



# Market Systems Development Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations

Lessons from SHARPE

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**May 2025**

A UK-Aid Funded Project



# Executive Summary

Market systems development (MSD) is emerging as a promising approach to sustainably improve economic opportunities for refugee, host and other disadvantaged populations in fragile and conflict affected situations (FCAS). Yet, guidance on effective monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) in these contexts remains limited. This paper outlines why MEL is particularly important for MSD in FCAS and the constraints to effective MEL in FCAS. It discusses lessons from the SHARPE programme in Ethiopia as well as several other recent MSD programmes in FCAS on how to conduct useful and practical MEL in FCAS. It concludes with implications for international efforts to improve MEL.

While MEL is important in all MSD programmes, it is particularly important for programmes operating in FCAS because these contexts tend to change more rapidly and significantly than sounder contexts. MSD programmes in FCAS are typically developing weak or non-existent markets, requiring multiple innovations to work together and developing substantially new business models. With significant uncertainties, more information is required to fuel rapid adaptation.

There are myriad constraints to MEL in FCAS. Access to target areas can be restricted or intermittent. Respondents' situations and poverty levels may make it understandably hard for them to provide accurate information. MSD programmes in FCAS often have bigger portfolios of partners with a greater proportion of small and/or informal businesses than those operating in stronger markets. The skill base in MEL for MSD in FCAS is still shallow.

Practical and useful MEL in FCAS starts with building strong relationships across multiple government, private sector, community and NGO stakeholders. Monitoring business models, impacts and market system resilience requires in depth information gathering to understand complexities, changes and nuances. At the same time simplifying information gathering, when possible, can broaden the reach of MEL efforts. Maintaining the capacity for both in-depth and simplified information gathering is important in FCAS. Practitioners have found that a range of information gathering approaches are needed, both in-person and remote. Frequent information gathering with short interviews is more effective in FCAS than fewer, larger information gathering efforts. Triangulation of information is essential as it's harder to gather accurate information from individual sources. Early planning to address likely constraints to MEL, as well as flexibility, help teams manage the inevitable challenges to MEL in FCAS.

Fundamentally, more information is needed in FCAS and information is harder to get. Therefore, more resources and skills are needed for MEL in FCAS compared to MSD programmes in stronger markets. A strong, in-house MEL team, a continued focus on building MEL capacity across the programme and a supportive programme management structure are all essential for this context. Teamwork among MEL and implementation staff helps to make the most of time in the field and builds credibility and trust with partners, communities and other stakeholders. In every MSD programme, it's important to cultivate a culture of curiosity and problem solving. Given the persistence and discomfort often required to effectively get and analyse information in FCAS, developing this culture is even more critical.

To improve MEL in FCAS, the MSD community needs to share more examples and increase practitioner exchanges on challenges and solutions. It is also important to build understanding of how to meet the principles and control points in MEL standards, in ways that are practical and manageable in FCAS. Improvements in MEL among MSD programmes operating in FCAS will hasten essential progress in implementation and learning.



# Acknowledgements

This paper is built on the hard work and deep insights of the SHARPE team. Thanks to all the Ethiopia, DAI UK and OU staff members involved in SHARPE for sharing their successes, challenges and lessons. Particular thanks to Harald Bekkers for initiating and guiding the paper development and to Anne Brady and Muneeb Zulfiqar for their extensive explanations, inputs and feedback throughout the process. Particular thanks also to Abdullahi Ahmed, Aden Omer and Nur Adem for demonstrating the challenges to, and effective practices for MEL in Jijiga. Sincere appreciation goes to the partners and community members we met in Jijiga for sharing their time and experiences. Thanks are also due to the other practitioners interviewed for this paper: Collins Apuoyo, Daniel Hudner, David Okutu, and Ritesh Prasad. Your time was much appreciated, and your insights and feedback were invaluable. Finally, thanks to UK Aid for funding and DAI for publishing this paper.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the UK government, DAI, OU or any of the people who provided inputs to the paper.

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## Acronyms

<b>FCAS</b>	Fragile and Conflict Affected Situations
<b>IAM</b>	Inclusive Agricultural Markets Activity
<b>MEL</b>	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
<b>MSD</b>	Market Systems Development
<b>NGO</b>	Non-government Organisation
<b>NU-TEC</b>	Northern Uganda – Transforming the Economy through Climate Smart Agriculture
<b>SHARPE</b>	Strengthening Host and Refugee Populations in Ethiopia

# 1. Introduction

By the end of 2023, nearly 25 million people were living in a protracted refugee situation.<sup>1</sup> Market systems development (MSD) is emerging as a promising approach to increase the self-reliance of refugees in this context. MSD is also being used to improve the incomes and resilience of both refugees and host populations, many of whom are also struggling with limited economic opportunities, climate-related risks and violence.<sup>2</sup> Lessons are starting to emerge on how to effectively apply MSD in refugee and host contexts as well as in other fragile and conflicted affected situations (FCAS). However, there is still very limited guidance on how to design and manage effective monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems in these contexts.

This paper shares lessons learned on how to conduct practical and useful MEL in FCAS for MSD programmes to inform learning, adaptive management and reporting. The lessons are mainly drawn from the Strengthening Host and Refugee Populations in Ethiopia (SHARPE) programme, but also include inputs from several other recent programmes operating in FCAS: GROW Liberia, Inclusive Agricultural Markets Activity in Uganda (IAM), Mercy Corps programmes in Ethiopia, Uganda, Nigeria and Tanzania,<sup>3</sup> and Northern Uganda – Transforming the Economy through Climate Smart Agriculture (NU-TEC).<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly there is more to learn. This paper aims to stimulate dialogue on MEL among practitioners and donors implementing MSD or other systemic approaches in FCAS to contribute to strengthening this essential aspect of effective programmes.

## Box 1: Summary of SHARPE<sup>5</sup>

SHARPE was a 5.5 year, £14.4M programme in Ethiopia implemented by DAI and funded by UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). It started in September 2019 and closed in March 2025. SHARPE reached almost 230,000 refugee and host community members and contributed to over £9.4M in increased income. The programme worked with over 230 micro, small, medium and large businesses that invested over £1.8M and earned over £36M in additional sales.

SHARPE worked in three remote areas of Ethiopia hosting refugee populations. It promoted increased refugee self-reliance and generated economic opportunities for host and refugee communities through the piloting and early scaling of MSD interventions. The approach was based on understanding the economic barriers that refugee and host communities face and working with key stakeholders — including businesses, government agencies, and service providers — to build, strengthen or extend markets into target communities.

<sup>1</sup> Defined as at least 25,000 refugees from the same country living in exile in a low or middle income country for more than five consecutive years. UNHCR (2024) [Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2023](#), p. 21

<sup>2</sup> Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (2024) [Can Market Systems Approaches Catalyze Self-Reliance for Forcibly Displaced and Host Populations?](#)

<sup>3</sup> Particularly, Resilience in Pastoralist Areas (RIPA) North in Ethiopia, Rural Resilience Activity (RRA) in Nigeria and Delivering Resilient Enterprises and Market Systems (DREAMS) in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all examples are from interviews with staff members of these programmes. A list of respondents is provided in Annex A.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Davies G. (2024) [Use of financial subsidies for the private sector in the context of host and refugee communities](#), p.2

## 2. Why does MSD in FCAS require strong MEL?

All MSD programmes require strong MEL to inform intervention management and strategy revisions. However, MSD programmes operating in FCAS need MEL even more than others because of the context and the weakness of the markets in which they operate. Practitioners have found that the context in FCAS often changes more rapidly and more drastically than other contexts. This volatility requires programmes to stay abreast of changes and their impacts on markets and households so that they can shift interventions and strategies as necessary to stay relevant and effective.

