

CASH CONSORTIUM GUIDANCE: HOW TO LAUNCH AND MANAGE A CASH ASSISTANCE PROGRAM AND CONSORTIUM

Lessons from VenEsperanza, Latin America's
largest humanitarian cash consortium

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Glossary of terms

AAH: Action Against Hunger

BHA: USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance

CaLP: Cash Learning Partnership

CARM: Community Accountability Reporting Mechanism

CCD: Collaborative Cash Delivery Network

CLCI: Cash and Livelihoods Consortium of Iraq (current name)

CommCare: VenEsperanza's data platform

DRC: Danish Refugee Council

DSA: Data sharing agreement

INGO: International non-governmental organization

IRC: International Rescue Committee

MEAL: Monitoring, Evaluation, Analysis, Learning

MOU: Memorandum of Understanding

MPCA: Multi-purpose cash assistance

NGO: Non-governmental organization

NRC: Norwegian Refugee Council

OIG: Office of Inspector General

Prime: the lead partner member of a consortium

PDM: Post-distribution monitoring

SOP: Standard Operating Procedures

SOW: Statement of Work

Sub: non-lead partner member of a consortium

TOR: Terms of Reference

USAID: United States Agency for International Development

WFP: World Food Program



Introduction

What is Multipurpose Cash Assistance?

Multipurpose cash assistance (MPCA) provides unconditional cash transfers to people affected by crises, offering participants a maximum degree of choice, flexibility, and dignity in how they choose to cover their basic needs.¹ A growing body of evidence supports MPCA as a cost-efficient and effective humanitarian emergency response modality, with the potential to achieve multi-sectoral outcomes at the individual and household level and to stimulate local economies.^{2,3}

Case Study: VenEsperanza's MPCA program

Between October 2019 and July 2022, VenEsperanza has provided emergency assistance to 416,000 vulnerable people affected by the Venezuelan crisis in 12 Colombian departments, shown to the right. VenEsperanza emergency assistance is funded by the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) of the U.S. government's Agency for International Development (USAID) and benefits highly vulnerable families, satisfying the basic needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, Colombian returnees, and host communities through unconditional MPCA. This assistance, provided over the course of six months⁴, supports the most vulnerable people affected by the crisis by helping them to meet their basic needs and improve the living conditions of their families and the nutrition of infants and young children.



What is a consortium and what benefits can it offer?

A consortium (plural: consortia) is an operational model wherein a group of organizations or agencies work together to achieve a common objective or goal. A consortium model offers several potential benefits. For one, a consortium can reach scale quickly by pooling resources between partners and leveraging their networks, achieving greater reach and coverage. In addition, greater effectiveness and efficiency can be achieved with a consortium model through the harmonization and standardization of programming tools and procedures, deduplication mitigation, and consolidation of data and information facilitated by a centralized consortium team. Furthermore, organizations working in consortium also have the potential for greater collective influence and

¹ CaLP network. Multipurpose Cash Assistance. Available at: <https://www.calpnetwork.org/themes/multipurpose-cash-assistance/>

² Overseas Development Institute (ODI). (2016). Cash transfers: what does the evidence say? A rigorous review of programme impact and of the role of design and implementation features. Available at: <https://odi.org/en/publications/cash-transfers-what-does-the-evidence-say-a-rigorous-review-of-impacts-and-the-role-of-design-and-implementation-features/>

³ Doocy, S. and Tappis, H. (2017). Cash-based approaches in humanitarian emergencies: a systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 13: 1-200. <https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2017.17>

⁴ In cases, cash transfers were collapsed into three months, providing the same total amount of assistance over a shorter period.

advocacy potential than any organization alone. Consortium models can also promote greater cross-partner learning and exchange. Finally, consortium models offer potential benefits to donors by consolidating multiple actors under a single award with a single focal point.

Case Study: The VenEsperanza Consortium

The VenEsperanza Consortium is the largest humanitarian cash consortium in Latin America, representing four international organizations: the International Rescue Committee, Mercy Corps, Save the Children and World Vision. This report presents the VenEsperanza Consortium as a case study to illustrate a consortium model delivering MPCA programming at scale through inter-agency collaboration between consortium partners and a shared funding stream.

Report overview

Purpose

The VenEsperanza Consortium is working to expand its research and influence on issues related to the provision of MPCA in emergencies and coordination between humanitarian actors in emergency settings. With this goal in mind, VenEsperanza has prioritized investment in greater evidence generation and analysis to harvest lessons learned for the benefit of humanitarian agencies and cash actors and to help inform strategic decision-making for the next stages of cash work in Colombia and beyond. As part of VenEsperanza's research and learning agenda, this research aimed to collect, analyze, and document lessons learned, best practices, and opportunities for improvement related to the VenEsperanza consortium and its MPCA programming.

Report structure

This report is an account of the VenEsperanza cash transfer program in Colombia and lessons learned to date. Findings are organized and presented by research theme, with each section dedicated to one component of the consortium's structure and/or operation. Each thematic section begins with an account of how VenEsperanza approached the design and set-up of that component of the consortium, as well as any changes and adaptations made since the consortium's launch. The bulk of this report is dedicated to the exploration of lessons learned, shedding light on what has worked well and what has not. Thus, each section also documents best practices as well as any gaps and opportunities for improvement. The annex includes additional resources and guidance.

Intended audience

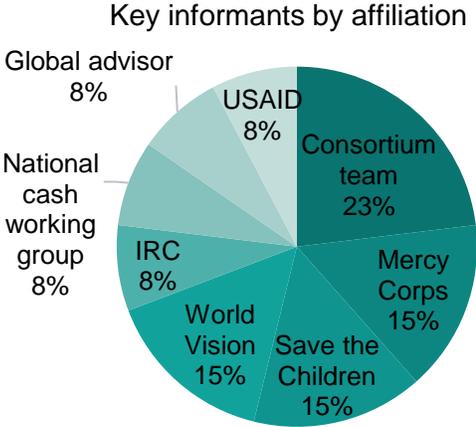
This guidance is intended for (1) internal VenEsperanza stakeholders, so that lessons learned may serve to inform and improve future programming and (2) external stakeholders looking to implement a MPCA consortium, so that VenEsperanza may provide a framework for future consortia and so that lessons learned from VenEsperanza allow for adoption of best practices and avoidance of mistake repetition.

Methods

Data sources and collection methods

This research draws on a combination of primary qualitative data collection (key informant interviews) and secondary data document review (VenEsperanza reports and documents).

Thirteen semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted remotely and in-person with selected VenEsperanza members at various operational levels, as well as key external stakeholders. Key informant samples were drawn using purposeful sampling following discussions with VenEsperanza leadership, who provided lists and contact information for targeted profiles. Ultimately, profiles included country directors of the partner organizations who make up the Steering Committee, past and present members of the consortium management and coordination team, program directors or managers of each partner organization, a global advisor, and representatives from Colombia’s national cash working group and from VenEsperanza’s donor, USAID. Of the fifteen key informants invited to participate, thirteen accepted the invitation, provided informed consent, and were interviewed in English or Spanish. Interviews lasted no more than one hour and took place between May and June 2022.



A document review was also conducted and included internal and public VenEsperanza documents, external documents and reports by partners and other global cash actors, and wider literature and evidence relating to cash assistance consortia and programs.

