**Primary Data Collection Techniques**

Primary data is data collected directly from the information source itself and has not undergone analysis before reaching the analytical phase of the needs assessment. Systematic observation and consultation of affected populations is undertaken during primary data collection to elicit community knowledge and perceptions. Assessment teams ask questions directly *to* the affected population through interviews and group discussions and *of* the affected area through observation. Using tools such as check-lists and questionnaires which are entered into spreadsheet or databases allows these information gathering processes to generate *data* to be aggregated, summarized, and interpreted later at the analysis stage. Primary data complements secondary data and lessons learned as information that feeds into an assessment.

The purpose of primary data collection is to:

* Gather community level information not available through secondary data
* Confirm or refute information provided by secondary data
* Provide a qualitative picture of the impacts of the disaster and identify risk factors
* Identify priority groups and sectors requiring immediate humanitarian response
* Ensure that the affected population participates in identifying priorities
* Identify key informants and priority sites for further data collection or monitoring.

Direct observation (DO) and key informant (KI) interviews can be carried out quickly and with relatively few resources during an emergency. They are typically used together for maximum impact, taking into consideration both views of affected people and of the field assessment teams. The goal to using DO and KI interviews together is to compare and contrast the information collected through both techniques, as much and as openly as possible, while restricting information gathering to those fundamental elements which can inform decision makers as to who is most affected, where they are, and what their key priority needs are.

Community Group Discussion (CGD) can also be used during emergency assessments. CGDs are similar to a Focus Group Discussion, but looser and more flexible in both composition and execution. CGDs are recommended when limited time is available for field level data collection, when specialised key informants are unavailable, and when it is known that variation in impact is quite important.

Before the assessment starts, teams must be clear on the unit of measurement, a set standard defining what will be measured and compared across at the analysis stage, such as a community, an affected group or a neighbourhood:

* A community can be described as a group of people that recognizes itself or is recognized by outsiders as sharing common cultural, religious or other social features, backgrounds and interests, and that forms a collective identity with shared goals. However, what is externally perceived as a community might in fact be an entity with many sub-groups or communities. It might be divided into clans or castes or by social class, language or religion. A community might be inclusive and protective of its members; but it might also be socially controlling, making it difficult for sub-groups, particularly minorities and marginalized groups, to express their opinions and claim their rights [(UNHCR, 2008).](http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/47da54722.pdf)
* A neighbourhood refers to a geographic unit of limited size, with relative homogeneity in housing and population, and with some level of social interaction and symbolic significance to residents. Social connections, common use of public facilities (e.g., schools, markets, health centres, water system, religious centre, etc.), and physical barriers (e.g., major thoroughfares) may contribute to overlap in residents’ definitions of neighbourhood. The neighbourhood perception can also be affected by individual characteristics, such as gender, age, and daily activities [(Weiss et al, 2007)](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2467386/). However, there is need for caution when considering the concept of urban neighbourhoods in developing countries. While rich and poor may live side by side geographically, the services they access (schools, transport, shopping areas, etc.) can be completely different and, aside from instances where the poor work directly for the rich, the economically defined groups may have limited contact with one another, and one geographically constrained area can host multiple neighbourhoods.
* Affected groups will vary from one affected country to another. Their types and definitions will need to be defined at the country level and based on already available information. The standard humanitarian profile classification proposed by the [IASC in 2011](https://cod.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/default/files/iasc_guidelines_on_the_humanitarian_profile_common_operational_dataset_2011-05-20.pdf) is a useful entry point to determine affected groups.

**Key Informant Interviews**

A key informant interview (KII) occurs when an individual with prior knowledge of the affected community is questioned to gather information on the consequences and effects of the disaster and on community needs. KIIs provide the field team with the impressions given by a community spokesperson on its behalf. This information creates a shared impression of the community’s perspective as to the impact of the crisis and ensuing humanitarian concerns.

**Who is a Key Informant (KI)?** The crucial characteristics of a KI are that they are well versed about their communities, its inhabitants, the site visited, and/or the disaster, because of professional background, leadership role, or personal experience. Usually a KI is a local civil, government or religious leader. KIs should be interviewed to:

* Obtain general information about the population (i.e. from an IDP camp manager, local authorities, mayor) or technical information from people representing specific professions, (i.e. health workers or school teachers).
* Gain in-depth knowledge about a specific topic or sector (e.g. interviewing a water committee representative or the leader of a women’s cooperative).
* Delve into sensitive and protection issues that may not be appropriate for group discussion (i.e. local NGO or community based organization leader).

Undertaking KIIs can be challenging and requires skilled and trained assessment team members. An initial group of KIs may be highly diverse in perspective and competency. Their personal knowledge of the disaster situation may vary greatly along with expectations or bias towards what humanitarian agencies might do for their community. KIs may know surprisingly little or may contradict each other. They may further retract initial descriptions of the impact of the disaster when a more powerful individual interrupts the discussion and offers a different assessment.

