User Guide for the HPSRI Capacity Assessment Tool

1. Introduction

The Capacity Assessment Framework for Health Policy and System Research Institutions (HPSRIs) is a comprehensive and adaptable tool designed to evaluate an organization's ability to conduct robust health policy and systems research (HPSR). Developed through collaboration with key experts and a thorough review of existing tools and literature, this framework serves as a guide for HPSRIs, including private organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic institutions, and government agencies. Its primary purpose is to help organizations identify strengths, pinpoint capacity gaps, and prioritize development efforts to support evidence-informed decision-making. By promoting a culture of reflective self-assessment and learning, the tool empowers HPSRIs to enhance their research and evaluation practices, ultimately contributing to improved health policy and system outcomes. This user guide provides detailed instructions for navigating the Excel-based tool ("HPSR-Capacity-Assessment-Tool_V1 (1).xlsm") and completing the assessment.

This capacity assessment tool has been thoughtfully designed by HERD International to support HPSRIs in evaluating their capacity for robust research and evaluations. This tool facilitates reflective self-assessment, fosters a culture of learning, and identifies areas for improvement and capacity development. By providing a structured framework, it enables organizations to identify their strengths and limitations, plan for capacity development to enhance evidence-informed decision-making, and improve the overall health policy and system research ecosystem.

2. Purpose and Scope

The Capacity Assessment Tool evaluates an organization's capacity across four key domains: Organizational Management; Technical Competency; Networking, Collaboration, and Co-creation; and Evidence Uptake. These domains cover critical areas such as policy frameworks, research expertise, stakeholder partnerships, and knowledge dissemination. The tool is designed for HPSRIs seeking to assess their current capacity, plan institutional strengthening, and monitor progress over time. By providing a holistic view of an organization's strengths and weaknesses, it enables users to prioritize capacity-building initiatives and align research activities with policy needs. The ultimate goal is to promote reflective self-assessment, develop a learning-oriented culture, and support evidence-based decision-making for better health outcomes.

3. Who Should Complete the Tool?

The assessment is most effective when completed by a diverse team of personnel with expertise in various organizational functions. Representatives from research, finance, human resources (HR), administration, operations, and leadership should participate to ensure a comprehensive evaluation. For example, research staff can assess technical competencies, while finance and administration teams can evaluate financial management and infrastructure. Involving both management and technical staff enhances the accuracy of responses. A designated coordinator should oversee the process, ensuring all sections are completed and responses are reviewed for accuracy and consistency.

4. Tool Adaptability

Recognizing that each HPSRI is unique, the tool is designed to be flexible. Organizations can select specific domains or subdomains based on their priorities, skipping sections that are not relevant. This flexibility ensures that the assessment remains practical and meaningful, regardless of the organization's size, focus, or operational context.

5. Key Components of the Tool

The Excel file is structured into several key sections, each serving a distinct purpose in the assessment process:

5.1 Background Information of Organization (Part I)

This section collects essential details about the organization, forming the foundation of the assessment. Users must provide the organization's name, year of establishment, and head office location (selected by province, e.g., Koshi, Madhesh, Bagmati). The nature of the organization—whether government, academic, NGO, private, or other—must be specified, along with areas of work, such as policy-making, program implementation, research, training, or knowledge brokering. Additionally, users should enter staff details, including the number of full-time and part-time employees, categorized by leadership, admin/finance, research, and support roles. Information on hiring external experts and the availability of basic amenities (e.g., workspace, electricity, internet) is also required.

5.2 Research and Management Capacity (Domains 1–4)

The core of the tool assesses capacity across four domains, each divided into subdomains with specific activities or standards. For each activity, users indicate whether it is undertaken (Yes/No), rate the organization's competency (Basic, Medium, Advanced), and provide a justification for the rating. Some subdomains require quantitative data, such as the number of research projects or dissemination events. The domains are:

- **Domain 1: Organizational Management** includes subdomains like Policy Environment (e.g., vision statements, ethical guidelines), Leadership and Management (e.g., market alignment, capacity development), Day-to-Day Operations and Administration (e.g., digital platforms, monitoring systems), and Financial Management and Sustainability (e.g., funding compliance, procurement).
- **Domain 2: Technical Competency** covers staff education and expertise, ethics and safeguarding, research conceptualization, literature review, research design, implementation, data management, scientific writing, and quality monitoring.
- **Domain 3: Networking, Collaboration, and Co-creation** evaluates partnerships with government, academia, and local organizations, as well as stakeholder engagement challenges.
- **Domain 4: Evidence to Policy Translation** assesses knowledge products (e.g., policy briefs), dissemination events, advocacy efforts, and barriers to policy impact.

