

# Understanding Coverage

## Counting Those We Leave Behind



The Shelter and Settlements sector, like other humanitarian sectors, has limited capacity and may not cover all humanitarian S&S needs in all contexts. It complements government responses, self-recovery processes, and other groups working outside of the cluster system. Measuring the impact of those efforts, including identifying where needs are not being met, is a critical aspect of improving future impact. A need-based coverage approach can potentially help.

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### The Current Situation

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#### The sector lacks a way to measure its collective impact

Shelter and settlements (S&S) assistance only reaches a small proportion of the total population in need after conflicts and disasters (Morel, 2018). S&S stakeholders are grappling with more frequent and intense crises and the need to respond at scale. Yet, in most contexts, the sector does not have a clear measure of the overall populations they have reached, how their assistance has contributed to meeting total needs, or how the scale and type of assistance has fluctuated over time (Ashmore et al., 2015; Oglethorpe & Welsch, 2018). Without that information, stakeholders cannot understand which needs are unmet, which segments of the populations are being left out of S&S assistance, and what stakeholders need to do to identify and address unmet needs.

Currently, the S&S sector measures its reach relative to its target. While stakeholders rightfully want to highlight their successes, the tendency to report non-specific estimates of populations reached has led to a lack of institutional understanding of who is not being reached and why.

This brief report identifies challenges to and opportunities for understanding and using coverage data to improve scale and quality of assistance.

## To estimate coverage, we need better data on both population in need and reached

Coverage is an indicator used to show the extent of humanitarian assistance in a given context. The most common way that the humanitarian community measures coverage is to calculate the population reached as a proportion of the population targeted. We can refer to this as target-based coverage.

Another approach is to calculate the population reached as a proportion of the population in need. We can refer to this as need-based coverage.

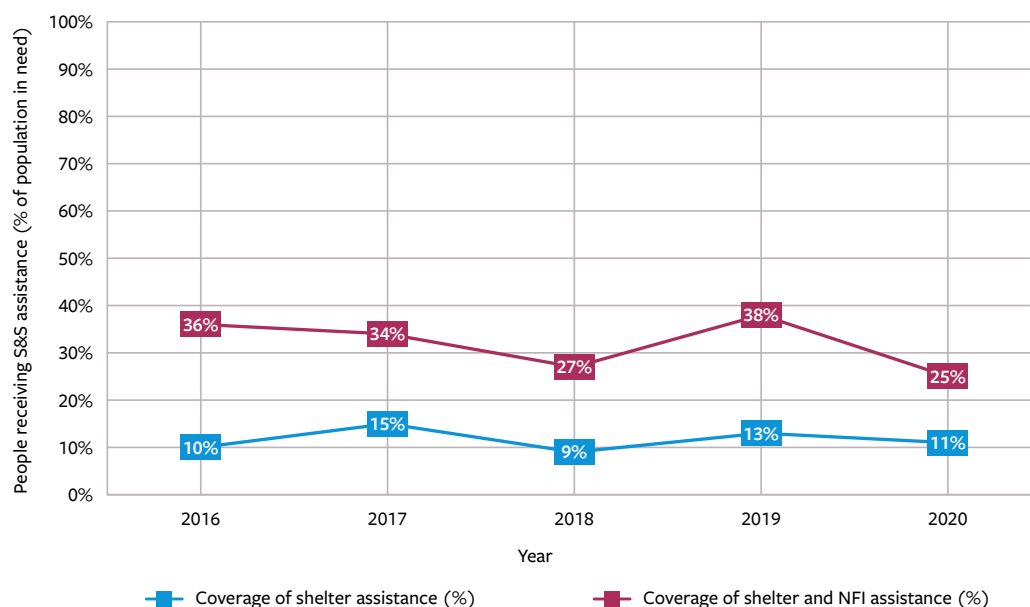
This report argues that the shelter and settlement sector should more routinely measure need-based coverage.

By understanding who was not assisted and why, we can understand our limitations, such as technical capacity, funding, access, and bureaucratic impediments. Many agencies already use need-based coverage figures to advocate for extra funding. A more coordinated and consistent sector-wide approach could facilitate a joint programming and advocacy strategy to ultimately increase the scale of S&S assistance.

