

JUST CAUSE IMPACT MEASUREMENT CASE STUDY SERIES

Mercy Relief, Seaweeds For Life

Introduction

In this case study, we summarise the impact measurement approach of the Seaweeds for Life (SFL) project, a sustainable development programme in the Philippines carried out by Mercy Relief (MR) in partnership with local NGO, STPRC during 2016-17.

What stands out in particular about Mercy Relief's approach is that they used Theory of Change workshops with their partner NGO as well as the beneficiary community to help articulate and refine their target outcomes. They also commissioned an external evaluation to provide an additional third-party assessment of the project.

About Mercy Relief

Established in 2003, Mercy Relief is Singapore's leading independent disaster relief agency. They work with local NGOs across Asia to carry out disaster relief as well as longer-term sustainable development work. Their projects over the past five years have covered a range of sectors including water and sanitation, shelter, sustainable livelihoods, healthcare and education. As of 2017, MR had responded to over 63 human disasters and implemented more than 50 sustainable development initiatives.

About Seaweeds For Life

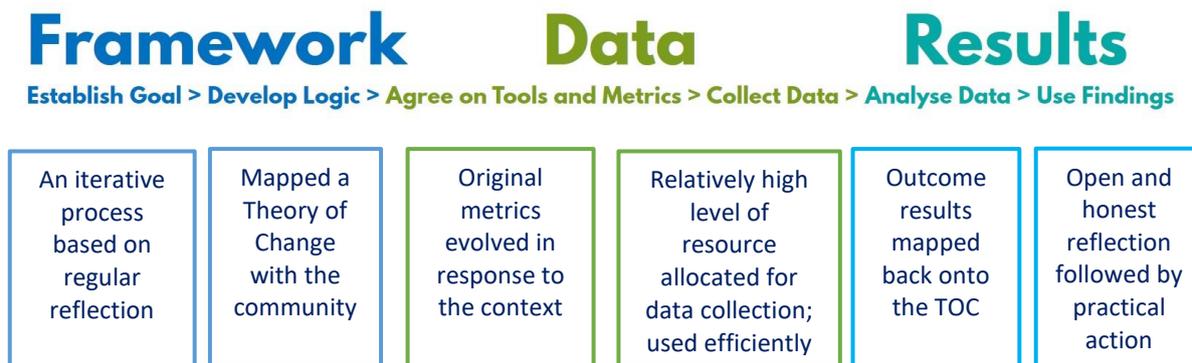
The SFL project started in January 2016 in three coastal communities in Palawan, Philippines, which had suffered significant damage from Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in 2013. In the years immediately following the typhoon, MR had worked with local partner NGO, STPRC to provide shelter and other immediate relief for the local communities. The SFL project in 2016 was a continuation of that support, focused on rebuilding and strengthening livelihoods and resilience to future disasters. The project was originally designed to last for 12 months from January - December 2016, focusing on three areas:

1. Support for seaweed farming (technical training; establishing community-run seedling nurseries; and one-off provision of seaweed farming materials such as ropes and seedlings).
2. Developing community-based enterprises (training and support for groups of community members to establish collective buying and selling schemes).
3. Establishing community-based savings groups (training and support for community members to form savings groups that empower people to save small amounts and also provide access to low-interest loans).

At the end of the initial 12 months of the project, there was still budget remaining and so MR agreed with STPRC to extend the project for a further period in 2017.

How did SFL measure its impact?

The diagram below shows a summary of the key steps in SFL’s impact measurement process.



STEP ONE - Establishing impact goals: An iterative process based on regular reflection

The goals of the project were around helping local households to improve their financial situation and, more broadly, around increasing the three target communities’ overall levels of disaster resilience.

These goals emerged as a natural evolution from the disaster relief work that MR had been supporting in the target communities over the previous two years. Initially, MR had sought to provide emergency relief to those affected by the typhoon – then once the emergency phase was over, the next step was to look at more sustainable, long-term development.

As the SFL project was implemented, MR and its local partner continued to review and reflect on the project’s goals through regular monitoring visits (around every two months, with a more formal review half way through the year). Through this process of regular reflection, they were able to refine their goals in response to lessons learned and the practical situation on the ground. For example, they realised that the project would struggle to succeed in one of the three target communities which was particularly difficult to access and where the community dynamics were not suitable for the project design. And so MR decided to drop that particular community from the project and instead to re-focus efforts on the other two target communities.

