ENHANCING UNHCR SOCIOECONOMIC ASSESSMENTS

GUIDE TO STARTING A SOCIOECONOMIC ASSESSMENT (SEA)

SEA RESOURCE PACK

This guide is part of a resource pack for planning and implementing SEAs.

Other planning aids available include:

- Standardized questionnaire modules
- Template to create a terms of reference for hiring a survey firm
- Note on resolving the "case versus household" issue common to surveys for forcibly displaced people

REGISTER YOUR SEA

It takes just 5 minutes and will allow UNHCR's Division of Resilience and Solutions - Research, Analysis and Knowledge Management Unit to offer you **customized support**. Register here: https://enketo.unhcr.org/x/#T90Bwg7O

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livelihoods@unhcr.org

4 STEPS TO PLANNING A SOCIOECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

STEP 1 CONCEPTUALIZE THE SURVEY

- Establish survey objectives
- Identify target population
- Set out relevant indicators of interest
- Determine the necessary disaggregation of results required
- Estimate the budget range

STEP 2 DEVELOP THE SURVEY OUTLINE

- Provide review of current literature and data
- Set out expectations of survey standardization
- Identify potential sampling approaches
- Review technical decisions related to survey design, implementation and analysis

FOLLOWING STEPS 1 AND 2, A SURVEY FIRM CAN BE HIRED (OPTIONAL) TO HELP WITH STEP 3 .

STEP 3 DEVELOP THE FULL SURVEY METHODOLOGY & QUESTIONNAIRES

- Based on survey outline, develop full methodology & questionnaires
- Flesh out implementation plans for fieldwork, data processing and other specifics

STEP 4 QUALITY ASSURANCE

- Submit methodology for quality assurance review

Contents

This socioeconomic assessment planning resource is produced by the Division of Resilience and Solutions – Analytics, Research and Knowledge Management Unit, UNHCR. Questions about planning a socioeconomic assessment or regarding the use of this document and related resources should be written to livelihoods@unhcr.org.

Guide to starting a socioeconomic assessment

Introduction

In the effort to promote socioeconomic inclusion of persons of concern, UNHCR operations routinely conduct quantitative surveys termed *Socioeconomic Assessments (SEAs)*. These provide the basis for selecting and designing interventions, targeting, measuring impact, and advocacy. SEAs were originally introduced in 2015 within the framework of the *Operational Guidelines on the Minimum Criteria for Livelihoods Programming.*[1] Their thematic scope can differ substantially; nevertheless, common topics include demographic characteristics of household members, dwelling characteristics, asset ownership, access to services, food consumption score/groups, coping strategies, debt/finance, assistance received, social participation and perceptions, priority needs, and consumption expenditure (with a view to computing monetary poverty). Currently, around 10-15 SEAs are carried out each year by UNHCR operations globally.

Despite the importance of SEAs and the data they deliver, an internal review of recent SEAs found that most of them were at the weak end of the quality spectrum; and that their quality, comparability and cost-efficiency is severely impeded by a lack of standardized methodological approaches and harmonized guidance material. To help address this shortcoming, this note – as part of a wider resource pack for SEAs – provides an overview of key steps required in the early phases of planning a SEA, and points to relevant reference material.

Given that every SEA is different and serves different purposes, this note aims to provide a large degree of flexibility in survey design while at the same time providing applied and practical guidance for country offices.[2] This note is aimed primarily at non-technical staff in UNHCR country operations tasked with starting up an SEA, and provides orientation for the early stages of survey planning. It is not intended to be an implementation guide for the full survey cycle, nor does it intend to provide in-depth technical guidance, e.g. on sampling methods, etc.

[1] While the *Minimum Criteria* are no longer required, the principles that they introduced, including socioeconomic assessments, have been mainstreamed into UNHCR Livelihoods programming and remain widely relevant across operations, including beyond the remit of the Livelihoods sector.

[2] It may be noted that SEAs occasionally include a qualitative component in addition to the quantitative survey. However, this planning guide focusses only on the quantitative survey.