*“Uncertainty and instability make it more important to have information. We must understand when things change – how it affects the private sector and what it means for household inclusion particularly of the most marginalised. For example, can they still reach their input suppliers, their markets? Do we need to inject some cash? There is more you need to know and understand.”*

*Daniel Hudner, Senior Researcher – Resilience and Market Systems, Mercy Corps*

### Box 2: Examples of rapid changes in context

During its 5.5 years, the areas that **SHARPE** targeted suffered from the effects of COVID 19 and a worsening macro-economic outlook, which affected all markets in Ethiopia. They also faced additional and frequent shocks that significantly affected economic activity and household resilience, particularly in refugee camps. These shocks included:

- From June through October 2023, rations in all refugee camps in Ethiopia were suspended. In addition to consuming rations, many households sell them to invest in economic activities. Without this source of income and in the face of a significant threat to subsistence, refugee households had both reduced money and reduced attention for long-term livelihood activities. Furthermore, surrounding markets suffered from a significant drop in revenues as the trade around rations suddenly ceased.
- Outbreaks of violence are a frequent occurrence in the Gambella area, one of three areas in which SHARPE worked. When the security situation deteriorates, access in and out of refugee camps is severely restricted, limiting opportunities for businesses to reach refugees and for refugees to interact with host markets.

In Uganda, **NU-TEC** operated in displacement and refugee hosting areas from 2015-2022. These areas experienced significant shocks during implementation. For example, the government made a new policy that no produce grown in refugee areas could go out of those districts. This policy changed the economic prospects of agriculture in the programme's target areas overnight. In the **IAM** programme, incidences of insecurity and violence in the target areas meant a start – halt – start approach to work and programming.

MSD programmes operating in FCAS are often building new markets or extending value chains and services into areas and populations which they did not previously reach. As such, these programmes are often working with partners on substantially new business models. These models rarely work as designed and require rapid assessment and adjustment so that they can work effectively in FCAS and involve and benefit the target populations.

*“We had to change everything we did to reach refugees – and that came about from progressive understanding of constraints and ways refugees could interact with business models and sectors.”*

*Paul Joicey, SHARPE Team Leader*

Furthermore, the weakness of markets means that programmes often have to work on multiple, interlocking innovations across various essential functions in markets at the same time. For this



approach to succeed in developing a new market, the programme must get frequent information not only on each innovation but also on the extent to which they are working together to build a previously non-existent or very weak market.

### Box 3: Example from SHARPE of building a new market

In the areas where SHARPE worked, lack of access to power affected people's opportunities and well-being. The SHARPE team's first step was to understand how the lack of power affected people and the strengths and weaknesses of any existing solutions. The next step was to consider what might be technically and commercially viable business models to address the significant gaps identified. With that information in hand, the SHARPE team identified home solar kits and energy kiosks as two potential models for host and refugee populations. Energy kiosks presented a viable model in refugee contexts to charge mobile phones and other battery powered equipment, an urgent need for refugees. The SHARPE team identified a company that could set up solar energy kiosks in refugee camps. The company and the SHARPE team had to develop every aspect of the market model, such as projected demand, the technical specifications for the kiosks, the franchising model, the kiosk business model and the marketing campaign. The SHARPE team also had to link this innovation to work they were doing in building a market for digital financial services to enable a viable payment approach. All the innovations had to work together to enable the solar power charging market to emerge in refugee camps.



*SHARPE MEL team interviewing an Energy Kiosk owner*



### 3. What are the constraints to MEL in FCAS?

Programmes operating in FCAS face a range of constraints to getting useful information. While other programmes face some of these constraints as well, the intensity and frequency of the constraints tends to be significantly worse in FCAS. The constraints can be divided into four categories: Access to respondents, respondents' context and poverty levels, the nature of MSD programmes in FCAS, and access to required skills to gather the information.

#### 3.1 Access to respondents

It is often difficult for programme staff or researchers to talk to and get information from those who programme interventions are reaching, particularly partners' household customers or suppliers. There are a variety of challenges:

- **Access to target areas:** Programme staff, researchers and sometimes even private sector partners may not be able to get into target areas due to violence and/or government restrictions.
- **Communications coverage:** As target areas are often remote, mobile phone coverage can be patchy. In addition, many in the target population may not have a phone.
- **Transport logistics:** In addition to being remote, target areas may be very large with dispersed populations, for example, a number of distinct refugee camps spread over a large area. This makes transportation to reach all the areas time consuming and dependent on having vehicles readily available.
- **Context of target areas:** Because target areas may be very poor, with limited infrastructure and services, private sector partners may be reluctant to gather data there, both because they may not see a high revenue potential in the areas and because of the challenging conditions.

#### Box 4: SHARPE's challenges in accessing refugee camps

SHARPE found numerous challenges in getting into the refugee camps in Ethiopia. Formal access to the camps was only granted by the government authorities managing the camps in 2022, more than two years after the start of the programme and well after COVID 19 pandemic restrictions were lifted. There were recurring security issues in Gambella which barred access often for months at a time. In another region, Dollo Ado, there were no commercial flights to a location near the camps. The only way to travel there was on UN flights, restricting the opportunities for going to the camps.

#### 3.2 Respondents' context and poverty levels

People in FCAS have often been through trauma. Many are still experiencing it. They are also typically very poor with extremely limited resilience. Unsurprisingly, they have pressing concerns on a daily basis. They may also be hungry and/or abusing substances when interviewers arrive. These challenges, naturally, affect their ability to provide accurate information. For example, SHARPE practitioners found that people they interviewed in refugee camps often had a 'recency bias,' and limited ability to recall information over time.

There are also other factors that make it difficult to get accurate information in FCAS. Household members and informal partners may lack literacy and/or numeracy skills, making it challenging to keep records, or answer questions by text. In humanitarian contexts, people may have an expectation of receiving benefits depending on their answers to questions, which can also affect the accuracy of their responses. Furthermore, people may have 'respondents' fatigue' due to the

plethora of agencies seeking information from them. In some FCAS, there is a lot of movement of people, with some leaving and other arriving, making it difficult to reach and track people over time.

### Box 5: Examples of challenges in getting accurate information in FCAS

**SHARPE** staff members were interviewing a refugee entrepreneur who had started a micro poultry farm with the help of a SHARPE partner business. Her chickens were not thriving, and the SHARPE staff members were trying to understand why. She said she was providing them with the feed and nutrients recommended by the partner business. However, careful interviewing revealed that her husband was ill, and she did not have enough income for her family's daily needs. Thus, she was diverting money from her poultry operation for daily expenses. She was afraid to tell the interviewers in case they took the chickens away.

