



MARKETLINKS

MAINSTREAMING THE MINIMUM ECONOMIC RECOVERY STANDARDS FOR IMPROVED MARKET-BASED PROGRAMMING

PRESENTATION TRANSCRIPT

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Laura Meissner: Good morning or good afternoon, good evening. We are delighted to have you here with us for the webinar around mainstreaming the minimum economic recovery standards for improved market-based programming. I'm an economic recovery and market advisor working on contracts. The office mandate is to save lives, eliminate human suffering and reduce the social and economic impact of disasters worldwide. We have been supporting the minimum economic recovery standards for several years now as part of a wider effort to ensure high-quality economic recovery programming for those affected by crisis. We have an excellent slate of speakers today I'm delighted to present. We have Sonya Salanti with the SEEP network, Elle Lee, Karri Byrne.

Saad Barood: And I'm going to hand it over to Sonya Salanti now who will explain a little bit more about what the Minimum Economic Recovery Standards are. Thank you.

Sonya Salanti: Hello, everybody thank you, Laura, thank you to everyone for inviting us to participate in the webinar today I'm going to go over a brief overview of the MERS and talk about the importance of standards and then we'll dive into what it actual looks like to see MERS in practice. We'll talk about emerging the standards and then we'll also talk about what it looks like to mainstream MERS at the local level through peer networks. We'll wrap up with some lessons learned from our mainstreaming work and an opportunity for all of you to participate in a Q and A. Just briefly, I work with the SEEP network. I'm focused on resilient markets thematic area, and I manage two initiatives that support market based programming, one of them being the minimum economic recovery standards, which is what you will learn about today and the other one being the markets in crisis community of practice, an excellent way for folks to engage in shared learning around what's working and lessons learned around Market Based Programming, specifically in crisis impacted environments. The next speaker, Elle Lee, Seep and Ellen have worked together for three, four years now. She's a member of the division of resilience and solutions based in Geneva, she supports country operations. We also have Karri Byrne on the webinar today, Karri Byrne has over 25 years of experience in humanitarian and development settings overseeing large complex programs in some of the world's most challenging environments. She has been a core contributor to MERS for several years, ever since the inception. She's a true MERS champion and expert. Then finally, we have Saad Barood, he's been working in humanitarian and development sector for five years and is a partnership manager with a Syrian NGO in Turkey. They're looking at early recoveries and livelihood. He has background in the trade actor and translates that work into designing and implementing economic empowerment projects in Syria, micro finance is a part of his training. Saad was introduced to MERS through capacity building work that SEEP did around the MERS with the cash based working

group. Those are our speakers today and now I'm going to provide a very brief overview of MERS. I'm not going to be able to go into a ton of detail on each one of the standards. This is just so you have a basic understanding of what the standards are. We have plenty of supported resources around MERS and the handbook is available for download on Minimum Economic Recovery (standardshandbook.org). MERS has been developed over a 13-year period, kicked off in 2007 and we're in the third edition of the standards. The development of the standards was driven by the need to provide guidance to the SEER standards and focusing on the economic interventions and market systems. In fact, MERS is a member of several humanitarian standards that form the Humanitarian Standards Partnership, the name of that is to promote accountability and quality across the humanitarian programming and ensure that there are complements between the standards. The HSP standard, you see a graphic of each of the standards there on the right of the screen, they all have the same format. They intentionally cross reference between the standards so that guidance is grounded in each technical sector which includes child protection, education, livestock, inclusion for older people, people with disabilities, and market analysis. All these standards and specifically the MERS, they represent an industry consensus on best practices. The current edition of MERS was informed with input from 90 organizations and 175 practitioners and over the lifetime of the MERS standards they have been formed with the process taking place across countries, across disciplines and across context. The structure of the standards is formed through four basic components. One, there is the standards themselves, there is key actions, key indicators and guidance notes. The standards themselves are statements that articulate the minimum that should be done to assist in an economic crisis or a humanitarian crisis. Of course, you can always do more if you're able in any situation and it is also very true that you most likely will not be able to meet all the standards. They're really designed to illustrate what to aim for in programming but are not intended to be a how-to guide or a prescriptive, "do this and do that". Key actions, those are the things that may be done by practitioners to meet the standards. Indicators are the signals that show whether a standard has been met. Guidance notes are the nuances of applying standards in different situations and where they're discussed. There are six sets of standards, and there is a one pager that is handy, it has all of the standards listed out and you can carry that around with you, post it up in your cubical, wherever you may be working, it is very useful. The first two standards, of course, the core standards, the assessment, analysis standards, they're general in nature in that they're usually applied across any intervention and they're also present in all the other humanitarian standards. The next set of standards, the next four, the enterprise and market system development standards, asset distribution, financial services and employment standards, those are what we refer to as the technical