**Step 1: Selection of KIIs**

The number and type of KIIs per location depends on information needs, the range of expertise or perspective required and available from the pool of KIs, the nature of the disaster, the availability of people, and the time that can be spent at the site. Assessment teams should identify as many KIs as time allows and select a diverse range. For example, if there is time to interview five key informants in an IDP camp, interview the health centre doctor, one water committee representative, the camp manager, one teacher, and one police officer. Be sure to arrange interviews with KIs of different genders, ages, and religious and/or ethnic identify to ensure a full picture of the affected community. To reduce bias when selecting KIs:

* Remember that communities are not homogeneous. Take into account power dynamics within the community so that opposing or competing social groups do not speak for one another.
* Define the different characteristics of people to consult (e.g. those most affected by the crisis, IDPs, minority ethnic groups).
* Consult the affected population directly and include women, older persons, persons with disabilities, and ethnic or religious minorities in the pool of KIs.

*Regular* citizens can also be valuable KIs because they can share their personal experience. For example, a young female household head may be able to highlight priority needs from the perspective of a mother. Likewise a person who is unable to walk without assistance can highlight challenges that certain groups or segments of the community face in accessing aid due to mobility challenges. While not traditionally considered KIs, these individuals provide a unique perspective of the experience of *typical* members of the affected community.

Be careful not to give undue weight, credit or time to certain KIs. This is an easy trap to fall prey to, especially if potential KIs are articulate and accessible (i.e. a university professor who speaks your language or a KI from the same city or school).

**Step 2: During the interviews**

* Doing KIIs requires good interviewing skills. Spend time establishing a good rapport with the person you interview before you go into specific questions. A good relation between the interviewer and the interviewee goes a long way in getting good, quality data.
* Make sure people understand why they were asked to participate as a KI and what will be done with the information they share. Ensure good communication and informed consent. Ask permission to carry out the interview. If using an electronic device, explain what it is and how it works.
* Interview KIs in a safe place that is convenient to them and their needs. Do not exceed 45 minutes to an hour for each interview.
* Ask how long the KIs have been in the area and what contact they have with the community. Be clear about the geographic area, or social group, they refer to.
* Take notes throughout the interview and ensure that the information is transferred safely and without distortion. Make sure you do not become too focussed on the questionnaire or form you’re using. Remember that a KII is more than a survey and constant note-taking may destroy the flow of the interview. Ideally you should be two conducting the interview where one can take notes and the other keep the conversation going. Record metadata on the forms, e.g., such as date, location of interview, job of the KI, group represented by the KI, contacts for each KI, as this information might be used during debriefing and analysis.
* Use findings from direct observation to verify information and unpick inconsistencies in KI responses. Triangulate information from multiple KIs and refine questions for future KIs based on inconsistent or missing information. Be aware of both your biases and those of the KI and how they might affect results
* Endeavour to maintain communication with the visited communities and inform KIs about how the information they provided is being used. Give KIs the opportunity to ask questions or share their thoughts on issues not yet discussed.
* Ensure that the safety and security of the KIs is not compromised by participating in an individual interview. Explain to observers why the specific KI was chosen and the topics you’ll discuss.

Where possible, assessment team members should meet half through the field visit to discuss progress and agree any necessary changes to the approach or timing. Team members can also share initial findings, share challenges, and note gaps in information. This enables their fellow team members to examine these issues during the second half of the field visit.

**Step 3: After the Assessment**

The team leader will organize a debriefing at the end of the assessment day to give field team members the opportunity to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the KI and the interview process. Team members should compare notes, findings, views and impressions. They will weigh the reliability of KI and discuss any team bias. Observations, anecdotes, or concerns not captured in the data collection form are identified and discussed during the debriefing. The team leader must ensure all the forms are correctly filled and that any inconsistency or issue is duly noted.

Key Informant Interviews strengths [(adapted from WFP 2005)](http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/manual_guide_proced/wfp142790.pdf):

* Takes advantage of local experts/expertise and maximizes the utility of information gathered from each KII
* Can provide crucial contextual and retrospective insights that can be missed by a structured questionnaire.
* Small sample size is relatively cost-effective (time, financial, human resources) in comparison to a household survey.
* Respondents are knowledgeable of local economic conditions and can identify potential constraints and opportunities.

Key Informant Interviews weaknesses:

* Selection of informants is highly subjective and can be prone to bias.
* Estimates of need/capacity are difficult to quantify, lack error and confidence parameters, and represent 'best-estimates' from the perspective of the informants.
* Small sample size means that personal interests of individual informants exerts a strong influence on estimates of levels of access.
* Need skilled interviewers and facilitators who are able to guide the discussion.

**Direct Observation**

Direct observation (DO) provides a snapshot picture of an affected location and adds context and meaning to data collected through interviews. Use of DO provides a ‘feel’ for the situation using sounds, smells, and visual impressions. DO can be used to rapidly collect different types of information in a disaster situation. DO does not require costly resources, or detailed training, making it a quick data collection process that is easy to implement. Two types of direct observation are possible:

* During **structured observation,** the observer **looks for** a specific behaviour, object or event. To guide structured observation, a checklist is normally developed to function both as a reminder and a recording tool.
* During **unstructured observation,** the observer **looks at** how things are done and what issues exist (or do not exist). To guide unstructured observation, a short set of open ended questions can be developed that will be answered based on observations.