**GROW Liberia** and a partner business were providing Lead Farmers with an incentive to train other cocoa farmers in their locality. However, the programme team found that very few women Lead Farmers were getting the incentives, although they were conducting the training. They discovered that Lead Farmers had to fill out a training attendance form to get the incentive and most women Lead Farmers were illiterate, so could not fill out the form.

SHARPE practitioners also found that households in refugee camps faced different circumstances depending on their situation before they had to flee their homes and on their connections within and outside the camps. Most households engaged in several, small income generating activities to survive. As is typical of those in poverty, they tended to use additional income to diversify their activities rather than expand current activities. Furthermore, it is likely that some were forced to engage in illegal activities to earn income, which led to inconsistent information on income and expenses as respondents would not, of course, mention these activities. These factors made understanding households' situations and the impact of interventions more complex than in many other contexts.

## 3.3 The nature of MSD programmes in FCAS

When building or extending markets into refugee and host contexts or other FCAS, MSD programmes often have to partner with many small and informal businesses because these are the only businesses that reach these communities. Getting information from small and informal businesses is much harder than larger enterprises because of their lack of records and the intermingling of business and household revenues and expenses.

Reaching scale in these contexts often means a large portfolio of partners, including informal microenterprises, SMEs and larger businesses. Getting information from a large portfolio requires more time and resources than a small portfolio. SHARPE partnered with over 230 businesses during the life of the programme, compared to a more typical 60-80 for similar sized programmes in a stronger context.<sup>6</sup>

Given access challenges in FCAS, it's common that programme staff members are trying to accomplish multiple aims when they are able to visit target areas. When SHARPE practitioners could get into refugee camps, they had a lot to accomplish in a short time, for example: meet with local officials to coordinate activities, meet with multiple partners to address challenges in their businesses, conduct design research, meet with potential new partners to get new interventions started and monitor existing interventions. This multi-tasking is challenging and means time for monitoring gets squeezed as implementation activities take priority.

## 3.4 Access to required skills to gather information

The priority in humanitarian contexts is saving lives and delivering support that will immediately

<sup>6</sup> Author experience and analysis of reference programmes: Samarth Nepal Market Development Programme and Alliances Caucasus Programme Phase III; as well as larger programmes: Propcom Mai-Karfi Nigeria and Enterprise Partners Ethiopia.



improve well-being. While aid programmes are trying to bridge the gap to address longer-term challenges in protracted FCAS, the shift is challenging. This history means that the skills to assess markets and businesses are often difficult to access in FCAS. It can be challenging to find experienced research firms. Staff with a humanitarian background may be unfamiliar with gathering information on aspects of markets such as input supplies, market access and enterprise profits. In addition, in refugee contexts, programme staff may have a different language and culture to that of the target populations. These challenges add another layer of constraints to MEL in FCAS.



*Interviewing a SHARPE partner inside a refugee camp, Somali region*

## 4. What are the implications of the constraints to MEL in FCAS?

Due to the challenges described in the section above, MEL in FCAS is harder and more expensive than in stronger market contexts. At the same time, more information is needed more frequently, not only for the programme management but also for businesses operating in those contexts. There are practical implications of these challenges both for information gathering and for the management of MEL in programmes operating in FCAS.

*“The economic situation [in FCAS] changes rapidly. This means adjusting approach and business models. As soon as you think you have fixed it, something changes which requires new thinking. So, building private sector capacity to be aware of potential changes and to adjust quickly is critical.”*  
Collins Apuoyo, Team Leader, NU-TEC and IAM programmes

The reality of the constraints to MEL in FCAS means that programmes often have to accept poorer quality information than they would in other contexts. Some common compromises that programmes in FCAS have to make follow.

- Some information may not be gathered at the optimal time based on seasons and business cycles. For example, it is best to gather data on the sale of an agricultural crop immediately after the sale, but in FCAS it may only be possible to gather that data several months later due to access challenges.
- Information gathering in some locations may be impossible or have to be entirely remote. For example, the SHARPE team could not get information from refugee camps in Gambella for months at a time. Information gathering in some other areas had to be primarily through phone calls.
- Information gathering takes longer due to the challenges that respondents are facing and the complexity of their situations.
- Information gathering often yields less accurate data than in other contexts due to respondents' challenges and the complexity of FCAS.
- It is difficult to gather complex information. The SHARPE team found that, particularly when gathering information remotely, they could get basic statistics, such as how many chickens a farmer had, but could get little qualitative information to understand the reasons for behaviours and changes.
- It is difficult to recheck data. If a staff member returns to check findings or gather more information a few days or weeks later, the situation may have already changed. For example, a family member may have become sick or an additional family member may have joined the household. These rapid changes, combined with recency bias, make verification of previous information difficult or impossible.

Analysis is similarly complex, because there is greater diversity of income sources than other contexts as well as subsidies, such as rations and other humanitarian support. To handle this complexity, revenue and expense models must be carefully thought through. Standard enterprise models do not work well.

To get sufficient information and conduct effective analysis in FCAS, programmes must allocate more budget for MEL than in stable contexts, for example for more frequent monitoring, greater travel distances and higher travel costs. Personnel costs can also be higher because more time and a high level of skills are required.



## Box 6: Example from IAM of budgeting for MEL

Costs for MEL in IAM were higher than those for other programmes because staff had to collect data often and trips were long. Interviews were lengthy and staff members often had to wait for extensive periods to talk to the right person, due to their other pressing concerns or government restrictions. In addition, junior data officers did not have sufficient skills to conduct complex interviews without senior staff support.



*Conducting research for this paper with the SHARPE MEL team in the Somali region refugee camps*



## 5. What are practical solutions to the challenges of MEL in FCAS?

Experience implementing MSD in FCAS has started to generate practical solutions to some of the MEL challenges outlined above. These have been divided into four sections: laying the foundation for effective MEL in FCAS, planning to gather and analyse information; gathering information and managing the MEL function in programmes.

### 5.1 Laying the foundation for effective MEL in FCAS

Getting information requires trust and credibility. This takes time for all MSD programmes, but often even more time and investment for programmes operating in FCAS. It is important to start developing relationships with relevant stakeholders from the beginning of a programme and to cultivate those relationships throughout the programme. The stakeholders in FCAS include, at a minimum: businesses, communities, authorities who manage and work in fragile areas and NGOs or other programmes working in those areas. Practitioners have found that it's critical to build credibility and trust with these stakeholders by explaining the MSD approach as well as what kinds of information their programme will gather and why. Frequent repeating and examples are required, as MSD programmes operate differently from most humanitarian programmes.

#### Box 7: SHARPE's experience in building relationships

For each of the three regions where the programme worked, SHARPE had a Hub team with three technical staff members located there. While each staff member had their specific responsibilities, they typically worked together to both implement interventions and monitor results. They built relationships with the authorities managing the refugee camps, NGOs working in the camps and businesses in and outside of the camps. Because the SHARPE Hub teams were responsible for implementation as well as MEL, they were able to offer refugee and host business owners practical support to improve their businesses. For example, they connected refugee poultry farmers with local feed agents and Community Animal Health Workers. By providing practical support alongside regular monitoring, SHARPE teams were able to build stronger relationships.

