# ADAPTING HEA TO MAKE IT MORE RAPID

## Background

Throughout the history of HEA, there have been demands for a more "rapid" version of the approach. In truth, classic HEA assessments are already rapid in relation to most other approaches, and were designed to obtain the information decision makers need in the least amount of time possible. However, it does tend to require a minimum amount of person-time per livelihood zone to build up a confident picture of local livelihoods against which to model potential outcomes. The typical standard per zone is 8 villages, with each village taking at least 2 days, assuming you have two 2-person teams interviewing. Thus, on average, to obtain baseline information for one livelihood zone it takes 16 team days, or 64 person-days.

Understandably, those who need information usually want to get it as quickly and cheaply as possible. Adapting HEA to meet a more rapid timeline has been done on a case by case basis, addressing specific questions and concerns in each case. No single "Rapid HEA" approach currently exists. While it is therefore not possible to produce a step-by-step guide to rapid assessments in this chapter, the accumulated experience of doing more rapid assessments has produced a variety of lessons on this subject which can serve as tips and issues for consideration. The single most important lesson is that the more rapid the HEA-based assessment, the more experienced the assessment leader needs to be.

### What is a rapid HEA assessment and when is it done?

There are times when a full HEA assessment may not be possible, and a rapid assessment of the situation is required to inform interventions. Most commonly, this occurs:

- after a rapid-onset disaster when immediate action is required;
- where there is limited access to the focus population (for example in an insecure environment);
- where a provisional assessment is needed to determine whether it is worthwhile carrying out a more detailed assessment; or
- in a slow-onset disaster (e.g. droughts) that has escalated into an emergency in the absence of an adequate response.

Rapid can be distinguished from classic HEA in two key ways:

1. The total number of person-days is fewer than the standard stated above. In practice, it is usually just one (or two) very experienced HEA practitioners who are called on to help answer the key question at issue.
2. In a classic HEA assessment, the procedure is to build the baseline first, then conduct the outcome analysis as a separate exercise; in rapid assessments, it tends to be necessary to combine all the steps into one single assessment process.

The key challenge in carrying out rapid assessments is to find the optimal trade-off between the need for faster results and the requirement to maintain the quality and reliability of the information collected. The general process is one of following the logic of the HEA framework to collect and interpret as much relevant information as possible, by whatever means is possible in the context. No single prescriptive approach is possible or indeed desirable.

At a global level, rapid HEA assessments have been carried out in recent years after the 1999 drought in Pakistan, the 2004 tsunami in Asia, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake in Pakistan and the 2006 conflict in Lebanon. Within southern Africa, examples include assessing the effects of the floods in Mozambique in 2000, the impact of the land reform programme in Zimbabwe in 2001-02, and the impact of the 2002 drought in Malawi.

### What are the objectives of rapid HEA assessments?

Rapid HEA assessments usually have one or both of the following objectives:

(a) To collect the minimum necessary information to determine which population groups are unable to meet their minimum food and essential non-food requirements, what the extent of their emergency needs are, and what the duration of those needs is likely to be.

(b) To determine the capacity of different population groups to return to pre-hazard livelihood patterns, and make recommendations for emergency livelihood recovery programmes.

### What are the constraints involved in doing rapid HEA assessments?

The very fact that a rapid assessment approach is required tends to mean that the operational situation is not ideal. It is important for both HEA practitioners and information users to be aware of the implications of the constraints associated with the assessment circumstances. The constraints vary from context to context but can include:

- Limited physical access to the population, e.g. because of damaged transport infrastructure or insecurity
- The effects of trauma on disaster-affected populations, who may be pre-occupied by bereavement or loss of homes or assets, means that interviews are not always possible or may need to be severely curtailed
- A high pressure working environment with the requirement to produce fast results and plans for interventions leaves little time for reflection and analytical precision
- A lack of existing in-country support may mean logistical and administrative gaps if the emergency is in an area where the assessing agency has not worked before

## How to do It

### The need for experienced HEA practitioners

The most important requirement in a rapid HEA is to use highly competent staff. The more rapid the assessment, the more critical is the role of good judgment and analytical skills on the part of the practitioner. A highly experienced HEA practitioner will be able to bring to the table knowledge and understanding of rural livelihoods from different places, and will be better able to spot inconsistencies and abnormalities in information collected, and to quickly address those. As a rule of thumb, a lead practitioner for a rapid assessment should have completed no fewer than five previous full HEA assessments, including both the baseline and outcome analysis components.

