs – e.g. risk of *refoulement.*

- Secondly, the JIAF process would need to be adapted – both to considerably lighten the current process overall (which was already untenably heavy even in a comparatively well-resourced coordination system), and to enable it to be implemented in a wider range of contexts depending on available data (knowing, for example, that Refugee Response Plans are present in a much wider range of contexts than Humanitarian Response Plans).

Annex 1 outlines possible options for different data scenarios. Additionally, however, if there were agreement in the value of a common analysis framework and the criticality of strong data and participatory assessments to support it, we could also consider treating essential data collection and analysis as a shared service and fundraise for it accordingly.

**Putting it into practice**

Adjusting the methodology is arguably the easy part – the more significant challenge would be rolling this out in a system with less bandwidth and resources at all levels. In practical terms, it would require using participatory approaches more systematically in non-refugee responses as part of the IASC Humanitarian Programme Cycle (something that is already planned for the 2026 cycle), and using standardized criteria drawn from JIAF 2.0 as part of the development of Refugee Response Plans. We should not underestimate what an adjustment this would be, particularly for refugee responses that are unaccustomed to using standardized needs analysis tools and processes. Nevertheless, we believe this change is vital to ensure humanitarian resources reach where they are needed most. The roll out could be done gradually, with the full change reflected in the 2027 cycle.

**What is missing and how can this be managed?**

A key challenge with adopting a common framework is capturing refugee needs that are not strictly humanitarian but which fall within UNHCR's broader mandate of supporting the achievement of

solutions. This dilemma of how to capture and support needs outside of "hyper-prioritized" contexts will now be increasingly relevant for other populations of concern as well – e.g. in protracted crises where humanitarian needs are less severe but IDPs still require support to access a lasting solution.

We believe that it will be important to find a tool that allows these needs to be captured – we could explore, for example, a two-part needs analysis/response plan that includes a chapter focused on the most life-threatening needs (severity 4-5) and a second chapter focused on addressing barriers to solutions and recovery. The success of this tool would depend, in part, on finding a framework that also resonates with development actors and other non-humanitarian funders. As such, it is likely to take additional time to find a suitable tool, and we therefore suggest to not wait for this to be resolved before moving to adopt a common framework for understanding humanitarian needs, which could be achieved more easily and offer important gains.

**Annex 1: Possible process adaptations for different data scenarios.**

- "Data rich" contexts – where a multi-sector household survey or census is conducted, and an analysis framework is applied. Where a Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) and JIAF are conducted, these could easily be adjusted and expanded to include refugee populations. For refugee contexts, existing analysis frameworks (e.g. the Vulnerability Assessment Framework in Jordan) could be adjusted to align with the common agreed framework. In these scenarios, needs and severity analysis may be conducted down to state or district level.

- "Partial data" contexts – where robust sector or partially multi-sector household-level assessments and associated analysis are conducted in targeted areas of the country. These assessments could be used to make approximations of overall magnitude and severity of need, although with lower certainty and to lower levels of granularity. For example, in South Sudan the Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring Survey and associated IPC Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition analysis process, while not comprehensively covering all sectors, would be sufficient to use as a proxy to estimate multi-sectoral need. Data limitations would need to be acknowledged for this type of context.

- "Data poor" contexts with strong UN/NGO presence but without existing refugee or non-refugee multi-sector assessments and analysis processes. Operational data could be used to conduct a low-confidence estimation of magnitude and severity of needs. In contexts with a Humanitarian Programme Cycle, the JIAF could be run as normal on the limited data. In non-HPC contexts, a new analysis process would need to be launched. This analysis could be outsourced, or in-country actors could be trained to conduct it. This would be additional work, but not so heavy as to be impossible.

- "Data poor" contexts with limited (or without) UN/NGO presence – here we would need to accept less visibility and produce only refugee caseloads. We would need to accept that these crises would therefore likely get less funding and priority, which would serve as an incentive to fundraise for data collection and analysis to understand needs more comprehensively to ensure needs in these crises get "counted" and prioritized.