Over the course of the project, it also became clear that the end-goal of increased “resilience” was open to many different interpretations. The team realised that they needed a clearer, shared understanding of this broad term and exactly what aspects of “resilience” should be their priority. Following the external evaluation in February/March 2017, MR decided to develop its own “resilience framework” which would be based on international definitions and best practice and could be used to further clarify this goal and prioritise needs for future MR projects.

STEP TWO - Developing the impact logic: MR worked with its partner and the community to develop (and later re-visit) a Theory of Change

Theory of Change (TOC) is a process of mapping out a programme’s activities and how they relate to short and longer-term intended change (“outcomes”). It is usually carried out through one or more stakeholder workshops, ideally involving a range of programme staff, partners and also beneficiaries to produce a shared blueprint for a programme’s intended impact. The result of the workshops tends to be a diagram and accompanying text to explain the assumptions and evidence for why the group

believes that the programme's activities will indeed lead to the intended outcomes. TOC is widely used by many non-profit organisations, especially in the international development sector, where evaluation tends to be relatively well resourced and stakeholder participation is commonly promoted as best practice.

In 2016, MR has started to introduce TOC for all of its projects. For SFL, the MR team carried out a workshop at the start of the project with their local partner to map out the TOC. This mapping exercise helped to refine and clarify the project's target outcomes and to show how different areas of activity linked to each other and combined to produce shared outcomes. For example, the technical support for seaweed farmers and the establishment of community savings groups were two separate areas of work, but they both combined to help families improve their financial situation.

“Impact is a big word, it sounds daunting. Instead think of it as measuring the change you make”

Following the end-year evaluation in February 2017, the MR team then re-visited the TOC and conducted a half day workshop with the communities themselves. This played a critical role in informing an updated set of priorities for the project in the year two extension. During the TOC workshop, participants were split into three groups and MR facilitated a “Dream Mapping” exercise, asking the participants to brainstorm their vision of long-term success for the project. Participants mapped out what they wanted to achieve and how they were going to achieve it.

MR's team were initially concerned that the community members may find the TOC process confusing or tedious, but in fact the response was very positive. The exercise was successful not only in providing a well-informed blueprint for the second phase of the project, but also in helping to empower community members for the longer term. MR was able to build on the momentum of the workshop to provide further leadership training and to inspire individual community members to take the lead for each key area of the blueprint.

“Theory of Change is not just a few steps to be followed, simply to justify a programme. Instead, it is a process of thinking and reflection”

SFL's Theory of Change as mapped by beneficiary community members

THEORY OF CHANGE: RESILIENT COMMUNITY						
	ACTIVITIES		OUTCOMES		VISION OF SUCCESS	
SEAWEEDS	Training on seaweeds processing and materials for seaweeds product development	→	Increase knowledge on seaweeds products manufacturing	→	Different sources of income from seaweeds products (noodles, gelatin, soap)	
	Sufficient planting materials for seaweeds farmers	→	Increase in number of members planting seaweeds ; faster and more frequent buying rate of seaweeds	→	Creation of alternative sources of income	
	Encourage more members to plant seaweeds	→	Dream of increase in seaweeds production so that they can reach 15 tons of consolidated dried seaweeds for Marupo and Balabac			
	Loan seaweeds seedlings to savings co-savers	→	Increase in number of farmers selling dried seaweeds to the organization	→	(Dreams of) increase in seaweeds production so that they can reach 15 tons of consolidated dried seaweeds from Marupo and Balabac	
	Talk to seaweeds farmers from other barangay and encourage them to sell to the organization	→	Increase in number of farmers selling dried seaweeds to the organization			
	Establish seaweeds buying station in Marupo	→	Lesser expense on transportation cost when selling seaweeds ; Easier access of money for basic needs because selling seaweeds is nearer to the farmers	→	Increase in savings	→
	Attend trainings on seaweeds planting	→	Increase in volume of seaweeds harvested; Better quality of seaweeds harvested	→	Better buying price for dried seaweeds	
ENTERPRISES	Capital sharing of every member	→	Increased access to capital	→	Different sources of income such as gasoline, poultry supply, hog raising, etc for every member	
	Training on different business processes such as accounting, pricing, financial management, etc.	→	Increase knowledge on running an enterprise such as accounting, piggy, financial management, etc.			
	Training on hog raising, vegetable planting, snacks cooking and selling, alternative fishing	→	Able to establish stronger organization	→	Stronger enterprise being managed by the organization ; Able to establish consolidation and processing of different products by the community such as cashew, seaweeds, etc. ; organization has its own boat for transportation of products	
	Training on leaders and members on topics such as trust, conflict management, dialogue, organization management, etc.	→	Able to establish camaraderie and strong bond among organization members ; able to develop trust within each member			
	Training and review of policies such as: 1) limiting enterprises loan 2) enterprise management (no one volunteers to buy feeds stock) 3) Transparency and clear finance	→	Higher capacity to meet daily needs	→	Lesser dependency and reliance on outside loan / loan	→
	Establish savings groups and rigidly implement its policies	→	Easy access of money within the community especially at the time mostly needed	→	Every member has sustainable source of income to ensure savings such as: - hog raising -cooking and selling of snacks -vegetable planting	
	Trainings on livelihoods and enterprise development	→	Increase knowledge on business and enterprise	→	Increase in savings share to increase savings	→
Give orientation and trainings to members	→	More strict and rigid implement of savings policies and systems	→	Encourage more community members to join savings groups. (Our goal is to get almost everybody in Balisungan have savings so that they can get out of poverty)		
SAVINGS	Trainings on new members	→	Spread / replicate savings : (More savings groups)	→	More community members know how to save	→
	Training on new officers / management team who are managing the group	→	Increase knowledge for savings officers	→	Better management of every savings group	
					→	Higher and sufficient income ; increase assets of every HHs
						Communities in Cabugao, Lajala and Tagumpay become more resilient to future disasters through enhanced economic resilience and better disaster preparedness