Assessment teams should use DO for “on the spot” triangulation of the responses, discussion, and explanations given by affected persons and KIs. However, because DO as a data collection technique provides only a snapshot of the situation, it has limited power in a rapidly changing situation or where there is substantial population movement, and it provides limited information about capacities and priorities of the people. While specific training is not a prerequisite for effective DO, some preparation is necessary to ensure that observers are aware that their own perceptions and expectations are subjective and impact upon how they report and interpret their observations.

**Step 1: During the field assessment**

After an introduction to relevant community leaders, start with a walk around the location with one or two community members. Ask them questions about what you observe on the way, to explain what has happened, and why things are as they are. Make diversions to visit locations of specific interest, such as water collection points, latrines, communal washing areas, schools, storage facilities, grave sites, markets and health facilities. Spend time in communal or public places (cafés, tea shops, markets, religious buildings, etc.). If an important site has not been seen because it was far from the chosen direction, make a separate visit to it. Note the time of day.

Recommendations when undertaking DO include:

* Observe with an open mind. Compare as much as possible with the results of KI Interviews. Restrict information gathering to what is relevant to your information needs and can be processed and analysed in the assessment timeframe.
* Be active in observations. Use all senses to gather impressions and collect data without pre-conceived notions or expectations. Record (i.e. using checklists) both what was expected to be evident in the site as well as what was not observed.
* Be aware of pre-existing capacities, opportunities, and social capital in sites visited. Note the absence of services and findings that contradict expectations.
* Respect local culture and gender dynamics: dress, behave, and communicate respectfully. Be sensitive to local concerns and the impact of the disaster. Ask permission to enter a house and/or ask questions. Be aware that taking photographs of affected persons can both endanger them (in conflict) or be highly inappropriate (such as men photographing women). Do not take photos where they are prohibited: always ask permission.

Observe:

* How people relate to one another, especially in light of age, gender, disability, and other minority status.
* People’s physical condition and activities. Look specifically at children, older persons, the chronically ill, and those persons with disabilities.
* If people from different groups or population segments are differently affected or vulnerable or have different coping mechanisms or access to aid, and why.
* The extent of damage. What has been damaged and what has not. What are the conditions of housing, properties, livestock, assets, etc.
* The daily lives and/or difficulties faced by women and other minorities (where and when culturally appropriate).
* The functioning, or non-functioning) of public services, sanitation systems, and infrastructure (e.g. schools, water points, health posts etc.).
* Power relationships and potential tensions within the community
* Activity, prices, and availability of products in the markets
* Presence or absence of crowds in public places, of children in schools, etc.
* The general state of cleanliness/sanitation, any obvious health hazards in public places (waste, pollution etc.).
* The general state of roads, types of available transport, traffic in the streets, etc.

Meet with the whole field team at least once during the fieldwork day at each site to review progress and decide what still need attention before leaving the site or which inconsistencies need triangulation.

**Step 2: After the field assessment**

A debrief between field team members should be organised by the team leader to collect observations, triangulate information, and wrap up final conclusions. DO findings should be formally recorded as it is easy to forget or overlook the information they provide at the analysis stage. In structured observation, this is straightforward, and a standard form is completed by the field teams. In less structured approaches, issues recording is most easily done in two steps:

* The observer notes in her/his field notebook the points of interest.
* Later, usually at the end of the day, the team members collates the information in a format agreed in advance (i.e. an observation checklist).

It is not always easy to interpret what is observed. DO is more useful in generating questions for follow up in subsequent interviews and should not be used for analysis independently of other sources of information, for the following reasons:

* Your sample of observations is likely to be small and selected non-randomly, observations may not be representative of the general situation in the site.
* Interpreting what you see may require technical expertise. This applies, for example, to the condition of crops, the protection status of children, or the physical condition of livestock.
* Observations may only be useful if you have something to compare them against. Would you have seen the same thing if you had visited the village at the same time of day and the same time of year before the current situation developed?
* If visiting the area for the first time, you may not know what to look for or what is normal or abnormal. Observations by people who know the area are of greater value than those of outsiders.

In case of inconsistencies, highlight areas where team observations and population responses do not match to enable further analysis of discrepancies and identify triangulation needs, through more interviews or secondary data review.

Direct observation strengths [(adapted from ACAPS 2011)](http://acaps.org/resourcescats/downloader/direct_observation_and_key_informant_interview_techniques/41):

* Can be used to rapidly collect different types of information in an emergency
* Does not require costly resources or detailed training to use.

Direct observation weaknesses:

* Because it provides a snapshot of the situation, it has limited power in a rapidly changing situation or where there is substantial population movement.
* It provides limited information about capacities and priorities of affected people.
* The gender, age, ethnicity and previous professional experience of the observer can affect the interpretation of data collected during observation.

