

Participatory Market Assessments: What We've Learned

Advantages, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

There are myriad advantages to participatory market assessments; however, these activities are also not without certain challenges. Mercy Corps' experience in facilitating these assessments in diverse contexts has provided us with a wealth of knowledge on what works and what can be improved. Understanding the highlighted advantages and challenges of community-led market assessments enables us to strengthen our approach and its results.

Advantages:

Gaining firsthand knowledge of local labor market demand - Communities, particular marginalized youth and young women, often have little knowledge about local supply and demand. Furthermore, some of these communities have very limited professional interactions with the private sector and potential employers. Community-led and participatory assessments enable individuals to gain firsthand knowledge about local employment opportunities, hiring trends, skills in demand, as well as a deeper understanding of the constraints they face in entering the labor market. The process of gathering market information builds knowledge of the economy and also builds skills in effective communication, teamwork, and increases confidence.

Example: In Indian-administered Kashmir, young women expressed that they often pursued gender-stereotyped roles (such as teachers or childcare workers) due to cultural norms, but also a lack of knowledge on other types of work and job opportunities available to them. Through participation in a market assessment, these young women were able to identify new, appropriate opportunities for work and for entrepreneurship through learning about high potential growth sectors.

Identifying concrete, immediate opportunities – One of the main goals of any market assessment is to identify immediate income generation, employment, and self-employment opportunities in the local economy. Markets are dynamic – they are always changing – and typical livelihoods programs are most often short-lived (2-3 years). Therefore, it is advantageous to use the information gathered in a market assessment immediately. Often, the data can be turned into a work plan with immediate action points.

Example: In Liberia, the assessment produced data which identified that some employers in urban Monrovia were currently looking for employees and/or were open to immediately taking on an intern or apprentice. Therefore, the team used the information within one-month after completion of the assessment by following up with these particular businesses.

Building bridges between private sector and marginalized communities – Poor, rural, and marginalized communities often have the most limited options for economic opportunity. Particularly, in the case of young males and females, professional interactions with potential employers and other market actors are often difficult and further complicated by deep-rooted stereotypes and discrimination. Participatory market assessments facilitate a platform for interaction between program communities and the larger population. The strengthening of these relationships, as well as the building of social capital and professional networks are a critical part of the process.

Example: In Liberia, young women are often viewed as untrustworthy and undesirable employees. Through the assessment process, young female assessors built up their confidence in speaking with potential employers. Furthermore, many of these assessors received positive feedback (and some job offers) from the businessmen and businesswomen they interacted with. Some employers shared that they did not know that youth could be so articulate and professional and acknowledged that they would now be willing to hire young people.

Challenges:

Capacity - Capacity of assessors may be lower than typical consultants or staff, as this process is likely new to them. Additionally, community assessors – particularly youth and young women - may have varying educational levels. In order to address low capacity, the training of assessors may require extra detail and time, as well as some role playing and significant practice with the assessment tools. Furthermore, the assessment leads may need to spend extra time in developing an appropriate SOW for assessors, as well as a thorough interview/vetting process.

Example: In Liberia, the team initially struggled to find youth assessors with the literacy and numeracy skills needed to carry out an assessment of this nature. Therefore, the Mercy Corps team spent some additional days identifying and interviewing possible assessors, as well as rigorous training of the final assessor cohort.

Time – Due to the likely capacity factors above, the assessment process may have a longer timeframe than a typical assessment. Identifying enumerators and training staff will likely add extra time to the process – possibly even a few extra weeks. The participatory elements - adapting the tools with the community, etc. – will also add some extra days to the overall assessment. Therefore, work plans and timelines should be developed accordingly and should be sensitive to these issues.

Example: In Kenya, the team spent two full days in a training workshop to prepare youth for implementation of the assessment. Topics included sessions on how to dress and introduce oneself properly to a shop owner as well as how to act and remain patient if a customer asks the shopkeeper for help during an interview.

Rigor – Community-led market assessments are not studies of extreme academic or scientific rigor. Rather, they are exercises to 1) gain immediate information about the labor market and local economy and 2) engage communities in understanding their economic opportunities and challenges firsthand. For these types of assessments, *the process is as important, if not more important, than the product.* Additionally, most of these assessments are very tailored to specific programs, geographic areas, and populations and are not comprehensive overviews of labor markets. Institutions such as the International Labour Organization and the World Bank often conduct large-scale studies on labor markets and economies, and these documents should be consulted during the desk research process.

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