5.3 Dashboard and Scoring

The tool includes a dashboard, powered by VBA macros, that summarizes scores and visualizes capacity across domains. Competency ratings are scored as Basic (1), Medium (2), or Advanced (3), with totals calculated for each subdomain. The dashboard displays maximum and minimum possible scores, percentages, and visual representations (e.g., charts) to highlight strengths and gaps.

6. Step-by-Step Instructions for Using the Tool

6.1 Step 1: Prepare for the Assessment

To ensure a successful assessment, begin by assembling a diverse team of representatives from research, finance, HR, administration, and leadership. Assign a coordinator to manage the process and ensure all sections are completed. Review the tool's structure, including its domains and subdomains, to understand the scope of the assessment. Decide which areas to prioritize based on your organization's needs, leveraging the tool's adaptability. Ensure all team members have access to the Excel file, either through a shared drive or cloud storage, and confirm that the technical setup (e.g., Microsoft Excel with macro support) is in place.

6.2 Step 2: Enable Macros for Dashboard Functionality

The dashboard relies on VBA macros to update scores and visuals. To enable macros, right-click the file, select **Properties**, and check **Unblock** if available, then click **Apply** and **OK**. Open the file in Microsoft Excel and, if prompted, click **Enable Content** to allow macros. If macros are disabled, navigate to **File > Options > Trust Center > Trust Center Settings > Macro Settings**, select **Enable VBA macros**, and check **Enable Excel 4.0 macros when VBA macros are enabled** and **Trust access to the VBA project object model**. Click **OK** and reopen the file. If the dashboard fails to sync, close the file, unblock it again, and reopen before clicking the **Refresh Dashboard** button.

6.3 Step 3: Complete the Organizational Profile (Part I)

Start by entering the organization's details in the Background Information section. Provide the organization's name, year of establishment, and head office location using the province dropdown menu. Specify the nature of the organization and select areas of work from options like research, policy-making, or training. Enter staff numbers, breaking them down by full-time/part-time and roles (leadership, admin/finance, research, support). Indicate whether external experts are hired and assess the availability of basic amenities by selecting "Yes" or "No" for each item. Review all entries for accuracy before proceeding to the capacity assessment.

6.4 Step 4: Assessment of Research and Management Capacity (Domains 1–4)

6.4.1 Domain 1: Organizational Management

Purpose: Assess policies, leadership, infrastructure, and financial management supporting HPSR activities.

- **Subdomain 1: Policy Environment**
  - **Objective**: Evaluate the presence, recency, and implementation of organizational policies.
  - **Steps**:
    1. Column B (O1.1): Select "Yes" or "No" for each policy/mechanism (e.g., Vision Statement, Risk Management Policy).
    2. Column C (O1.2): Specify how many years ago each policy was last updated (e.g., "2" for 2 years ago). Leave blank if not applicable.
    3. Column D (O1.3): Indicate implementation status (Fully Implemented, Partially Implemented, Not Implemented, Not Applicable).
  - **Tips**: Align policies with national guidelines and provide accurate recency data.
- **Subdomain 2: Leadership and Management**
  - **Objective**: Assess the frequency and competency of leadership activities.
  - **Steps**:
    1. Column C (O2.1): Select "Yes" or "No" for activities (e.g., aligning priorities with market needs).
    2. Column D (O2.2): Rate competency (Basic, Medium, Advanced).
    3. Column E (O2.3): Justify the rating with specific examples (e.g., "We use project tracking software but lack advanced features, hence Medium").
  - **Tips**: Be realistic about competency levels and provide concise, specific justifications.
- **Subdomain 3: Day-to-Day Operations and Administration**
  - **Objective**: Evaluate infrastructure, technology, and operational mechanisms.
  - **Steps**:
    1. Column C (O3.1): Select "Yes" or "No" for items (e.g., physical facilities, digital platforms).
    2. Column D (O3.2): Rate capacity (Basic, Medium, Advanced).
    3. Column E (O3.3): Justify the rating (e.g., "Limited server capacity, hence Basic").
  - **Tips**: Consider both hardware and software when assessing infrastructure.
- **Subdomain 4: Financial Management and Sustainability**
  - **Objective**: Assess financial practices and sustainability strategies.
  - **Steps**:
    1. Column C (O4.1): Select "Yes" or "No" for activities (e.g., funding compliance).
    2. Column D (O4.2): Rate research team competency (Basic, Medium, Advanced).
    3. Column E (O4.3): Justify the rating (e.g., "Detailed financial records but no contingency plans, hence Medium").
  - **Tips**: Focus on the research team's role and highlight funding diversification efforts.