standards and they provide specific guidance in those technical areas. Let's dive in briefly to each one of those standards. The core standards are aligned with the core humanitarian standards and this is really looking at things through protection lens. At a minimum in economic recovery, this focuses on doing no harm and ensuring people's Right to life with dignity. That's with a market system lens. This is applicable across all phases of an intervention. The very minimum, you should be adhering to those four standards. The assessment and analysis standards, they are like the other companion standards regarding assessments and program monitoring. Again, these apply to a market system lens, it sets out what to consider when mapping and analyzing the economic market landscape. The innovation and market system it's development standards, that's where we really dig into the market systems approaches. These look systematically at markets and how to support and strengthen them. They can be used to guide programs that seek to grow or stabilize income, they're used to prevent market distortion, and to set up for longer term recovery, resilience and linking to development programming. The asset distribution standards provide guidance on market aware ways to distribute productive assets, those are things that people use to generate income or make a profit. These standards outline what to consider when protected, replacing, facilitating access to assets. This is a place where cash and vouchers are sort of dived into, although cash and vouchers are covered throughout the standards. The financial services standards look at considerations specifically related to the financial services ecosystem and financial service providers. They focus on how to effectively engage that sector. When designing financial service interventions, it is important not to replace the local institution products or in other ways cause harmful distortions in the financial services market. These standards help to avoid those situations. Finally, we have the employment standards, which focus on appropriate interventions that respond to the realities of the labor supply and demand in a crisis context. It also outlines the employment intervention should promote decent, safe working conditions, provision of living wages and that interventions should not undermine employment opportunities in the short or long term. I know that was a very quick, very brief overview of each set of the standards. There's so much more available to help you learn about the standards. Please visit MERShandbook.org. We have multiple translations of the standards available for download. There is a learning hub with micro learning videos about the MERS, there are recorded webinars about the MERS, we have several case studies available. We also have training materials available on request from folks that want to be able to train staff or learn more about MERS. Please visit there and there's an app that includes all the humanitarian standards that you can download on your phone and they're available in both online and offline environments. So now I'm just going to briefly talk about our mainstreaming work and then turn it over to our

other presenters. One of the problems we have found with uptake of the standards is that it really requires behavior change at an individual level and institutional level. It is one thing to hand people the MERS handbook, here is a great resource. It is another thing to support people to use it. With that problem in mind, we designed the mainstreaming approach. It has two pillars to it, one is mainstreaming from an organizational perspective, and then mainstreaming from a peer network perspective. What's had of what's this look like? The organizational level, mainstreaming takes place across an organization's operations. So, we would see MERS reflected in an organization's policies and standards of practice and operational guidance. We would make sure that there's staff in place at the organization that can serve as MERS champions and ambassadors and they have time in their work plan to be able to contribute to the MERS activities. We would want to see MERS reflected in the business development activities and the organizational strategies. MERS are referenced in proposals and you see them in long term strategic plans, that staff have opportunity for training, capacity building around MERS, and finally, that all these are activities are supported by financial resources or budget line items that can support the various components of the mainstreaming work. Then the other approach we have, it is mainstreaming with peer networks. So, this is more of a peer to peer social influence approach of mainstreaming. With this, we have performed outreach to crosscutting groups specifically focusing on humanitarian coordinating mechanisms, working groups, donor Committees, doing awareness raising around those groups. From that, we learned there are people that right away see the value and impact of MERS and they adopt the MERS and become MERS champions. They serve to promote up take of MERS internally with their organization and externally among their partners. This influence begins to spread and then through that we see increased application of MERS again being reflected in proposals in plans and organizational strategies. So, we're going to look at two examples of this. One with UNHCR at the organizational level and one at the peer to peer level. With that, I'm going to turn it over to Elle Lee from UNHCR.

Elle Lee:

Thank you, Sonja. Thank you to Marketlinks for having us be a part of this webinar so we can showcase our mainstreaming partnerships we have had with SEEP since 2018. Even before our formalized partnership began, I would say that UNHCR has had close contact with SEEP throughout the development and fine tuning of the MERS handbook throughout the various iterations. Then in 2018 we had the pleasure to embark on a formalized partnership to more actively mainstream the MERS throughout our organization and implementation of our activities. Then our mainstreaming partnership began with an opportunity assessment to see how best to mainstream the MERS with our colleagues in the field. This consisted of staff surveys and focus group discussions with colleagues

at headquarters, regional and field levels and then analysis of the results and following on from the assessment, findings showed that effective mainstreaming would result from integrating the MERS into both capacity building initiatives and policy and strategy guides. So from there, the SEEP network designed customized training and coaching plan for us which involved a formal in-person workshop for our regional livelihood officers, consisting of both coaching and technical support and then a virtual training course which launched in 2019 for up to 20 field colleagues. Our partnership has been continued. We are now looking into our third year of partnership in 2020. We continue activities involving recognition of our partnership across SEEP and communication platform following up on our action plans for mainstreaming and then a follow-on of activities again thinking about expanding activities that were begun in previous years such as the virtual course through our ongoing partnership. As one of the main pillars of our mainstreaming work, we have been able to integrate the MERS into our policies and standards of practice at hunk. Beginning in 2016 the MERS were used to inform and create an internal set of standards to support our field colleagues, to have the most impact in our economic recovery programs. And these internal standards were called the minimum criteria for livelihood programming. Every year we would assess field operations adherence to these standards to ensure that we were having the most impact. In 2018 as we had more of a strategic shift globally through the global compact on refugees, UNHCR was led to examine its role vis a vis other stakeholders and through this process we recognized that there's an existing set of industry best practice consensus standards through the MERS and it made more sense to point directly to the MERS instead of having our own internal guides. The MERS is directly referenced in our 2018 concept note for the 2019 through 2023 global strategy period, and this is accessible in the document that's shown on the screen called the Refugee Livelihood and Economic Inclusion Concept Build. Then another important pillar of our mainstreaming initiative has involved capacity building. As we all know, it is one thing to have a strategy or policy, and it is another thing to operationalize the standards. As mentioned, we first started off with a workshop for our regional livelihood officers, and this really served as a training of trainers because we also have in country, country level trainings and around 10 to 15 countries every year. This is an opportunity to convene around 30 UNHCR staff and partners in government, other development actors, humanitarian actors and sometimes even the private sector, UNHCH which means that the integration of the MERS in the trainings allows for 500 people to have access to the MERS every year. We have also had the opportunity to cohost MERS workshops with UNHCR offices in collaboration with the SEEP network and as mentioned, we have had the virtual training course for up to 20 field colleagues and we're hoping to expand that to a new cohort in 2020. Through virtual trainings, we have had the chance to develop