Data analysis and synthesis

Key informant interview audio was transcribed, coded, and analyzed by theme. Using a deductive and inductive approach to data analysis, all transcripts were sorted into categories corresponding to core components of the consortium’s structure and/or operation, and then ‘open coded’ in Dedoose⁵ to identify and label all segments of data within each category. Codes were grouped by conceptually equivalent themes and analyzed for response patterns and trends to develop findings.

Secondary data was analyzed and triangulated with primary data to minimize bias, enhance accuracy and reliability of results, and ensure the credibility of the findings and conclusions, with each finding directly traceable to evidence. Finally, interpretation of findings was supported and validated through review and feedback on draft research products.

⁵ Dedoose Version 9.0.17, web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (2021). Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC www.dedoose.com.

Findings

Governance and decision-making

Consortium formation

The VenEsperanza consortium was formed at the request of USAID. Seven International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) applied for USAID funding for proposed MPCA programming in Colombia. USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) encouraged these organizations to either form a single consortium of seven members or two separate consortia. The following two cash consortia were formed:

- VenEsperanza (the “American” consortium): composed of Mercy Corps, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children, and World Vision
- Cash for Urban Assistance, CUA (the “European” consortium): composed of Action Against Hunger (AAH), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

What has and has not worked well?

There is the perception among key informants that whereas CUA was formed organically and democratically because they formed a consortium voluntarily, VenEsperanza came together at the request of the donor and thus, had to overcome some initial tensions between the member organizations, herein referred to as partners. At the onset, key informants also described an atmosphere of competition and contention between the two consortia. Communication and harmonization both within and between the two consortia, however, have improved over time.

Key informants expressed that the consortium partners are strong organizations possessing the requisite internal structures (including but not limited to human resources, finances, technical expertise, etc.) and mechanisms to implement quality programming at a large scale.⁶ A potential consequence of these large INGOs working in consortia, however, is a sense that they dominate the cash space in Colombia, making it difficult for smaller national or local NGOs to enter.

“How many partners can you have in a consortium? What's a reasonable amount? Is it three, four, seven? At what point are there too many partners? Because I think it's a question to ask. It's a real challenge... with each partner that you include, you increase the number of friction points and number of potential issues in terms of coordination. So, it needs to be analyzed with great caution early on.”

— Key Informant

Selection and role of the prime

Three of the four VenEsperanza partners (all except IRC) were interested in being prime, the lead agency and grant holder. A multi-round voting process involving all four partners was held in February 2019 to determine which organization would serve as prime. Ultimately, Mercy Corps was

⁶ Mercy Corps (2021). VenEsperanza Real Time Evaluation: Learning from COVID Adaptations.

elected. Following the election of the prime, the consortium developed its Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and subaward agreements.

What has not worked well?

Findings from key informant interviews illustrate the sensitive nature involved in building and maintaining governance and decision-making structures when operating as a consortium. Informants spoke to the inherent challenges of balancing different leadership capacities, styles, and identities of multiple actors. There is a perception among informants that some resentments have remained among the sub(s) that had wanted to be prime and weren't ultimately selected, and that there is some lingering resistance toward the prime at times. This resistance is perceived to have lessened over time but has not disappeared entirely and appears to remain a source of tension. Contributing to this - and stemming in part from the way the consortium was formed - are differences in how stakeholders view the roles of the prime and subs. Subs voiced frustration at times with how donor communication was perceived to be "filtered" through the prime and disappointment at certain moments when they felt the prime made unilateral decisions and/or inadequately consulted with partners. Given this, multiple key informants expressed the need for strong written governing documents at the onset of the consortium's formation, not just verbal agreements, and a non-legally binding MOU, all of which should be updated regularly to meet evolving needs and to align communications and expectations.



"We don't have a consortium charter, we don't have a document that really specifies how we make decisions. We sort of have an accumulation of verbal agreements from different meetings, minute notes, but we don't have a specific governance document. I think that establishing that from minute one... could be really helpful."

— Key Informant

What worked well?

Key informants saw the prime selection process as democratic, inclusive, and fair, helping to set the tone for participatory and equitable decision-making processes from the onset. This sentiment was reinforced in the consortium's MOU, which was "established in the spirit of partnership characterized

LESSONS & BEST PRACTICES

An MOU is an important aspirational tool and framing document, useful in setting up the spirit of the partnerships and laying the foundation for the governance and decision-making structure. However, it cannot replace the need for:

- *strong subaward agreements that determine the contractual and legally binding terms and conditions between lead agency and/or grant awardee and subs and/or sub-awardees.*
- *a written and agreed-upon governance charter that clearly outlines how decisions will be made. Considerations include: the prime-sub roles/responsibilities, consortium partner management, donor communication expectations and information flow, the bounds of stakeholder engagement and compliance, and dispute resolution.*

Governing documents should be reviewed on a regular basis (biannually or annually) for continued accuracy and relevance, and to promote familiarity with structures, practices, policies, and procedures among all key stakeholders.

by cooperation, mutual support, transparency, and respect”. Key informants felt the MOU, which outlined shared principles, roles and responsibilities, and decision-making processes within the consortium, was an important tool in promoting and enshrining a collective sense of identity, shared vision, and commitment to common principles. To date, stakeholders feel that partnership has generally upheld the transparent and collaborative spirit of that set out in the MOU.

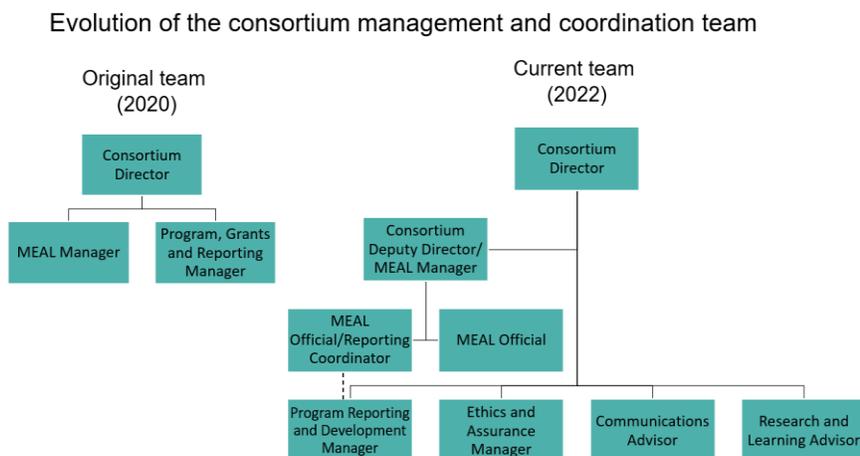
Governance and decision-making structure

VenEsperanza’s governance structure was largely adopted from the Cash and Livelihoods Consortium for Iraq (CLCI)⁷ and adapted to the Colombian context. Core components are as follows:

CONSORTIUM MANAGEMENT AND COORDINATION TEAM

The VenEsperanza consortium management and coordination team, herein referred to as the consortium team, is the main consortium coordination body and responsible for maintaining communication and collaboration with partners, promoting harmonized and standardized implementation, providing strategic direction and technical support and oversight to field teams, and monitoring, compiling, and sharing information at the consortium level, among other core functions. Consortium team staff are

contracted by Mercy Corps, as prime and award holder, but are meant to represent the interests of the whole consortium, not only those of Mercy Corps. When VenEsperanza first formed, the consortium team was comprised of three staff members and has since grown to eight, six of whom are full-time staff.



