

MERS Guidance in Response to COVID-19

April 10, 2020

In this rapidly evolving context, we know it is important to continue providing updates of the latest thinking from MERS collaborators. Below are updates to the March 25 guidance on how the MERS Standards can help you adapt your current programs in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some suggestions on Immediate and Potential Future Actions are provided.

A working group of MERS collaborators has pulled together the following guidance to help teams identify immediate next steps and potential future actions. While all of the [Minimum Economic Recovery Standards](#) remain relevant, some have taken on new meaning or need adaptation to the new context.

For those who are new to the MERS Standards, they include Key Actions, Key Indicators, Guidance Notes, and examples to help support the implementation of the Standards.

IF YOU ONLY HAVE TIME TO LOOK AT THREE STANDARDS:

Core Standard 1: Humanitarian Programs are Market-aware (p11) – It is clear that people do not want to (or do not feel able to) stop working, despite advice on ‘distancing’ for slowing the spread of the virus. Therefore, all humanitarian programs should think about how to respond to the crisis in a way that respects people’s need to earn an income in the short and long term.

- **Immediate Action** – All humanitarian programs should consult technical staff who can provide livelihoods and market advice
- **Potential Future Action** – Identify where market actors are already making positive changes and find ways to reinforce this behavior

Enterprise and Market System Standard 3: Be adaptive and risk aware (p75) – This is one of the most critical standards at this time, and it calls us to look at our programs with new eyes. Even within the MERS, Key Actions and Key Indicators will need to be contextualized to new reality.

- **Immediate Action** – Review programs using the MERS to identify areas where adaptation is necessary (due to COVID-19) or possible (to improve alignment with good practice)
- **Potential Future Action** – Ensure adaptive management approaches are built into programs to ensure emerging data is used and programs are able to respond to change

Enterprise and Market System Standard 4: Work with existing market actors and use facilitation approaches (p79) – Given the global reach of the pandemic, this standard is more important than ever before. Local knowledge and networks will be critical for meeting needs and adapting approaches. Consider new ways to build capacity and new partners and networks that might not be traditional responders to epidemics. For example, farmers cooperatives will be essential to maintaining food supplies. What are new ways of working that can keep them and their customers safe?

- **Immediate Action** – Make a list of networks who may be able to help with various adaptation activities. Note any capacity building needs
- **Potential Future Action** – Develop the facilitation skills of local actors and groups in order to strengthen recovery and resilience

OTHER STANDARDS THAT ARE CRITICALLY IMPORTANT AT THIS TIME:

Core Standard 2: Efforts are Coordinated to Improve Effectiveness (p16) – The far reach of this epidemic means that resources will be stretched beyond anything we have previously experienced. It is essential that aid and development organizations share information and coordinate efforts at a higher level than seen previously in order to preserve resources. This includes working with governments; as well as gathering harmonized data on market context and sharing widely so that appropriate market-based interventions can take place safely.

- **Immediate Action** – Learn who is collecting data or guidance that may be valuable to you and your programs
- **Potential Future Action** – Collaborate and share data you have gathered with those networks

Core Standard 4: Do No Harm (p24) – While this still applies to the individuals and communities we support through our programs, organizations have an increased responsibility at this time to ensure that their operations do not bring the virus into communities and that their own staff remain healthy and well, and have the ability to look after their families.

- **Immediate Action** – Ensure your staff is informed how to keep safe and feel confident to stop work when they feel unsafe or in order to take care of family
- **Potential Future Action** – Ensure that programs do not transmit the virus to areas not currently affected

Assessment & Analysis Standard 1: Prepare in Advance of Assessments (p40) – Since many of us are isolating at this time, use the time to gather information already available from your own resources and others who may have done market work. Leverage your networks, and gather information about important markets, using phones or other remote means, even on an informal basis. This can be used as baseline information or to do deeper analysis on particular populations of concern. The slowdown of our work provides an opportunity to think more creatively and deeply about how to address the market issues that will arise in the immediate and long term.

- **Immediate Action** – Gather existing market data from multiple relevant sources, determine data gaps
- **Potential Future Action** – Identify opportunities for shared data gathering with other organizations

Assessment & Analysis Standard 3: Fieldwork is inclusive, ethical, objective (p51) – While there has been a great deal of progress in remote monitoring and data gathering via technology. Meeting this standard will be particularly challenging in the months to come, particularly ensuring that we are reaching groups that do not have reliable access to phones.

