

The Minimum Economic Recovery Standards

Case Study: Applying MERS to a Market Study in Congo-Brazzaville



This case study shows how the MERS were applied to a 2018 market study conducted by Catholic Relief Services, following displacement in Congo-Brazzaville. Drawing on this experience, suggestions have been made on how to apply the standards elsewhere.

The Minimum Economic Recovery Standards (MERS) lay out a series of standards, key actions, indicators, and guidance for any post-emergency interventions with economic implications. The MERS were predicated on the need to integrate market systems into post-emergency resilience building efforts.

Background

In May of 2016, conflict triggered by post-election violence and subsequent government response in the Congo-Brazzaville department of Pool led to the displacement of an estimated 107,000 people.

Almost two years after the initial displacement, most internally displaced people (IDPs) had yet to return to their homes and still lacked basic necessities. In response, CRS and Caritas proposed an additional NFI distribution to those families not included in initial distributions. For this distribution, CRS wanted to examine the possibility of using a market-based approach.

A market assessment was conducted in March 2018. The main objective of the assessment was to determine whether local markets were operational and had the capacity to supply NFIs to the target population. In addition, the assessment would identify the supply chains of the different products to the markets and identify possible modalities and their potential impacts on local markets.

ICRC's Rapid Assessment of Markets (RAM) ¹ approach was used to conduct the market assessment. Interviews were conducted with wholesalers and retailers in the 10 markets visited. In addition, key informants on the market committees were also interviewed. Four enumerators from Caritas Brazzaville, Caritas Kinkala, and Caritas Nkayi were trained, and a test of the tools was conducted.

¹ <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4199-rapid-assessment-markets-guidelines-initial-emergency-market-assessment>

Results and Recommendations of the Study

The study showed that markets near where IDPs were residing had not suffered damage and access was normal. Trade routes in the Pool, which had been circumscribed during the crisis, had started opening after a cease fire agreement in December 2017. Supply in the Bouenza region where many IDPs fled was generally unaffected by the crisis. Almost universally, surveyed vendors stated that they could readily increase supply to meet potential increases in demand.

The study recommended NFI fairs with vouchers to the selected beneficiaries with direct distribution being the fallback option for those areas with poor market access.




Conducting a market study in Congo-Brazzaville

Utilization of MERS

The MERS contains six categories of standards:

1. Core Standards;
2. Assessment and Analysis Standards;
3. Enterprise and Market Systems Development Standards;
4. Asses Distribution Standards;
5. Financial Services Standards; and
6. Employment Standards

For this experience, we focused on the first two: Core Standards and Assessment and Analysis Standards. Core standards of MERs are aligned with the Core Humanitarian Standards, adapted for an economic recovery context. While the Core Standards apply to all economic responses, the Assessment and Analysis Standards focus on assessments and thus are almost entirely applicable to the Congo-Brazzaville study. The remaining standards fall outside the scope of the Congo-Brazzaville assessment, focusing mainly on established programs.

The following tables lists those activities undertaken during the assessment under the appropriate standard. Those activities marked with a  symbol deviate from the standard or were not undertaken.

Core Standards Observations

Core Standard 1: Humanitarian programs are market aware
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ It was determined that no previous assessments had taken place to evaluate market capacity (so there was no duplication) ✓ Key markets were identified through the Caritas procurement/logistics teams ✓ Market analysis was utilized to propose market-based NFI fairs as a response
Core Standard 2: Efforts are coordinated to improve effectiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Caritas worked with WFP to establish lists of IDPS and coordinated closely with the government ✓ Since the government had not officially declared an emergency, the cluster system was not in place Ø No analysis was undertaken of stakeholder environment (government, transporters, etc.) looking at capacities, power dynamics, which actors were marginalized, etc. Ø There was little examination of the market-based enabling environment. However, WFP had already implemented a cash program (first using mobile money, then e-vouchers)
Core Standard 3: Staff have relevant skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Enumerators were chosen from staff of each local Caritas where the survey took place. They were trained in the questionnaires and procedures ✓ These staff had participated in the NFI distribution so were aware of that process and the proposed market alternative
Core Standard 4: Do No Harm
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Each staff member signs a code of conduct ✓ A gender assessment was conducted after the market assessment Ø There is a need to subsequently apply a “do no harm” lens to selected market chains if the project is funded
Core Standard 5: Interventions for target populations are well-defined
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The market assessment responds to this standard including the response analysis

