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Multi-purpose cash assistance for Lebanese

Inter-agency Joint Learning Event Learning Brief

July 2023 ■ ■





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On June 27th 2023, Mercy Corps co-organized with Acted, Concern and Oxfam a learning event on the implementation of Multipurpose Cash Assistance (MPCA) interventions for Lebanese. While the MPCA modality has been initiated and designed around the assistance to refugees, the provision of unconditional cash assistance for Lebanese is a recent development in the country. This requires an adaptation of implementation modalities and warrants the need to share learning across agencies and to identify possible strategies moving forward.

Mercy Corps extended the invitation to all agencies implementing MPCA for Lebanese through the Lebanese Humanitarian INGO Forum (LHIF). The attendance was composed of field teams, Monitoring and Evaluation teams, technical advisors and senior program / management representatives.

The event was not meant to create a parallel fora, but rather to feed into existing ones (e.g. Food Security and Agriculture Sector Working Group, Basic Assistance Working Group, Cash Working Group) and consolidate learnings. The outcome of the event is a comprehensive internal lessons learned document that will be shared among the participating agencies as well as this brief with key recommendations for external audiences.

Learning Brief • July 2023

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Key Takeaways

1. Cash assistance modalities and operational aspects

All agencies presented their respective MPCA programs and shared challenges and best practices in relation to the implementation modalities and operational aspects of providing assistance to Lebanese households. Outlined below is a summary of the operational key takeaways and recommended best practices of the agencies.

1.1. Community engagement

Key discussion points

- Insufficient sector guidance on needs-based selection was identified as a challenge.
- All agencies encountered difficulties in familiarising the community with the door-to-door process and in aligning internationally accepted criteria with the community's own perception of vulnerability.
- Reaching the most vulnerable in rural areas poses challenges due to limited feasibility of door-to-door visits. These individuals often face significant social marginalisation, necessitating agencies to diversify selection and community engagement approaches to also include municipal referrals, NGO referrals, and community meetings.
- Municipalities have made attempts to interfere in the selection process and exert bias, a situation that was additionally aggravated by the timing of municipal elections (prior to their postponement).
- In a country as connected as Lebanon, individuals readily express their frustrations on social media, thereby giving rise to additional challenges concerning acceptance, security, reputation, and more.



Best practices

- Engaging local Social Development Centers (SDCs), Mayors, Mokhtars and other community leaders proved overall beneficial for outreach.
- Upon project approval, organising an information session to engage the community, provide guidance on self-referrals, and address questions.
- Considering the establishment of a community committee as part of the verification process, to minimise exclusion & inclusion errors. Ensure that the committees are inclusive of all categories of the population (women, elderly, persons with disability).
- Conducting a robust needs assessment and continuously reassessing, verifying, de-duplicating, and refining data as necessary.
- Establishing referrals to local stakeholders & aid actors can allow for a more integrated approach, but it is crucial to clarify that referrals do not guarantee the delivery of the services, nor an assurance of quality of the services delivered. In addition, referrals are not always possible in some remote areas where aid actors are less present.
- When implementing community feedback mechanisms, organisations should inquire about the community's preferred communication method at the outset.
- Ensuring sufficient capacity to address grievances in a timely and efficient manner, as MPCA often generates high expectations and frustrations, particularly at the selection stage.

1.2. Determination of transfer value

Key discussion points

- The absence of coordination and sector recommendations regarding the transfer value and the percentage of the SMEB to be transferred to Lebanese households was identified as a significant challenge.



Best practices

- Coordination with INGOs regarding transfer values for similar projects was pursued. When feasible and within budget constraints, INGOs aligned the transfer value with the existing national support system.
- The Food Security and Agriculture Sector (FSAS) and the Basic Assistance Working Groups (BAWG) are collaborating on a report that compares SMEB values for Lebanese and refugee populations, which could provide guidance to NGOs in determining transfer values for future programs.
- The adoption of a dollarisation approach for MPCA programs and the use of USD for the calculation of the SMEB/MEB costs, along with the calculations in LBP, was crucial to reduce discrepancies and mitigate transfer value loss.
- Whenever possible, adjustments to increase the transfer value were made prior to the first transfer, considering the increase of the SMEB value.

1.3. Working with Financial Service Providers

Key discussion points

- Practical issues may arise such as a shortage of USD liquidity and limited availability of small bills at points of sale (PoS).
- FSP's PoS distance to households varies based on the provider, hence making this an important distinction in selection of viable options in light of the current transportation costs.
- Establishing a mutual agreement with the FSP on the necessary documentation needs, including for non-holder of Lebanese IDs, is important. Exploring different options, such as prepaid cards or proxy arrangements, can accommodate individuals without valid documentation, including protection cases.
- There is a wide spectrum of donor requirements and demands of FSP regarding vetting, with some requiring full vetting of all beneficiaries, while others stating that screening / vetting contradicts humanitarian principles.