## In the last 5 years, the sector has met a maximum of 38% of known needs

Humanitarian agencies optimize their funding and capacity to fill gaps and address immediate, humanitarian needs in crises. Other stakeholders, such as national and local governments, diaspora groups, faith-based groups, and self-recovering populations, expand that coverage, but the supporting data is often not systematically documented.

**Figure 1** shows estimates of need-based coverage of combined shelter and non-food items (NFI) assistance and shelter assistance between 2016 and 2020.



**Figure 1.**

Trends in population in need and reached over time, showing highest estimated need-based coverage of shelter assistance

The data in Figure 1 is based on the lowest publicly available estimates of the population in need and the population reached. It suggests that global need-based coverage of combined shelter-NFI assistance has not been greater than 38% in recent years. In the same period, need-based coverage of shelter assistance (drawn from data that is additional to the combined shelter plus NFI data) has not been greater than 15%.

Extrapolation of the data in Figure 1 suggests that in the five years from 2016 to 2020, **85% of the population in need did not receive any shelter assistance from the sector.**<sup>1</sup>

For comparison, the target-based coverage for the same period, as reported in the GSC Dashboard, ranges from 52–65%. While both reporting methods are legitimate, the sector should decide which one provides the most meaningful data for improving its future performance.

## Challenges to understanding coverage

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Each of this study's over 20 interviewees directly involved in S&S assistance noted the numerous challenges to collecting and analyzing need-based coverage data in humanitarian contexts.

### Population in need is a dynamic concept

Methods for estimating **population in need** of S&S assistance vary, although they are often informed by estimates from U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) or from government institutions.

However, S&S actors often generate their own estimates of population in need. They tend to use one of two broad approaches:

- Generate a detailed snapshot of need at a particular time.
- Broadly estimate need based on evolving data and local contextual information.

Available information about population need fluctuates over time. In interviews for this report, S&S actors mentioned examples of the assumptions they need to make when assessing evolving and compounding circumstances. However, agencies do not always document these assumptions and make them publicly available. Even if they did, information generated using one set of assumptions will seldom be applicable in all situations, making it unlikely that other S&S actors would use them.

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<sup>1</sup> The need-based coverage values in Figure 1 are high estimates because the count of beneficiaries is the most accurate available, based on GSC reporting (Global Shelter Cluster, n.d.) while the estimates of population in need are most likely undercounted, based on all information that could be found through a review of sixty publicly available reports published on the U.N. OCHA, GSC, and ReliefWeb websites between 2015-2020. In several cases, the population in need was aggregated between shelter, NFI, and camp coordination and management (Oglethorpe & Welsch, 2018) or not available all together. When unavailable, population in need estimates were extrapolated from data on population targeted and average coverage.

## **There isn't a consistent way to estimate population reached with S&S assistance**

Publicly available data on S&S reach sometimes relates solely to shelter assistance, but in many instances, it combines NFI and shelter assistance. This reflects the fact that shelter and NFI assistance can be managed by the same agency or carried out by different agencies. This variation makes it challenging to extract data on the extent of shelter assistance specifically.

Furthermore, not all of the data on the reach of shelter assistance (whether it includes NFI or not) is reported to the cluster coordination and information management system. NFI assistance, which may or may not include significant shelter-related assistance, reaches more people than specific shelter-related assistance in most contexts, making the percentage of people reached with shelter assistance look higher. For example, the [2020 HRP for South Sudan](#) indicates that 2.3 million people needed shelter and NFI assistance, without explaining how they categorized those individuals. One may assume that all those listed needed some shelter assistance. Moreover, if a population is assessed as having a shelter need, agencies do not often identify if this need could have been met in another way, such as with livelihood or cash and voucher assistance. Disaggregated information would help to interpret the rough proportion of shelter and non-shelter-related NFI needs.

## **Population targeted may not reflect the population in the most need**

A number of issues can determine how agencies identify their **targeted populations**. Agencies generally try to target populations based on vulnerability, as this maximizes constrained funding (DG ECHO, 2017; USAID/BHA, 2013). However, in reality, agencies frequently target populations based on contextual and other practical factors. For example, agencies must consider cost, local policies (such as no-build zones), and security issues. As a result, they sometimes provide some assistance to less-vulnerable populations, such as host communities.

