

The Minimum Economic Recovery Standards

Mainstreaming MERS within Smaller Organizations: A Regional Peer-to-Peer Approach

Sector: *Economic Recovery, Food Security and Livelihoods, Cash Response*

Location: *Gaziantep, Turkey*

Type: *Protracted Conflict and Displacement*

Mainstreaming MERS: Why It Matters

The Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (MERS), developed through the joint efforts of more than 90 agencies and over 175 practitioners, represent an industry consensus on economic recovery for the humanitarian and development sector.

The MERS have become well recognized and accepted as an industry standard providing key actions, key indicators, and guidance notes to enhance the effectiveness of organizations working to support the economic recovery of crisis-affected populations.

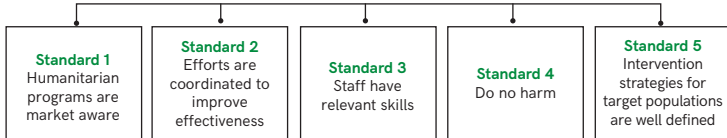
The MERS are applicable to all types of economic and market-based programming for relief, recovery, and resilience building across any sector. The standards highlight intervention consideration strategies across a range of topics - enterprise and market systems development, asset distribution, financial services, and employment - in areas affected by conflict, disaster, or disadvantaged situations.

The aim of mainstreaming is to institutionalize change to create a new normal. To mainstream the adoption and use of the MERS across the humanitarian and development sector, the SEEP Network has been harnessing knowledge and driving change through a multi-faceted approach tailored to the needs of different actors including:

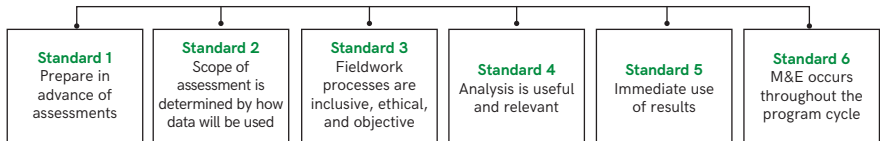
1. Individual learning opportunities for practitioners;
2. Tailored mainstreaming approaches for larger NGOs and UN agencies such as UNDP, OCHA, and the Global Early Recovery Cluster;
3. Peer-to-peer approaches catalyzed through clusters and working groups to support smaller organizations and regional adoption; and
4. Donor awareness building and adoption to support uptake and delivery of the MERS through applicable funding mechanisms.

A Quick Look Inside the Standards

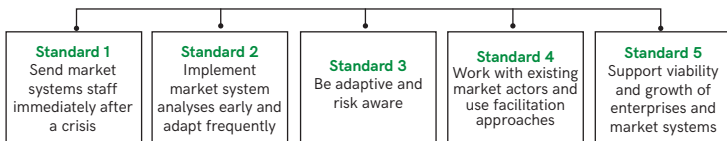
Core Standards



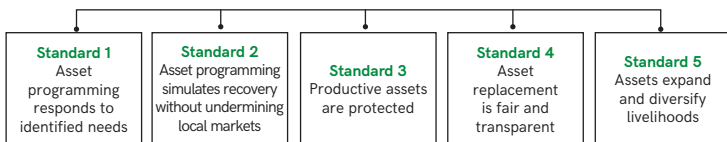
Assessment and Analysis Standards



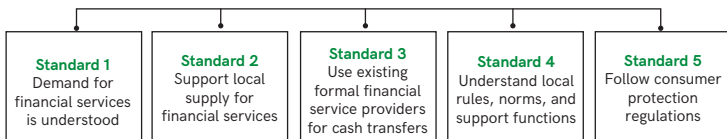
Enterprise and Market Systems Development Standards



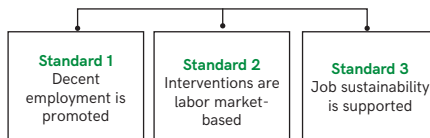
Asset Distribution Standards



Financial Services Standards



Employment Standards



Catalyzing Use and Awareness of MERS Through Clusters

“Being introduced to the MERS at the cluster level gave us the opportunity to develop a common understanding of response and recovery issues that were challenging us and how we might address them differently based on global best practice.”

“Great workshop, great facilitation, and a lot of learning and practical application. Understanding the MERS standards and how can be incorporated in the field and HQ is crucial.”