Assessment and Analysis Standards Observations

<p>Assessment and Analysis Standard 1: Prepare in advance of assessments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∅ The standard refers to pre-emergency preparedness in countries prone to crisis. CRS had not been operating in country previously, so little advance preparation had taken place
<p>Assessment Analysis Standard 2: Scope of assessment is determined by how data will be used</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The overall scope and timeline of assessment was laid out prior in the Scope of Work ✓ There were few existing assessments other than needs assessments ✓ The assessment included market mapping ✓ The assessment included both men and women, larger and smaller traders ✓ The assessment was limited and did not gather extraneous data ∅ Coordination occurred with WFP and the government, but there was little coordination with other stakeholders. The team was composed entirely of CRS/Caritas staff ∅ The assessment was not participatory in classic PRA sense. Information was gathered using standard survey protocols. Information flowed one way from informants to enumerators
<p>Assessment and Analysis Standard 3: Fieldwork processes are inclusive, ethical, and objective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The enumerators were trained prior to the field work ✓ Tools were tested in the field and adjusted ✓ The data was entered on spreadsheet ✓ Participants were informed of purpose of interview and that their information would be confidential. Those who were uncomfortable were not interviewed ✓ Interviews were mainly conducted in the local language ✓ Information was reviewed in daily meetings and summarized ∅ The surveys focused on wholesalers and retailers (not the entire value chain) ∅ The team was entirely male
<p>Assessment and Analysis Standard 4: Analysis is useful and relevant</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The data was processed quickly and cleaned prior to analysis ✓ Results were consistent within and across markets ∅ A rapid analysis was undertaken with team and Caritas (not all stakeholders were involved) ∅ There were some issues with data entry and design of data entry form preventing more sophisticated analysis. However, most of the data was qualitative so overall results were not affected
<p>Assessment and Analysis Standard 5: Immediate use of results</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The results fed into a proposal to OFDA ✓ A response analysis was undertaken and NFI fairs were selected as the most appropriate intervention ∅ The assessment report was written in English, limiting the audience ∅ It is unknown whether results were shared with other stakeholders
<p>Assessment and Analysis Standard 6: M&E occurs throughout the program cycle</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∅ Program had not yet been implemented at the time of the MERS review

Conclusion

The MERS standards provided excellent guidelines for the Congo-Brazzaville market assessment. However, not all the standards were applicable under the circumstances, and the applicable standards were not all rigorously followed.

Perhaps the most problematic standard to implement was the Assessment and Analysis Standard 1: Prepare in Advance of Assessments. Given that CRS had no physical presence in the country, advance preparation was not undertaken. Even in countries with ongoing CRS presence, resources for emergency activities are often unavailable until an emergency strikes, and funding is procured. CRS is currently undertaking cash preparedness planning in selected countries. Similar efforts should be undertaken for market preparedness in disaster prone countries. While disasters are often localized, examining national level markets would provide critical information that could be supplemented with more targeted local assessments in the period following a disaster.

Coordination and inclusion of stakeholders can also be problematic. In Congo-Brazzaville, Caritas presence on the ground was critical to the overall emergency response. However, there is no cluster system in place even though Caritas had good relations with the government and worked in conjunction with WFP to establish beneficiary lists. In countries with clusters, informing the appropriate clusters in advance of the assessment and presenting the results after the assessment would be a big step in resolving this issue.

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

Lead Author: Edward Walters, Technical Advisor, Agriculture and Markets, Catholic Relief Services

About Catholic Relief Services

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is the official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States. CRS saves, protects and transforms lives in more than 100 countries, without regard to race, religion or nationality.

www.crs.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