Best practices

- Notify the FSP in advance to ensure they can arrange for an adequate supply of small bills at specific points of sale, as well as inform beneficiaries about the best timing to withdraw the assistance, and about their right to refuse receiving cash in LBP.
- Collaborate with the FSP to ensure their staff are well trained (including on Code of Conduct) and that beneficiaries are not requested to pay any transfer fees as these are covered by the program.
- Address all complaints from beneficiaries regarding the FSP in a timely manner and ensure a zero tolerance policy on any form of misconduct, while ensuring the confidentiality of the beneficiaries.

2. Alignment and coordination efforts

Coordination efforts in MPCA programming have encountered significant challenges due to fragmented coordination mechanisms, the absence of an operational cash working group (CWG) for an extended period, and the current limitations around membership of INGOs implementing MPCA from the existing CWG.

2.1. Coordination with local authorities

- Conducting a comprehensive stakeholder mapping of the intervention area is crucial to identify actors that need to be involved at different stages of programming - including referral pathways for Lebanese - thereby ensuring acceptance and support.
- Ensuring early engagement with local authorities and communities is essential, emphasising on upholding humanitarian principles. Clear explanations must be provided to all stakeholders, outlining the assessment process, and underscoring that selection is driven by needs rather than status.
- Fostering coordination with local authorities is important to guarantee the safety and security of both beneficiaries and field teams throughout the assessment and Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM) process.



- Some agencies have encountered difficulties when working with some authorities that attempted to impose their own beneficiary lists. NGOs must be prepared to withdraw from an area if sustained political pressure hinders the establishment of a fair and transparent process aligned with humanitarian principles.

2.2. Coordination with national authorities and social protection schemes

Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) / National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP)

- Delays, lack of clarity regarding the focal point, and inadequate internal communication among MoSA staff have hindered the coordination process. Different focal points requesting varying data for the same activity have caused confusion and inefficiencies.
- The process of obtaining a signed Memorandum of Understanding or a Data Sharing Agreement with the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) takes several months, which does not align with program timelines.
- Concerns have been raised regarding the clarity and reliability of the data provided by MoSA, as numerous beneficiaries who were on MoSA's lists reported never receiving NPTP assistance.
- Lack of community knowledge about accessing or registering for NPTP support, along with delays in response to registrations, highlights the need for official confirmation of registration status.

Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN)

- Deduplicating beneficiaries' lists with the ESSN has not been possible thus far.



2.3 - Coordination with the humanitarian architecture

- The current working group approach (Basic Assistance, Food security, Shelter... WG) leads to a very complex and fragmented approach to cash programming, making it impossible to have a holistic analysis of cash modalities and their cohesion and complementarity for the Lebanese caseload.
- The current structure and composition of the recently revived cash working group does lack the necessary provisions for meaningful engagement of MPCA actors.
- The existing fora does not provide a dedicated space to discuss MPCA for Lebanese households, despite the importance of integrating this discussion within the existing coordination mechanisms.



Recommendations

For Lebanese authorities

- Establish a strong and transparent deduplication system encompassing all MoSA cash disbursements including NPTP and the National Disability Allowance (NDA), which requires strengthening the data management capacity at governmental level.
- Review the design and inclusiveness of the ESSN registration system to ensure it is accessible to everyone. Community feedback indicates that information regarding ESSN and how to register is lacking among vulnerable households. .
- (I)NGOs can play a crucial role in identifying vulnerable Lebanese individuals and households who are unable to access ESSN support (either due to registration issues or lack of response/assistance) and in supporting them to register.
- Reopen the ESSN registration and establish a transparent and efficient referral pathway from NGO assistance to the national system.
- Strengthen the role of SDCs to enable them to work directly with INGOs on outreach, deduplication process and beneficiary verification, with a goal of eventual handover to SDCs in due time.

For the Cash Working Group (CWG)

- Expand NGO participation beyond the working group co-chairs, creating an inclusive environment for discussions focused on MPCA for Lebanese households.
- In coordination with MoSA, lead on deduplication efforts that guarantees beneficiary data protection.
- Promote harmonisation of targeting approaches and transfer values across programs.
- Monitor transfer values and household purchasing power to inform overall aid effectiveness.



- Provide comprehensive guidelines and tools, taking on a more prominent role in coordinating various interventions and identifying gaps.
- Mitigate fragmentation of cash assistance across different sectors/working groups by encouraging greater harmonisation across cash-components of sector-specific programming.
- Negotiate preferential rates with FSPs for humanitarian actors.

For donors

- Commit development funding to facilitate graduation and exit strategies from cash assistance.
- Influence coordination actors to improve coordination systems, harmonise transfer values and develop deduplication systems.

For NGOs

- Design interventions with an exit strategy in mind, aiming for sustainable solutions.
- Align interventions with national systems at all levels (SDCs, MoSA, ESSN) and contribute to their strengthening.
- Reinforce their referral mechanisms for effective cash plus (protection, livelihoods) programming.
- Prepare joint scenario planning and training sessions with FSPs to ensure all parties are aware of roles and responsibilities throughout the payment delivery cycle.
- Codify data exchanges within contract / Statement of Work (SOW) to ensure both data accuracy and data privacy.
- Coordinate / integrate FSP grievance channels (e.g. hotline, in-store representatives) with the MPCA programme to ensure all cases are referred back to implementing agency and dealt with accordingly
- Exchange lessons learned and best practices.



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

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