It is usually desirable for at least two interviewers to work together (to allow for the minimum of triangulation between different investigators). When necessary, it is possible for a single highly experienced HEA practitioner to work with high caliber but untrained local staff or partners, and to provide them with some on-the-job coaching in HEA interview skills.

### The HEA framework & the methods

The framework for a rapid HEA remains the same as for a full HEA. This means the outcome analysis is still based on an understanding of the baseline situation of different wealth groups in different livelihoods zones, what effect a defined shock or hazard has had, and how people have responded to that hazard. The baseline picture also still refers to asset holdings, sources of food and income, and to some extent, expenditure patterns.

What differs in a context where a rapid assessment is required is (a) the field methods used will often have to be adapted to get as much information as possible in less than ideal circumstances, and (b) the total quantity of information that can be collected will inevitably be less than we would normally collect in a full HEA, and decisions have to be made about strictly prioritising information needs and about how to cope information gaps that cannot be filled.

### Using secondary and primary data

In an emergency context, where time is limited, making good use of existing secondary data is more important than ever. Secondary data will almost inevitably refer to the situation before the disaster that prompted the rapid assessment, therefore it will be of most use in giving an overview of the baseline situation. Depending on how soon after the disaster your assessment takes place, there is less likely to be secondary data available on the problem, so primary data collection in the field is likely to focus more on understanding the impact of the disaster.

Primary data collection will be important for verifying the secondary information on the pre-disaster situation, and for understanding how the disaster has affected people. In emergency contexts it is strongly recommended that rural appraisal methods are used for rapid assessments rather than structured questionnaires. This is because time and access constraints typically limit one's ability to prepare an adequate questionnaire, to sample properly, and to interview the large number of households usually needed for a representative sample. Rapid rural appraisal methods are more flexible and suited to an emergency context.

While HEA assessments often use focus group discussions, in some circumstances it will not be feasible to arrange them. For example, immediately after disasters, communities are disrupted and households are often very pre-occupied with dealing with the physical, economic and psychological effects of a disaster, and it is often not appropriate or possible to ask groups of people to take large amounts of time to assist in assessments. In those circumstances, individual household interviews have been undertaken as a substitute for focus group interviews. These are typically shorter than focus group discussions, as there is no need for different households to reach agreement. However it becomes even more important to carry out cross-checks on the information provided in individual interviews, both within and between interviews. Furthermore, one individual household interview does not substitute for one wealth group interview. It is recommended that where individual household interviews are carried out, that 3 individuals from each wealth group are interviewed in each village. Knowledgeable local people can be used to bring you to households matching the criteria for each wealth group provided in the wealth breakdown. The analyst should avoid visiting only one part of a village, and should use their analytical skills to verify whether a consistent pattern is emerging from interviews. If there are many inconsistencies, then additional household interviews should be carried out to try to reconcile or explain those.

Chapter 6: Annex E provides a checklist of possible sources of secondary information in emergencies, and issues to consider when reviewing secondary data to understand the baseline/ pre-disaster situation. It also provides a checklist of issues for discussion when trying to understand the impact of a disaster on the household economy.

### Ways of making fieldwork more rapid

As noted above, the ultimate objective of rapid HEA assessments will be the same, in most cases, as a classic HEA assessment. Making the process faster inevitably means taking some short-cuts in how this objective is met. It is essential that any "short-cuts" in the assessment are made transparent in the report. A few common ways of reducing the time required for collecting baseline information are:

- Focus only on those whose livelihoods have been badly affected by the disaster. From the secondary data review and a basic understanding of baseline livelihoods patterns, it should be possible to deduce which wealth groups and which livelihoods activities are most likely to have been badly affected by the disaster. Whereas in classic HEA we interview all wealth groups (although often prioritising the poor), in rapid assessments field interviews should concentrate heavily on those groups worst affected by the disaster. At the same time, the links between wealth groups should emerge from this discussion, and ways to ensure these links are maintained and strengthened need to be kept in mind.
- Reduce the number of household representative interviews per zone. In extreme cases, there have been examples of rapid assessments in which information was only collected from village-level community elders and knowledgeable people, rather than talking directly to household representatives from each wealth group. The validity of this approach has only been tested informally. For example, a rapid national assessment in Malawi in 2002 used this approach, and results were found to be quite similar to those from a more in-depth survey carried out later. However, there will inevitably be a loss of precision, and there is a risk that decision-makers will not accept the results.
- Leave aside the expenditure questions in every interview. Instead, take the time to put together (with help from key informants) a minimum basket typically required by the poorest households and find out the prices of those items from markets or relevant key informants (e.g. school authorities for education costs). Your focus will then be on comparing current income levels with the cost of the survival food and non-food baskets to see whether an emergency intervention is needed.
- Focus only on the most important sources of food and expenditure. Normally in full HEAs we would try to ask about every single crop produced and every single way of making income. In rapid assessments we may limit ourselves to asking details about only those sources of food and income that contribute, say 75-85% of the total, and then getting more rough estimates of the value of the remaining items, for example via proportional piling and relating smaller sources to the size of bigger sources.

### Understanding the hazard in a rapid assessment

The likely impact of the disaster should be gauged for every livelihood activity. If we know the relative importance of each activity, then we will be able to estimate the total impact on that basis. Information for this section usually needs to come from primary data collection. However, with reasonable baseline information and with some livelihoods experience, it may be possible to make an informed guess about the effects of hazards on different population groups which could inform a very short-term interim intervention while a longer-range assessment is carried out.

Because the sorts of contexts in which rapid assessments are carried out tend to be quite fluid, there is a greater than normal risk that predictions will become out of date quite quickly. Where there are many "unknowns" around how the situation may develop in the short-term (e.g. during a conflict situation, or in the immediate aftermath of a flood where road and market access may quickly improve, or simply where multiple agencies may be responding to needs at speed), it is recommended that analysts provide more scenario-based projections and recommendations. This can either be in the form of estimates of the effects of specific events (e.g. "if conflict resumes, then the extent of needs will increase, but if there is no conflict then the needs should be as reported here), or it may be in the form of best, worst, and most likely case scenarios. The key to useful scenario predictions is to be very clear about what variables are being taken into account in your analysis, and what their different values are under the different conditions envisaged in your scenario. That way, those variables can be monitored over time so that decision-makers can understand which scenario is actually coming to pass.

### Time frame

The length of time needed for a HEA is based on the number of zones to be covered and the number of skilled staff available. For a single zone with a single experienced HEA practitioner working with one local partner, we would expect the following approximate timescale:

- Secondary data review: 1-2 days
- High level key informant interviews (national/ district level): 1-2 days
- Village level interviews (@ 1 day per village): 4-6 days
- Report-writing: 2 days
- **Total**: 8 – 12 days (plus travel)

The time required can be reduced by using more experienced staff. The use of more inexperienced staff can increase the time required by adding in training time.

## Frequently Asked Questions

***Q: Why do a full HEA if you can just do a faster, cheaper rapid assessment?***
A. Rapid HEAs should not be a first-choice type of assessment because they require significant compromises in the level of detail collected and almost invariably also require some compromises in the reliability of the data because the reduced data-set and number of interviews means there are fewer opportunities for cross-checking the information. Also, with a standard HEA baseline, you can re-use it year after year and the short term investment in gathering baseline data pays off over the long run. However it is not recommended to re-use the baseline gathered in a rapid assessment, and therefore the return on the investment in a rapid assessment over the long term is not high.

***Q: Are rapid assessments the same as emergency assessments?***
A. In practice, yes, the vast majority of rapid assessments are carried out in emergencies. At times they are carried out in non-emergencies because of a lack of resources to carry out a full assessment. This is far from ideal however, and the rapid assessment in that situation should be used to try to leverage more funds for a full assessment.