- **Immediate Action** – M&E and program staff should work collaboratively to brainstorm challenges and opportunities for future assessments
- **Potential Future Action** – Develop plans to continue data gathering that are as inclusive, ethical, and objective as possible

Asset Distribution Standard 3: Productive Assets are protected (p104) – Cash and voucher assistance (CVA) is critical to ensuring that assets are not sold as a negative coping strategy. Other interventions such as savings and credit will also play a critical role in supporting households to remain resilient to the pandemic. If we do not protect people's ability to "hold position" at this time, then the long-term repercussions will be much worse. All programs should look at what this means for their target populations in the short term

- **Immediate Action** – Gather data on ongoing/planned CVA activities and other immediate responses that can protect household and business assets. Share information with financial service providers to gain a clear picture of community need
- **Potential Future Action** – Design programs that fill gaps, being sensitive to the potential for market distortions

Financial Services Standard 2: Support local supply for financial services (p124) – Financial institutions that serve the poor will be facing their own crises as they seek to protect their staff, support their members/clients, and address liquidity shortfalls that always accompany crises. Determine if support is required to financial service providers and seek non-distortionary ways to keep these institutions operating and able to maintain community trust.

- **Immediate Action** – Gather data on financial service needs of population and the ability of providers to meet those needs in light of the crisis
- **Potential Future Action** – Consider doing scenario planning that looks at the medium to long term outlook for local markets and the institutions that support them

Financial Services Standard 3: Use existing formal financial service providers for cash transfers (p129)

– The use of cash transfers is growing quickly (especially contactless technologies), with 54 new countries creating cash transfer schemes to address the pandemic ([see CGD article](#)) and international organizations like WFP committing to move away from food aid to the unrestricted cash transfers. Many countries have improved their digital infrastructure in the last few years, meaning there is greater potential than ever for cash transfers to contribute to sustainable access to financial services.

- **Immediate Action** – Learn about the digital infrastructure in your areas of operation. Identify ways to use local financial service providers for the distribution, while ensuring there are alternative delivery mechanisms for those without access to phones or bank accounts
- **Potential Future Action** – Invest in local payment systems and the financial system writ large, including solutions to address the digital divide and the capacity constraints of marginalized groups

Employment Standard 3: Job sustainability supported (p151) – Identify ways that employers can maintain existing employees, particularly youth and women. Of course, 'job sustainability' no longer has to mean 'full-time job'; but analyze what changes are likely in the market due to the epidemic, and work with employers to find creative solutions. Government response, changes in trade, will all play a role.

- **Immediate Action** – Identify any creative solutions that have allowed employers to support employees and/or keep working and share these examples widely, to give good publicity to the employers and encourage other employers. Support employers to maintain liquidity
- **Potential Future Action** – Work with other organizations to identify long term employment trends/issues for local markets and identify ways to support without distorting the market

Naturally, there are other MERS Standards that may be relevant, but this provides a starting point for thinking where and how to support the communities where we work. One thing that has become clear to the MERS community is that the standards are even more interconnected than we ever envisioned. We also realize that who is most vulnerable may have changed, as those in urban areas (previously less vulnerable because they are closer to markets) are now potentially more vulnerable. Keep this in mind as you use the MERS handbook.

Other resources to note:

- Sphere has provided guidance across all their standards and companion standards, which you can [find here](#).
- CaLP has excellent resources available on cash and voucher assistance (CVA) which can be [found here](#).
- A consortium of NGOs working with savings groups developed guidance to help savings groups think through how they want to move forward during this period. The guidance is [available here](#).
- The Markets in Crisis (MiC) Dgroup, a forum for practitioners working on market issues provides a useful discussion board. [Join the conversation here](#).
- To compliment the markets and livelihoods advice above, advice for adjusting food distributions can be [found here](#).

The [Minimum Economic Recovery Standards Handbook](#) is available as a download, an [interactive handbook](#) and on the [HSPapp](#) (available in [Spanish](#), [English](#), [French](#), and [Arabic](#) in all formats.) Visit www.mershandbook.org.