Help us help you in planning your SEA

Resources available: templates, standardized modules, technical notes

As described in detail in the subsequent sections of this guide, UNHCR's DRS Research, Analysis and Knowledge Management Unit provides a range of tools and services that can help you in planning a SEA. In addition to this planning guide, a set of standardized questionnaire modules, as well as a template TOR for procuring a survey firm have been developed for this purpose. UNHCR DRS also makes available a set of technical notes (e.g. on addressing the "case versus household" issue) and is available to review different steps involved in the design of your SEA, including the development of a Survey Concept Note, Survey Outline, Survey Firm TOR, and Survey Methodology and Questionnaires. See Annex A for an overview of these outputs and available support.

Register your SEA online

In order to provide streamlined support, all operations planning SEAs are strongly encouraged to register their SEA on the UNHCR-DRS online tracker. This simple and user-friendly tool provides a quick overview of a SEA's progression through the key process steps outlined below and allows DRS to offer tailored support across the project cycle. Registering a SEA takes less than 5 minutes, and subsequent progress updates (for which the system will send automated email reminders) can be carried out within 1-2 minutes. Register here: https://enketo.unhcr.org/x/#T90Bwg7O

First steps to consider when planning a SEA

Step 1: Conceptualizing the survey through design of a concept note

This important step should precede the development of a more detailed survey outline and methodology. Getting this broad conceptualization right will make all subsequent steps substantially easier. Moreover, given that this step is not overly technical, it is the ideal opportunity to build broad internal consensus around the delineation of the planned survey. Once agreed, the below items should be documented in a ***survey concept note*** (usually 1-2 pages).

- **Survey objectives**
  The first step in conceptualizing a survey is to clearly develop the survey's key objectives. This statement should take a big-picture approach (as opposed to a narrow discussion of the areas of data that are of interest) and should outline precisely and in a detailed manner how the survey data will be used in programming, advocacy, etc.
- **Target population**
  It is important to clearly identify the target population for which the survey is to deliver representative estimates. In most cases, this will be all persons-of-concern residing in a certain country or region or camp. However, depending on the survey's objectives, it may be a sub-group, and this should be clearly specified.
- **Key indicators of interest**
  Once the survey is firmly set in the "big picture", consideration should be given to the main statistical indicators that would be necessary to properly inform the overall survey objectives. At this stage of the survey planning process, it is not absolutely necessary to define the set of key indicators in purely statistical terms (e.g. it would be sufficient at this

stage to specify that current primary school enrolment is an indicator area of interest, as opposed to more precise specifications such as “net and gross primary enrolment rates”. It is understood that the survey will eventually cover more than the key indicators developed here (the subsequent survey design phase will often uncover a need for further secondary indicators), but they represent a minimum set by which the subsequent survey production can be quality controlled.

- **Determine the necessary disaggregation of results required (e.g. by location, country of origin, gender, etc.**
  In most SEAs, it is insufficient to produce estimates only at the aggregate level for the entire target population of interest. Usually, disaggregation of the results is required (e.g. by sub-camp or other geographical location, by country of origin, by gender, by age group, etc.). This data need is an important input for all subsequent steps and should be clearly identified at the conceptualization stage.

- **Indicative budget frame**
  While it is too early at this stage to fully cost the survey, it is useful to come to a rough decision on the available budget range within which the survey should be implemented.

  The cost of data collection activities varies significantly globally as a result of several factors, including cost of living, sample size, length of questionnaire and data collection modality (internal or contracted). On average, UNHCR verification exercises are estimated to cost between US$ 50–75 per household (US$ 10–15 per person). For national surveys, the World Bank estimates a cost of US$ 64–405 per household for a complex, representative survey of 90-120 minutes.[3] The duration and complexity of most UNHCR socioeconomic assessments will fall between these two modalities, while the geographic scope is likely to be more narrow than a national survey (and therefore less costly, given the significant expense of transportation).

  Based on this, a 45-minute survey can be expected to cost from US$ 20,000–40,000 for a small sample (300-500 households), and no less than US$ 50,000 for a larger sample (700 or more). Adding length or complexity obviously results in a higher cost, while the use of internal resources in an area with easier access, for example, reduces them. Cleaning and analyzing the results is also an expense which must be accounted for. Contracting a professional firm for a larger household survey can easily cost US$ 100,000 or more.

Step 2: Developing the survey outline (and subsequently recruiting a survey firm if needed)

Once the survey is fully conceptualized, the next step is to develop a ***survey outline*** (usually around 3-9 pages). The survey outline adds to the four areas described in step 1 with more technical considerations – without requiring in-depth technical expertise.