context specific case studies which some of the other presenters will be going into more in depth about. Then some of the mainstreaming initiatives, just talked about, through the capacity building and through the policy and strategy, development has led to really a community of UNHCR staff and partners that serve as MERS ambassadors at headquarters and country level. We're again hoping to expand some of the initiatives to grow this network of community of practice. Now I will be handing over to one of the trainers of our regional and virtual training workshop Karri Byrne who will speak about our partnership.

Karri Byrne:

Hello, everyone. I will again thank everybody for bringing us to where we are today. It is a fantastic journey I have to say. The number of people that have been engaged with MERS over the years has been wonderful. I'm just going to tell you a very small amount about the online course and how that went. Although it was an online course, we tried hard to make it very interactive and building the case study was kind of a piece of that. It is only through using the standards and applying them to your own experience that I believe people will start to fully understand what the standards have to offer. So as we went through the coursework, people were starting to use them and that built the number of questions that they had and as they started to look at what they would want to have for their own coursework most people found that there were about 10-12 standards that probably applied to their specific situation that they were looking at. For the case studies specifically, we asked them to focus on just two, maximum three, and then to build their stories around that. It meant that the case studies stayed more focused. When you read them, you'll only see them referring to 2-3 different standards. I just want you to understand how rich the dialogue was around the MERS and how much more there was behind those case studies that we're lucky enough to have some of the case study folks with us today. So that's fantastic. So, this case study for Chad is focused on a livelihood officer that's new in her position, she recognized the need for the monitoring systems, the MNE to be better aligned to meet livelihood objectives. The system as it stood when she arrived only captured the protection work and it didn't get any of the meaningful livelihood work, the impact of it. It also didn't capture that place where protection and livelihoods reinforce each other. The case study, it reflects on what she is learning in the class and her experience early on. She realized that early in the process she realized that planning was an issue as well. The case study looks at its kind of documents this progression she made as she familiarizes herself with the MERS standards, but also then tries to use them in her efforts with using them in her daily work to talk to her colleagues. It just gives us a nice if is a good read. It gives us this nice journey as she looks to the different issues in her new post. We have been in that position. And balances the concerns that her team was coming up with, her protection colleagues were coming up with, and she was

trying to understand as she was applying the MERS standards to her situation. Although this discussion was about livelihoods and protection, that's where the sticking point kind of was, I think most people can relate to a situation where your team, you know, your livelihood, markets team, it isn't working in harmony with other technical teams, whether they be protection, something else, they're left out because one side or the other may be left out because they feel somehow that they're different, that they set themselves apart. I think what this case study really talks about is that, and how it can lead to dysfunctional monitoring that then reinforces that separate and really doesn't help anyone. So it is a good story about how one woman started working with her team to make this situation better, but used the MERS to provide her guidance along the way. The key takeaways really are that good planning and good data are essential. I think we know that, but it provides a specific set of examples. The second point would be how the MERS helped her and the team find clarity on the objectives, which then helped them really focus on what needed monitoring, what specifically needed monitoring. Not just what data gathering could be done. I think we have all faced that situation too. Finally, I think another point that comes out of the case study is how the MERS provided a solid starting point for the conversation and kind of a pathway for that discussion so that the team could work together a little bit better and become more collaborative. That's a quick snippet on the first case study. I believe we have the links available or handouts available. I will let others manage that in the background for me. All right. The second case study, it was in Tindouf in Algeria. Another course participant was excited about the potential for using MERS in her work and she's with us here today, that's great! When she started looking at what she could do for the case studies she wanted to go into the field and gather data and write this great, deep piece of work. Honestly, thing of the course was that the planning season was coming up for UNHCR and at the end of the fiscal year and we were going to run out of time. We decided to decide; she's written up the key study, it is essentially her plan for doing all that work and she'll update us on how far she's gotten with it. I hope I haven't put you on the spot! I think what this does, it provides an example of how you can, yourself, make a plan for when you're going out to the field and doing focus groups, some other kinds of assessments, you can have an example of how to make sure that you are incorporating MERS in that work, in that field work that you do. Great to have an example. Again, just to remind you, the focus, the case study here, it focuses on two, three standards, but it is really clear when you read it that there are dozens of other standards that would also apply for her. We tried to keep it focused so that it is not overwhelming for the reader. There is really a lot there. So, the Tindouf case study, what I have done on this slide is highlight the three standards that she's going to be looking at if she goes out and does that work. The first one, it is just core standard 1, that humanitarian programs are market

