
MERS Personal Case Story: Can Livelihoods and Protection Get Along?

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Sector: Livelihoods

Context: Refugees and Displacement

Background

I arrived in Chad in May 2019 as a senior livelihoods officer for UNHCR. As soon as I took up service, I realized there was a lot of chaos surrounding the livelihoods work. There was no hand-over report, and it was clear that most of the intended livelihoods interventions were, in reality, food security activities. The aim of the programs was to replace or integrate food assistance or improve dietary requirements, and the focus was on lowering expenditures instead of making an income. However, these interventions provided no room for improvement in terms of living conditions and income generation. In fact, an independent consultant conducted an evaluation project to measure the impact and effectiveness of livelihoods interventions and it highlighted, among other things, the lack of clear objectives and monitoring work.

Based on my previous experience visiting Chad on short-term missions, it seemed nothing in the situation seemed to have changed in terms of approach and interventions. It was difficult to grasp a clear idea of the livelihoods programme and the changes it wanted to make. Livelihoods activities appeared to be a mix of food security, nutrition, community services and education interventions. What was lacking was the crux of the livelihoods work: the transition towards better living conditions, increased income and the ability to manage shocks. All this would translate into a general capacity of making decisions and becoming capable to manage external circumstances, including the capacity of UNHCR to support sustainable livelihoods. This approach impacted monitoring and evaluation (M&E) capacity - as the focus on monitoring was focused on what UNHCR and its partners were able to provide and not so much on how good the “beneficiaries” were at reacting to these inputs.

MERS Training as a Springboard

In fall of 2019, I took part in a virtual MERS training course organized by UNHCR in partnership with the SEEP Network. The training provided a good opportunity to look more in depth at improving the M&E work within UNHCR and to contribute methods of re-adjusting and better centering livelihoods activities.

In determining how to move forward with this endeavour, I asked for support to the evaluation unit in HQ. As we discussed the challenges I was facing, it became clear that I couldn’t address the M&E issues without improving the planning process. Concurrently, as I advanced through the MERS training and was learning how to apply my everyday work to the standards and recognized some of the Standards were really applicable for addressing my challenges.

For example, looking closely at the MERS **Assessment & Analysis Standard 2: Scope of assessment is determined by how data will be used**, revealed that problems with monitoring were indeed related to

proper planning of activities. The planning of interventions entailed very broad objectives: improving living conditions; achieving self-reliance; supporting refugees to meet their own needs. These objectives which were qualitative and difficult to measure. However, the monitoring work was focused on quantitative data and heavy on process indicators. Essentially, the monitoring didn't capture the changes that livelihoods projects should generally bring to the refugee population. To better understand the interventions implemented by the different sub-offices, I asked colleagues in the field to fill in a weekly report. But this was not useful exercise, as the reports lacked important descriptors of the context, the activities, the skills of the targeted population and the modalities of implementation. In essence, for the Chad operation, monitoring simply was not possible because: 1) It wasn't clear what we were monitoring (or if we were trying to monitor something intangible); 2) The operation relied very much on quantitative indicators. Hence, as articulated in the ***MERS Assessment and Analysis Standard 3, the analysis was not useful and relevant.***

This is a common challenge I face in my work. My perception is that like many organizations, UNHCR struggles to make sense of livelihoods work and in fact apply the protection principles to livelihoods data or the protection data to livelihoods work.

Why the Gap? Finding Common Ground Between Livelihoods and Protection

The objective of protection, as I understand it, is to make everybody equal thus ensuring every refugee has the same rights associated with his/her status. From livelihoods, we expect that each refugee has a job and that they are all equal in their employment and earning the same wages. Yet these principles can generate incongruities with livelihoods work. For example, consider the premise that rather than providing jobs for refugees, UNHCR should facilitate opportunities and access to jobs to people who have the capacities and the will to pursue their objectives. This means that those with technical capacities, opportunities and social skills will make more money compared to those who lack these characteristics. Yet – this would make it appear that protection and livelihoods are incompatible, as not everyone would have equal employment and equal wages.

In reality - many struggle to find the complementarity between protection and livelihoods work. Personally (and I believe this might be the case for many livelihoods' officers) I find it difficult to accept the principle that there is no middle ground towards achieving a goal. It translates in livelihoods terms into having access to the formal labour market, into owning the land instead of having access to it, and other such conditions. My perception is that livelihoods can be described as making the most out of what we have, and middle ground can often be the best possible option, given the context and the circumstances.

Thus, livelihoods can contribute to enhance protection gradually through steps that might not be ideal in legal terms but might be necessary in socioeconomic terms. This underlines the importance of useful and relevant data. Good planning and monitoring, with multiple sets of data, can contribute to increasing the level of protection, while allowing access to economic opportunities and improving living conditions. The caveat is that data need to be selected and interpreted correctly.