## **There's no agreed definition of "vulnerability," and therefore no agreed definition of "need"**

Vulnerability is a context-specific concept, based on a complex interplay of factors. Despite the GSC establishing the strategic objective of prioritizing the most vulnerable populations in S&S responses, there is no universally agreed method to determine relative vulnerability, although the [GSC's Shelter Vulnerability Classification Working Group](#) is currently developing a methodology for vulnerability classification.

Agencies must also consider and incorporate human protection concerns into decisions about which populations they target. For instance, agencies may define single female-led households as the most vulnerable in a particular crisis setting and then target them for assistance.

## **Some locations are easier to assess and access than others**

Rural and remote populations typically have high S&S needs, but they tend to receive less assessments and assistance, due to the added cost and time constraints of reaching them. Agencies and academics have also raised concerns over the lack of documented rationale for project location selection (Ashmore et al., 2015), as agencies balance the needs of urban and remote rural populations in an increasingly urban world. S&S actors base program location on distinct agency mandates, including access (either prioritizing

hard-to-reach or reachable populations) and vulnerability. However, documenting those decisions more systematically would capture who was targeted, where, and why to support institutional learning.

## Data on population reached generally includes NFI data too

The GSC database is the most accessible source of data on **population reached** with shelter assistance, disaggregated from NFI assistance. Most other information, including funding data from the U.N. OCHA Financial Tracking System, combines shelter and NFI assistance data. This data does not differentiate between a beneficiary receiving a tarpaulin, a shelter toolkit, or a hazard-resistant house and there is not a standardized time around which to measure coverage.

## There's a lack of understanding of non-GSC actors, so we only have part of the overall picture

The GSC dashboard does not include S&S assistance provided by other groups, such as the diaspora, faith-based groups, self-recovering populations, and government programs. Even multi-sectoral programming data is challenging to disaggregate within the broader humanitarian assistance system. For example, if an agency outside of the S&S cluster implements a protection program involving S&S assistance to reduce risks or otherwise support the population in need, the population they reached may not be attributed to S&S assistance in U.N. and GSC databases.

## Improved data and methodologies are emerging

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Despite these challenges with S&S data, several humanitarian and development agencies have increased open-source data and promoted evidence-based decision-making.

For example, the **Settlements Approach** (Urban Settlements Working Group, 2020) emphasizes the whole-of-population approach to conducting assessments. It promotes multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder collaboration to assess needs based on considerations beyond physical damage. The Settlements Approach also aims to ensure the settlement's overall population is not overlooked when counting all individuals or households and considering their varying levels of need.

The **Joint Intersectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF)** provides a transparent people-centered needs analysis to analyze the magnitude and severity of populations' multiple needs. This framework provides hope for improved monitoring of the severity of affected populations' needs and how to address whether assistance has met those needs.

Other efforts have focused on spatial data to enable evidence-based humanitarian decision-making. For instance, iMMAP recently discovered over 300 settlements of refugees along the Colombian border, prompting UNICEF involvement and a greater understanding of humanitarian needs. Similarly, **IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)** collects and analyzes data on vulnerability and mobility of displaced and mobile populations. The data allows IOM to notify relevant sector coordination mechanisms of urgent concerns. Notably, IMPACT Initiatives has produced open-source needs assessment data, so other groups, such as local agencies, can access it.

ACAPS produces an annual risk analysis report to outline expected events and changes with humanitarian consequences. The 2021 risk analysis report, for example, estimated that countries such as Haiti and Ethiopia would likely have increased shelter needs (ACAPS, 2021). With these advancements in data analysis, S&S actors can invest in preparedness to maximize available resources and increase coverage. In addition, consecutive analyses such as this risk analysis, show trends rather than snapshots in time.

## **The S&S sector should debate the potential value of need-based coverage data**

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The S&S sector should collectively discuss and debate the potential value of shifting to a need-based coverage approach. This initial research suggests that it offers a more accurate indication of the overall reach of S&S assistance and conversely, an indication of the areas where assistance is needed but is not being provided. Such information will be useful input for future strategies, programmatic responses, and collective advocacy.