aware. Her future work is expected to make youth businesses more viable; they want to have more granular data available. That's what they're going to be looking at. It will help to better identify potential market distortions and help develop the basis for improved monitoring so that they can respond to market changing conditions and that's how they're becoming respondent to core standard 1 and making their humanitarian programs more market aware. The second standard that's looked at in a case study, it is that efforts are coordinated to improve effectiveness. That's core standard 2. There are ongoing coordination efforts, all the usual kind of groups that we have for coordinating ourselves, but they realized that there was a need to increase transparency with the community and answer questions and clarify misconceptions. The work that's to be done in the future will be to help ensure that those activities are aimed at the right level, not just exclusively at one level, in this case, the producer level, but that they look at the market more holistically. The third standard that they're looking at, it is the economic and market systems development standard, number 2, and that implementing market systems analysis early and adopt frequently. That's the standard, implement market system analyses, early and adapt frequently. All my adaptive management friends out there are going yeah! What the case study talks about, it is a bit of their process to gather information, more information, better information on formal and informal markets including information on support services, private sector groups, policy environment, cultural norms, and other things that hadn't really been considered previously. Then they will share the results with the community and the livelihood working group. They're hoping that the vulnerability assessment can be done alongside and included and that they'll be able to use the results to avoid over indebtedness issues, particularly with the youth. That gives you a little window into what they're looking for or what the case studies can tell us about. The takeaways from the overall mainstreaming process and the course itself, the first take away, it is really that using the standards immediately, during the training, the training took place over a couple of months and so it was every two, three weeks we would have a class. It was essential that people then did their homework and came back. They came back, had new questions, because they were applying it along the way as they go. Particularly when it didn't go the way they wanted it, so they learned more and came back with better questions. That was great. Another mainstreaming takes away, it is that timing is critical. I mentioned that some people didn't get to write the kind of case study they wanted to because they were pressured by internal planning and budget conversations. If you're considering doing mainstreaming, try to the best of your ability to pick a time when people have slightly more bandwidth. I have to say that the field folks, they were fantastic at UNHCR, if they missed a course, they would go back, they listened to the recording, we had really high response rates on the homework

and they did great. Every week, we heard how pressured they felt. Don't do that to your folks. The third take away, around mainstreaming in general, it is that I think it is worth it in that course to include a mix of contexts and experience and seniority. Don't think it has to be your most junior staff. There was a real benefit to having not just one regional group kind of trial it, but a wide group in the course, that the senior folks would ask questions that came from their position and their wanting to understand how to best use and kind of monitor the use of MERS. The more junior folks, the folks that had newly come into development or emergency work, they had different questions, and I think everybody benefited from that mix. Those are my top three takeaways. If you're going to do a mainstreaming process, keep those kinds of things in mind. Now I'm handing over to Saad.

Saad Barood:

Hello, everyone. Thank you for attending this webinar. I especially thank the team for making this amazing event. I will start with what we are doing in MERS in Syrian program. First, I would like to give you a quick brief update on what Syria crisis looks like. We have a huge displacement from Syria into new borders of Turkey, we have around 3 million people living in non-state areas. You can imagine, those people are living in difficult settings, they're living in camps, off camps, and many humanitarian efforts are not working than in normal settings. In the last few months we have with this huge crisis we have seen a crisis, around 800,000 people are displaced because of the heightened attacks on civilians, markets, schools, hospitals and I think if you will just look it up, the news, things are not going easy. At the same time, there's been some aid, and that's where we come and say it is always better to give someone to teach someone to fish rather than feed them a fish. Let's focus on the markets. In that aspect, we just look at the markets and what kind of challenges we have in these markets. So, we're serving people inside Syria and Syrian refugees in Turkey. Inside Syria, markets have been disrupted. The supply, the continues supplies of aid has disabled the functioning market, many people are dependent on aid. The items being requested for aid is available, people are selling the aids that they're not using. Everything is everywhere. Raised dependency on aid. If we started a project on economic empowerment, giving the folks 1,000 to establish their job, they don't expect the NGO to come and run it of them, mainly they just consider the 1,000 as a gift provided to them. From donor's perspective, that was also a challenge that we come to them with economic empowerment ideas but they always there's always privatization for emergency relief projects. Dealing with the situation and area, I can understand that, but also there is stable areas where we need to focus on economic empowerment. Lastly, the business development services, the market development, different approaches that we need to learn about and to be honest, not everyone in the local NGOs has experience in those. Staff at all

levels are not familiar with the MSD approach, how we should empower the markets, what kind of approaches we have, what kind of actors we should focus on. That's been a challenge, and there's also lack of information, lack of assessments, lack of information, how we're going to approach it, this market, that market, this type of beneficiaries, what worked, what didn't work. We have lack of assessments in general. Lastly, in the lastly here, I can mention that when some donors, when some NGOs come, approach the receiver Yan case to implement economic empowerment, they usually come from successful experiences somewhere else, they have done things that have worked effectively in Afghanistan or Africa where the situation in Turkey is not the same, of course. I will speak briefly about our mistakes that we did in the economic empowerment programs before we have been introduced to the MERS. For example, in the photo, you see electrical generators. In a project we provided people who wanted to start a business with an electronic generator so that they can use it for their businesses. By asking many, a huge number of electronic generators, we provided a problem in the market, the prices went up, the normal businessmen were upset by our intervention, they said what we have is causing harm to the market and causing harm to the prices. This is happening also with other types of aid, there is always competition between the NGOs and the development local population on demanding one item. For example, also donors were not very satisfied with our design of the economic empowerment programs, and we did not have any kind of standards book, anything, come see this is how we're doing according to our standard. It is easy to convince them on a relief program because we have this feel, we have the INE, we have different kind of standards. For MERS, we didn't know about that at that time. More important, we were focusing on the beneficiaries themselves rather than focusing on the market-based approach which was a very important approach to create a very effective economic recovery. MERS and Sonya, the team, they came, they introduced the MERS, we learned from them and more importantly, they provided us with the Arabic version of the MERS. Everyone in our team, everyone in our response hub were aware of the MERS and now things have been changing. I will mention here the title of the MERS standard and some of the points that we have followed, and I will explain the effect of each one of them. Now we have another project of asset distribution asset distribution. In this photo we have seen a lady that we provide with sewing machine before we're going and distributing the sewing machine, we have done a market assessment, we have done a need assessment. We provided exact need to the exact person without disrupting the market. We have in consideration the need assessment and we have asked every lady could invest with us. We just provided part of the assets and asked them to provide the other part of the assets as well to make sure that they are looking to create a functional business. Those three things we have learned from the MERS. In

