

MERS Dashboard Tool Implementation

As a part of the MERS Focal Point program, CARE country offices and member partners used the newly developed MERS Dashboard Tool. This tool helps practitioners assess new, current, and previous programs' compliance with the relevant MERS Standards and provides a process to discuss successes and areas for improvement.

The CARE Focal Points chose to use the Dashboard in Ghana, Somalia, and Lebanon. The Focal Points later reviewed their experiences with the Dashboard in both a structured interview process and by answering written questions.

The four key questions staff used to guide the review were:

1. Who used the MERS Dashboard?
2. What were their main impressions?
3. What did its use add to the response (design or thinking)?
4. What might you suggest to improve the tool?

Main Impressions of the Dashboard Tool

Overall, the teams in Ghana, Somalia, and Lebanon agreed that using the Dashboard was a positive experience, even though it did require support from the CARE MERS Focal Points and time investments from the field teams.

The team in Ghana, supported by CARE's MERS Champion Sani Dan Aoude, reviewed all six of the MERS Standards and used the Dashboard in the early program implementation stages for a MERS Foundation COVID-19 response in cocoa producing areas. The team felt the MERS were truly relevant to the program, and Sani felt the Dashboard was *"quite practical in integrating market considerations into all phases of the project cycle."*

The team in Somalia focused on the Assessment and Analysis Standards. Sahara Ibrahim, CARE's Cash and Markets Technical Advisor, reported that while the team was very new to the MERS, the standards were *"useful to guide the team into having a scope and timeline for the assessment, as we already knew how the data will be used. The standards make sure the assessment was also useful, relevant, and used quickly. We used the information to decide on cash transfer amounts."*

Value Add to Program Response

In Lebanon, the Dashboard was used early in the design process for the country office's response to the August 2020 Beirut Port blast. As the response was very market driven, all but one of the MERS standards was deemed as applicable. Holly Welcome Radice, CARE's Global Cash & Markets Technical Advisor, who worked with the team shared their thoughts, *"Using the MERS Dashboard early on made us think about things that we would not have thought of and reach out to others that we would not have engaged. It was right after the blast and it was a bit hectic, so having a tool and a process helped. It showed us some gaps, brought out some areas*

where we had a lack of information. We were in the start-up phase and developing SOPs - so we could use the info and perspective from the Dashboard to make changes and do better.”

The CARE Ghana MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning) staff worked several of the key actions and indicators into the MEAL framework for the project. Sani Dan Aoude reported that using the Assessment and Analysis Standards improved the objectives and design of the planned assessments. Using the Dashboard ensured the needs and preferences of affected populations were considered.

“Using Dashboard for the Core Standards and Assessment and Analysis Standards, we realized that we needed market assessments for certain services and goods, specifically for the small businesses in construction, for the shelter sector. We also needed more market inclusion questions at our needs assessment stage. It prompted us to include continued data monitoring and information gathering on market systems throughout the response.” – Sani Dan Aoude

In Somalia, Sahara Ibrahim, CARE’s Cash and Markets Technical Advisor for the East, Central, and Southern Africa Region (ECSA) worked with a team developing a 3-month pilot project addressing sexual and reproductive health outcomes with CVA. It was a ‘heavy-lift’ for teams not used to working on market-based programming and with the MERS Standards. Sahara had to push the team initially, with *“myself and HQ/Regional and health/nutrition experts doing most of the input. We shared the process with the field. I asked them to choose the most relevant standards and introduced the MERS. None of our health staff had ever heard of it.”*

“We used the Core Standards and the Assessment and Analysis Standards. We looked at the Enterprise and Market Systems Analysis Standards, but nothing was relevant. We were more organized in using the assessment and kept it wide. We had to conduct quick market assessment of the materials required for the pilot project, this included cost of transport to the MCHs, cost of health services etc. so we used the Analysis and Assessment and Analysis Standards 2 & 3¹.

Assessment plans were developed which included looking at transport and who is in the market already, which might not have been on our radar. Our team who was working on this were ‘cash adjacent’ and so this was a way to expose sectors (health) not usually engaged with market-based programs. Even though they know about cash, being market-aware is a stronger need...there is a need for more market-aware programming. They know many things well, but the dashboard helped them see gaps and places to improve.”

Suggestions for Improvement

Overall, the experiences were positive, and there were improvements to project design and quality. Suggestions from CARE MERS Focal Points included developing an app or on-line tool to use to enter information, compressing the options to avoid repetition within the standards, and introducing the Dashboard Tool after a MERS introduction course for CARE field staff. Offering a course would ensure more buy-in and a deeper understanding of the MERS content.

¹ A&A 2: Scope of Assessment is determined by how data will be used & A&A 3:Fieldwork processes are inclusive, ethical and objective

While Sani and the team felt the MERS Dashboard tool did help Ghana improve the quality of the program, there were significant challenges as well.

“Using the MERS Dashboard was challenging. Our team was not familiar with this type of exercise, and emergency work was new to them. We had 2-3 sessions together just to get through deciding which standards were relevant and ended up using them all. We started without the full team but had staffing changes as the project was starting up. Having folks come late to the Dashboard process was hard, and took a lot of time, which was made worse by a delay in project implementation.”

Looking back, I will say, we should have prioritized the Assessment and Analysis Standards and the Enterprise and Market Systems Development Standards for ease of adoption and use.”