As described in more detail below, such a survey outline should be developed by UNHCR operations irrespective of whether the survey will be carried out with in-house capacity or

[3] Based on a 2015/16 review of expenditure in Focus, UNHCR registration section estimates the following per person costs for verification: Kenya- Kakuma (US$ 9.83), Kenya- Nairobi (US$ 11.54), Rwanda (US$ 7.75), Niger (US$ 13.49) and Burkina Faso (US$ 17.27). Meanwhile, the World Bank estimates the following average regional costs per household for national surveys: Europe and Central Asia (US$ 49), Latin America (US$ 105), South Asia (US$ 126), Middle East and North Africa (US$ 224) and Africa (US$ 322).

contracted out to a survey firm. In the latter case, the survey outline will form the basis for the TORs for contracting.

- **Review current literature and data to inform survey design**
  While surveys are usually conducted to fill data gaps, it is rare that no prior data exists on the target population at all. Before embarking on a new data collection exercise, it is important to develop a comprehensive list of the existing data - even if this has a thematically very narrow scope, covers only parts of the target population, or is of low quality. Existing data is relevant to not only understand better how your SEA will improve, and or fit within, the existing data environment, but also to help inform which questions remain unanswered.
- **Review best practice tools to inform survey design**
  In many of the indicator areas that are of interest to an average SEA, UNHCR or other institutions provide standardized survey questionnaire modules. While step 2 does not yet get involved in actual questionnaire development, it is important to be aware of and explicitly mention in the survey outline any UNHCR-internal and other international best practices for questionnaire design that are relevant with a view to the survey's key indicators as conceptualized above, in order to ensure that subsequent questionnaire development – whether carried out by a contractor or the operation itself – aligns with these standardized modules wherever appropriate. Standardization of survey design with the following recommendations is strongly suggested so that the data you collect will be fundamentally comparable with other local, national, regional and international surveys, and allow you to contextualize your results. Where applicable, it is recommended that the survey align with the following approaches:
    - National approaches used by the government statistical offices:
        - National statistical offices of the relevant country may offer a range of data collection tools, including questionnaires adapted for the local setting which allow comparisons across time and population.
        - A wide range of SEA questionnaire modules that follow best practices are available from institutions supporting national statistics offices:
            - MICS
            - DHS
            - LSMS
    - UNHCR-internally developed standard modules:
        - Cash
        - Employment (available as part of the SEA Resource Pack)
        - Energy
        - Food security, including coping strategies
        - Health and related topics
        - Information and Communication Needs
        - Livelihoods
        - Multidimensional Poverty Index for forced displacement contexts (under development by DRS, expected in 2020)
        - Skills (under development, expected in 2020)
        - Social participation and perceptions (under development by DRS, expected in 2020)
        - Water and sanitation (also see the UNHCR WASH Manual and Resources: Annual Household Survey)

- Other potentially relevant standard modules:
  - An (incomplete) attempt at summarizing the many different "standardized" questionnaire modules that exist – including some of the above - is the IHSN Question Bank.

- **Identify potential sampling approaches**
  Another important aspect of preparing for the actual survey design development phase is to explore the different data sources that may lend themselves as a sampling frame. This should take place even before the actual sampling strategy is devised under step 2 below and is an important input to a survey's design (and to the TORs for a survey firms). Broadly speaking, a sampling frame is any list that comprehensively describes the population from which a representative sample is to be interviewed and from which a random selection can be made – without necessarily providing any detailed information beyond identifiers of any kind. A typical example of a sample frame in UNHCR's work is an up-to-date registration list of refugees, e.g. from proGres. However, sampling frames don't need to be lists of individuals or families/cases/households. In a camp setting, an up-to-date list of dwellings (e.g. from a recent shelter survey) can also serve as a sampling frame. If no such list exists, in clearly contained geographical areas populated solely by the survey's target population (e.g. a refugee camp), available maps or satellite/drone imagery can also be a fallback option for a sampling frame.