other program we have also distributed production assets and we have come back and checked the MERS and checked what we can benefit from the MERS to our program. We checked with the local markets, we checked with what we can do without affecting the normal farmers, we don't need the farmers that are benefiting from other programs to gain more advantage or leverage over the normal works. We did the assessment, we picked exact seeds we needed. In the photo, you can see the man holding a black tray, a black something. This is plastic trays which is called seeding trays. These are new technology to the seeding market. Those new technologies can enhance the farmer's production. To do so, we distribute items and conducted training with supervision from professionals to make sure that the farmers would benefit from those without disrupting the local farmers in the area. Those two examples have been providing us with more encouragement to come forward and do other examples in a local area, we created a saving groups from the local people. Instead of coming with a predesigned project, we asked them how you normally function. They said we normally come three, four people into one group, and we come and spend money from each one of us, we provide exact amount of money to say 1 hundred, 500, and then we create a co-owned business. In that project, we create different groups, group of women, group of farmers, we exactly know what the local norms, what the local customs being done, we did not reinvent the we'll or did not introduce something from we did not introduce a strange concept to the population. Lastly, in the direct and indirect strategies, other projects, we asked the population themselves to come and introduce themselves to the market rather than the NGO come and introduce the assistance. That created a better effect on the population, creating more ownership of the projects that we're implementing in the ground. I'm just trying to capture all the examples that we have been benefiting from the MERS very briefly. The MERS has been described to us as it is a guidance that prevents you from doing stupid things. I can see very clearly we have done a very, very normal mistakes, that's been done around the globe and very easily, when we have taken a look at the MERS because of its development in English and Arabic, we can improve we have the chance to improve our interventions. What we did, me and a colleague of mine conducted the training to our colleagues, we conducted two versions of the training, one in Arabic and one in English, around 40 participants from different organizations, local and international attended the training. It was done it was cofounded and coordinated with the center here. What I see now in the meetings of early recovery, whenever we come and discuss about economic recovery, I see everybody holding their MERS guides in their hands. Whenever we must discuss an intervention, they come, they look at the MERS. They just say according to the MERS, we should do 1, 2, 3, 4. The MERS has improved Bonyan's intervention on a personal level, on an organizational level. It has improved the early recovery cluster approach;

everyone not only is aware of the MERS and everybody is encouraged to use them. I believe that MERS has been mainstreamed by OCHA and the recent training that's being conducted here, it is about quality and accountability. The trainers, they handed a set of manuals to the trainees and MERS was one of them. They said please follow the MERS standards in your programming for the programming. I think we still have one step to take here from my point of view from South of Turkey, it is to approach more and more donors to be aware of the MERS that would improve the approaches from top, bottom, bottom, top point of views. Thank you very much. I hand to Sonya Salanti.

Sonya Salanti:

I want to thank you, Saad, also thank you Karrie and Eli for providing great examples of what mainstreaming looks like and how it manifests in different organizations across different contexts. I want to leave you here with a few takeaways to consider regardless of where you may be, whether you're on the donor side, implementer side, from the donor community perspective what are some things you can do? I think one of the first things as just mentioned, just building awareness of MERS within donor institutions. This is internally among your own staff, and then externally by providing training and professional development to your partners. I would say also think about how to integrate MERS into proposal requests. When you're designing RFPs, RFAs, include the MERS as standards that should be referred to in that proposal submission, then use them to review, evaluate the proposal. There is a way of program design, meeting quality, accountability criteria for economic recovery programming. Then you can use MERS to ensure program quality across portfolio program as a benchmarking tool to make sure that a full set of interventions are adhering to these program quality standards. That's from the donor side. From the humanitarian, development side, I did want to emphasize that MERS doesn't just apply in humanitarian settings, it is a useful tool for development practitioners similar to donors put it in proposal requests, I would say include the MERS, reference standards in proposal, include them in the implementation plans, and definitely use them as a monitoring, evaluation tool. You already have indicators written for you in the MERS. That's why they're designed that way. Again, you can use MERS to benchmark. Proving across the full portfolio if you have an economic development or economic recovery pillar in the strategy you can benchmark all the programs using the MERS and help to improve your long-term strategy. Then, as Saad illustrated, use this to advocate with donor, governments, multilateral partners, you know, illustrating here are the standards, here are the economic recovery standards that should be present in the interventions that are being designed and implemented. You know, hold the donors accountable to adhering to the standards and ensuring that grantees have access to and are applying the standards. Finally, I have mentioned a few times now, please go visit MERShandbook.org to learn more about the MERS

and learn about different training events we have coming up, soon to be announced, additional resources will be posted soon on the handbook, on that site and then if MERS is something you want to learn about, you think it could benefit the institution, I encourage you to reach out to SEEP and reach out to me, I'm happy to schedule a brief information session to talk more about MERS and figure out how it may be integrated into your programs. Yeah. Just want to complete this by saying stay tuned to our website. We'll be establishing several regional focal points that will provide light technical assistance and training and in many different countries and areas, and that information will be soon, and we'll also be scheduling several outreach and training events. Looking forward to sharing more information about that in a bit. With that, I think it is time for our Q and A which is going to be moderated by Laura. Looks like there is a lot of good questions!