6.4.2 Domain 2: Technical Competency

Purpose: Evaluate the research team's expertise and skills across research stages.

- **Subdomain 1: Education and Expertise**
  - **Objective**: Document staff qualifications and expertise.
  - **Steps**:

        1. T1.1: Enter staff numbers by educational level (Certificate, Bachelor or below, Master, PhD/Post-doc).
        2. T1.2: Specify researchers with expertise in fields (e.g., Public Health, Data Science) and methodological expertise (Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods).
        3. T1.3–T1.5: Indicate expertise in research areas (e.g., Policy Analysis) and studies conducted in the last 5 years.
        4. T1.6: Enter employee numbers by years of experience (<5, 5–10, >10 years).
    - **Tips**: Ensure counts reflect current staff and verify study counts with records.
- **Subdomain 3: Ethics and Safeguarding**
    - **Objective**: Assess adherence to ethical standards.
    - **Steps**:
        1. Column C (T3.1): Select "Yes" or "No" for ethical practices (e.g., ethical clearance).
        2. Column D (T3.2): Rate skills (Basic, Medium, Advanced).
        3. Column E (T3.3): Justify the rating (e.g., “Annual ethics training, hence Advanced”).
    - **Tips**: Align responses with national guidelines and reference specific protocols.
- **Subdomains 4–10: Research Processes**
    - **Subdomains**: Research Conceptualization, Literature Review, Research Design and Methods, Implementation, Data Management and Analysis, Scientific Writing, Quality Check Mechanism, Monitoring and Evaluation.
    - **General Steps**:
        1. Column C (e.g., T4.1): Select "Yes" or "No" for activities (e.g., stakeholder engagement, using statistical software).
        2. Column D (where applicable): Specify activity frequency in the last year.
        3. Column E: Rate skills (Basic, Medium, Advanced).
        4. Column F: Justify the rating with examples.
    - **Tips**: Use records for activity counts and provide evidence-based justifications.

6.4.3 Domain 3: Networking, Collaboration, and Co-creation

Purpose: Evaluate partnerships and stakeholder engagement.

- **Subdomain 1: Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration**
    - **Objective**: Assess partnerships and engagement challenges.
    - **Steps**:
        1. N1.1: Select "Yes" or "No" for partnerships (e.g., government, academia).
        2. N1.2: Indicate stakeholder engagement in co-creation.
        3. N1.3: Select stakeholder prioritization criteria.
        4. N1.4: Indicate non-health sector engagement.
        5. N1.6: Select engagement challenges.
        6. N1.7–N1.9: Select "Yes" or "No" for activities, rate competency, and justify ratings.
    - **Tips**: Specify stakeholder types and highlight successful collaborations or barriers.

6.4.4 Domain 4: Evidence Uptake

Purpose: Assess translation of research into policy and practice.

- **Subdomain 1: Knowledge Products and Events**
  - **Objective**: Evaluate knowledge products and dissemination events.
  - **Steps**:
    1. P1.1–P1.4 (Knowledge Products): Select "Yes" or "No," specify product numbers, rate competency, and justify ratings.
    2. P2.1–P2.4 (Events): Select "Yes" or "No," specify event numbers, rate competency, and justify ratings.
  - **Tips**: Use records for counts and highlight product/event impact.
- **Subdomains 2–4: Communication, Advocacy, and Barriers**
  - **Objective**: Assess communication, advocacy, and policy translation barriers.
  - **Steps**:
    1. P1.2: Select communication channels and rate competency.
    2. P1.3: Select advocacy methods and rate competency.
    3. P1.4: Select policy influence mechanisms and rate competency.
    4. P1.6: Select methods for adapting findings and rate competency.
    5. P1.8: Select barriers and provide details for "Other."
  - **Tips**: Provide evidence for competency ratings and specify context-specific barriers.