The Hub teams also worked to build solid relationships with the wider communities in the host areas and refugee camps. Initially, the communities did not expect SHARPE staff to return to their areas more than once or twice. But by being in the field most days, the Hub teams showed community members that they would return as regularly as possible. The teams got to know community leaders and developed their understanding of the refugee and host communities. Being able to greet people by name and ask them about their families and businesses went a long way toward building trust and credibility. As trust was built, SHARPE staff members found that people were more willing to give them time and information. They also found that their increasing understanding of the refugees and host populations' contexts helped them interpret what they were hearing.

*"We have to directly contact and create relationships with the stakeholders to get useful information – RSS [Government Refugee and Returnees Services], RCC [Refugee Central Committees], - community camp leaders. We have to develop relationships with them before we implement and do information collection... When we get to know the context and develop relationships, it's much easier."*

*Nur Adem, Jijiga Hub MEL Officer, SHARPE*

## 5.2 Planning to gather and analyse information

### 5.2.1 Understanding business models

Understanding business models is a critical part of MEL in MSD. Typically, a programme works with market actors to develop a business model for one or several business partners. Depending on the nature of the market and business model, the programme may then support or encourage more businesses to adopt and adapt the business model. Commonly, MSD programmes gather in-depth information on business models as they develop, using tools such as in-depth interviews and observation. Once a business model is working effectively and a programme is encouraging growth of the model, MEL usually switches to getting more basic information but from more sources. Information at this stage focuses on basic business statistics such as revenues and number of customers. This information is gathered from partner companies and, as much as possible, other companies that seem to be adopting the model.

As highlighted in Section 2, MSD programmes in FCAS often work on completely new or substantially different business models. Given the challenges and volatility in the context, it often takes longer to develop and adapt these business models so that they can function profitably and impactfully in FCAS. Experienced SHARPE practitioners estimated that the development and adaptation process took on average 2 years, while in more stable contexts, it typically takes about 1 year. This means that SHARPE had to gather frequent, detailed information through in-depth interviews for twice as long per business model as programmes operating in more stable contexts. In addition, as mentioned in Section 3.3, programmes in FCAS may have more, smaller and more informal partner businesses. This also compounds the time and detail required in information gathering.

**Tip 1: Plan for more intensive information gathering per intervention/business model for longer in FCAS, compared to MSD programmes in mainstream markets.**



*SHARPE MEL Advisor and SHARPE MEL Manager interviewing a partner in a refugee camp in Gambella*

## Box 8: Examples from SHARPE of gathering and using detailed information

SHARPE gathered detailed information on the new business models they developed with partners and used the information to help partners adjust the models to host and refugee contexts. For example, in the Gambella region a SHARPE partner was providing quality seeds and other agri-inputs to customers in host and refugee populations. SHARPE gathered information from the farmers using the agri-inputs. Among other insights, they found that the farmers using tomato seeds from the company were not happy because the tomatoes were smaller than those that customers in the region were familiar with. The tomatoes also had higher water content and so were more perishable than the varieties commonly grown in the region. SHARPE used these and other insights from farmers to agree with the partner which agri-input products were appropriate for the area.

In the Dollo Ado and Jijiga regions, the SHARPE team gathered extensive information on new energy kiosks opened in refugee camps through a partner's franchise model. In addition to getting data from the solar energy company, the team gathered monthly data from the individual kiosk franchise owners on sales, number of customers, number of cell phones charged and other basic business data. They checked in with the kiosk owners weekly or bi-weekly, in person as much as possible, and frequently chatted with customers to hear about their experiences. The SHARPE team also had monthly calls with each kiosk owner to understand problems and challenges. To cross-check data and get a broader perspective, the team talked with the Refugee Community Councils and community leaders to gather data on how the new businesses and their customers were doing. This intensive information gathering quickly showed that the kiosks in some areas had insufficient capacity. Supply could not meet demand and business opportunities were being missed, such as powering fridges to sell cold drinks and ice. SHARPE worked with local technicians to upgrade the kiosks to increase capacity given the strong demand, resulting in better functioning businesses and happier customers.

Once a business model is working effectively, the information to be gathered can be simplified. To simplify information needed, it's helpful to develop a detailed understanding of the business model using a diagram that shows transactions, and an accompanying excel sheet that shows the typical business cycle, revenues and costs. The model helps the team to pick out the most essential information to gather from partners, other businesses and beneficiaries to understand the growth and continued functioning of the business model as it, hopefully, expands and/or spreads. In SHARPE, the MEL team used detailed business models to develop simple data sheets that guided staff members' information gathering in the field.

**Tip 2: Develop a detailed understanding of functioning business models that the programme aims to scale up. Use this to simplify information to be gathered, particularly from micro and small businesses in target areas.**

However, even at the scale up stage, business models are likely to change more frequently than in mainstream contexts due to the rapid and frequent changes in FCAS. So, while it is possible to drastically simplify information gathering on a business model during the scale up stage, it's important to maintain the capacity for in depth interviews to understand how models are changing when needed.

**Tip 3: Ensure staff capacity and time is still available to gather in-depth information on business models even during a scale up phase.**



## 5.2.2 Understanding impacts

Understanding the impacts of new business models and other changes in markets on members of the target group is also vital. Typically, MSD programmes aim for members of the target group to increase their incomes, as well as make incomes more stable and predictable. To understand the impacts of increased and more stable incomes, programmes in stronger markets and targeting people at or near the poverty line tend to focus on household expenditures and expansion of the targeted income-generating activity, such as growing crops in a particular agricultural sector. Research and experience show that in the context of severe poverty, it is equally important to understand changes in household expenditure, but it is also important to gather information on diversification of income generating activities, not just expansion within the target sectors.

If they did not ask about diversification, the SHARPE team found that they did not really understand the changes the target group members were making and the impacts they were experiencing. While target group members at or near the poverty line could be expected to use business revenues to cover business costs, those in severe poverty will often have to divert business funds to household issues, such as filling an income gap when a family member gets sick or paying for school fees. The SHARPE team found that asking detailed information regarding use of revenues earned enabled them to better understand impacts, challenges and changes in resilience. While simple surveys may be useful to get basic information on impacts as the scale of results grows, in-depth interviews are needed, particularly early on, to understand the depth and nature of impacts across multiple income sources.

**Tip 4: To understand impacts, gather detailed information on household expenditure, use of business revenues and diversification of income-generating activities. In-depth interviews are an essential tool for this.**

### Box 9: Understanding household changes resulting from SHARPE's work

SHARPE conducted a study to understand whether their work in strengthening systems and developing markets had helped to improve individual refugee households' economic resilience and their ability to cope with economic shocks. The findings showed that, except for a handful of shopkeepers, no households were identified as resilient before SHARPE support. The research found that resilience emerges from the interaction between the skills refugees possess or learn over time and the opportunities offered to them through the system in which they live. The systemic approach applied by SHARPE helped in providing the opportunities and necessary support that people need in order to run a business and therefore build their resilience.<sup>7</sup>

Like in any other MSD programme, teams operating in FCAS need to consider the causes of the impacts they find at the household level. A typical [framework for determining which method to use to assess attribution](#) is still applicable in FCAS, provided that the team carefully considers the counterfactual situation and practically applies the assessment method chosen. For example, the SHARPE programme was introducing new livelihood opportunities into refugee camps. Through their initial analysis, the team found that in most refugee situations, there were very few options for livelihoods. In these cases, the counterfactual could be constructed from an understanding of households' situations and what they were likely to have been able to do without programme interventions. The team could estimate impacts by looking at households' situations before and after the intervention and comparing against the constructed counterfactual when needed.