Laura Meissner:

Yes! You have all been a terrific audience and participants have quite a lot of questions. We will get to what we can. If the questions, the answers, if they spawn additional questions from you participants, please feel free to put them in the chat box. Again, we will address what we can. I'm going to start just in terms of mainstreaming and using the minimum standards. There are quite several questions that I would categorize to use an American phrase about when the MERS rubber hits the real-world road. I will throw out quite a couple of these, and I think several of our speakers will be able to cover them. For example, we had one from Pam about for agencies who are working on more sort of sub assistance levels, small scale livelihood activities, does MERS cover both this as well as more sustainable job creation, market system development type of activities? Can MERS be used to help bridge the gaps between these two types of programming and are there any examples? I will share that one to Karri Byrne first and then we have more coming.

Karri Byrne:

Sure. Thank you, Laura. Pam, good question. I'm glad you asked it. The great thing about a set of standards is that and these are minimum standards, right, we certainly expect that businesses with higher levels of resources would hold themselves to even higher standards. Yes. The MERS are applicable to sub assistance levels, small businesses, just even livelihood activities. We really looked at it from a market systems lens and a system's perspective. They apply, absolutely, again, if you're looking at what the standards are, there's also a lot that relates to us. Remembering to implement market systems analysis early and adapt, that's a standard that's pointed at us, and that makes it easier for us to kind of do that interpretation in an analysis. When we are, I'm just looking at EMS standard 4, when we're working with existing market actors, and use the facilitation approach, that will look very different with small actors than it does with larger businesses. You still work with them in a facilitated approach rather

than a telling them what they're business should be, that kind of thing. I hope that answered your question.

Laura Meissner:

Thank you. There are also a few on Andrew Kline, Pam, you know, in many cases, where we're doing economic recovery programming, there are not clear laws and regulations about the economy and businesses, there's a quote we often work with business people, laws that don't exist, they're not working, not being applied, to any of the panelists have any thoughts about how MERS can offer some insights here or how your agencies have navigated sort of nebulous or unhelpful regulatory space? I'll leave that up to anyone.

Karri Byrne:

I'll go ahead, take that one too, Laura. I would say that the EMS standards 4 and 5 are probably the closest while policy isn't specifically, deeply covered in MERS, I think looking at the idea of standard 5, it is supporting the viability and growth of enterprises. And market systems, and of course, having good policies, laws in place that are also followed of as intended rather than kind of skirted around or ignored, that's about the viability of the market system and the viability of the businesses within it. I would say to that extent, that wider operating environment is considered, and, of course, again if things like the way we do our market system analysis, how much do we have to bring that in. The guidance notes, they're really providing great resource to everyone. I always encourage everybody to look at the guidance notes. The standards themselves are much bigger than the kind of one line that can be put in a tiny little box. They really cover some a couple of pages and have a lot of guidance on how to interpret them. I do when we say someone is standard compliant in an area, it refers to that larger piece as appropriate to their context.

Laura Meissner:

Thank you. I'm going to have this next question be focused for Saad and Nada, she's one of the folks featured in the case study we talked about earlier. There is a question around to what degree did the implementation of the standards create a fair playing field for women owned businesses and in what ways. We would love to hear insights around MERS and gender.

Saad Barood:

I can take this. To be honest, MERS is very comprehensive, and the guidelines clearly highlight the importance of looking at the gender issues when we design our programs. MERS did not per se say that there should be more gender items or more opportunities for women, but it has effectively driven our attention to that issue and in the first core standards, there is always the do no harm and there is always assessments we should look through the community and see what the community is like. For example, in Syria's case, there are a lot of women headed families, the women in the families, they're the breadwinners so he had should be involved with the economic programs. So, in that context, yes, the MERS has improved the women led businesses, but it is not because it has

encouraged us to do so, it has encouraged us to do the right thing to be done in the market.

Sonya Salanti:

I may add, taking this to the macro level, the third edition, they were designed with several crosscutting themes, one gender, the other, resilience, refugees reflecting on the current evolution of market system programming. So throughout the MERS, while there is not a standard specifically about gender, there are in the guidance notes and almost in every set of standards, there is some reference to consideration for special populations, women, people with disabilities, you know, younger people. Keep in mind the standards can't cover everything in depth, but wherever possible the standards do provide, you know, some contextual guidance around how to consider different populations.

Laura Meissner:

Thank you. Nada, did you want to add anything? I think she's having internet challenges. If you're able, you wish to share, that's wonderful, if not, that's understood. I will move on for the moment. Taking a step back from the populations that we work with, and looking more institutionally, there was a question I'm sorry, are you there. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be working. We'll try later. In terms of institutionality, there was a question for Ell, in terms of working with the regional livelihood officers, what percentage of them are local staff and have you found that this affected buy in and use of the MERS?