**Community Group Discussions**

A CGD brings together a group of individuals with some common characteristics to gain information about a specific event. CGDs are used to elicit opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions from a group to gain insight about the impact of a disaster and ensuing humanitarian priorities. A CGD should not be mistaken with a Focus Group Discussion (FGD), which has a more rigid structure, collect only qualitative data (verbatim and text) with fewer and more homogenous participants whose characteristics are carefully identified in advance to ensure that a specific composition is achieved. An FGD usually has a more specific target area and focuses on exploring 3-5 main question-areas, whereas a CDG can include more people, with greater diversity, encompass more areas of interests and uses a more structured data collection form.

In a rapid needs assessment, CGDs:

* Identify most significant needs and concerns.
* Seek input from a variety of stakeholders about the needs, and capacities, of affected populations.
* Provide an understanding of how the disaster is impacting a community.
* Contribute to the development of a strategic plan to identify strengths and needs of affected populations and gaps in knowledge.

Unlike the one-way flow of information in an interview, CGDs generate data through group discussion. Listening as people share and compare their different points of view provides a wealth of information, not just about what they think, but why they think the way they do. The discussion’s aim is to provide an understanding of how the disaster is affecting a community, *from the perspective of the community*.

**Step 1 – Planning (before the CDG)**

A CDG need to be thoroughly planned before moving to the field. Important questions when planning include:

* How many sites should be visited?
* What defines a site? Is it determined geographically as a specific location, or is it determined by other factors such as living arrangement, for example, spontaneous settlements, organized camps, damaged own houses, host families, etc.? Organizing discussion groups by criteria such as living arrangements can help compare across the different groups when analysing the data
* How many CDGs should one aim at?
* Will the discussion be limited to one community group per site?
* Can male and female community members be included in the same community group discussion, or will better quality information be achieved through separate male and female discussions?

Remember that once a structure for CDGs in the particular field trip is decided one need to be consistent across sites. Having mixed groups in one location requires a similar setup in the next to allow for appropriate comparison across population groups and geographical locations.

Composition of CGDs:A group of four to eight persons is an optimal size for a CGD. Groups smaller than this are more accurately seen as multiple key informant groups, and larger groups are more difficult to manage.

However, following a crisis, large groups of people may live in close confines and being rigorous about group size or composition may be difficult. Bear in mind that a CGD is a flexible tool that has been developed for rapid information gathering and it is different from other established social research methods. Group size and structure should be determined based on the context and this should be clearly documented in the methodology section of the assessment findings.

Where possible, choose participants randomly but so as to maximise the diversity of the group. Ensuring diversity in a CGDs, based upon how variation in participant background, insight, perspective, and diversity by culture, gender, and geography, will contribute to assessment information needs. The selection of the participants will also depend on the specific interest, aims and objectives of the assessment.

Because of time constraints inherent in a rapid assessment and access limitations, CGD composition must be flexible. It may only be possible for an assessment team to gather one group of women and one group of men, with limited diversity within each group. This is okay; the purpose of a CGD in a rapid assessment is to understand the variation and diversity of the impact of the disaster on the population and give the population voice. CGDs are only one piece of the puzzle.

Content of CGD questions

CGD questions can either be in a questionnaire form or an agreed set of questions to stimulate and focus discussion. To achieve rapid consolidation and analysis of findings a tool that has predefined responses based on lessons learned and knowledge of the situation is useful. However, this should not be used to limit the inclusion of new and unforeseen responses from the group. Include some open-ended questions allowing for multiple possible replies, but avoid leading questions that suggest the facilitator’s opinion or a preferred answer

Length of Community Group Discussion: An assessment covering multiple sectors can take a long time, but remember that participants have their own obligations and priorities beyond speaking with the assessment team. Set a time limit, usually from 60-90 minutes and ensure that the discussion begins and ends on time.

Location of Community Group Discussion: CGDs should be held in locations that are central and easily accessible, by foot or private/public transportation. Consideration should be given to maximizing participation, while minimizing inconvenience. CGDs should be held in *safe* locations which are ideally separate (both geographically and socially) from the rest of the community. Private homes, classrooms, public meeting rooms, verandas, and other segregated places can all work.

Once in the CGD location, participants should sit in a circle, either all in chairs or all on the floor. No one participant should be higher than another. Some participants, such as those who are hard of hearing or visually impaired, may need assistance in meeting specific needs in order to participate. Persons with mobility challenges may need assistance in traveling to the CGD. Language translation may also be necessary for CGDs with older persons or ethnic minorities who may speak a different language to the local *lingua franca*.

Ask the participants what they do for a living and what part of the community they come from. Note characteristics of the participants (e.g. gender, age and socio-economic status) and the population subgroups represented.

**Step 2 – During the CDG**

Participation: The CGD process must include the development of clear and measurable information goals. These are critical for the assessment team, but it is also important for participants to understand why they are being asked to participate in the CGD. CGD invitations, if any, should be clear about confidentiality, use of findings, and ensure that participants do not have false expectations for participation, such as preferential provision of humanitarian aid.