<sup>7</sup> Sen Bekkers, N., Brady, A. and Bekkers, H. (2025) Understanding Resilience within the context of SHARPE, DAI.

## Box 10: Gathering information on impacts in IAM

In the IAM programme, staff members gathered case studies from target group members every quarter. The staff members focused on listening to the stories of household members from the beginning of their engagement with programme partners and how the interaction and their situation evolved over time. Through the discussion, they were able to explore the results of the programme and other factors influencing the households. This approach helped the IAM team to get a thorough understanding of impacts for households resulting from the programme activities, as well as to identify gaps and new challenges to inform adaptive management.

In other situations, assessing attribution might require comparing beneficiaries with others who have not interacted with programme partners. Finding a comparison group in FCAS can be challenging due to restrictions on access to locations and populations, as well as challenges of interviewing people who will not benefit. Mercy Corps found that they could take advantage of phased implementation, using baseline information from people who were just starting to interact with programme partners as a comparison group for those who were reached earlier. Programme teams were also able to categorise people within a geographic area according to their levels of interaction with, and support from partners, and then compare changes among the categories, to understand the impacts of intentional layering and integration of interventions. It is useful to remember in FCAS that assessing the counterfactual perfectly is rarely possible; but practicality and creativity can yield reasonable estimates.

**Tip 5: When determining methods to assess attribution, carefully consider the counterfactual and be practical in applying the chosen method.**

### 5.2.3 Monitoring changes in context

Because changes in context tend to happen frequently, monitoring the context is particularly important in FCAS. SHARPE found demand can change frequently and suddenly in refugee camps due, for example, to ration cuts or increased conflicts. Because demand is essential to market development, the team had to regularly monitor changes in demand. They maintained regular contact with officials, businesses in and around the camps and key informants in communities, through in person visits and calls. Through these contacts, the SHARPE team not only found out about shocks like ration cuts but also how those shocks were changing demand for key products.

**Tip 6: Maintain regular contact with key informants to learn about changes in the context and how government, businesses and people are responding.**

### 5.2.4 Understanding market system resilience

As shocks are frequent in FCAS, understanding market system resilience is also essential. For example, if restrictions on movement are increased, can businesses and households still interact? Gathering longitudinal data is useful to understand how business models and the system more broadly are responding to shocks and evolving over time. This involves gathering basic information on business models, market actor behaviours and prices over time, as well as understanding changes in underlying factors related to resilience such as market actor connections and availability of information. Programmes also need an information management system that can handle longitudinal data – quantitative and qualitative- and provide ways to present it effectively for analysis.

There are now a number of frameworks for assessing market systems resilience, for example the [USAID Market Systems Resilience Framework](#). However, it's important not to just take a



framework off the shelf and apply it, particularly in FCAS. Like all measurements in FCAS, assessing resilience must be customised and practical. This starts with considering what are potential shocks and stressors in the context and what are coping mechanisms to prepare for and maintain or improve market functions in the face of these. Then assessment can focus on those particular aspects.

**Tip 7: Use analysis of potential shocks and stressors, and coping mechanisms to focus assessment of market systems resilience in FCAS.**

## Box 11: Example of assessing market systems resilience in SHARPE

SHARPE assessed the resilience of the market systems in which it worked. The assessments used a definition drawn from USAID's guidance: 'the ability of a market system to respond to disturbances (shocks and stresses) in a way that allows consistency and sustainability in the market system's functioning, or that leads to improvement in its functioning'.<sup>8</sup>

For example, in December 2023 the SHARPE team assessed the resilience of the poultry sector in Jijiga. The team found that the market system was demonstrating the characteristics of a resilient market with strong evidence against each of the five selected indicators (learning, innovation, new business models and linkages, scale and inclusion). This was evident through the partnership with EthioChicken, which had instilled confidence in the market actors, and the establishment of a regional poultry hub, Horn Afrique, which was enabling sustainable market linkages with host and refugee businesses. At that time there were 16 active refugee poultry farmers who were expanding their poultry businesses. The demand for eggs across the region was continuing to grow and there was growing interest from other actors to enter this market. As a result of the increasing number of market actors, a strong value chain for commercial poultry was emerging.<sup>9</sup>

## 5.3 Gathering Information

### 5.3.1 Simplifying data gathering

Simplifying data gathering is essential in FCAS. Practitioners emphasise that there are two essential elements to simplifying data gathering. The first step for any assessment is reducing the information to be gathered. Only information that the team knows how they will use should be gathered. The second step is developing data sheets that clearly specify required information so that those gathering the information have a handy tool when they are in the field. However, the SHARPE team found that those gathering information still need the capacity to go beyond the data sheets to gather additional information to understand rapid shifts or complex cases when needed.

**Tip 8: Simplify data gathering by reducing data to be gathered and creating clear data sheets.**

<sup>8</sup> Vroegindewey, R. (2019) Guidance for Assessing Resilience in Market Systems, USAID.

<sup>9</sup> SHARPE (2024) SHARPE Quarterly Report October to December 2023, p. 6-7.

## Box 12: Examples of simplifying data gathering

In the cocoa sector, the **GROW Liberia** team needed information on cocoa farmers and changes in their farming over time. The GROW team created very basic templates for data gathering with only critical information such as name, gender, area under cocoa, and the quantity of last year's harvest. The team cut out all non-essential information. For example, they didn't ask for phone numbers – most people didn't have them anyway, age or other demographic characteristics. To gather the information, two MEL field officers were based in the field with motorcycles. The MEL manager uploaded the data templates on tablets, which the field officers used to record information in the field. The officers uploaded the information gathered each evening so that the MEL manager and other team members had instant access to it.

In Nigeria, **Mercy Corps** had a programme building resilience in agriculture systems over a wide area in the north east. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they used a large phone survey to understand the effects of COVID restrictions and spread on farming households, particularly women-headed households, in a situation already affected by conflict. They gathered information on market access, inputs access and food access. Because they had been working in the area, they had phone numbers of households from partner coops, links in communities, registrations from previous events and other programmes. The success of the survey rested on cutting down the information they gathered to the minimum so that interviews were short, and ensuring clarity in questions so that interviewers and respondents understood the information needed.

### 5.3.2 Developing ways to gather information

Because access to respondents can be challenging in FCAS, it's useful to plan multiple ways to gather information during a programme. SHARPE partners submitted regular reports (weekly or monthly depending on the business model) with basic quantitative information. SHARPE also talked with partners by phone at least once a month to gather qualitative information and visited them as frequently as possible. SHARPE practitioners also mentioned that they maintained multiple ways to contact their informal, micro-enterprise partners. For example, they would keep a record of the owner's cell phone number but also the numbers of another family member and a neighbour. That way, should the owner have insufficient funds to pre-pay their phone, for example, a SHARPE staff member could still reach them.