Elle Lee:

Thank you for the question and Laura for facilitating. We only have five regional livelihood officers covering three of the subregions in Africa, and then Europe and then the Americas. However, UNHCR has presence in over 130 countries globally in which we have livelihood focal points. I would say in terms of buy in, up take to the MERS, it doesn't matter so much if our staff are national or international. I would say it is quite mixed gender equality on the country if the livelihood is national or international. However, what does matter, it is the skill set or background that the staff has because UNHCR is primarily a had protective agency and many of our staff are lawyers or protection officers. Many of them don't have experience working on economic development programs, and I would say that that actually affects more whether they are willing to learn more about the MERS and apply it in the everyday settings and know how to apply it in the everyday settings. Of the 130 countries, I would say so UNHCR has staff in 130 countries around 15,000 staff, less than 1% have the skill set of economic development in their backgrounds. Yes. I think this may tell you a lot about UNHCR's role in the programs and they work with many partners in the field so that also speaks to our role in terms of convening and sharing the MERS, not only internally but externally as well.

Laura Meissner: I'll ask a follow up, you mentioned from moving from your own guidance, it was informed by MERS, more in the background, to having an explicit integration of MERS. Did you find that to be a challenge institutionally or was it a fairly easy process?

Elle Lee: Thank you for that question, Laura. To provide a bit more background on our internal standards, as I mentioned, they were called the minimum criteria. They were quite a condensed version of the MERS. I think many people internally saw them as simple identified and perhaps more easily accessible than the MERS, the MERS is longer, and it is a full-on handbook. The MERS is not necessarily meant to be read cover to cover. It is more of a guidance resource that can be referred to for specific situations. I think we found that it is helpful that the MERS represents industry consensus best practice standards and they are a companion. Many of our colleagues are familiar with this so it is helpful to draw the linkage. As mentioned, the capacity building initiative is crucial. It is one thing to just hand a set of standards to a field colleague and then it is really crucial to be able to explain who to actually apply them so the trainings we have had regionally and with our colleagues, but also with our partners has been so informative for our field colleagues.

Laura Meissner: Thank you. I have one more question sort of focused on the institutional side and then we'll pivot back to field realities. This can be for any presenter that works on implementation. The question, in terms of talking to donors, investors, have you noticed a change in terms of using the MERS for what they call telling the story, asking for funding, explaining the return on investment of livelihood and market-based programming? Maybe Saad, would you like to take this first? If others want to add in? 2001 this is an important question. The donor is always looking to make sure that the program being drafted and proposed to them follows the highest standard possible, highest standard possible. When we introduced the programs, we have been following the MERS standard, annual international standard, we feel that donors are more flexible, feel more confident that the program is well designed. Without this, they must come back and say from my previous experience, from my previous projects somewhere else, and that will lead us eventually into covering some other programs that are being implemented somewhere else. Yes, the MERS has helped us into bringing more solid arguments into the table, but this has been working sometimes and sometimes it didn't work, which is most of the times. Thank you.

Laura Meissner: Turning back to field realities. There's a question and perhaps Karri Byrne would like to take this one. Corruption, unfair market scenarios are unfortunately common in places where we work. Are there thoughts on best practices,

highlighted by the MERS for screening for such things and potential private sector partners and for minimizing these types of risks?

Karri Byrne:

Thank you. That's a hard one! It is not correction is not addressed directly. It is it is addressed more as you are trying to implement. You will see it more in the four technical standards. What's transparency look like if we're doing things well in financial services, in employment standards, in asset distributions. I would say too, where it probably comes out the most, asset distribution and financial services standards. It is in there, but it is almost like the question is flipped because it is talking about how to improve transparency and improve operations because it often is one of the side benefits of getting rid of corruption, you actually work more efficiently. I would say that's probably how MERS best handles that. The guidance notes, again, I spoke about them before. Saad will remember from when I was in Turkey with his group, I must tell you, read the guidance notes, read the guidance notes. That's where really some good, rich information is and there are good examples in there as well. Positive and negative. I have been pleased that people are willing to share their negative experiences. We can learn so much more from what we want to avoid. Sometimes we feel that positive examples are great, but I could never do that. There's a lot in there to be thumbed through.

Laura Meissner:

I have another question in terms of working with refugees, perhaps this could be for Saad or others. Regarding refugees, are trainer, implementers of economic recovery programs and the MERS trained to address cultural differences and possible tensions in the refugee communities and how can agencies follow up to monitor for ensuring effectiveness and sensitivity around these issues. 2001 thank you. I guess based on the question itself, we can highlight the issue that working with the market should be an inclusive issue. To be inclusive we have to have trainers from other communities as well, not just for the sensitive issue but for the refugees, they're aliens to the area, they don't know the markets, they don't know how the markets are functioning and they don't know how the markets would respond to their products, to their ideas. Having this group of trainers from refugees and housing communities working together in providing the trainings would benefit the market, the design from market perspective and also having the host community trainers in the group would enable them to alert the refugees about any sensitive issue and make sure that they're highlighted and they are avoided as well. Thank you. I'll address my next question I think to Sonja, if others wish to chime in, please do. How can economic recovery actors best navigate government engagement in markets? Particularly in crisis areas where this might be a sensitive issue, and how can MERS perhaps help here?

Sonya Salanti:

That's a good question. I appreciate it. I think one of the things that's crucial is even before a crisis, be in a fragile environment that advocacy with government institutions is incredibly important and advocacy specifically around the use, awareness raising of MERS with government the partners is important I would say as we keep saying, you can't just hand standards over to any institution and expect that they'll be able to use it but by working with governments ahead of time, implementers that had partnerships with government, engaging with different government entities or programs and the donors that are also working with governments, I think it is important that they use MERS as a way for governments to N.D.P. that this is a form of accountability to effective populations, accountability to the donor agencies that are providing funding to support people in times of crisis and accountability for implementers to make sure that there is quality programming. It can start small. Some of these capacity building initiatives, that.