Facilitation:

Experience has shown that it is useful to have two facilitators for each CGD; one note taker and one facilitator. Ensure that the facilitators are of appropriate age and gender so that male groups are facilitated by men and (where culturally required) female groups by women. The facilitators should be have the appropriate language skills and cultural knowledge to communicate with the community. Native speakers if possible. Facilitators with experience in working with communities are desirable, however this may not always be possible. It is therefore important to have a facilitator who has been thoroughly briefed on the format of the discussion. The facilitator should be skilled at managing group discussions, gauging the agreement or disagreement of the overall group with what is being said, balancing dominant personalities, addressing potentially tricky and/or upsetting questions, and be well versed in the topics that are being covered.

Familiarity with the assessment tool being used is vital so definitions and discussion approach is used as consistently as possible across the assessment teams. The facilitator should establish ground rules (for example, everyone has a right to speak, no one person has the right answer, and speakers should not be interrupted), ensure that everybody understands the purpose of the discussion, and get permission from the group to take notes. Effective interview techniques require skill in four key areas:  listening, paraphrasing, probing, and note taking.

Reaching consensus is important.  Questions may allow one single response, multiple responses or they may require a prioritization of responses (for example, first, second and third priorities).  If there is vastly varied responses achieving this consensus will require very clear definitions and skilled management of the discussion. There may be times where noting “no clear consensus” will be relevant, and recording the range of opinions will be required.

Completion: Upon completion of the CGD:

* Ask participants for any final thoughts or input.
* Thank each of them for participating.
* If agreed to in advance, confirm when and how participants will receive a summary of the community group findings.

**Step 3 – Analysis of CGD Findings (after the CGD)**

After the CGD, facilitators need to summarise their notes by comparing findings, sharing observations, and discussing responses to key questions, arriving at a short summary that is mutually agreed. The summary should also indicate whether certain questionnaire questions are misleading and/or confusing. This finding should be shared with the team leader and fed back to the assessment team for potential revision of the questionnaire.

The analytic process should result in clarity on key priorities identified by the CGD: main groups impacted and any other unanticipated information. When analysing the findings of a CGD, consider:

1. The import of specific words, meanings and their contexts should be determined.
2. The internal consistency of responses should be doubled checked to ensure that answers haven’t been changed to mollify more influential CGD participants.
3. Specific responses and those based on experience have more weight than vague/ impersonal responses.
4. Look for trends or ideas that cut across the entire discussion

What to watch out for in CGDs:

* Verbalizations, non-verbals, and omissions (what people are not saying)
* Language and meanings of words/phrases, including vocabulary or jargon
* Abstractions, new concepts, and examples or stories
* Explanations (yours and theirs), contradictions (between thoughts and feelings, statements and examples), and criteria for evaluating issues, impact, needs etc.
* Degree of consensus and/or agreement, relationships and influence patters between participants
* Emotional reactions (enthusiasm, joy, excitement, perking up of interest, energy, anger, fear, curiosity, changes in emotional tone).

Community Group Discussion strengths [(adapted from WFP 2005)](http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/manual_guide_proced/wfp142790.pdf):

* Allow for dissent and consensus building about levels of access from various perspectives and/or interest groups.
* Can provide crucial contextual and retrospective insights that can be missed by a structured questionnaire.
* Small sample size is relatively cost-effective (time, financial, human resources) in comparison to a household survey.
* Allows for gender and vulnerability perspectives to emerge on key issues.
* Respondents' views and priorities are actively sought so as to ensure strategic responses fit to needs and abilities of affected communities.

Community Group Discussion weaknesses:

* Selection of informants is highly subjective and can be prone to bias.
* Estimates of need/capacity are difficult to quantify, lack error and confidence parameters, and represent 'best-estimates' from the perspective of the informants.
* Small sample size means that personal experience of individual respondents exerts a strong influence on estimates of need and capacity.
* Small sample size creates difficulty generalizing from sample (n) to population (N).
* Need to have skilled facilitators to guide discussions and analyse qualitative data.

**General tips for Key Informant Interviews and Community Group Discussions** [(Adapted from WFP 2005)](http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/manual_guide_proced/wfp142790.pdf)

**Planning**

* Involve experts in the design and planning of the assessment and tools.
* Decide whether to use a semi-structured (checklist) or structured (questionnaire) form. A semi-structured interview is a guided interview in which an exhaustive set of questions are decided ahead of time. Questions are open ended, with the aim of stimulating discussion on a given topic. A structured interview involves one person asking another person a list of pre-determined questions about selected topics using a questionnaire. Each KI is asked exactly the same questions (ideally in the same order) so answers can be accurately aggregated and comparisons be made with confidence between sample sub-groups or between different assessment periods.
* Field test the data collection instrument and refine it as necessary. Make sure the translation is accurate. Include space in the data collection instrument for capturing direct observation comments and notes to verify information and correct inconsistencies. This helps add context and meaning to collected data.
* Plan the field data collection carefully. Ensure there is enough time to carry out KIIs, DO, and GCDs. When possible, inform the authorities of the assessment itinerary and time of date/time of the visit and time or arrival/departure.