Note: This version of the TOC was developed in February 2017 following the external evaluation – it is an iteration of the original TOC mapped at the start of the project.

STEP THREE - Agreeing tools and metrics: The team's original plan set out a detailed list of output and outcome metrics for tracking, but over time these evolved to match the context

At the start of the project, MR agreed with its local partner a comprehensive set of outputs and outcome indicators for the partner to track and report on. However, in reality the local partner was unable to keep up with the detailed and regular reporting specified in the original plan. Some of the project's priorities also changed, meaning that the original indicators were not necessarily the most relevant over time. As a result, MR adopted a more flexible and pragmatic approach, collecting fewer indicators overall, with less of an emphasis on quantitative results.

“Evaluation is a way of thinking; tools are just a by-product”

The external evaluation was commissioned at the end of the project's first year, requiring the evaluator to develop an appropriate set of tools and metrics retrospectively. Due to practical constraints, the evaluator was unable to carry out any quantitative data collection (e.g. a survey of beneficiaries). Instead, the evaluator relied on an intensive three days of focus group discussions and one-to-one interviews with beneficiaries and other stakeholders. The interviews and focus groups were loosely structured around the project's TOC, exploring stakeholders' perceptions of what had changed in their lives as a result of the project in relation to each of the main areas of the TOC. The

evaluator also asked open-ended questions to explore any unintended changes (positive or negative) that the project may also have generated.

STEP FOUR - Collecting data: Fairly high level of resource allocated, stretched as far as possible

For SFL, the task of collecting impact data was split across three main parties:

1. The local NGO staff who implemented the project on a day-to-day basis. These staff monitored outputs throughout the course of the project and carried out face to face interviews with each beneficiary towards the end of the first year (as described above).
2. MR's staff who visited the project every two to three months. These staff spent significant time engaging with the communities and collecting informal feedback, stories and observations. They used to build a nuanced picture of how the project was progressing
3. The external evaluator who visited the project at the end of the first year. As described above, in order to manage the budget and scope of the evaluation, the evaluator collected data through a three-day field visit, supplemented by a document review.