What has not worked well?

There is universal agreement among key informants that the original consortium team was too small and that it was a mistake not to invest more in the consortium structure. Key informants admit that in its original design, they had underestimated the amount of work involved in coordination and management and choose to prioritize the budget for operations over the consortium team. As a result, the original structure was seen as unsustainable, with too many responsibilities falling on too few people and led to them being overworked and prone to burnout. Looking back, some informants also felt that there was a large organizational risk involved in having such a small team and felt that limited bandwidth may have translated to missed opportunities and/or sacrifices in program quality.



“We dramatically underestimated the number of staff in the initial consortium.”

— Key informant

⁷ Formerly the Cash Consortium for Iraq (CCI)

“We were cautious about spending money that could be used on targets to beef up the consortium structure. That was a mistake.”

— Key informant

There are expressed and concerted efforts by the consortium team to identify with and represent the consortium, rather than any individual partner. Despite this, key informants voiced that there are times when the interests of the team have been questioned by partners and that there remains some mistrust among partners about whether the consortium team truly represents the consortium’s interests vs. those of Mercy Corps, which houses their contracts. Consortium team staff also expressed feeling that partners perceived them as Mercy Corps, rather than neutral consortium staff.

“It’s really important to do everything we can so that people at least trust our intentions, coming from the coordination team and trust that were out there for everybody, not just Mercy Corps.”

— Key informant

“[Partners] are looking out for their best interests. So, the consortium team has to look out for the consortium.”

— Key informant

What worked well?

The fact that the original consortium team was so lean allowed them to be agile and to move quickly. That said, the growth of the team is universally perceived by informants as an important and necessary development and one that resulted in improved coordination capacity and quality. The current structure is considered more sustainable and healthier for consortium staff since tasks and outputs are more manageable for any single staff member and key tasks are assigned to people with specialized backgrounds. Additions of a dedicated ethics and assurances manager, communications advisor, research and learning coordinator, and the expansion of the MEAL team were all cited as important in expanding the consortium’s reach, influence and technical support. Many informants also praised the consortium director’s commitment to conducting site visits, connecting with field teams, and understanding field realities. Lastly, many informants recognize the combination of consortium staff’s

LESSONS & BEST PRACTICES

- *Invest adequate (if not extra) resources for the consortium structure.*
- *Don’t underestimate the time, effort, and importance of coordination efforts.*
- *Staff dedicated to the consortium should be neutral and represent the best interests of the consortium as a whole. It may be worth considering drawing from all partners rather than the prime. Minimally, the expectations and boundaries of the consortium team’s work should be clearly defined.*
- *At a minimum, a cash consortium team should include: a director, deputy director, MEAL manager & at least one assistant, communication manager, reporting and program development manager, and an ethics manager.*
- *Don’t “reinvent the wheel”. Learn from other consortia. Adopt/adapt their structures and governance documents.*

technical competences (cash knowledge and expertise, sector experience) and interpersonal skills (consensus building, relationship management, collaboration, communication) as a strong asset.

STEERING COMMITTEE (SC)

The VenEsperanza Steering Committee (SC) was established as the main governing, leadership, and oversight body. The SC votes on key decisions around strategic direction, funding, programmatic adaptations and pivots, advocacy, etc. Composed of country directors from each partner and chaired by the consortium director, each member represents his/her respective agency's needs and interests within the SC. VenEsperanza's SC meetings have varied in regularity over the lifespan of the consortium. While the SC held monthly meetings during the design phase, meetings became less frequent (every two to three months) during the implementation phase. Recently, monthly meetings have resumed. As per the consortium's MOU, only SC members should attend meetings (support staff can be selected to attend in their place in the event a country director can't join). An agenda is created and shared in advance so all can contribute.

What has not worked well?

Issues have arisen at times when SC meetings became less regular (particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic), which resulted in (1) country directors being less informed and having less input, (2) space for misunderstandings or misgivings to form or grow, (3) undermining of a collective relationship and (4) more bilateral conversations which can cause communication gaps for those uninvolved. There have also been some disagreements about who should be present at SC meetings. While some feel only country directors should attend (to ensure efficient and effective meetings), others have expressed the desire for additional staff (e.g., program directors), more familiar with technical aspects and/or day-to-day field realities, to be present.

LESSONS & BEST PRACTICES

- *Commit to regular steering committee meetings, if only to discuss updates and share information. Country directors have a lot of demands on their time but regular meetings should be a priority.*
- *Determine and reach agreement early on who should/shouldn't be present at SC meetings and revisit as needed.*
- *Commit to joint decision-making and equal partnership as much as possible.*

“It’s important to maintain a common vision for where we want to go. I think we lost that a little bit when we stopped meeting as frequently. The longer we go without speaking to each other, the more room there is for interpretation and for different issues [to build up] by not addressing them.”

— Key informant

“The more information you share, the smoother things go. A gap in communication leads to a lack of trust.”

— Key informant

What worked well?

The SC has generally been able to reach consensus on important issues. The time and effort invested in individual relationships as well as a collective relationship at the SC level has helped foster understanding and empathy during negotiations. Informants expressed the importance of regular SC meetings to ensure smooth and open information flow, active engagement and buy-in of members, and relationship maintenance.

WORKING GROUPS

Working groups provide forums for members to convene, harmonize and coordinate various tools or approaches to make them relevant and meaningful, learn from each other, leverage different skills, promote accountability, and work to enable an efficient and effective response.⁸ The technical working group (TWG) and Monitoring, Evaluation, Analysis and Learning working group (MEAL WG) were established from VenEsperanza's onset and remain the most robust of all working groups. The TWG, which brings together the deputy country director or program director role as well as the program manager role for each of the four partners, is responsible for the technical and programmatic oversight of the consortium's program implementation. Similarly, the MEAL WG ensures timely, transparent, accurate, and reliable MEAL oversight for the consortium. Other working groups have developed as the need arose. For example, a safeguarding and ethics working group was established early on and was quite regular at the onset but has become more of an ad hoc body over time. In addition, a communications working group has grown over the course of the program as it's become increasingly important to harness the communications platforms of partner organizations to amplify campaigns around fraud mitigation, bolster community accountability and feedback mechanisms, amplify VenEsperanza's impact through local media, and improve content development for increased visibility. Working groups generally follow a regular meeting schedule (e.g., weekly, bi-weekly, monthly) and have specific thematic meetings as needed.

What has not worked well?

Key informants expressed that there is room for improvement by making working groups more formal. This could be achieved, for example, through more regular meetings, formal agendas, and/or established terms of reference.

What worked well?

Working groups are perceived to improve collaboration, coordination, and harmonization among partners, allowing them to discuss common challenges and common themes, as well as share ideas and solutions in their areas of work. Working groups were viewed as most strategic and effective when they include staff at multiple levels, such as program directors, who bring authority and strategic vision, and program managers, who are more familiar with the day-to-day implementation of the program on the ground and can weigh in on local field realities.