**Chose appropriate team members**

* Mobilize enumerators/researchers/assessment specialists with local knowledge and language skills. This will enable you to: (i) understand what is going on and the interactions among different groups, and (ii) ‘read between the lines’ of what is (and is not) being said.
* Ensure gender and age balance in the teams.
* Choose experienced assessment team members, with:
  + Knowledge of humanitarian issues and disaster impacted communities
  + Ability to separate him/herself from the topics at hand, maintain objectivity, be independent, and have no “hidden agendas” that will affect the outcomes.
  + Strong communication skills and able to relate to a variety of opinions without showing preferences.
  + Ability to guide efficient group discussion and encourage all participants, while maintaining a flow that keeps with the stated agenda.
  + Skill and cultural competence in facilitating individuals who represent diversity (gender, age, religion, ethnicity, and disability).
  + Flexible and encouraging of relevant diversions in the discussion to accommodate participants’ input and ideas.
  + Perceptive and good listening skills who can probe sensitively to elicit further discussions.
  + Patience in letting individuals share ideas without rushing them, allowing time for reflection between questions.
  + Respect for the diversity of participants and their opinions and input.
  + Experience using participatory techniques and an understanding of the topics to be discussed.

**Before the field**

* Review the interview manual and be clear about what you want to find out. Make sure you know the reasons for each question and how responses will be analysed. Think about what sort of answers you might expect to the questions you will ask. Make sure you understand local weights and measures.
* Review the secondary data you have on the area and the current situation, and your notes from interviews and discussions to date to help prioritize different topics and ask the right follow-up questions.
* Make sure you have a good translator with you, if you are not fluent in the local language, and that s/he is well briefed. Ensure that there are two of you, whenever possible, one to lead/facilitate the discussion, the other to take notes.
* Train team members properly to achieve accurate and precise measurements. Decide in advance who will conduct the interviews.

**Decide where to meet**

* Try to find somewhere where the group can sit in a circle, if possible, so that everyone can see everyone else and you can have eye contact with everyone.
* Choose a contained space if possible, a certain degree of privacy is desirable as you don’t want a lot of spectators.

**How to start – give a careful introduction**

* Your introduction is critical and will set the tone for the whole interview/discussion. Begin with a traditional greeting, thank the participants for coming, and introduce yourselves. Briefly, tell them a bit about yourself, and who you work for. (It can be useful to include a few personal facts about yourself, such as how many children you have. People relate more easily to individuals they can identify with.)
* Explain that you are there to assess the situation after the disaster and that you are interested to learn what is going on in the community in general, how people are living, and what they can do for themselves, as this will help you understand the best way to assist.
* Avoid saying that the purpose of your visit is to assess needs for aid. However, if the area has a long history of relief assistance, point out that requests for relief assistance are evaluated on a number of considerations, not just the responses they give. Stress that there is no benefit to exaggerating the problems. The more accurate the information, the more likely it is that there will be a response. Share that aid resources are scarce and will be allocated strictly on the basis of need.
* Explain that you are not the decision makers. Emphasize that you need to be able to provide the decision-makers with good, accurate information on the situation faced by the community, their capacities as well as their needs. Do not make promises about assistance or raise unrealistic expectations of aid. Ensure people do not expect preferential humanitarian support in lieu of participation.
* Tell participants that they have the right not to answer specific questions if they wish, and that you will respect that right.
* Do not ask for full names, as this might make some people less willing to talk honestly.

**How to behave during an interview/discussion**

During the interview/discussion, your own attitude and sensitivity are important:

* Keep it informal. Be friendly and relaxed and put participants at their ease. Adapt your behaviour to local customs to gain respect and listen respectfully. Do not take more than 45 minutes for a KI interview or 90 minutes for a CGD.
* Refer to the interview guide/manual discretely. Memorize it as much as possible. Do not use it as a questionnaire. Use it to ensure that all topics are covered by the end of the KI/CGD, but be flexible and allow new and unexpected issues to be raised.
* Respect people’s sensitivities and their right not to answer certain questions if they choose not to.
* Look at people when they talk, to enhance their confidence and helps you listen.
* Be aware of non-verbal communication from your informants and from yourself, avoid passing judgement (verbally or through body language) on what is being said.
* Rephrase what has been said to make sure that you (and other people) have understood a point correctly.
* Do not (or appear to) be in a hurry, but show that you value the time people are giving up to talk with you.
* Do not be afraid to admit your lack of understanding; when something is not clear, ask the group or KI to help you understand.
* Do not talk too much; you are there to listen and learn.
* If interviews or discussions are leaded by two people, the team member leading/facilitating the discussion should note important facts, points of agreement, and points that need to be followed up, but should not take detailed notes. The note taker should do this. It can be very disconcerting for the people being interviewed if the person putting the questions continually breaks off to write notes. The note-taker may occasionally and quietly remind the facilitator of the time and points that need to be followed up. Ideally both team members should be competent facilitators and may change roles for subsequent KIIs or CGDs.