Data Matters

At the same time, data collected by protection staff -- such as level of education and employment history -- are extremely important for livelihoods planning. These data inform the kind of interventions that can be implemented and the expected impact. However, data related to vulnerabilities might not be that relevant in a livelihoods sense if proper interpretation is not applied. For example, a physically disabled woman with a good understanding of how markets work might have (depending on the context) more possibilities to succeed than an illiterate man. The level of vulnerabilities experienced can contribute to effective livelihoods planning but it is not what makes the difference. Socioeconomic data is often nuanced and tells one side of the story which needs to be augmented by other forms of information. Just like a puzzle, we need to put each piece in the right place to assemble the full picture. Sometimes, depending on the perspective, different people see different images or give different interpretations of the same picture.

The **Enterprise and Market Systems Development Standard 2: Implement market system analyses early and adapt frequently** is crucial to plan and monitor livelihoods interventions and prevent protection issues. Labour market analysis are like the corner pieces of the puzzle - they help to frame information. Unfortunately, there are different kinds of market analysis, which makes things very confusing. Yet, they are extremely important, as very often refugees tend to replicate the same livelihoods activities over and over. In Cameroon, all the women were making beignets or selling nuts in the street. Soon, it became difficult to make a profit and they needed to walk around to reach clients, posing problems for themselves and their children's safety. In Afghanistan, saffron had an economic boom because, once grown, it was extremely expensive. Unfortunately, those who invested in the business experienced considerable losses. When the saffron was sold five years later, the value had decreased due to the high supply. These outcomes have negative impacts in terms of protection. A wrong investment for someone who is struggling in making ends meet can have catastrophic consequences. However, by using updated market data, these issues can potentially be avoided, or its effects can be minimised. Protection risks can be managed by predicting how the market will react to a given activity. Market risks can be dealt with by looking at the individual vulnerabilities. A combination of the two sets of data can often, but not always, tell you how things are likely to evolve.

Conclusion

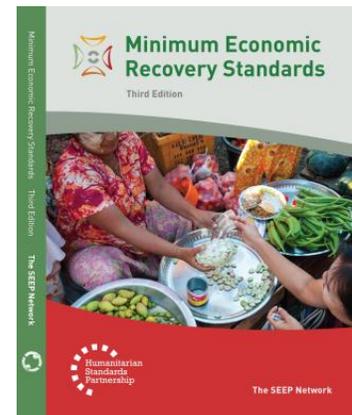
In my experience, protection and livelihoods represent two different ways to tell a story but can contribute to each other's aim. Yet, protection and livelihoods professionals "speak" different languages and might have opposite starting points (equality vs equity). To make the conversation easier, it helped to translate economic concepts and socioeconomic data into protection topics. At the same time, the risk can be that the data is misinterpreted which can happen when applying livelihoods information to protection and vice versa. The starting point is for protection and livelihoods to understand and agree on what they want and can achieve based on what is available. My personal experience is that protection's strength is to define what final aim is while livelihoods takes a more gradual approach, based on what is possible given the socioeconomic context. Thus - monitoring should measure how much progress is made based on the given circumstances.

About the MERS

The **Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (MERS)** articulate the minimum level of activities required to support the economic recovery of vulnerable populations in the wake of crises. The MERS handbook offers tools and approaches that support practitioners, multi-lateral stakeholders, local market actors, governments and donors to support economic recovery through market-based response. The standards draw from the accumulated experience of the world's leading humanitarian agencies and economic development practitioners. The third and most current edition of the MERS represents the expertise of over 90 organizations and 175 technical professionals.

What are the Standards?

The MERS are comprised of six sets of standards that can be read in sequence or separately. The **Core Standards** outline approaches and activities that prevent and/or mitigate harm—whether physical, social, economic, environmental or otherwise and promote protection in alignment with the Core Humanitarian Standards. The **Assessment and Analysis** standards provide a road map for designing, implementing and sharing assessment results that inform effective and context-appropriate programmatic strategies. **Asset Distribution** standards guide practitioners to apply market-aware thinking to asset distribution, to support activities linked to longer term-recovery and minimize disruption of local market systems. The MERS also contain standards designed to bolster livelihoods, expand financial inclusion and support self-reliance through **Enterprise and Market System Development**, **Financial Services** and **Employment**.



How are the Standards structured?

Each set of standards includes Key Actions, Key Indicators and Guidance Notes. The MERS also provide examples of good and bad programming, demonstrating to decision makers which approaches and interventions are considered best practice—enabling them to avoid mistakes from past responses. The MERS are not prescriptive. Standards can be applied in whatever combination makes the most sense and will have the most impact for the context.

Where can I get the Standards?

The MERS are available to download online, or to purchase as a hardcopy handbook. You can also use the HSPapp to download MERS and the partner Standards on your mobile device.

MERS and the Humanitarian Standards Partnership



The MERS are a member of the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP) which aims to improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian action through an increased application of humanitarian standards. The partnership is comprised of six standards initiatives, which in addition to the MERS include: Sphere, the Child Protection Minimum Standards, the Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards, the INEE Minimum Standards for Education, The Humanitarian Inclusion Standard for Older People and People with Disabilities and the Minimum Standards for Market Analysis.

To learn more and access the full set of standards, visit www.mershandbook.org.