- **Key final considerations on survey design, implementation, and analysis**
  While every SEA is different, there are a few major technical decisions that any SEA should avoid in any case (which unfortunately wasn't always the case in past SEAs[4]). In the survey outline, it can be useful to rule such approaches out explicitly and categorically at this early stage. The below list provides a non-exhaustive set of considerations that applies to any SEA.
  - Avoid non-probability sampling approaches (e.g. convenience sampling, where every subject meeting the criteria is administered a questionnaire until the sample size is met, or snowball sampling, where respondents refer enumerators to acquaintances). Such non-probability sampling approaches do not present statistically representative results.
  - Where the survey aims to produce disaggregated data on specific subpopulations (e.g. subcamps, country of origin, etc.), consider oversampling of under-represented subpopulations as a means of increasing sampling efficiency
  - Where the sampling approach results in differing selection probabilities, ensure the application of weights during the analysis stage to ensure an unbiased inference from the sample to the population.
  - Individual-level information (e.g. education, employment, etc.) should always be captured for all household members, not just the household head. To accurately measure your key indicators across the entire population it is necessary to gather information on all members of the household.
  - Carefully consider all potential sampling approaches. In past SEAs, there appears to have been an exaggerated focus on proGres data as a basis for sampling despite the fact that it has known quality issues in some countries and

[4] UNHCR. 2019. "Observations from review of past socioeconomic assessments" documents in detail the technical shortcomings of past SEAs and is available upon request.

the fact that the population under analysis (in particular in camps) often lends itself well to alternative sampling approaches.
    - Where UNHCR registration data is used as a sampling frame, be aware of the fact that the grouping of individuals into "cases" or "groups" in UNHCR registration data is not equivalent with the concept of a "household" applied in standard survey methodology. See technical note "Resolving the 'case' versus 'household' issue in UNHCR's quantitative surveys" for further detail on this issue.
    - Align questionnaire with existing international statistical standards and methods wherever possible.

As has been noted above, SEAs are often contracted out by UNHCR operations to private survey firms. The survey outline developed in step 2 forms an essential basis for developing the TORs required for this contracting. A ***TOR template*** (see last section of this document) for procuring a survey firm is available, based in the information compiled in steps 1 and 2 above.

Step 3: Development of full survey methodology and questionnaires

This step sees the survey outline developed into a full-fledged ***survey methodology and questionnaires*** (usually around 10-20 pages excluding questionnaires) and requires in-depth technical expertise. In settings where this is not available in-house, it this step will be carried out by a contracted survey firm. Adequate steps should be taken to ensure that any firm selected for this task has the requisite technical skills. In many countries, this will include local universities and may include private consulting firms. A host of international firms also provide services in this space.

Given that every SEA is different, no one-size-fits-all guidance can be provided on this step. The sections usually found in a survey methodology include but are not limited to:

- Background and existing literature/data
- Survey objectives
- Target population and determine the necessary disaggregation of results required (e.g. by location, country of origin, gender, etc.)
- Key indicators of interest
- Survey governance, including identifying the partners involved and agreeing on processes for the approval and management of the different survey steps.
- Sampling strategy
- Overview of questionnaire development:
    - Proposed scope and structure of questionnaire (see Annex for full questionnaire)
    - Stakeholder / data user consultations that were carried out
    - Confirmation that questionnaire is based in a well-developed data analysis plan (see Annex for full analysis plan)[5]
    - Outline of piloting / testing of questionnaire that was carried out
    - Description of standardized modules used in questionnaire development
- Field staffing structure, training plan and fieldwork plan
- Fieldwork quality control mechanisms

[5] A data analysis plan should always be devised in the early stages of survey planning. Rather than deciding on survey questions first, key indicators and required tabulations must be determined in line with the information needs.

- Data processing approach (e.g. tablet-based, pen-and-paper with or without subsequent double entry, etc.)
- Data analysis approach (how will the raw data be turned into the indicators of interest)
- Full costing of survey implementation
- Annex: Survey timeline (Gantt chart)
- Annex: Full draft questionnaire
- Annex: Field manual
- Annex: Data analysis plan

It should be noted that the technical proposal received from a survey firm in response to the TORs should not be considered a full survey methodology. Operations should mandate that survey firms revise and expand their technical proposals into a full survey methodology after further discussions with the operation and resubmit as such for review and approval by the UNHCR before fieldwork can start. The TOR template includes some standardized text to this effect.