It's worthwhile establishing multiple remote methods for gathering information. For example, programmes in FCAS are using Telegram or WhatsApp groups, phone and texts to gather information, often using all three simultaneously or switching among them depending on what is most appropriate for a particular respondent and type of information.

**Tip 9: Identify multiple ways to reach partners or other key information sources and develop several remote information gathering methods early in a programme.**

### Box 13: Examples from SHARPE of gathering information remotely

In addition to phone, texts and emails, the SHARPE team made extensive use of WhatsApp and Telegram groups to gather information and complement more formal data gathering from partners and community members. The choice of platform depended on what was widely used in the different areas where the programme worked.

For example, the SHARPE team in Dollo Ado started a WhatsApp group for partners in each of the refugee camps in which they worked in the region. Partners would send regular updates on their activities in WhatsApp. For example, the Community Animal Health Workers would send daily updates on client visits and what animals they had treated that day. This information contributed to building a detailed understanding of the Community Animal Health Worker business model.

In Jijiga, the WhatsApp group that the SHAPRE team started for the livestock sector included Community Animal Health Workers, community agrovets and expert trainers/vets. The Community Animal Health Workers would use the groups to get quick feedback on animal health issues from the trainers. The prices for animal medicines were also routinely shared on the group. These exchanges provided the SHARPE team with a wealth of information.

In the Gambella region, the SHARPE MEL Officer started Telegram groups for partners and their customers. The groups provided information for SHARPE as well as a platform to discuss problems as they arose. The groups also allowed partners and customers to share information with each other. For example, a community member would post that their goat was sick to get advice from the SHARPE supported agrovet in the area. This interaction would also provide information to SHARPE on how well the agrovet business in the area was working.

#### 5.3.3 Field visits

Visits to the field are inevitably busy, and integrating time for gathering information into other field-based activities can be a challenge. Nevertheless, too tight a plan doesn't work in FCAS. It's important to have some flexibility for interviews that run longer than expected, for example, waiting for a person who is a vital information source or following up on unexpected information with another source. Whenever possible, frequent visits to the field that include monitoring will be more effective than longer but less frequent visits. Frequent visits not only build trust with partners and communities, they also allow teams to manage recency bias and build a robust longitudinal record of progress.

Frequent visits with flexibility also enable triangulation of information, an essential aspect of increasing information accuracy in FCAS. SHARPE practitioners found that cross-checking information among partner businesses and different participating households helped to improve the accuracy of data. The IAM programme team held informal community meetings at convenient community-based locations to cross-check data from business partners.

**Tip 10: Plan flexibility and triangulation into frequent monitoring visits in the field, whenever possible.**

## Box 14: SHARPE approaches for effective interviewing

The SHARPE team developed some strategies for making interviews in FCAS more effective. When interviewing people in severe poverty, they brought food to offer interviewees and ensured that interviews were short. This often meant coming back multiple times to get information rather than having longer interviews. The SHARPE team also found it useful to cross-check information quickly by asking for the same information twice in different ways within an interview or asking different family members the same question during one visit. For example, when the teams interviewed poultry farmers, they talked to the whole family because all family members were involved in collecting eggs. This allowed them to cross-check data between the different family members. Building up a solid understanding of the context, business models and impact also enabled SHARPE team members to sense check data during an interview. This way they could clarify the information immediately when responses seemed unlikely. These approaches significantly improved the accuracy of information gathering in the field.

### 5.3.4 Working with others to get information

Because access to communities can be difficult, practitioners in FCAS often ask or contract others to get information for them. Various approaches have been tried with pros and cons.

- **Contract community facilitators to gather information:** This approach has the advantage that those gathering information are based in the relevant communities and are accountable to the programme for collecting information. A disadvantage is that contracted information gatherers may feel pressure for information to be positive, and may not report data, particularly negative data, accurately. This approach works best once a business model is working effectively, and the scope of data required is clear and straight forward. It is not so effective when information gathering is exploratory.
- **Ask or contract NGOs working in the area to gather information:** This works well when information gathering utilises existing skills within the NGO's team. For example, if an NGO works on women's empowerment, their staff will likely be effective in gathering information on this topic. NGOs can also share useful data on the overall context of an area. However, it does not work well when MSD programmes ask NGOs to gather information outside their areas of expertise. For example, staff from an NGO providing health services will likely have difficulty gathering information on businesses and markets.
- **Hire and develop a cadre of data gatherers in or near programme areas:** Several programmes have tried this approach. For example, the IAM programme hired recent graduates to gather information in communities five days a month. Mercy Corps cultivated links with universities and consulting firms to identify a cadre of local data gatherers. Several lessons have emerged from these experiences. Developing a strong cadre of local data gatherers takes time. It's important to start early and to plan for significant investment in training and mentoring. Also, there is often considerable demand from other agencies for strong data gatherers so understanding remuneration rates and considering ways to promote retention is beneficial. The approach of identifying people with a higher level of education has worked well because they not only have good literacy skills, but they have also developed their analytical skills. However, the cadre will continue to require support throughout the programme, particularly when information needs change. Therefore, it is important that senior staff members accompany data gatherers for information gathering regularly to identify any issues and provide coaching, as well as to get a deeper understanding of results. Furthermore, complex qualitative information gathering will still need to be carried out by seasoned practitioners.

- **Ask business partners to collect data in communities:** When businesses have good access to their client or supplier base, this can work well if businesses can benefit from the information being gathered.<sup>10</sup> However, like in other MSD programmes, it does not work to ask businesses to collect data that is not useful to them, as they will often take short-cuts on accuracy and/or depth. The IAM programme found that the partners who were good at gathering and sharing information tended to be smaller businesses, rather than market leaders. These partners were hungry for information so that they could understand their clients better, and also to identify business opportunities in the FCAS. The bigger companies tended to be interested only in sales volumes and profit indicators, and were less willing to invest time in gathering household level data. Mercy Corps has found that the private sector does tend to have better access to their customers and suppliers in FCAS than programme staff, but little incentive to do customer-based surveys or detailed information gathering. Supporting partners to improve bookkeeping so that can report accurately on sales is useful but can take considerable time.

**Tip 11: Asking or contracting others to gather information for the programme can be a good option in FCAS, provided that sufficient capacity building and support is provided, and limitations are recognised.**

### 5.3.5 Additional ideas for information gathering

The SHARPE team identified two possible tools that they did not try but they thought might work well for gathering information in FCAS:

- The first was asking community members and partners to take videos, for example of livestock care practices or business interactions. There are often people in communities who have a phone with video capability and short videos can be sent to programme staff remotely. Videos could help staff concretely see what is happening in communities when they cannot visit.
- The second was asking educated household members in informal businesses to keep a diary. This could include quantitative business data but also qualitative information on business progress and challenges. Diaries could help to combat recency bias and collect longitudinal data, particularly when staff access to areas is impossible or intermittent.