Financial distribution

Originally, the consortium's budget was not evenly split between the four VenEsperanza partners because there were different levels of pre-existing funding and programming between partners. In

⁸ Mercy Corps (2021). Consortium guidance: How to set up and manage successful Humanitarian Consortia.

the second round of funding and subsequent cost modification and extension, however, the financial offer was divided evenly across the four partners, after removing the consortium management costs. In the latest round, the targets provided by the donor no longer aligned with a four-way financial distribution between partners, forcing the partners to renegotiate the financial breakdown and resulting in non-equal shares of the budget by partner.

What has and has not worked well?

While conversations around budgets have often been the most contentious and heated, key informants consider that the processes to date are very participatory and partners have generally been able to reach consensus around financial distribution.

Geographical distribution

Initially, it was up to the consortium partners to decide who worked where. Geographical distribution among partners was largely based on where partners already had field presence and funding which resulted in certain partners “sharing” certain geographical areas. However, at the later request of the donor, there have been changes in geographic distribution at the time of new/updated awards, resulting in some major shifts in where certain partners operate.

What has and has not worked well?

Early on, consortium partners were able to reach consensus about which partner would work where and were able to leverage existing partnerships, programs, and contextual knowledge because decisions were largely based on partners’ field presence. However, multiple partners working within the same geo-zones has reportedly created tensions among partners and caused confusion among participants, especially when there are differences in how partners are operating. In response, there have been “donor driven” shifts in geographic distribution to maximize coverage of the population’s needs and reduce geographic overlaps among partners both internal and external to VenEsperanza. Key informants reported that these changes in partner’s geographical coverage have been very challenging and have had major consequences for field programming (including for non-cash programs), staffing, funding, and networks. Informants consider that more thoughtful and deliberate consideration of geographic divisions among partners (and with the donor) from the onset could have avoided some of these problems and saved time and resources in the long run.

Information and data management

Selecting and building a platform

From the beginning, the two consortia (VenEsperanza and CUA) were in clear agreement in needing a harmonized platform. Both consortia launched an expression of interest process to identify service providers to host the platform. Once shepherded through Colombia’s procurement process, a more formal request for quotations and proposals ensued, followed by a scoring process. The consortia ultimately landed on CommCare by Dimagi⁹. A case management platform originally designed for mobile health workers, CommCare was selected primarily for its case management abilities, allowing VenEsperanza to track and follow up with participants over the lifecycle of the program (by assigning

⁹ CommCare by Dimagi. <https://www.dimagi.com/commcare/>

unique IDs and linking different forms across household members and over time), as well as the ability to automate deduplication of individuals directly within the platform.

What has not worked well?

Some informants felt it took a long time to get the platform up and running and that field staff faced a steep learning curve using it. Informants also reported that at the beginning, the platform's systems had various flaws and functionality issues; the deduplication system being primary among them. The deduplication system, in its original form, was unprepared to take on such a large caseload and required numerous iterations and improvements spanning the first year of the program. While the consortium put temporary solutions in place when it overloaded or crashed, these fixes typically involved manual processes, translating to less efficient programming and more burden on field staff.

What worked well?

The agreement between the two consortia to use the same service provider and work closely together with that provider was considered an important decision and achievement towards standardization and harmonization. Beginning with an expression of interest rather than a formal tender or bidding process was also viewed positively, as it allowed space for questions and a "test run" with potential providers before committing.

The selection and use of CommCare is considered a major innovation for MPCA delivery and management. The utility of the platform throughout the entire programming cycle (from identification and selection of participants, to distribution and follow-up), its offline capability, and its ability to integrate time-saving and case-reducing automatizations in deduplication and accountability mechanisms were all major advantages to CommCare and thus considered well worth the large initial investment.

Furthermore, Dimagi's customer support and technical assistance during platform design and development was seen as a major benefit of having selected CommCare. The Dimagi team was readily available to provide support and training when needed. One recommendation from VenEsperanza informants to future consortia is to map out program workflows and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) before moving to platform design so that objectives and pathways are clear to the service provider's designers from the onset. Dimagi has also helped VenEsperanza make more recent adjustments to CommCare to speed up processing and functionality. In general, informants feel the platform and deduplication system has improved over time and are now considered to work very well.

LESSONS & BEST PRACTICES

- *An expression of interest, rather than a tender, allows you to gauge interest without triggering a formal procurement process.*
- *When selecting a provider, consider customer support and technical assistance.*
- *Process should proceed programming when it comes to platform design. Technology should adapt to program needs and workflows, not the other way around.*
- *Automized deduplication has proven to be a worthwhile investment for VenEsperanza, saving time & resources.*

Data sharing agreements & deduplication efforts

VenEsperanza's data sharing agreements (DSAs) were largely adapted from the Collaborative Cash Delivery Network (CCD) and adopted to the Colombian context. The CCD also played a major role in ensuring that agreements complied not only with Colombian data management and protection laws, but also with American and European regulations and standards to which the two consortia are held.

What has not worked well?

A real time evaluation (RTE) conducted in April 2021 found that the consortium faced obstacles coordinating and drafting agreements with WFP and UNHCR¹⁰, an issue that persists as of the writing of this report. Key informants see the lack of a DSA with UN agencies as a major obstacle and one that continues to stall and complicate deduplication efforts. Without a DSA in place allowing the exchange of personal data, it's essentially impossible to carry out deduplication with those agencies. Another finding from the RTE was that even when sufficient agreements were in place with referring partners, data was often lacking in quality. The consortium has since established clearer mechanisms to reduce this burden between the VenEsperanza members and local partners and government offices but informants report that there's still room for improvement in this regard.

What worked well?

Informants consider it a best practice to develop DSAs early on, a lesson learned that came out of Iraq and served VenEsperanza well to follow. Using the CCD template also allowed VenEsperanza and CUA to move faster because most legal departments are already familiar with that model. Informants also recognized the support of the CCD in ensuring compliance with international requirements as a major asset. The consortium's MEAL team is widely recognized for its role in leading the design, implementation and oversight of duplication mitigation efforts once DSAs between the consortia partners were in place. Key informants recognize and praise the MEAL team's strong technical knowledge and the support it has provided to field teams in this area, citing ongoing improvements throughout the life of the program that have dramatically reduced errors and the time and resources spent on deduplication efforts, which were previously done manually.

Data monitoring, analysis and reporting

From the beginning, the standardization of MEAL processes, procedures and tools was a top priority. As outlined in VenEsperanza's Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Plan, "*VenEsperanza tools will be standardized across all partners... All agencies will agree on data collection methods and attend shared trainings to ensure that all members are collecting the data in the same way... [and] all information collected will be uploaded in this system, guaranteeing that all data will be centralized and properly aggregated*". The M&E plan, developed and spearheaded by the MEAL Manager, established routine monitoring systems, data quality assessment and validation procedures, and reporting structures, templates, and timelines. Regular trainings were also established to refresh knowledge about data systems, data flow, reporting, and accountability.

¹⁰ Mercy Corps (2021). VenEsperanza Real Time Evaluation: Learning from COVID Adaptations.

What has not worked well?

Key informants reported a lack of uniformity as to what constitutes fraud cases, what needs to be reported, and what actions must be taken in response. Findings also suggest that partners were not universally clear from the beginning of the program about the fact that credible allegations of fraud need to be shared with Mercy Corps' global headquarters' ethics team. This has caused ongoing issues and many informants felt fraud allegation thresholds/definitions and reporting/response mechanisms could have been better established at the onset. Another challenge expressed by informants is that both internal (consortium to partners) and external (donor to consortium) demands and requests for information in short time periods have put stress and pressure on teams. This was especially true early on but is said to have improved with efforts to harmonize data reporting flows.