In early 2018, the SEEP Network partnered with the Cash-Based Response Working Group based in Gaziantep, Turkey to access organizations working with market-based programs in the region to build awareness and catalyze uptake of the MERS.

The knowledge dissemination model is articulated in Figure 1:

1. A Working Group or Cluster receives new information on the MERS;
2. Early Adopters pursue institutionalization of the MERS within their organization;
3. Early Adopters share knowledge of the MERS through local implementing partners or peer-to-peer networks to improve program quality and ability to apply the MERS in the field; and
4. Early Adopters use the MERS to influence donors on program quality leading to integration of the MERS within future proposals thus indirectly influencing other NGOs.

It is important to note that smaller organizations working in crisis zones have limited time and resources to attribute to staff development and program quality improvements. Finding these organizations and reaching out to them through regional cluster networks is often a useful first step when adopting the MERS.

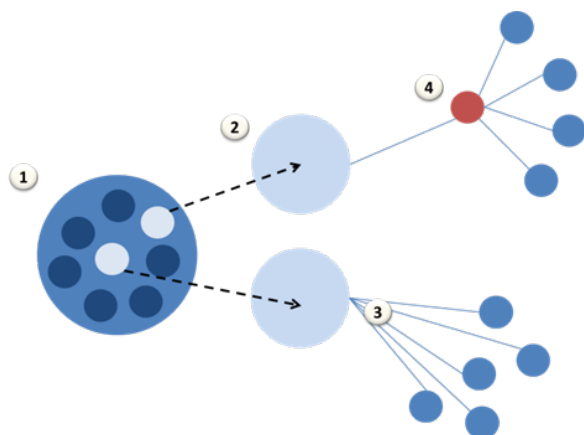


Figure 1: Peer-to-peer approach

Delivering training through clusters or working groups also allows for a common understanding on program quality to be developed within peer groups working in the same locations. Consequently, a greater appreciation of the challenges and changes required for interventions can be sought across peer groups and greater collaboration on intervention design and delivery can be discussed. This ensures that crisis-affected populations are receiving the same quality interventions from different organizations working in the same area and mitigates against the risk of interventions undermining each other.

The Early Adopter: Saad Barood @ Bonyan Organization



“The MERS handbook is a ‘how not to do something silly’ dictionary. It’s logical and easy to navigate. When you don’t know what to do, you simply reach inside for the answer.”

Saad Barood works for Bonyan, a local NGO based in Syria and Turkey. The organization specializes in relief and early recovery interventions across multiple sectors. Saad and his colleagues were not familiar with the MERS prior to an invitation to attend a MERS training event by the locally-based Cash-Based Responses Working Group. The training in Gaziantep was attended by 22 people from across 19 different locally based CBOs, NGOs, and larger multi-lateral organizations.

Saad is neither a project manager nor markets specialist but rather an experienced partnerships manager. When presented with the MERS, he realized its importance. Being up-to-date with standards ensures that Bonyan Organization’s programs are designed and delivered to proactively meet quality requirements and gain a solid reputation in market system interventions. Also, the programs should be able to compete for future funding and, most importantly, better support crisis-affected populations.

“Having the contributors to the MERS delivering the training event gave it credibility from the outset, generating the energy and buy-in needed to inspire use of the MERS.”

In addition to his partnership management role, Saad is an entrepreneurship trainer and had assumed, prior to the training, that this background meant that he understood market systems principles sufficiently. However, Saad acknowledged that business skills are different to market systems analysis and design skills discussed in the MERS training, all of which are core to developing good market-based program interventions.

As the training progressed, Saad identified issues within his organizations’ programming that he had either not been aware of or had not known how to tackle previously that could be possibly addressed by adhering to the MERS.

The Assessment and Analysis Standards highlighted the necessity of performing even a light touch assessment to inform any program engaging with market systems. The MERS also provided the rationale for analysis (even in a crisis). Finally, MERS presents a minimum level of economic assistance activities that should be reflected in funding proposals.

The Enterprise and Market Systems Development Standards created an awareness of the option of utilizing “less direct” delivery approaches for intervention to reduce the risk of market distortion and strengthen local markets. This has been a powerful change to Bonyan’s program design. Recent use of this learning for a UNDP-funded rehabilitation and infrastructure saw a shift in delivery approach with the community leading construction efforts and Bonyan facilitating the process and funding.