It is critical that any shift in focus does not require collection of a larger quantity of data. Therefore, the sector should initiate a broad discussion around how to focus future data-collection efforts can be more targeted and effective. We recommend four initial topics for discussion and debate.

### **Define coverage and its indicators**

S&S actors must gain consensus that need-based coverage is valuable. They should agree on the types of assistance (including multi-sectoral assistance) are considered to cover shelter or NFI needs. Each donors' reporting requirements calls for distinct indicators and each agency approaches assessments, program design, and evaluations differently. S&S actors can collectively agree on:

- The types of assistance that are and are not considered to “cover” humanitarian shelter needs
- The time-frame post-crisis to evaluate this coverage.
- What indicators to use.

Coverage can be measured qualitatively or quantitatively. Baseline quantitative data is critical to understanding the scale of any S&S assistance and should be a precursor to qualitative analyses. This can help both the agencies currently providing assistance and conducting monitoring and evaluation or another agency who chooses to conduct future evaluations.

When using quantitative data to estimate coverage, there is an implicit assumption that it equates to covering needs. Yet qualitative indicators of outcomes, such as the wider impacts of shelter assistance on security and livelihoods, are equally important in assessing coverage and overall impacts of shelter assistance. For example, while the number of shelter repair kits distributed is useful to know, qualitative feedback on outcomes, such as if the shelter assistance has influenced an individual's security or livelihood, is an important aspect of measuring program impact.

## **Improve documentation of assumptions during program design**

Agencies should record any assumptions they make in estimating need and reach and which form the basis of program design. Those assumptions can then be tested against program outcomes and modified as needed, promoting continuous improvement in assessment methodology.

Donors must acknowledge the conditions and risks prompting these assumptions and remove limiting requirements from their documentation protocols. In nearly all grant proposals, agencies already include a section in their narrative, logical framework, or an appendix on risks and assumptions related to their program design. Donors should require this increased documentation to be included in publicly available reports of the need and program targets on the U.N. OCHA and GSC websites.

Agencies make many quick yet informed assumptions in their needs assessments and program design. These include assumed percentages of the population who were the most vulnerable based on who was receiving public assistance before the crisis and extrapolated estimates of populations in need based on local news articles or stakeholder contacts. While the assumptions themselves do not present problems in rapidly evolving humanitarian crises, the lack of transparency does. Without information on the assumptions made or why, the data is not possible to triangulate and it is inaccessible to those outside the particular program.

## **Capture S&S assistance outside of international humanitarian actors**

GSC Members should engage with other actors providing assistance, understand their coverage and gaps, and identify and target the distinct gaps they can fill.

Greater understanding of what others are doing will help S&S actors develop a more complete picture of who is not receiving the assistance they need. They can then target those gaps more specifically and advocate to reflect collective needs. In part due to the inaccessible nature of the cluster system to all actors providing assistance, there is no overall understanding of needs and how they are being filled. The international humanitarian actors within the GSC should engage with all actors providing assistance, understand their coverage and gaps, and identify and target the distinct gaps they can fill.

While the international humanitarian community often overlooks the influence of diaspora remittances, they must recognize the role of this type of support and how to collaborate (International Organization for Migration, 2022). Diaspora groups have nuanced insight into community needs, vulnerability, and access. For instance, diaspora groups have demonstrated tremendous organizing capacity after disasters specifically (Haiti Renewal Alliance, 2021). Initiatives like these, which have already been supported by both USAID and IOM, should be counted as S&S assistance and built upon by other humanitarian S&S stakeholders.

## **Research coverage of different modalities of assistance and multi-sectoral interventions**

Future research should evaluate the relative coverage of different assistance modalities, such as multipurpose cash, and highlight how funding restrictions or back-end systems in agencies may need to be adapted to respond at scale. Researchers could investigate different multi-sectoral and shelter-focused responses to assess whether shelter actors met needs within a specific time frame and in identified settlements, such as one or two years after assistance.

Recognizing the low coverage of humanitarian S&S assistance, researchers have called for research to investigate methods of increasing its scale (Opdyke et al., 2021), including supporting self-recovery processes (Parrack et al., 2014). With so little known on the coverage of shelter assistance in general, a systematic study of this coverage of different modalities would provide novel insight into the methods of meeting the greater amount of shelter needs.

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