What worked well?

External key informants (cash working group, donor) are positive about VenEsperanza's information sharing, regarding it to be timely and of high quality. Requests for data/information are met readily and the consolidation of information at the consortium level is seen as helpful. VenEsperanza's MEAL unit is considered highly effective, technically strong, and responsive to requests.

There have also been a number of positive adaptations to VenEsperanza's MEAL structures and procedures, two of which are described in greater detail below.

Case 1: During the pandemic, shifting to remote data collection required adaptations in CommCare and implementation of more rigorous follow-up and verification processes to mitigate the potential increased risk of duplication and of potential fraud during remote registry. For instance, a feature was added to the eligibility survey so surveyors could flag any suspicions within the form itself. VenEsperanza also increased the percentage of participants included in the verification phase from 3% to 10%, randomly and automatically selected from CommCare, before each cash distribution. The program also raised the frequency and percent of participants surveyed for post-distribution monitoring to ensure key areas were adequately monitored during the transition. Verification thresholds were reduced upon resuming presential work, since such rigor was costly to the program and required considerable staff and time.

Case 2: Initially, there were varying levels of quality and content from partners and there wasn't alignment on how indicators were being reported. Thus, the decision was made to consolidate all reporting at the consortium level to ensure standardization and harmony in terms of content, quality, and timeliness across all partners. Many informants consider this a best practice and one they recommend future consortia establish early on.



LESSONS & BEST PRACTICES

- *Develop a robust M&E plan along with training, refresher trainings and compliance oversight.*
 - *Standardize and harmonize monitoring, analysis, and reporting structures as early as possible.*
 - *Develop a fraud accountability plan, establishing clear fraud definitions and thresholds, as well as harmonized protocols and procedures for how allegations are reported, when, by who.*
 - *Consider revisiting and adjusting validation and follow-up mechanisms as information needs change.*
-

Staff management

Staff selection & hiring

Each partner organization has their own personnel hiring procedures and protocols, handled by their respective HR systems. Hiring processes generally follow similar steps, such as an open call for a given position, a revision of resumes of available candidates, and a series of interviews and reference checks, followed by contracting. The consortium management team staff are contracted through Mercy Corps and are thus subject to Mercy Corps protocols and hiring processes.

What has not worked well?

A challenge expressed by consortium team informants is that they don't have control over how partners select staff. As such, there is a perception that hired staff among partners do not always have desired skill sets, particularly when it comes to technical skills. Some informants suggested potentially standardizing statements of work (SOWs) across partners to ensure a minimum standard for technical profiles. Furthermore, staff turnover is high in the sector (and even includes rotation of staff between consortium partners), necessitating near-constant recruitment and hiring.



“I think that there has to be some sort of an agreement, whether it's written or verbal, about hiring practices of the partners, how oversight works, who's ultimately responsible, and how to ensure accountability from them. That's missing completely and it's too much of a liability with a program this large.”

— Key informant

“The consortium does not have a voice or vote in partner staff selection. We need very strong technical capabilities, and we find ourselves with teams that don't have them so we have to strengthen capacity all the time through training. It would be better to at least establish minimum requirements for staff.”



— Key informant

What has worked well?

Originally, when there weren't as many cash actors in Colombia, staff hiring procedures weren't as rigorous and competitive as they are now that there are more technical profiles available. The wealth of national cash expertise and experience among potential hires has grown substantially.

Staff training & onboarding

Once hired, staff undergo their individual organization's general training and onboarding procedures, often lasting around a week. Following that, the staff will receive additional sector or cluster-specific tailored trainings or shadowing experiences. Staff involved in VenEsperanza programming then undergo additional training, provided by the consortium's MEAL team.

What has not worked well?

As mentioned above, staff turnover is high in the sector, requiring constant training and onboarding. At the consortium level, training has occupied a lot of time and effort, amplified by the volume of new

staff and program adaptations (especially at the beginning of the program, when process improvements and pandemic-related shifts converged). There is a move towards using videos to help streamline the process and cut down on the time required for MEAL staff to conduct trainings.

What worked well?

At the onset, a lot of training was focused on developing cash knowledge so there was a lot of emphasis on technical trainings on cash. The contracting CaLP experts to provide cash technical training to multiple staff members of each partner organization was viewed positively. Overtime, VenEsperanza personnel trainings have been updated as the program has advanced to include greater emphasis on additional topics, including but not limited to protection, nutrition, ethics and empathy, and fraud allegation identification, reporting, and response. Regular refresher trainings are considered a best practice.

Staff management

There has been tremendous growth to the program, and with it, the need for increased staff management and oversight.

What has not worked well?

Here too, high staff turnover is an obstacle, often disrupting working relationships, team dynamics, and workflows. Staff management and oversight was also more challenging during the pandemic, when communication was remote and staff were more prone to additional stress.

What worked well?

Informants cite that VenEsperanza's collective culture of shared responsibility and accountability for the work at all levels has been an effective staff management strategy. Empathy and support from leadership and promotion of work-life balance and staff care are also cited as helpful tone setting.

Inter-agency coordination and harmonization

Harmonization & standardization

Harmonization and standardization of tools and processes between partners in a consortium is key. VenEsperanza's survey instruments (e.g., eligibility screening survey with vulnerability criteria, PDM survey), data and information management platform (CommCare), and MEAL processes have been standardized from the very beginning. Furthermore, VenEsperanza has developed a series of SOPs to streamline processes across partners, including for: MPCA programing, inter-agency participant case transfer, cash delivery, CARM, and managing and reporting cases of duplicate assistance/ payments and cases of payments to ineligible participants. The consortium also has documentation defining minimum cash standards, describing donor expectations and standards, and guidance documents (e.g., on using CommCare, on implementing the eligibility survey).

What has not worked well?

While SOPs, guidance documents, and a MEAL plan are in place to promote a standardized approach to tools and processes at the consortium level, informants have reported that not all documents are widely known and/or accessible to all partners at all levels and that not all of them had been available in Spanish, despite it being the primary language of the vast majority of partner staff. Many informants felt that it was a missed opportunity not to have widely circulated concise, clear, Spanish-language guidance documents at the onset of implementation when they were critically needed. While SOPs and guidance are living documents and are regularly updated to reflect adaptations to data collection tools or the data platform, a practice evidenced by the document review for this research, key informant interview findings suggest that staff may not always be aware of “refreshed” versions.

LESSONS & BEST PRACTICES

- *Engage in thoughtful decision making around what needs to be standardized and what doesn't. Generally, standardization is better for partners and participants alike. These decisions should happen as early as possible and be inclusive of all partners. The threat lies in needing to standardize something later on because it wasn't done at the onset.*
- *Develop clear and comprehensive SOPs in all languages necessary. Share SOPs widely and create spaces to build and reinforce understanding.*
- *Revisit and refresh documents and SOPs on standards.*
- *Commit to regular refresher trainings around standards.*

“Harmonization is an area where I think we could have done better... We had some minimum standards but there was also frankly a lot of trust that the other agencies had a similar understanding of what we meant to do. I would recommend that future consortia do more thoughtful decision making, instead of decision making by necessity, around where it is important to be harmonized and where it's not, and probably do a little bit more harmonization from the beginning.”