Spreading the Word Through Local Peer-to-Peer Networks

“We were asked ‘what are you going to do next?’ This was a call to action to take responsibility of our new knowledge. Otherwise, what is the point of training?”

Utilizing the MERS is not out of reach for any program or organization. The ability to create change within a short timeframe on a limited budget has been evidenced by early adopters who acknowledged the value of the MERS and had a mandate to enact change internally.

Since the initial training in May 2018, Saad has accomplished the following with on-going support from the SEEP Network:

- Spearheaded retrospective assessment and integration of MERS into select Bonyan programs for piloting in order to secure build buy-in within his organization;
- Addressed a key barrier to adoption in the region by translating MERS materials to Arabic; and
- Organized and delivered two knowledge sharing sessions (in both English and Arabic) with peers externally to generate more interest in mainstreaming MERS within organizations regionally. Co-funded by GIZ, these sessions have been attended by 40 people across multiple organizations including donors previously unaware of the MERS.

Articulating the Value of the MERS for Smaller Organizations

“It gives us an opportunity to push back to the donors. We don’t want to flood our country with in-kind donations, however well-intended.”

The MERS standards introduced Saad and his colleagues to best practices in humanitarian programming that had previously been inaccessible to the Bonyan team.

It has given them the opportunity to refer to the MERS standards to advocate internally for better quality programming.

Drafting proposals has also become easier as there is now a standard to refer to when designing program processes. The MERS provides justifiable arguments to fund the activities and timeframes needed to produce better quality programming with donors.

Even a Small Change in Knowledge can Yield new Ways of Doing: Using the MERS in Bonyan

An incumbent livelihoods project delivered by Bonyan Organization had worked with business owners to address their needs resulting in an in-kind donation of 190 electric generators to local businesses. This one-off surge in demand created local market distortion, inflating the prices of the generators.

The program team was aware of the implications of their program design but admitted that if they had used the MERS beforehand they would have identified that risk and known how to avoid it.

As a result, new programming will be assessed against the MERS with emphasis on:

- Assessment and Analysis Standards – to understand the market systems prior to distributions
- Asset Distribution Standards – to improve any distribution interventions to reduce distortion risks
- Financial Services Standards – to support design of other interventions to improve access to new assets outside of in-kind distributions (where appropriate)

How To Get Involved

If you, your organization, or cluster want to integrate the MERS into your work, there are so many ways to start right now.

Individuals:

- Download the MERS handbook [here](#)
- Download the Humanitarian Standards Partnership App (with the MERS) [here](#)
- [Sign up](#) to the Markets in Crisis community of practice
- A calendar of future training events and other resources can be found on the [SEEP Network website](#)

Organizations: [Contact SEEP](#) to discuss tailored training events and mainstreaming partnerships.

Clusters and working groups: [Contact SEEP](#) to discuss outreach activities and training opportunities.

Donors: [Contact SEEP](#) to discuss opportunities to support your grantees with MERS resources, training and collaboration.

Acknowledgements

The SEEP Network wishes to thank the following people and organizations for their support and partnership in Mainstreaming the MERS.

- Mohamad Haddad, CARE Turkey and Sinan Aldemir, UNOCHA - for coordinating and hosting the MERS workshop for the Gaziantep Cash-Based Response Working Group;
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- Mohammad Mahrousa, Bahar Organization - for co-facilitation of MERS workshops for clusters
- Katie Whitehouse - for authoring this case study.

About SEEP

SEEP is a collaborative learning network. We support strategies that create new and better opportunities for vulnerable populations, especially women, to participate in markets and improve their quality of life. For over 30 years, our members have served as a testing ground for innovative strategies that promote inclusion, develop resilient markets, and enhance the livelihood potential of the worlds' poor. www.seepnetwork.org

About the Minimum Economic Recovery Standards

The Minimum Economic Recovery Standards are an initiative of the SEEP Network. Now in the third edition, the MERS were developed through the joint efforts of more than 90 agencies and over 175 practitioners, represent an industry consensus on economic recovery for the humanitarian and development sector. The MERS have become well recognized and accepted as an industry standard providing key actions, key indicators, and guidance notes to enhance the effectiveness of organizations working to support the economic recovery of crisis-affected populations. The standards highlight strategies designed to promote enterprise and market systems development, asset distribution, financial services, and employment in areas affected by conflict or disaster. To learn more visit: www.mershandbook.org