The Mercy Corps Senior Researcher interviewed also sees potential in remote sensing tools. For example, remote sensing can measure changes in the area covered by a weekly town market, or the area under cultivation of various crops.<sup>11</sup> However, data from these tools is hard to interpret in isolation; they work best when combined with contextual analysis and other data sources.

**Tip 12: Be creative when considering monitoring approaches and tools, particularly where access to target locations is limited.**

## 5.4 Managing the MEL Function in Programmes

### 5.4.1 Human Resources

Human Resources are critical to MEL in FCAS particularly because of the added requirements and challenges compared to programmes in stronger markets. A strong, in-house MEL team headed by a full time, well-qualified MEL manager is essential, even if some data collection will still need to be outsourced. Programmes in FCAS often require a larger MEL team than other MSD programmes to gather sufficient information in challenging contexts and often across many small or informal partners, as well as larger businesses. Thus, the budget for human resources in MEL will be higher for programmes operating in FCAS than other MSD programmes.

<sup>10</sup> For more on encouraging and supporting the private sector to gather and use information, see Fower, B. et al. (2022) [Shifting the locus of learning: catalyzing private sector learning to drive systemic change](#).

<sup>11</sup> The work of Tillmann von Carnap explores some of the possibilities.



At the close of the programme, SHARPE's MEL team consisted of four full-time, in-house staff members supplemented by a part-time MEL adviser, although the team had been smaller previously. SHARPE's MEL covered a portfolio of 230 partner businesses in five sectors over the life of the programme. Very roughly, this indicates a ratio of 60 partner businesses for each full-time MEL officer. Similar-sized MSD programmes tend to have ratios of partner businesses to full-time MEL officers of 20-30 over the life of the programme, with a comparable complement of technical staff who also engage in monitoring.<sup>12</sup> While this is not, of course, the only metric that matters in an effective MEL system, it does illustrate a challenge in having a sufficient human resource complement for MEL in FCAS where partner business portfolios tend to be larger than those in stronger market systems.

**Tip 13: Hire and retain a well-qualified MEL manager and strong, in-house MEL team with a sufficient number of staff members.**

MEL for MSD in FCAS is relatively new and the current skill base in the field is shallow. Therefore even with a strong MEL team, it is essential to build the capacity of both MEL officers and implementation staff members in MEL for FCAS. MEL managers in FCAS have found mentoring staff and supporting them during monitoring field visits, particularly for qualitative information gathering, is vital. For example, staff members have to be prepared to deviate from data checklists in interviews if they find a different situation than they expected. This is a challenging skill that requires staff members to understand why particular information is required and how it will be used, so they can adapt interviews as needed on the ground. Close mentoring is required to develop this type of understanding and skill. In addition, it's vital to build the capacity of the whole team on using information effectively for adaptive management, particularly if they are more experienced in humanitarian work and new to MSD.

**Tip 14: Build the capacity of the MEL and implementation teams in MEL practices suitable for FCAS.**

*"The situation in refugee and hosting areas is not as straightforward as we might think. There are a lot of nuances, and interventions don't always follow the same pattern. So, we do a lot of training and mentoring [in MEL] for our own and partner staff. Sometimes you have to send your senior [MEL] staff members into the field [to get required information] and incorporate the unique nuances – and they are expensive".*

*Collins Apuoyo, Team Leader, NU-TEC and IAM programmes*

In FCAS it is useful to build surge capacity into the team, if possible, to address intermittent access to target locations. Surge capacity can enable the team to make the most of their time in the field, both for activities with partners and monitoring. Surge capacity can come from geographical flexibility where main office staff or staff from different geographical areas can support staff who work in a particular area. It is useful for senior managers to work with their staff in the field in any case, and this can also support staff in busy periods. Finally, if the programme has developed a cadre of information gatherers, they can help to gather sufficient information when access to target areas is possible.

**Tip 15: Plan surge capacity into your team to address intermittent field access.**

Because MEL in FCAS is such a critical function, it is important that the senior programme manager(s) understand MEL and consistently demonstrate its utility in programme decision making. Senior managers must encourage all team members to embrace MEL and hold them accountable for making MEL a key part of their jobs.

Gathering information in FCAS can be challenging and uncomfortable. Effective senior managers boost team morale, encourage teamwork and a strong work ethic, and make MEL work meaningful and fun. One of the best ways to accomplish this is by going to the field with teams

<sup>12</sup> Author experience and analysis of reference programmes: Alliances Caucasus Programme Phase III and Growth and Employment in States 1 (GEMS 1).

and discussing findings and insights at the end of each day in the field. A senior manager encouraging and guiding staff towards applying MEL insights to implementation challenges can effectively show staff the importance of MEL. Making MEL discussions casual and enjoyable can go a long way towards increasing enthusiasm for MEL in teams.

**Tip 16: Ensure that senior programme managers take an active role in encouraging and supporting the programme team in MEL.**

### Box 15: Example of SHARPE management support for MEL

SHARPE's Senior Programme Manager made frequent visits to target areas with both main office staff members and the Hub teams in each region. She was also intimately involved in key studies on results, for example on changes in resilience of refugee households. These frequent visits allowed the manager to have numerous conversations with programme staff members on insights they were gaining in the field and their implications for interventions. Her consistent interest in understanding results in the field also reinforced the importance of MEL throughout the programme.

## 5.4.2 Coordination

Coordination on strategy and implementation tends to be more challenging in FCAS. In any given programme and context, it is critical to define where programme knowledge and findings will influence strategy formulation and adaptive management. In many MSD programmes, these processes occur primarily in a central office. However, in FCAS a dispersed structure is often necessary. In this case the 'brain-trust' of the programme might be in regional hubs or a combination of regional and central offices. This structure puts a premium on bridging the geographical divide between teams, for example by ensuring frequent remote communication, conducting regular, full-team retreats and having central office staff spend time in the regional hubs.

**Tip 17: Determine where the 'brain-trust' of the programme will be and ensure there are multiple ways to bridge the geographical gaps among programme team members.**

### Box 16: Example of coordination across locations in Mercy Corps

In Mercy Corps Ethiopia, management ensures frequent interaction between staff in the main office in Addis Ababa and field teams in target areas. For example, they conduct virtual training courses that include both main office and field staff, as well as occasional in-person training when possible. In addition, the design and MEL documents required to support intervention approval and implementation can only be developed through interaction between team leads in the main office and field staff members. Team leads provide technical expertise while field teams provide inputs on contextualising interventions to various locations.

## 5.4.3 Designing MEL for efficiency

In FCAS it is helpful to design the MEL function for efficiency. This means ensuring the system is simple and manageable. For example, [intervention guides](#) are a common tool used by MSD programmes. In FCAS, it is even more important than in other MSD programmes not to overcomplicate this tool. This can mean not adding too many tabs and minimising unnecessary revisions of sections, for example by waiting until a business model for an intervention is clear before developing the upper levels of the monitoring plan. It can also be useful to invest in a data

gathering, storage and management system that can handle quantitative, qualitative and longitudinal data.