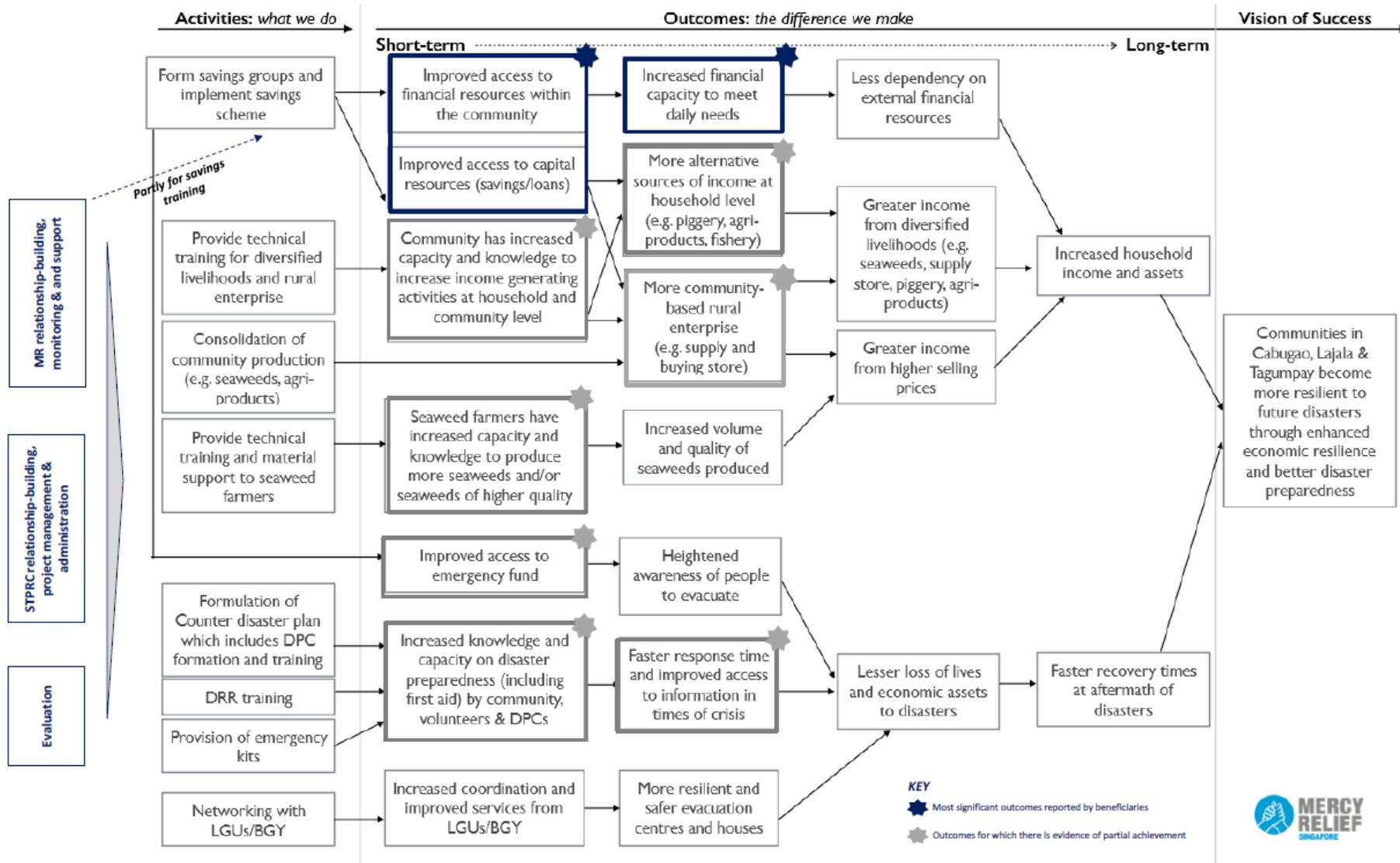
Overall, the level and frequency of data collection was relatively intense, requiring significant staff time from both the local partner and the MR team. Whilst this was a burden in particular for the local partner, the major benefit of allocating this level of resource to monitoring and evaluation was that it provided insights and learnings in real-time, which the team used effectively to continually adapt and refine the project. Meanwhile, the MR team managed their budget strictly so that their visits cost as little as possible. They also stretched the budget by using the monitoring visits not only to collect data, but also to deliver additional training for the local partner and beneficiaries.

STEP FIVE - Analysing Data: Achievement of outcomes mapped back onto the TOC

The external evaluators collected a range of qualitative – and, to some extent, quantitative – data during their field visit and document review exercise in February 2017. This was analysed in the context of the project's original TOC, where qualitative and quantitative evidence was pieced together to form an assessment of which outcomes from the TOC had been “significantly” or “partially” achieved. The evaluation report listed its assessment for each outcome, citing supporting evidence such as focus group discussion findings, quotes and quantitative data where available.

The overall results were summarized using the original TOC diagram, with stars and highlighting overlaid to show which outcomes had been significantly or partially achieved.

Achieved outcomes mapped onto the programme theory of change



STEP SIX - Using the findings: open and honest reflection followed by proactive, practical improvements

From the outset, MR's main objective in measuring SFL's impact was to inform learning and continuous improvement. The project was funded from MR's core funds and public fundraising rather than specific individual donors, meaning that MR was not required to provide specific reporting on Key Performance Indicators to any external party. This is unlike many other non-profit projects, where impact measurement may be primarily dictated by a major funder and the non-profit may feel pressure (genuine or imagined) to present results that look good, rather than those that offer an opportunity for genuine learning and improvement. For this project, MR had arguably more flexibility and opportunity to reflect openly and honestly on their results.

