

The Minimum Economic Recovery Standards

Case Study: Using the MERS to Rapidly Identify Quality Improvements for Market Interventions in Fragile Development Contexts

Project: The DREAMS project
Sector: Health & Livelihoods
Location: Nairobi, Kenya
Type: Resilience; fragile development contexts; urban settings

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 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:

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

Mainstreaming the MERS: Global Communities Take on the Challenge and Identify Immediate Improvement Opportunities



Global Communities aims to be a global leader of market-based approaches in its humanitarian and economic recovery programming. To accomplish this, the ability to comply with the latest MERS standards is seen as a significant value-add to the organization.

As a demonstration of this commitment, Global Communities partnered with the SEEP Network (the institutional sponsor of the MERS) to mainstream the MERS within the organization through a long-term change process.

The beginning of this 'change' process includes a pre-assessment of the organization's current capacities regarding the MERS and the creation of a dedicated internal team of MERS ambassadors who occupy internal functional and programmatic roles at the field and headquarter level. This team works together with SEEP to catalyze the uptake of the MERS within the organization utilizing their unique knowledge of the organization's processes, practices, and culture to identify what needs to adapt internally to support the adoption of MERS.

In December 2018, Global Communities began the formation of a multi-country team of twelve MERS ambassadors through a SEEP-facilitated MERS training event for selected individuals from across the organization. During this training event, participants conducted an exercise wherein they used the MERS to benchmark the quality of one of their current programs. This exercise is used to aid practitioners in identifying opportunities for improvements in their programs.

The initial findings from this exercise have been highlighted in this case study to showcase:

1. The application of market systems thinking and the MERS in a health project;
2. The application of the MERS to support program quality in a fragile development context; and
3. How quickly the benchmarking activity can be done using the MERS *key indicators* and *key actions* by project managers who have a basic understanding of the MERS.

Introducing DREAMS: A Long-Term HIV/AIDS Prevention Project for Women Living in Fragile Environments

Success in public health requires a holistic approach, making a market systems lens helpful to practitioners.

The project’s vision is to help girls become **D**etermined, **R**esilient, **E**mpowered, **A**IDS-free, **M**entored, and **S**afe (**DREAMS**). It is an ambitious multi-country project funded by the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) initiative, in partnership with the Gates Foundation and the Nike Foundation. The aim is to reduce HIV infections among adolescent girls and young women (AGYM) who currently account for 74% of new HIV infections among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa.



The Kenyan DREAMS project is being implemented by Global Communities in partnership with St. John’s Community Centre (SJCC) and the Kenya Girl Guide Association (KGGA) in informal settlements within Nairobi County. A key goal is to reduce new HIV infections among AGYW ages 15 to 24, as well as target girls ages 10 to 14 with HIV prevention interventions before they become sexually active. The initiative has been underway in Nairobi since July 2015, and to date over 12,000 AGYM have benefited from the program.

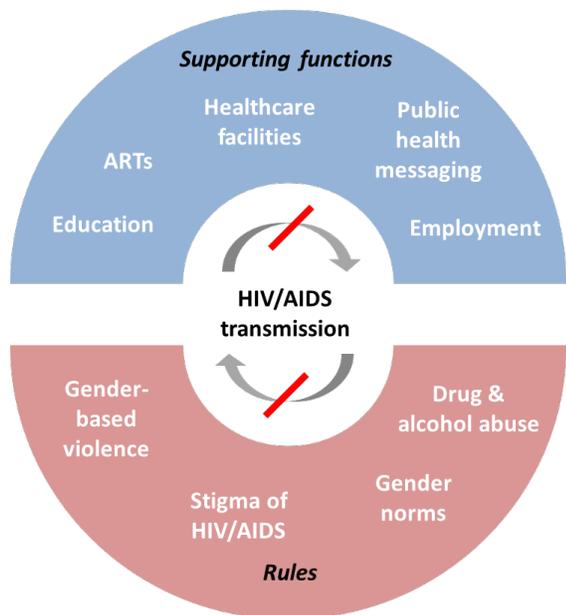


Figure 1: Market systems representation of reduction to HIV/AIDS transmission

The project recognized that it required a holistic understanding of the constraints inhibiting effective and long-term transmission prevention and management of HIV/AIDS within the local health system. Effective HIV/AIDS management is not dependent on public health services and messaging alone.