— Key informant

“I think the current director was a little bit surprised when we started traveling again and realized just how different partners were implementing. In some cases, different was just different, and in some cases, different was worse.”

— Key informant

Many informants also feel it was a missed opportunity not to have done more harmonization and standardization related to implementation in the beginning, specifically as it relates to the identification of participants, the provision of information to participants, and CARM systems. These components were generally left to the partners to develop, resulting in different approaches. When pandemic-related travel restrictions were in place, the consortium had limited ability to identify differences in implementation among partners. Once traveling resumed and field visits were conducted, it became immediately apparent that partners were not harmonized in their

implementation approach and in some cases not exhibiting good practice. Thus, the consortium has had to reinforce program standards and conduct a series of adjustments three years in. Another area cited for improvement of harmonization and standardization is not only internally within VenEsperanza partners, but also with partners in CUA.

What worked well?

The centralized harmonization of MEAL (supported by an M&E plan), survey tools, and the data platform at the consortium level is considered an important and necessary practice and one that all consortia should undertake. With the possibility to return to traveling, consortium leadership has been able to identify differences and work towards enforcing standards among partners. Increased efforts by consortium team leadership to engage in discussions with each partner at multiple levels around harmonization and standardization of practices is seen as a helpful step towards course correction in this regard. The majority of informants have cited cross-learning/cross-pollination opportunities as a best practice and feel that VenEsperanza could benefit from a more concerted effort to facilitate those exchanges.

Coordination and collaboration

Coordination and collaboration are key to the success of any consortium and require ongoing communication and relationship building/maintenance with a number of internal and external stakeholders. This section explores VenEsperanza’s internal relations between partners and external relations with other organizations, donor, government actors, and financial service providers (in this case, the operator providing cash e-payments and bank providing cash cards).

INTERNAL (CONSORTIUM) INTER-AGENCY RELATIONS/COMMUNICATIONS

What has not worked well?

The identity and personality of each partner organization is not limited to VenEsperanza and thus, there is an ongoing need (and challenge) to invest in understanding and empathizing with the unique perspective of each organization while simultaneously working to foster a collective set of goals, values, and identity as members of the consortium. Since VenEsperanza programming is not the only programming partners implement, field staff often have to navigate two parallel systems (their organization’s internal operating and reporting structures and those of the consortium), each with different expectations and standards.



“At the end of the day, our identity and personality as an organization is not solely based on VenEsperanza... I know VenEsperanza is important as a consortium, but we have to understand our individual positions on certain issues when we make certain decisions.”

— Key informant

While national level coordination between VenEsperanza partners is reported to be robust and well-functioning, this appears less so at the field level, where many have cited a need to improve inter-agency relations, especially in places where partners geographically “overlap”. At the national level and higher leadership level (country director and program director/manager levels), VenEsperanza partner staff know each other and have relationships, facilitating a more collective vision. In contrast, field staff often don’t meet/know staff from the other three VenEsperanza partners and are more

likely to work in “silos” within their own organization, which may contribute to less identification with the VenEsperanza vision and missed opportunities for harmonization and collaboration.

What worked well?

Consortium leadership is recognized for its communication, relationship building, and consensus building among partners. The consortium team is also widely praised for making themselves available/accessible via multiple channels and willing to provide support. There is a concerted effort by consortium leadership to make meetings engaging and enjoyable and partners have recognized and appreciated team building efforts (e.g. icebreakers/games to kick-off calls, events dedicated to reflection and listening). In September 2021, VenEsperanza began issuing a consortium-wide monthly bulletin with key updates and news highlights, celebrating accomplishments and helping staff stay informed about what partners are doing. All these efforts have helped to foster stronger relationships and communication between partners, especially at the higher (national) level.



“Now that we are back to having more field presence, I think we need to be more intentional about meeting each other periodically and getting to know each other. We've learned to operate virtually but I think relationship building is key. When I go out into the field, that's when I hear that we're not really coordinating or [I hear] complaints about the other partner and so there's a gap we need to close.

— Key informant

EXTERNAL AGENCY RELATIONS/COMMUNICATIONS

What has not worked well?

External actors (e.g., national cash working group, donor) have the perception that VenEsperanza partners are not always aligned and sense internal tensions in the consortium. Informants have cited opportunities for VenEsperanza to improve coordination and relations with various actors, including (1) CUA, especially at the field level, (2) UN agencies, particularly WFP, and (3) the Inter-Agency Mixed Flows Group in Colombia (known for its Spanish acronym, GIFMM¹¹).

What worked well?

VenEsperanza partners are active members in the national cash working group and are fast to share information, resources, and experiences with others. In addition, the relationship and coordination between VenEsperanza and CUA is seen to have improved over time.

DONOR RELATIONS/COMMUNICATIONS

What has not worked well?

The donor expressed concern regarding differences in implementation quality among VenEsperanza partners and feels that it is the prime's role to ensure all partners are achieving the same high-quality programming. The donor also perceived that VenEsperanza has more “pushback” and “resistance”

¹¹ The GIFMM was created in 2016 by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to respond to the increasing flow of people arriving from Venezuela. The group coordinates the national response to the situation of refugees and migrants in Colombia. Source: <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/gifmm-fact-sheet-january-2019>

from some of the subs compared to other consortia and cited both factors as a source of confusion and frustration.

What worked well?

When it comes to information flows with the donor, partners expressed feeling that consortium leadership has performed well in bridging communication between the donor and partners and recognize the time and effort involved in maintaining that relationship. Many partners were grateful that the consortium's leadership takes on this role, citing that it helps streamline information flows and relieves the burden from partners. Key informant interview findings did suggest that there were frustrations at one point among some consortium partners at not having more direct access to the donor and perceived that messages were "filtered and catered more towards Mercy Corps' position and interest", but that subsequent conversations and transparent communication helped to dispel this suspicion. In addition, the donor has begun having calls, every two months or so, with each partner's programmatic teams to facilitate more direct contact.

VenEsperanza stakeholders unanimously expressed support for the following practices to foster effective communication between the donor and the consortium:

- Clear expression of expectations and requests with sufficiently concrete guidance helps to eliminate misinterpretation and allows for clear understanding and implementation of adaptations;
- Organized, consistent and formal communications from the donor regarding issues and points for improvement helps the consortium to manage alignment and adaptations of implementation practices between the partners;
- Discussion and mutually agreed upon timelines for implementing changes helps the consortium to analyze and plan adequately in order to ensure the effectiveness of adaptations;
- Continuous, clear communication about the long-term vision of the donor helps the consortium to respond and align accordingly.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS/COMMUNICATIONS

What has not worked well?

Government relations were considered challenging at the onset of the program when negotiating the amounts for the cash transfers. There was a lot of disagreement between both consortia and the government around what the amounts should be and required understanding the government's frameworks and policies and tactful negotiating on all sides to reach a compromise. Since those initial conversations, there hasn't been as much active engagement or advocacy with government actors and institutions, an area cited by informants as an opportunity for improvement.

What worked well?

Informants have highlighted the importance of establishing a point of contact with local authorities even before cash programming proposals are submitted so they are informed and aware of potential future programming. Equally important, informants caution, is maintaining relationships with government institutions throughout the course of the program.