**Tip 18: Ensure the MEL function is efficient by keeping it simple and manageable and investing in a practical information management system.**

### Box 17: Mercy Corps' data management system

To streamline data collection, storage, management and use across multiple programmes, Mercy Corps has invested in applications: **CommCare** and **Power BI**. CommCare is used for data collection and management while Power BI is used for data visualisation to support reporting and use. One of the reasons that Mercy Corps chose CommCare is the ease of building longitudinal data sets and information over time. Customising these applications for the organisation enables Mercy Corps to have some consistency across MEL while still allowing individual programmes to tailor data collection and management to their specific contexts. The system also allows all staff members in a programme to easily see and use their own data. While getting programmes onto the system takes time, Mercy Corps is seeing improvements in reporting and adaptive management as a result. For example, in the RIPA-North programme, the team was able to monitor the impacts of drought on key market characteristics such as trends in purchases of veterinary services or numbers of livestock sold in near real-time, improving their ability to respond quickly with appropriate interventions.



*SHARPE MEL team interviewing a refugee business owner in his home*



## 6. What are key lessons for MEL in FCAS?

The discussion above highlights key considerations when developing and managing the MEL function for MSD programmes in FCAS. These are summarised below.

- More information is needed in FCAS and information is harder to get. Therefore, more resources and skills are needed for MEL in FCAS compared to MSD programmes in stronger markets. A strong, in-house MEL team, building MEL capacity across the programme and supportive programme management are all essential components.
- To address the constraints to gathering information in FCAS, a range of information gathering approaches is needed, both in-person and remote. Regular and frequent information gathering works better in FCAS than fewer, larger information gathering efforts.
- It's useful to build relationships with multiple information sources for any type of information needed, as access to information sources is more precarious than in stronger markets and triangulation of information is essential for accuracy.
- In-depth information gathering is important to understand the complexities, changes and nuances in FCAS. At the same time, simplifying information gathering, when possible, can broaden the reach of MEL efforts. Maintaining the capacity for both in-depth and simplified information gathering is ideal.
- It's helpful to identify existing and likely information gathering constraints and develop options for overcoming them early in a programme. Relatedly, it's important to be flexible – seizing opportunities for information gathering by deploying additional human resources when possible and using alternative plans for information gathering when access is restricted.
- Teamwork in MEL is essential. Having MEL and implementation staff work together in an integrated way makes the most of time in the field and also builds credibility and trust with partners, communities and other stakeholders.
- In every MSD programme, it's important to cultivate a culture of curiosity and problem solving. Given the persistence and discomfort often required to effectively get and analyse information in FCAS, developing this culture is even more critical.

## 7. What are the implications for international efforts to improve MEL?

As the MSD field pushes progressively into weaker and more fragile markets, it's important we develop lessons in MEL alongside lessons in implementation to ensure that programmes can be managed adaptively and effectively. This effort starts with raising greater awareness of the added importance of MEL in FCAS and the additional resources needed for effective MEL in these contexts. There are a number of other ways that the MSD community can support programmes working in FCAS to develop and manage a strong MEL function.

As more programmes working in FCAS use an MSD approach, they should share examples and experiences of MEL. The following are particularly needed.

- **Descriptions of monitoring business models** that start by explaining the intensive data collection to understand and provide information to adapt the model. Then, once the model is working effectively, documenting it clearly and choosing a lean set of data to monitor expansion and further adaptation.
- **Partner data sheets** that are simple enough to gather data from informal businesses in FCAS, while still providing sufficient data to understand their complex situation.
- **Descriptions of monitoring for different intervention types and contexts**, explaining details like sources of information, mix of methods, frequency of data gathering, triangulation and sample sizes.
- **Simplified impact assessment surveys**, including how the information was gathered, who gathered it and the questionnaire.
- **Ways to get information when access is limited**, particularly through remote mechanisms.

More exchanges among practitioners would also be useful to discuss how to address the management and technical challenges that arise in MEL in FCAS, such as:

- Approaches to bridge the physical gap between staff in the main office and staff in field offices particularly related to determining information needs, analysing incoming information and using findings to inform implementation.
- Effective approaches for senior managers to support MEL in FCAS.
- Benchmarks for resources required for MEL in FCAS.
- Ways to adapt and use technology to gather information in FCAS, particularly when access is restricted.
- Processes and tools for storing and analysing the extensive qualitative information needed in FCAS.
- Practical methods for monitoring market system resilience in FCAS.

International standards for MEL should take into consideration the challenges and requirements of programmes operating in FCAS. The principles and control points in the [DCED Standard for Results Measurement in Private Sector Development](#) are relevant to, and useful for MEL in FCAS. For example, as in other MSD programmes, an early draft results chain that sketches out the logic of an intervention is important in FCAS. The DCED Standard also recognises that programmes must be practical in their application of control points. For example, while it can be expected that programmes working in reasonably robust market systems develop a MEL plan within a few months of starting an intervention, it may make sense for a programme in a FCAS to delay the development of their MEL plan for the higher levels of a results chain, until after a business model is starting to operate effectively. Assessing attribution is equally important in FCAS as it is in other contexts. Developing an appropriate approach to assess attribution for an



intervention in FCAS requires particularly careful thinking to choose a valid method and apply in practically. More examples of how programmes in FCAS address the control points in the DCED Standard practically taking into consideration the constraints they face would support both programmes and the practical application of this standard more broadly.

Practitioners who straddle the humanitarian and MSD fields have noted that the humanitarian sector is better at sharing information than development programmes. Lessons can be drawn from the humanitarian sector to improve information sharing that could ease the burden of information gathering to some extent in FCAS. While there are considerable information needs that are programme specific, information platforms could make data available on specific contexts that are needed by multiple agencies working in the economic sphere in that context. Multilateral agencies, donors or other organisations could establish information sharing platforms on specific areas that would then be populated by programmes working in those areas and/or dedicated consultants hired by the platform owner.

Improvements in MEL among MSD programmes operating in FCAS will hasten progress in implementation and learning, enabling programmes to make a more effective contribution to the increasing challenges of self-reliance and sustainable economic opportunities for refugee, host and other disadvantaged populations.



*IAM Focus Group, Uganda*



## Annex A: List of Respondents



### SHARPE:

Paul Joicey, Team Leader  
Nandi Hall, Project Director  
Harald Bekkers, Senior Technical Advisor  
Anne Brady, Senior Programme Manager  
Muneeb Zulfiqar, Technical Advisor  
Bethелеhem Gelgelo Ayele, MEL Manager  
Mohamed Aden, Dollo Ado MEL Officer  
Jemberu Teka, Gambella MEL Officer  
Nur Adem, Jijiga MEL Officer  
Tihitena Habtamu, Senior Business Advisor  
Mesay Adugna, Senior Business Advisor  
Tsion Tesfu, Senior Business Advisor  
Opiew Olock, Gambella Hub Lead  
Abdullahi Ahmed, Jijiga Hub Lead  
Abdisalam Amin, Dollo Ado Business Advisor  
Nezif Yesuf, Gambella Business Advisor  
Aden Omer, Jijiga Business Advisor  
Nabanita Sen Bekkers, Researcher

### Other Respondents:

Collins Apuoyo, Team Leader, IAM and NU-TEC (previous)  
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David Okutu, Program Performance and Quality Director, Ethiopia, Mercy Corps  
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## Website

Ethiopia–Strengthening Host and  
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