In this context, access to education, continued healthcare support and anti-retroviral therapy (ART), livelihood opportunities, and challenging the stigma around HIV/AIDS and social acceptance of gender-based violence and drug and alcohol abuse were recognised as key influencing factors in successfully preventing and managing HIV/AIDS.

The diagram opposite provides a simplified visual representation of the system of *supporting functions* and *rules* that support the reduction of HIV/AIDS transmission, especially among vulnerable populations.

Dreams Project Context

The DREAMS project is part of the Resilient Communities unit of Global Communities working toward long-term outcomes within a fragile urban context. DREAMS is situated within a fragile environment influenced by many factors. The informality of the working and living conditions that the target population find themselves within, as well as frequent political unrest, threaten the stability of the local area, weakening local institutions and investment confidence in the long term. These areas also face risk of fires and waterborne disease outbreaks. During these events, livelihoods can be disrupted, homes and businesses destroyed, and healthcare centers overwhelmed. Maintaining sustainability is a challenge when conditions are constantly fluctuating, and local populations and institutions have limited resilience to mitigate, respond to, or adapt to these changes.

While DREAMS is a long-term development project, it must also contend with destructive recurrent crises, which are considered normal and not a humanitarian priority. Given the limited institutional support to prevent or respond to local crises, Global Communities have unintentionally become *de facto* responders to emergencies in the slums where most of the target group for DREAMS lives and works. This kind of support and response is unsustainable and can create dependencies on agency interventions to play the role local actors and institutions should be playing. Thus, there is an inherent need to build resilience within local systems to respond and recover from these events without undermining the sustainability of longer-term project outcomes.

Market systems exist across the disaster lifecycle, and their functionality becomes dependent on how the system is affected during different stages of a disaster lifecycle or the fluctuations between chronically stressed and more stressed situations in fragile environments. Therefore, practitioners working with market systems need to understand how the system is affected across these different scenarios to intervene in a way that supports, rather than undermines, both the recovery and resilience of the system.

The MERS were developed to bring the concepts of market systems to the humanitarian space, where the knowledge gap in market-based approaches was hindering rather than supporting crisis response and recovery activities. As such, the MERS have mostly been presented for use in the context of humanitarian response and crisis recovery. However, although the MERS are incorporated within the Humanitarian Standards Partnership, they are not exclusively for use within humanitarian contexts.

The MERS were developed precisely to help program design and delivery to support markets through crisis. As such, the MERS can provide guidance for effective programming for those working in humanitarian crisis situations and those working on longer-term projects in fragile environments. This was confirmed when the DREAMS team attended the MERS training in December 2018.



Figure 2: MERS Workshop for Global Communities in Amman Jordan

Benchmarking: Using the MERS to Rapidly Identify Quality Improvements for Projects in Complex Contexts

The simplicity of the MERS allowed DREAMS practitioners to break down the complexity of market systems development approaches and more easily identify shortfalls in program design.

The DREAMS project team were included in Global Communities MERS Mainstreaming team, given their understanding of market systems development in fragile urban contexts. It was envisioned that the DREAMS team could help Global Communities identify where the confluence of humanitarian and development work would benefit from better quality market-based programming. During the MERS training event, DREAMS project managers conducted an exercise using the MERS to benchmark their program quality.