Step 4: Quality assurance of survey methodology

Irrespective of whether the development of the survey methodology and subsequent survey implementation is carried out by the operation itself or contracted out to a survey firm, the submission of the survey methodology constitutes a key milestone of the survey process and it should be reviewed / quality assured by a technical resource within UNHCR that is not directly involved in the SEA in question. If no such technical resource exists within the operation or at the regional level, the UNHCR DRS Research, Analysis and Knowledge Management Unit is available to review the survey methodology. UNHCR DRS will provide an overall assessment of the different quality aspects of the survey methodology through a standardized approach. The assessment will be shared with operations and Regional Bureaux in a timely manner agreed upon with the UNHCR operation. This simple review process is a crucial safeguard against low-quality SEAs, in particular where the implementing country operation has limited survey expertise.

An outlook to the final stage of the SEA cycle

This note is aimed primarily at non-technical staff in a UNHCR country operation tasked with starting up a Socioeconomic Assessment and provides orientation for the early stages of survey planning. It is not intended to be an implementation guide for the full survey cycle. Once the start-up phase of a SEA - as described above - is completed, the survey will move into the stages of data collection, cleaning, analysis, report production, and dissemination. These steps are not covered by this guide. Nevertheless, it appears useful to point out that the survey cycle does not end with the production and dissemination of a SEA report. The final step in any survey is proper documentation and archiving. UNHCR invests substantial resources in data collection, but too often the results are only made available to a limited set of colleagues and partner, many of whom change over time. To make the best of this effort and help UNHCR become a valued resource for data to promote solutions to forcible displacement, it is critical that survey data (anonymized, if it includes personal information) be made available to a larger group of stakeholders, as is now customary in most public and research institutions.

In facilitate this, UNHCR is in the process of developing platforms and processes to systematically documents and archives its SEA microdata, both internally (https://ridl.unhcr.org) and – where appropriate – externally (https://microdata.unhcr.org/). The steps involved in preparing a survey's microdata for these repositories is described in detail in the document “Guidance note on preparing socioeconomic assessment data for UNHCR Microdata Library”, which is available upon request. Resources are available through a central Data Curation Team to support this process, so that operations do not have to do so themselves. Operations conducting a socioeconomic assessment are requested to contact the Curation Team in the UNHCR Data Service to organize this step.

The implementing operation is, nevertheless, responsible for:

- Ensuring that all microdata files are cleaned and labelled in one of the usual statistical formats, such as Stata, R, SPSS, etc. (Excel data files should be avoided if possible)
- Associated files (such as survey methodology document, microdata files, questionnaires and survey report) are submitted to the UNHCR DRS or Data Curation Teams once the survey is completed.
- The following metadata items are accurately described:
    - Full title of survey
    - Abstract
    - Scope (topics) of questionnaire
    - Universe (i.e. target population)
    - Geographic coverage
    - Producers & sponsors
    - Sampling procedure
    - Response rate
    - Weighting
    - Dates of data collection
    - Mode of data collection (e.g. paper-based, tablet-assisted, etc.)
    - Summary of any major edits made during data cleaning

Annex A: Summary of steps and available support

Outputs	Description/Objective	Roles
Survey Concept Note (Step 1) • 1-2 pages	Build internal consensus around survey goals. No technical expertise required. Contains: • Survey objectives • Target population • Key indicators • Analysis domains • Indicative budget	**UNHCR Country Team** • Draft Survey Concept Note **DRS** • Available for technical review & comments
Survey Outline (Step 2) • 3-9 pages	Adds detail to concept note. No technical expertise required. Survey outline can be used to contract a survey firm. Contains: • Review of existing literature and data • Expectations of questionnaire standardization • Potential sampling frames • Key considerations for design and implementation of survey	**UNHCR Country Team** • Draft Survey Outline **DRS** • Available for technical review & comments
Terms of Reference for Survey Firm (if applicable)	Terms of reference for recruitment and procurement of a survey firm. May consult procurement or programmed colleagues.	**UNHCR Country Team** • Draft TOR (if applicable) **DRS** • Available for technical review & comments
Survey Methodology & Questionnaires (Step 3) • 10-20 pages + questionnaires	Can be led by recruited survey firm or consultant. Requires technical expertise.	**UNHCR Country Team** <u>OR</u> **survey firm/consultant (if applicable)** • Draft Survey Methodology and Questionnaire **DRS** • Available for technical review & comments • Provide quality assessment of survey methodology through a standardized mechanism