What has not worked well?

VenEsperanza partners each have a separate contract with all financial service providers, including the cash e-payment service provider and banks, and tend to communicate on an individual, rather than collective, basis. This was seen by informants as a missed opportunity to consolidate and unify as a consortium.

Coming from a private sector and business perspective, financial service providers faced a steep learning curve in terms of understanding and implementing donor-funded humanitarian assistance, and this caused confusion and a delay in aligning expectations and needs between the e-payment operator and the organizations in particular.

What worked well?

With the arrival of the new director, as well as a dedicated ethics and assurances manager, there is increased interaction and engagement with the e-payment service provider at the consortium level. Informants feel that while this is a positive step in the right direction, establishing a strong relationship from the beginning could have saved time and resources upfront.

LESSONS & BEST PRACTICES

- *Promote and facilitate cross learning opportunities and exchanges between partners dedicated to sharing best practices, lessons learned, mistakes made, solutions developed, and other reflections.*
- *Inter-agency team building exercises and creative engagement is important even, and perhaps especially, when workloads are heavy.*
- *An internal bulletin can help partners stay informed and can also help enforce the collective identity of the consortium.*
- *Equally important is ensuring partners have contact information for key focal points to facilitate collaboration within and between consortia (e.g., referrals).*
- *Let local government actors know about a proposal before submitting so they are aware of potential future projects within their jurisdiction.*
- *Commit to ongoing government advocacy. Early on, aim to identify key focal point(s) who are willing to work with the consortium to ensure programming aligns with and complies with the government's frameworks.*
- *Identifying and selecting a service provider is an extremely important decision and should involve careful considerations around capacity, coverage, ethics and assurance, etc.*
- *Establish a working relationship with financial service providers from the moment of contracting and ensure their understanding of humanitarian assistance programming obligations and standards. Don't assume financial service providers are familiar with the humanitarian architecture or with donor expectations or requirements. It is important to accompany them in this process.*

Participant identification and selection

Participant identification

The consortium identifies potential participants through a number of different methods, including but not limited to the following channels, as outlined in VenEsperanza's M&E plan:

- Direct identification by program staff in the field
- Direct referrals of field personnel working in complementary programs
- Indirect referrals from community members, including official and unofficial leaders
- Referrals from local authorities
- Active search of participants
- Indirect references from local service providers, including NGOs, municipal social service agencies, United Nations agencies and informal/formal support groups

What has not worked well?

During the pandemic, teams had to rely almost exclusively on the referral lists of local partners, which increased protection and fraud risks and necessitated more verification processes. Identifying and reaching *caminantes*, those migrants who are continually moving on foot, continues to be a challenge too.

LESSONS & BEST PRACTICES

- *Establish standards and expectations early on about referral systems and standards.*
- *Commit to educating local partners and community leaders, as well as staff, about these standards and expectations.*
- *Establish strong CARM systems.*

There is some debate and dilemma around whether or not to compensate community leaders, who often make participant referrals to the program and sometimes provide support organizing and communicating to participants. Key informants explain that on one hand, some community leaders invest a lot of their time providing this support, raising the question of whether they should receive some sort of compensation or benefit. On the other hand, there have been instances of community leaders exploiting (potential) participants and/or soliciting kickbacks, or payment from participants for having referred them to the program, which has raised a number of protection concerns and challenges in defining fraud/extortion in these instances. Thus, with a desire to recognize the support of community leaders while also preventing instances of exploitation, key informants consider that there is a need to further explore these scenarios and develop defined action plans.

What worked well?

Key informants voiced support for VenEsperanza's various methods of identification, which have increased the program's reach and coverage. The referral systems are also considered to have grown more robust over time.

Participant selection

VenEsperanza's participant selection process is determined by an eligibility survey with automated eligibility criteria based on vulnerability. Survey and criteria development is summarized below.

ELIGIBILITY SURVEY

Designing the eligibility survey was a highly participatory process. Led by the cash working group, experts from each cluster and representing each of the seven organizations (both consortia) were selected to participate in the process. Each cluster held thematic meetings to develop and propose a set of appropriate cluster-specific questions. This process lasted about a month. After, all questions were pooled together into a 260 question-survey. Then, multiple rounds of revisions and negotiations among consortia partners, who worked through the survey question by question, resulted in the current 150-question eligibility survey. The entire survey process from beginning to end took around

five months. The survey then passed through a piloting phase to analyze and minimize inclusion and exclusion error. There have been few changes to the eligibility survey since it was first developed, except for minor adaptations related to remote implementation during the pandemic.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

In coordination with the rest of the Collaborative Cash Delivery (CCD) network and the National Cash Working Group, the consortia jointly developed vulnerability criteria to identify MPCA participants. Partner representatives of each cluster helped to establish the vulnerability criteria what would be used to determine eligibility. In cluster-specific meetings, the experts developed a vulnerability score, from 1-3, in each thematic area. Response options to questions were designed to correspond to each score, essentially creating the ability to create a “streetlight” scorecard option where a “red” score of 3 was most vulnerable and “green” score of 0 was least vulnerable. This allowed for a summative vulnerability total score used to determine vulnerability. Following statistical analysis, a score of 91/300 (representing the upper quartile on the bell curve) or greater, indicated eligibility. The original selection model has since been updated and improved on following additional analyses with global experts and statisticians.

LESSONS & BEST PRACTICES

- *During survey development, create a fully empowered decision-making body who can determine what to keep and cut, otherwise the process can become unwieldy.*
- *Dedicate sufficient time to develop and pilot the survey and eligibility criteria, as it is quite time-intensive.*
- *Automatization of vulnerability criteria that is unknown to participants and staff is a strategic way to reduce selection bias.*

What has not worked well?

Pooling desired survey questions from cluster experts to develop the foundation of the survey implied a lot of time involved in negotiating and cutting down questions. Many informants consider the eligibility survey to be long and time-demanding for participants and surveyors alike. Several informants have voiced the need to revisit the survey and to review the language around questions, the relevance/ appropriateness of the questions, the need and usefulness of the data that is collected via current questions, and whether there is additional or different data that should take priority. Lastly, now that teams have returned to the field, all eligibility surveys should be conducted in-person, but not all partners have made this shift, resulting in differing methods depending on the partner and region.



“What it means is that to this day, our eligibility survey is very long. And that is not particularly fair to our participants. We have to balance the need for good data and good decision-making with respect for the dignity and the time of our participants.”

— Key Informant

What worked well?

Automized eligibility criteria directly programmed into CommCare is seen as an achievement, allowing the participant selection process to function more efficiently, with fewer errors, and with less bias and/or potential for corruption or dishonesty since neither surveyors or participants know how

the criteria is determined or what variables factor into the criteria. Many informants also consider that the consortium was quick in adapting and adopting remote survey methods during the pandemic. To minimize inclusion and exclusion errors, VenEsperanza and CUA have refined the definition of “vulnerability” through econometric analysis, based on a proxy means test model, conducted by statistical experts with consultant Infometrika¹² in 2020 and 2021 to ensure that assistance is directed to those most in need of humanitarian assistance. The resulting selection model is considered to be high-quality with very low inclusion and exclusion error.