While the DREAMS project has seen success in many of its intervention areas, challenges remain with maintaining the livelihoods of their target group in certain sectors. Although there has been successful self-employment and job acquisition and retention in certain livelihoods in which women have been trained, others have seen drop-out rates as high as 30%¹



Figure 3: One of the women benefitting from DREAMS livelihood interventions

Using the straightforward layout of the MERS, which are rooted in best practice from MSD delivery, the project staff were able to quickly identify issues in the program that were likely the root cause of current project challenges. The team discovered weaknesses in the program delivery that threatened the sustainability of project outcomes and were likely inherited from the original program design.

The DREAMS team saw that the MERS provided a pathway for development projects in fragile and volatile contexts. The DREAMS team were able to reflect on program quality and ensure that the principles for long-term market system strengthening were adhered to despite the

volatile context common with informal settlements. The MERS are specifically designed to provide guidance for navigating these challenging contexts in which current market system development guidance is less prescriptive.

¹ This number is derived from the total number employed (208) versus those who left employment for various reason such as attrition due to drop out, long periods of internship/apprenticeship, and financial limitation (including transport to work, etc.)

This exercise showcased the opportunity of projects working in fragile contexts to use the MERS to rapidly assess program quality and design interventions that can create long-term sustainability outcomes while meeting short-term crisis needs.

The assessment was deliberately rapid because of the need to identify initial opportunities for improvement based on the MERS standards at minimal cost to the project.

The DREAMS team assessed their project against all six categories of standards. At this initial benchmarking stage, the assessment was done across the whole project rather than each individual intervention. Through the process, the DREAMS team learned that some standards were not applicable to the project at all. However, while some standards were already being well or partially adhered to, some required more work.

The standards highlighted below were identified as high priority in addressing some of the project challenges identified earlier in this case study:

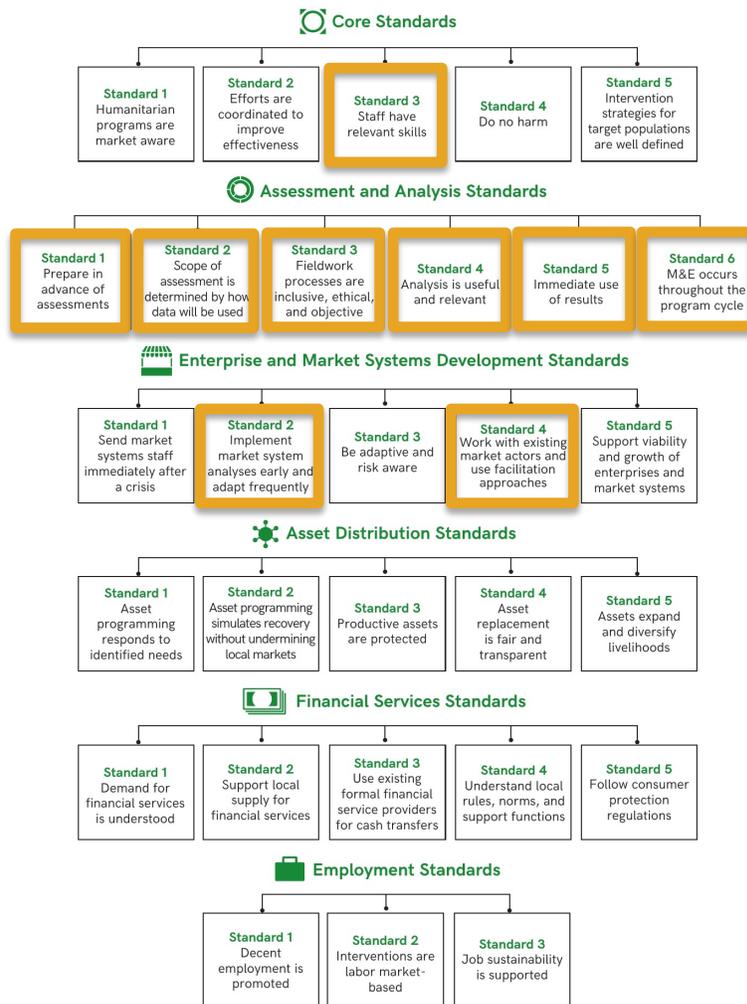


Figure 4: Prioritisation of the MERS

Having identified and prioritized the standards most relevant and influential in improving the project, the DREAMS team identified potential actions to improve project quality:

| Standard | Opportunity for change | Action to be taken for next phase |
|--|---|--|
| <p><i>Core</i></p> <p><i>Standard 3</i></p> | <p>The DREAMS project has been well delivered by the field staff, but they have limited market systems knowledge, which means the programs have followed a traditional direct delivery approach to certain interventions.</p> <p>There is opportunity to integrate market systems knowledge to develop innovative programming that focuses on building resilience in local systems.</p> | <p>Work with project staff to identify the right team with the skills and knowledge to support program design and monitoring.</p> <p>This may occur through training of existing staff with support from experts and acquisition of new staff in program design and delivery.</p> |
| <p><i>Assessment and Analysis</i></p> <p><i>Standards 1 - 6</i></p> | <p>Although market assessments were conducted to identify key livelihood opportunities for the target group, it was not broad enough and assumed that the target group had the knowledge of what type of livelihoods would be best to improve their employability.</p> <p>Indeed, many women chose similar livelihoods within the same area, thus saturating the market. This market distortion reduced local demand and led to drop-outs as well as issues with already-established business owners.</p> | <p>Market assessments need to understand the supply and demand side of the market and the supporting functions and rules underpinning those markets in more depth. The assessment needs to cover a broader reach than just the local market within slum areas and must challenge assumptions that the target group has the information to make informed employability decisions.</p> |
| <p><i>Enterprise and Market Systems Development</i></p> <p><i>Standard 2</i></p> | <p>Given the high likelihood of the recurrence of similar crisis events in the target area, pre-crisis analysis could be conducted in the area to prepare local market actors (including the target group) to prepare and respond to crisis events to mitigate risk and reduce disruption.</p> | <p>Conduct pre-crisis market analysis for the priority sectors to support proactive contingency planning and response through local actors and build resilience of the target group and project outcomes.</p> |
| <p><i>Enterprise and Market Systems Development</i></p> <p><i>Standard 4</i></p> | <p>Upon reflection, Global Communities has been taking more of a direct rather than indirect approach to livelihood development and emergency response in the target area of the informal settlements. To reduce dependence on external funding and skills, facilitative approaches are required.</p> | <p>Upon completion of updated market assessment, Global Communities will identify local and active market actors (both public and private) relevant to deliver interventions and facilitate long-term change in local systems to support relevant livelihood and health system strengthening.</p> |

Next Steps: Increasing Uptake of the MERS Benchmarking and Translating the Results into Practical Action

Global Communities, having witnessed the speed at which projects can be initially assessed against the MERS by informed project managers, wanted to replicate the process for other Humanitarian Assistance and Economic Recovery projects.

In partnership with SEEP, Global Communities is developing a low-maintenance internal dashboard to support rapid assessment and communication of project quality in accordance with the MERS. Piloting of the assessment tools will test the competency requirements needed for project managers to conduct these rapid assessments. The data acquired from benchmarking will identify common and priority challenges in meeting standards across Global Communities and feed into the strategy for catalyzing the adoption of MERS within the organization.

Meanwhile, the DREAMS team has returned to Kenya to begin actioning the changes they identified from their rapid assessment. The team, recognizing the importance of good assessment and analysis in designing appropriate market interventions, will use this data to inform the requirements of their next phase of project funding.



Figure 5: DREAMS project managers using the MERS handbook for assessing their program

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

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About Global Communities

Global Communities is an international non-profit organization founded in 1952 that works closely with communities worldwide to bring about sustainable changes that improve the lives and livelihoods of the vulnerable. Global Communities believes that the people who understand their needs best are the people of the community itself. Learn more at www.globalcommunities.org

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