Assessing Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health

In a humanitarian crisis, it is important to understand the SRH situation of both male and female adolescents to develop a plan that responds to their specific needs. Information about SRH needs is gathered through assessments conducted during the course of an emergency situation.

An initial rapid assessment (IRA) is conducted during the first 72 hours of an acute emergency and is used to collect demographic information and identify life-saving issues that must be addressed urgently to ensure the well-being of the beneficiary population. It is important to remember that the MISP is a life-saving set of interventions that are implemented without prior assessment. The initiation of the MISP should never be delayed while waiting for results of any assessment, including the IRA.

After an emergency situation has stabilized, a situational analysis will provide information about the baseline status of RH needs and services, and will help the agency prioritize interventions when comprehensive RH services are introduced. Situational analyses may use several methods of data collection, including secondary data, in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions (sex-separated, if culturally required), community mapping, and facility assessments.

Comprehensive RH assessments are not often conducted in emergency situations because they are time-consuming and they can place additional burdens on precious human and logistic resources. After stabilization of an acute emergency, however, a comprehensive RH assessment of RH knowledge, beliefs and behaviors, can provide valuable information that will help an agency design an SRH program that responds to the specific gendered needs of the beneficiary population.
Ethical and Legal Considerations when Conducting Assessments with Adolescents

Adolescents have the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including sexual and reproductive health, during emergency situations. In both emergency and stable situations, it is often necessary to collect information about the adolescent population, in order to understand their SRH needs and design programs that specifically address those needs. Adolescents should be permitted to contribute to the knowledge base that is used to guide the programs they benefit from. It is essential, however, that care is taken not to cause harm to the adolescent or put them at risk for the sake of collecting adolescent data. This is particularly important with regard to ASRH, which may be personally, culturally or politically sensitive.

The WHO Scientific and Ethical Research Group (SERG) has established guidelines for the ethical collection of data from adolescents. These guidelines are summarized as follows:

1. Agencies conducting research or assessments among adolescents must ensure that:
   - The goal of the assessment is to obtain information that is relevant to adolescents’ health needs;
   - The information could not be scientifically gained from adult sources;
   - The risk of conducting the assessment is low in comparison with the benefit that will be obtained from the information;
   - The interventions that are introduced as a result of the assessment will directly benefit adolescents and will be at least as advantageous as any available alternative.

   Special care must be taken when collecting data from very young adolescents. Very young adolescents should not be recruited for the assessment unless the information gained from them cannot be obtained from older adolescents.

2. Unless the law specifically states otherwise, consent to participate in the assessment should be obtained from the adolescent alone. If the adolescent is mature enough to understand the purpose of the proposed assessment and the level of involvement requested of him/her, then s/he is mature enough to provide informed consent to participate.

3. Confidentiality must always be observed when conducting research with adolescents.
4. Confidentiality must always be maintained, even when parents (or both adolescents and parents) have provided consent.

5. Institutions conducting assessments involving adolescents must be sensitive to the needs of adolescents and should have the appropriate staff and facilities to care for this population group.

6. In circumstances in which researchers believe they are obligated to report adolescent behavior to any authority, the adolescent subject must be made aware of the possibility of such reporting prior to his/her involvement in the assessment.

Other ethical considerations:
In addition to the above, there are other important ethical issues that must be taken into consideration:

- **Approval**
  Prior to conducting an assessment, it is important to obtain permissions from the body coordinating the emergency response (the Global Health Cluster, for example) as well as from national and local government and health authorities, community leaders and partner organizations.

- **Security**
  The security of the beneficiary population and the staff should be of primary concern. If conducting the assessment could put the participants or the study team at risk, then the assessment should not be conducted.

- **Referrals**
  The assessment (or sections of the assessment) should not be conducted if appropriate referral services are not available. For example, questions regarding sexual assault should not be asked unless there are medical and psychological services available to a participant who reveals that s/he is a survivor of sexual assault.

- **Informed consent**
  Informed consent must be obtained from each individual involved in the assessment. The participant must be fully informed of the purpose of the assessment, the methods that will be used, the nature of the questions that will be asked, and the risks and benefits of participating.

- **Participation**
  Participation in an assessment is completely voluntary. An individual has the right to refuse to participate in the assessment and may decide to withdraw at any time. S/he may also choose not to answer any question without being pressured by the interviewer to respond. It is the obligation of the individuals or agency conducting the assessment to respect the wishes of the participant if s/he decides not to participate.

- **Privacy**
  Data should be collected in a setting where privacy is ensured (both visual and auditory) and where adolescents feel comfortable, so that the participants are more likely to respond freely to questions. Adults or older adolescents must not be allowed in the room during the interview. If the participant is a caregiver of a very young child, it is permissible that the child be in the room during the interview, but it is preferable that other arrangements to care for the child be made if possible.

- **Confidentiality**
  The assessment team has the obligation to maintain the confidentiality of the participants at all times before, during, and after the assessment. Members of the assessment team must not discuss any aspect of the assessment, except with the study supervisor, if clarification is needed. The identities of the participants must be guarded and must not be linked to the responses that they provide. The participants’ responses must not be discussed anywhere, with anyone except with the study supervisor if clarification is needed. If questionnaires are used, they must not contain information that could be used to identify the participants, and they should be kept in a locked cabinet; if there is any risk that the questionnaires might endanger the participants or the staff in the future, they should be destroyed once data analysis is complete.
• **Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)**

    Agencies, institutions and governments may have institutional review boards, or IRBs, which have the responsibility to approve, monitor and review any research conducted with human subjects. IRBs are also known as *ethical review boards* (ERBs). The requirements of the agency, government and funding institutions should be reviewed to ensure IRB compliance, prior to conducting any assessment.

**SUGGESTED READING:**

   [http://rhrc.org/resources/general%5Ffieldtools/toolkit/index.htm](http://rhrc.org/resources/general%5Ffieldtools/toolkit/index.htm).