MR's team were indeed particularly open and reflective in their internal conversations about the impact of the project. Whilst some aspects of the project were highly successful, other parts proved to be significantly more challenging than originally expected, meaning that impact in some areas was lower than forecast. The team discussed these findings at length amongst themselves and in consultation with the local partner and the beneficiary communities.

“You are doing well, but are you doing the best?”

Based on their lessons learned, they took a set of proactive steps to further improve the project in year two. For example, for the community savings groups, the impact evaluation showed that the groups were highly successful in helping members to increase their savings and access cheaper credit – however, it was unclear whether this impact could be sustained without continual outside intervention. To answer this question, MR brought in experts from another Philippines based NGO with wide-ranging experience in this area.

Following the external evaluation, MR also made several improvements to its overall partner selection and project management processes. For example, the organisation developed a new in-house project evaluation framework to be used in assessing all potential future projects. The framework builds on that used by the external evaluator for SFL and aligns with the widely used OECD DAC guidelines for evaluations in the development assistance sector¹. It is used to evaluate new projects even before starting them. MR also introduced a new initiative, the Project Selection Committee, to facilitate internal discussions about the feasibility and potential impact of each new project. The list of criteria would not only inform MR of where each project stands, but the list will also undergo fine tuning over time.

As of June 2017, MR had not published the impact results from the SFL project and in general, the organisation's public reporting has historically tended to focus on outputs more than outcomes. However, in 2016-17 the organisation is updating and strengthening its public reporting and marketing, aiming to report impact data on an increasingly regular basis through documents such as its “Year in Review” report.

¹ For detail, see the DAC website:

<http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm>

What can we learn from MR's impact measurement approach with SFL?

Main challenges

Facing the facts when things do not work out as planned

Impact evaluation tends to show up both the successes and failures of a programme – and it is often difficult to admit that things are not working out perfectly as expected. This is especially true when the team is sincere and passionate about helping the community. MR's SFL team addressed this challenge by being consciously open minded about their flaws and by acknowledging that there will always be limitations and areas for improvement.

“Organisations have to be committed to improving themselves, otherwise there is no point in measuring impact and collecting data that you don't use.”

Collecting sufficiently robust quantitative data

At the end of the first year of the SFL project, the local partner NGO ran interviews with each beneficiary to collect a set of quantitative demographic and outcome data. They asked interviewees to recall their income and savings levels at the start of the project and also to report their current income and savings levels (i.e. 12 months later). The aim was to provide a set of pre- and post- data that could be used to identify any changes in the financial status of the participants following the project intervention. However, there were many issues with the survey methodology where interviewees were asked to report their financial situation and in particular, to recall their situation 12 months previously. Different people may have interpreted the question differently – hence their answers may not be comparable. And people may have struggled to accurately recall their situation a year before. In reality, the data from these interviews was not reliable enough to be usable in the year end impact evaluation.

What worked well

A strong focus on engagement with and accountability to the beneficiary communities

MR's team maintained a strong focus on the end beneficiaries throughout the programme and evaluation process. The data collection process was seen as a way to engage in a two-way dialogue with the local communities, helping to build a genuine sense of ownership of the project by the local communities.

Allocating sufficient resources for evaluation and learning; managing those resources efficiently

There can be a mindset amongst some organisations in the non-profit sector that money should always go directly to end beneficiaries and not towards learning or other core costs that build the strength of a programme over time. However, MR was able to commit relatively significant resources towards evaluation and learning for the SFL project – partly due to the flexible way in which the project was funded through core funds. After allocating resources to this area, MR also succeeded in managing the evaluation budget efficiently to derive maximum benefit from the data collection and analysis.

Hiring an external evaluator to gather unbiased feedback

MR's team found that whilst they were able to collect a significant amount of data and feedback internally, they could not be sure that they were forming a neutral or unbiased assessment of the project. Whatever questions the team asked to the community would be likely to contain at least a

hint of confirmation bias. Thus, they felt that an external third-party evaluation, independent from the project team, would provide worthwhile additional perspective. It could also provide the community with a platform to openly express their opinions about the project.

“Don’t do impact measurement for donors, do it for the people”

Caveat: This case study is provided as an example of how one organisation has approached impact measurement in one particular context. Please note that readers should not interpret it as “best practice” as there are many valid approaches in any given context. The information has been kindly shared by the organisation to help others in the sector learn more about what worked well and the challenges faced with the different approaches to impact measurement.