Communication channels with participants

Messaging: from VenEsperanza to participants

VenEsperanza partners communicate important information to participants in a number of ways, including but not limited to mass WhatsApp messages (sent via CommCare), individual phone calls, in-person house visits, in-person events and presentations, printed materials, social media, community mobilizers and volunteers, third party communication streams, etc.

What has not worked well?

Informants have expressed reservations about communicating key messages through community leaders. While leaders can prove essential in facilitating access to participants and disseminating important program information, there have also been unfortunate cases of community leaders using or misconstruing certain information for personal gain at the expense of (potential) participants. Since VenEsperanza can’t control how messaging passes from community leaders to participants, informants stress the need to exercise caution and seek additional, alternative methods.

What worked well?

Informants consider that having a variety of communication channels is essential in ensuring access to accurate and up-to-date information to a range of participants with diverse preferences and capacities. Special considerations should be made to include different demographic subgroups, including those participants who are disabled, those who are illiterate, those without phone or internet access, etc. Informants also highlight the importance of ongoing and repeated communication throughout the program to reinforce key messages. Equally important is ensuring that messages are harmonized across all consortium partners and are updated regularly to reflect current realities. The national cash working group conducts continuous monitoring of the current situation in Colombia and produces a monthly document with key messages that are important for cash participants to receive. For example, to counter some false messaging around elections, the working group developed messages to insist that assistance is not connected to any political party or affiliation. Messages have also been developed to inform participants of helpful resources, like the government’s temporal protection status. Lastly, informants have acknowledged that unified VenEsperanza branding and marketing across partners has improved the consortium’s visibility and identity and is key to establishing trust and recognition among participants.

¹² Infometrika. <https://web.infometrika.com/>



“Something that we learned, which was especially important when we were working remotely, is that you can't provide information enough. Following up became very important. So, we would call to let people know that their transfer went through or to find out if they had received it. And that was really important because by doing that, and it's a lot of phone calls, you learn and you hear from participants and can reinforce key information. Even if they've attended distribution events, heard the talk, received the brochure, it's still useful to reach out and repeat the information to ensure understanding.”

— Key informant

CARM: communication from participants to VenEsperanza

Community Accountability Reporting Mechanisms (CARM) aim to provide participants and community members the opportunity to communicate with the VenEsperanza team to ask questions, raise concerns or complaints, provide feedback or suggestions, or report cases of exploitation or abuse. While VenEsperanza partners have each developed their own individual CARM systems, the consortium has required that, at a minimum, each partner have three communication channels available to participants: a helpline (phone number), WhatsApp, and email. Beyond these channels, partners are also welcome and encouraged to implement other strategies, which have included comment/suggestion boxes in key sites, help desks, social media platforms, text messaging, websites, and MEL methods (e.g., focus groups, PRM survey, verification methods), among others.



“If you expect to have zero fraud when you're doing cash, that's never going to happen. There is a percentage of risk. It's about how you manage and mitigate that risk.”

— Key informant

What has not worked well?

Key informants expressed that VenEsperanza partners are not all using the same CARM systems or held to the same CARM standards and thus, there are notable differences in quantity and quality of CARM systems across partners. Furthermore, as stated previously in this report, CARM reporting mechanisms and thresholds have not been established at the consortium level, resulting in challenges assembling and comparing cases (see section on information and data management).

Multiple informants cited CARM as a place where harmonization (or at the very least setting minimum standards) across partners from the onset may have better served the program. There

LESSONS & BEST PRACTICES

- *Commit to developing robust CARM systems with a variety of communication options.*
- *Establish minimum standards regardless of whether CARM is harmonized at the consortium level or left to partners. Monitor partner compliance with standards.*
- *Ensure there is a team dedicated to regular and timely analysis, compilation, and sharing of incoming CARM data. Facilitate spaces to regularly review and reflect on CARM data trends and build action plans to address any issues that emerge.*

have also been instances where CARM systems have not worked optimally. To offer one example, participants have reported being unable to get through to helplines at times.

What worked well?

There are a number of benefits to investing in strong and reliable CARM systems. As described in VenEsperanza’s M&E plan, CARM can increase accountability, empower participants, improve program impact and quality, capture important information, detect early warning signs, build stronger relationships with communities, provide vulnerable people with a venue for anonymous feedback, and detect corruption, theft and abuse. Mercy Corps, for example, has collected over 50,000 pieces of feedback from participants, which has allowed them to have real-time data about participants and to understand what types of questions are coming in (signaling where they might need to do more targeted messaging) and the types of problems they may be facing (along for rapid response). CARM data has allowed the team to make important and timely adjustments and improvements. To be most effective, informants consider that strong CARM systems should facilitate a variety of communication options for participants in order to promote greater inclusivity and not deny access to those who may be illiterate, those without telephones, etc. VenEsperanza also developed CARM-specific guidance, such as standard answers to frequently asked questions for the hotline, a communication strategy and key messages, and information flows for sensitive complaints involving fraud, exploitation, abuse and corruption.

The CARM systems have grown considerably and undergone several adaptations. For example, WhatsApp accounts have been registered and now have a blue check mark to signal an “official” status, generating more trust among participants. In addition, some partner’s helplines have been consolidated to a single number so when participants call, they are asked to select their region and to accept a data privacy agreement before being referred to their local line.



“Having committed and robust community accountability mechanisms has been critical at all stages. It has helped us avoid major fraud scandals and has really helped us identify fraud cases very quickly, at least as far as we know. Having the participants know that they could reach out to us for things that aren’t as serious... and having that relationship of knowing that we are listening and responding, I think has kept the door open for them to tell us when other things are happening. It’s created trust and that’s hard to do at scale otherwise.”

— Key informant

“We really do listen. It’s not just talk. We really hear what participants are saying and have made significant adjustments to the program.”

— Key informant



Annex: Resource toolkit

Key resources

[The Cash Learning Partnership \(CaLP\) website](#)

[The Collaborative Cash Delivery Network \(CCD\) website](#)

[The Cash and Livelihoods Consortium of Iraq \(CLCI, formerly CCI\) website](#)

[VenEsperanza website](#)

Consortia guidance

Consortium Guidance: How to set up and manage successful Humanitarian Consortia (Mercy Corps, 2022)

[Cash Consortium of Iraq: Case Study Findings \(CCI, 2017\)](#)

Cash program implementation guidance

[Lessons Learnt from Latin America and Practical Guidance for Multipurpose Cash Assistance \(MPCA\) Integration \(USAID & Save the Children, 2022\)](#)

[Multipurpose Outcome Indicators and Guidance \(Grand Bargain Cash Workstream, 2022\)](#)

[Safe Cash Toolkit: Collecting and Using Data to Make Cash Programming Safe \(IRC, 2020\)](#)

[E-transfer Implementation Guide for Cash Transfer Programming \(Mercy Corps, 2018\)](#)

[Cash Transfer Implementation Guide \(Mercy Corps, 2017\)](#)

[Cash transfers: what does the evidence say? A rigorous review of programme impact and of the role of design and implementation features \(Overseas Development Institute, 2016\)](#)

[Cash Transfer Programming Methodology Guide and Toolkit \(Mercy Corps, 2015\)](#)

[Operational Guidance and Toolkit for Multipurpose Cash Grants \(UNHCR, the CALP Network, DRC, OCHA, Oxfam, Save the Children, and WFP, 2015\)](#)

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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