**How to behave during a semi structured interview/discussion**

The purpose of KIIs and CGDs is to find out what concerns the participants, and generate information and ideas that would not be captured by responses to a questionnaire. A free flow of ideas is essential, but the facilitator must keep the objective in mind. Here are some tips:

* Start each topic with an open question (one that does not have a simple yes/no answer); prompt with specific questions if response is limited.
* Each question should follow on from the answer to the previous question.
* Finish enquiries on one topic before moving to the next, but follow the flow of the conversation, keeping a track of leads, so that you can follow these up later.
* Do not interrupt the flow to ask a question or propose an exercise that is not clearly related to the topic under discussion.
* Allow participants to explain their points fully, even if they go off at a tangent. Try to understand their logic and concerns. Politely interrupt if a respondent strays too far from the subject and gently refocus the discussion back to topic.

**How to ask questions**

* Ask clear and direct questions, e.g.: How…? Where…? When…? Who…? What…? How much…? Keep asking: Why?
* Ask questions about groups of people, not individuals, e.g.: “How many goats do most poor families have?” (not “How many goats do you have?”).
* Ask one question at a time and no more than one question in the same sentence.
* Only ask questions to which the respondents can be expected to answer.
* Be clear about the time period to which the question refers.
* Keep sensitive issues until later in the KI or CGD. Avoid asking sensitive questions directly (i.e. do not ask about total income, but about things that allow you to estimate income, such as number of days worked and daily labour rates).
* Ensure that each question is clearly understood, especially if using an interpreter.
* Do not phrase questions in a way that assumes or implies that the informant(s) should follow (or have followed) a specific course of action.
* Avoid leading questions, in particular questions that invite people to paint a very pessimistic picture. Examples of such questions are: “Has anyone died of famine in this area?” or “How many households need shelter assistance?”
* Do not induce particular answers by helping the group, or interviewee, to respond.

**Involve everyone, avoid domination**

Balanced participation is likely to be one of the biggest challenges:

* Ensure that everyone has a say. Do not allow more powerful individuals or groups to dominate the proceedings. Although it is best to avoid dictating who should answer questions, if one or two individuals are dominating, ask the same question to different individuals to encourage others to respond.
* Pay attention to participants who remain silent. Try to include them by using your eyes to invite them to speak out, or by asking them questions directly.

**When assessing a conflict situation**

* Explain who you are and why you are there, including your relationship with the government and other parties. Emphasize your independence, and avoid being accompanied by any party of the conflict, if possible. Find ways to talk with all groups in the community, not just those who present themselves as ‘leaders’.
* When you visit and meet with people who are identified with one side of the conflict, avoid being accompanied by others who could be identified with, or suspected as being from, another side, or anyone from a group with a history of animosity towards those whom you are visiting. This applies to your own national staff and your driver as well as local officials or the staffs of other organizations.
* Do not ask questions that may stigmatise people or endanger respondent.
* Ensure the anonymity of the data collected, and do not ask for full names. If key protection risks are observed or reported by a KI, refer them confidentially to the most appropriate authorities or agency (police, Protection Cluster colleagues etc.) for confidential follow up.
* Expect biased information. Many people will either have an interest in presenting a biased picture or be afraid to tell the truth, especially if other people are present.
* Be sensitive to the situation. People you meet and talk with may be under threat or putting themselves at risk merely by being seen talking with you.
* Do not ask sensitive questions and never ask about allegiances. Avoid direct questions with political or military significance (e.g. front lines, recent bombings or attacks).
* Never provoke an argument. Avoid crowds. Be ready to cut short the KII or CGD or withdraw completely if the situation is, or becomes, tense.
* In situations of open repression, remember what you are told, do not take notes. Write up your notes after you have left the area when it is safe for both the team and the community. People are likely to be less honest and talkative if they see you take notes. They could be at risk should your notes fall into the ‘wrong’ hands.

**Analyse and cross-check during the interview/discussion**

* Keep track of the story you are being told. Is it consistent? Clarify any apparent inconsistencies. Cross-check as much as possible by asking the same question in different ways and comparing responses of different people. Do not simply ask the same question over and over again.
* Do not accuse participants of lying. If something does not make sense, take the blame for being slow to understand and ask them to explain further.

**Watch the time and progress, take breaks, and stop when it’s time**

Keep a regular check on progress. If you sense that the KI or CGD is not providing useful, accurate, and credible information, politely bring it to a close and move on to another group, or go elsewhere. Wrap up by rapidly summarizing what has been discussed and the main ideas expressed by the group.