6.5 Step 5: Review and Validate Responses

After completing the assessment, review all responses to ensure completeness, ensuring no relevant questions are missed and justifications are provided for each rating. Cross-check entries with team members to validate accuracy and maintain objectivity, using organizational records to confirm numerical data like staff numbers or project counts. Resolve any conflicting responses through team discussions, aiming for consensus based on evidence. This step is crucial for ensuring the assessment reflects the organization's true capacity without bias or exaggeration.

6.6 Step 6: Update the Dashboard

Once all responses are finalized, click the **Refresh Dashboard** button to update scores and visuals. If the dashboard doesn't update, verify that macros are enabled and the file is unblocked. The dashboard will display total scores for each subdomain, calculated by summing competency ratings for "Yes" responses (Basic = 1, Medium = 2, Advanced = 3). It also shows maximum possible scores (if all activities were Advanced) and minimum possible scores (if all were Basic), along with percentages. Review charts or tables to identify patterns, such as subdomains with predominantly Basic ratings, which indicate priority areas for improvement.

6.7 Step 7: Analyze Results and Plan Improvements

Use the dashboard results to identify strengths and gaps. Subdomains with Advanced ratings represent areas to leverage, such as documenting best practices for replication. Low-scoring areas, such as Basic or No responses, highlight capacity gaps requiring action, like training or policy development. Prioritize development efforts based on organizational goals and available resources—for example, invest in statistical software training if "Data management" scores low.

Create a capacity development plan with specific milestones, such as improving “Ethics and Safeguarding” from Basic to Medium within six months. Plan to reassess periodically to track progress and update the dashboard.

6.8 Step 8: Save and Share Results

Save the completed Excel file with a clear naming convention, such as “HPSRI_Assessment_2025.xlsx,” and back it up to prevent data loss. Share the dashboard and key findings with leadership, staff, and external stakeholders like funders or policymakers to secure support for capacity-building initiatives. Use dashboard visuals, such as charts, to communicate results effectively. Document decisions and action plans in a separate report or within the tool’s notes section to ensure accountability and follow-through.

7. Best Practices for Effective Assessment

To maximize the tool’s value, adopt these best practices. First, maintain honesty and objectivity in responses, avoiding exaggeration to ensure a realistic assessment; justifications should provide clear context for ratings. Second, ensure collaboration across teams by holding workshops or meetings to align on responses, capturing diverse perspectives. Third, use the tool’s adaptability by focusing on relevant domains and customizing questions as needed, while preserving the assessment’s structure. Fourth, use the results to inform strategic decisions, such as allocating budgets for training or engaging stakeholders to address policy gaps. Finally, conduct the assessment regularly, such as annually or after significant changes, to monitor progress and sustain a culture of learning.

8. Troubleshooting Common Issues

Several issues may arise during the assessment process, but they can be resolved with the following solutions. If the dashboard fails to update after clicking **Refresh Dashboard**, ensure macros are enabled and the file is unblocked (see Step 2). If macros remain disabled, manually check Excel’s Trust Center settings to enable all macros. If scores show #NA or 0, verify that all relevant questions have “Yes/No” responses and competency ratings; fill in missing fields and refresh the dashboard. For conflicting team responses, hold discussions to reach a consensus, using data or records to support decisions.

9. Using Results for Organizational Growth

The assessment results are a roadmap for organizational improvement. Develop a capacity plan targeting low-scoring area—for instance, hire a data scientist if “Data management” is weak. Engage stakeholders, such as policymakers, to align capacity-building with external needs, securing support for initiatives like training programs. Set measurable milestones, such as improving a subdomain’s score within a set timeframe, and reassess regularly to track progress. Highlight strengths, like Advanced ratings, in reports to funders or partners to showcase organizational capabilities and build credibility.

10. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. **Why is my dashboard not updated?** Ensure you've clicked **Refresh Dashboard**. If it doesn't update, check macro settings or unblock the file.
2. **Why does clicking "Refresh Dashboard" show an error?** Macros may be disabled. Enable them via **File > Options > Trust Center > Trust Center Settings > Macro Settings**.
3. **Why is the dashboard not syncing with macros enabled?** Close the file, unblock it (right-click > Properties > Unblock), and reopen.
4. **Can I skip sections?** Yes, skip irrelevant domains or subdomains, but ensure enough data is provided for a meaningful assessment.
5. **How do I interpret scores?** Compare total scores to maximum possible scores to gauge capacity; low scores highlight areas for improvement.