Saad Barood:

Has mentioned, for example, a cluster training, they're working with donors, you know, awareness raising with the government partners and introducing them to the MERS and then constant follow up, it is also important. It is a long-term process, getting back to the behavior changing notion, what standards are doing essentially is asking individuals and whole systems to do things differently. That requires a lot of follow up and engagement with partners across the spectrum, from governments, down to even the local community-based NGOs.

Laura Meissner:

There is additional questions, Sonja and we'll stay with you. If others have insights, please share. Have there been outreach to the World Bank, international finance corporation or other institutions on using the MERS given that editorial review groups like these tend to drive economic programming at the macro level.

Sonya Salanti:

That's a good question. We have done a lot of work around especially when doing training or activities at the country level, we find that it is easier to get hold of folks at the World Bank or ISC or some broad, global institutions with staff at the country level. We have had a few discussions with representatives in Lebanon, a few discussions in Ahmen, we're in a position of working with them slowly over time to continue to provide us, you know, awareness raising around the MERS. It is something that we could be doing more of. Again, working peer to peer level, it helps with multilateral partners and some of the large NGOs with connections to sort of finding that right person to take an interest and become a champion. Then often from one person, a country level office that works with the group, we can get information out to the much larger institution. That's a good question. Thank you for that.

Laura Meissner:

Does anyone else have anything else to add to that one?

Elle Lee:

A lot of the MERS up take, spreading, it is related to partnerships and inviting partners to be a part of some of the capacity building initiatives. As mentioned during the presentation, UNHCR normally conducts in country trainings in up to 15 countries every year and we always invite our partners, we realize that we're not working towards refugee inclusion alone and it is multistakeholder initiative and requires multistakeholder engagement. To many of the trainings we're inviting governments, be but also other multinational organizations and sometimes even private sector actors.

Laura Meissner:

Thank you very much. I think we have time for maybe two more questions. I have one from Patricia, she was asking about referencing standards around inclusivity. It is does MERS require that the design and implementation of programs consider different levels of household poverty within target locations. Maybe Karri Byrne, Saad, you could both address sort of anxious, where is inclusion under the MERS and B, Saad, in terms of how you use MERS to design and what MERS is and is not.

Karri Byrne:

Sure. Thank you, Laura. Inclusion comes up in the core standard 1. It is part of that idea of being market aware, it is understanding, it is referenced in the guidance notes for core standard 1. It will not be a surprise to anyone, that it comes up a bit, then also in the financial services standard as financial inclusion, it is so directly related to the work that we do. I forgot the first part of the question and the other thing I was going to say. MERS doesn't require already knowing different household poverty levels. The MERS overall really try to help people work with where they are. If you're a big sophisticated international NG, o with lots of country offices, more of the standards should be met by you. If you're a small local organization that doesn't mean that you can't still meet lots of the standards, but they will be met in a different way, in a at a different level. I'm sure Saad has great examples and something to add there.

Saad Barood:

Thank you. Exactly. Exactly, what has been mentioned over and over, so the MERS has a lot of guidance notes. Those are really, much valuable. If you are thinking about program design per se, and I work in relief for a lot of time. In the other kind of standards, like we have this much calories for food basket, this much of water liters per person, per day. MERS is not like this. MERS is not a design for projects, it is a guidance note, it should be according to the program that the NGO is developing, but the guidance note just guides you to make a very solid programming, a very solid programming, to prevent us from creating from are creating gaps or forgetting about something very important that we are not looking. It is pointing us in the right direction rather than handing us the project design to be implemented from different context. Also, in the MERS,

there are always case studies, experiences explained. These are insightful for anyone who's trying to use the MERS.

Laura Meissner:

Thank you. The last question unfortunately for today. There was a couple of questions, including from Stephen, others, wondering if there have been assessments, evaluations on the impact of the use of MERS, be it at the institutional level, sector level, looking at impacts on target populations? I can take that one. There was an evaluation of SEEP's project of managing updating and expanding MERS, I think it was back at 2015 and you can search for that on the deck, deck.us. A.gov, I can try and I'll work with that the looks like, I don't have a link right now but perhaps we can post it to the page afterwards although that, however, looked more at the implementation of the project and how institutions using them are solving the standards. I don't think it went as far as what is the value added to populations on the ground of having programming that's been forwarded informed by the minimum standards than perhaps by the facts. I think that's a fascinating topic and if others are aware of this, have done this in their own projects, certainly please feel free to share. With that, looking at the time, it is unfortunately time for us to wrap up. I want to give a very big thank you to our presenters, to all of them, a very big thank you to the whole team at Marketlinks for making this happen, including our captioner, Kelly, thank you to you, our participants for listening and asking such wonderful questions and finally, I would like to let you know how you can go from here. You will notice there are some exit poll questions up on the screen. Feel free to share those. You can also click on any of the web links, trying to include quite a few resources but you should find those useful. This webinar, as we said, it is being recorded and it will be shared both as a video recording and with the transcript, you can keep an eye on the market link website for that and also for future work from Marketlinks, next month, March, Blended Finance Month, and there is SLS, a webinar on that coming up on March 26th. So please do stay engaged in the Marketlinks community and in the markets in crisis communities of practice if you are not already and thank you. Have a wonderful rest of your day. Goodbye.