**Note taking**

Taking notes during an interview or discussion, regardless of the methodology being used, is critical for ensuring that what the respondents say is accurately captured. A common error is for data collectors to interpret or analyse what respondents have said prior to writing it down. It is crucial to separate data collection from data analysis and to avoid assuming that you know what the respondent meant. Data collectors should be encouraged to note any analytic insight that they might gain from their field experience, but this should not be confused with documenting what the respondents have actually said. Key Steps to follow in Data Collection include:

* Be sure to separate description and raw data collection from your own analysis, judgement, interpretation or insight.
* Do not attempt to recall what was said in an interview or discussion at a later time (e.g. in the car or back at the office). Inevitably, such recalled data will be biased by your own insights and analysis.
* Be disciplined and conscientious in taking detailed field notes at all stages of the fieldwork, including notes on how the fieldwork that was carried out differed from the fieldwork that was planned. Notes about how the respondents were selected (in relation to the planned sampling strategy) are important for assessing comparability among data collected from different sites and at different points in time.
* Be descriptive when taking notes. While it is critical to document what respondents said, note also focus group participants’ reactions to points that were made in the discussions as well as any other relevant visual observations that you make. The intent is to have data that describe accurately, not only what was said, but also the setting in which it was said.
* Make notes that refer to the interview or discussion guide, checklist or questionnaire that you are using. It is often helpful to create the checklist with space for adding field notes, ensuring that each note is correctly situated under the relevant checklist point. Another option is to number the discussion guide or checklist points and refer to these numbers in your notes. For questionnaires, the usual practice is to leave space for ticking or filling in answers on the questionnaire itself.
* Quote directly from interviews or discussions. This allows people to be represented in their own words and terms. It also provides powerful anecdotal evidence for reports, proposals, etc.
* Use the notes that you have taken to confirm important points that are made in order to ensure that you have understood their intended meaning fully. Notes also facilitate crosschecking with other sources.
* Even if you think that a point is not important, document it. This serves two purposes: the point may prove to be important either later in the interview/discussion or during analysis; and your noting of every point assures respondents that you are being unbiased in what you document and giving each person’s ideas equal value.
* Do not let note taking disrupt the flow of the conversation, interview or discussion. In one on-one interviews, this is not usually a problem. In group settings, however, where your role as facilitator is paramount, the use of a facilitator and a separate note taker is the best approach

**After**

* As quickly as possible after the end of the discussion, team members should sit together to review the notes and agree whether anything needs to be modified or added. They should also reflect on how the KIs or CGDs went, what might have motivated respondents to give certain answers and, for KIs, whether they were sufficiently well-placed to know about the various subjects under discussion.
* At the end of the field assessment visit, meet with community representatives. Explain what has been done and seen, share initial conclusions, and inform the community how this information will be used.

**How to tell, and what to do, if things are going badly wrong**

Things are going badly wrong when:

* Information is not being volunteered readily.
* One person is dominating the discussion and not allowing others to participate.
* When you cross-check, things become less clear and contradictions emerge.
* If the information given was true, the informants would be dead.
* Members of the group cannot reach a consensus.

What to do if things are going badly wrong:

* Check again who is in the group. Sometimes problems arise because participants come from different social groups. In this case, re-form (split) the group.
* Sometimes respectfully explaining that things do not make sense, and that you will disregard the data if this continues, can lead to a change of attitude by respondents.
* If things are really bad, give up as soon as politely possible and move on to the next set of questions. If that does not work, politely end the KI/CGD.

**How to work with an interpreter?**

* Ensure that the interpreter understands the subject and vocabulary of the interview and is able to forge a respectful relationship with interviewees.
* Double check responses regularly with the interpreter to keep communications open and facilitate an understanding of the purpose of the interview or discussion.
* Speak in short units of speech, not long involved sentences or paragraphs.
* Avoid technical terminology, abbreviations, acronyms, and professional jargon.
* Avoid colloquialisms, abstractions, idioms, slang, similes, and metaphors.
* Encourage the interpreter to translate the interviewee’s own words rather than paraphrasing or "polishing" it. This gives a better sense of the interviewee’s concept of what is going on and his or her emotional state.
* Encourage the interpreter to refrain from inserting his or her own ideas or interpretations or omitting information.
* To check the interviewee’s understanding, and the accuracy of the translation, ask the interviewee to repeat instructions or whatever has been communicated in his or her own words, with the interpreter facilitating.
* During the interaction, look at and speak directly to the interviewee, not the interpreter.
* Listen to the interviewee(s) and watch their nonverbal communication, observe facial expressions, voice intonations, and body movements.
* Be patient. An interpreted interview takes longer. Careful interpretation often requires that the interpreter use long explanatory phrases.

Even if you use an interpreter, there are ways you can become more actively involved in the communication process.

* Learn proper forms of address in the local language. Use of titles conveys respect for the interviewee and demonstrates your willingness to learn about their culture.
* Learn basic words and sentences of the local language. If possible, be familiar with special terminology used. The more you understand, the greater the chance you will pick up on misinterpretations and misunderstandings in the interpreter-interviewee interchange.
* Use a positive tone of voice that conveys your interest in the interviewee. Never be condescending, judgmental, or patronizing.
* Repeat important information more than once.
* Reinforce verbal interaction with visual aids.