



Photo credit: Suraj Shakya for Mercy Corps

# BENEFICIARY IDENTITY AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

OCTOBER 2018

*Cash transfer programs (CTPs) constitute nearly half of Mercy Corps' humanitarian portfolio with their use growing across the sector. Our vision is for field teams to have ready access to high quality technology products and systems to streamline the design, setup, and maintenance of beneficiary information management systems within them. In turn, this will improve delivery, security, and tracking of cash-based humanitarian assistance, with the potential to impact millions of vulnerable people annually.*

## **The Beneficiary Identity and Information Management Project aims to:**

- Create ecosystems of complimentary mobile-first tools and processes, with initial focus on CTPs
- Establish guidelines and promote capacity building around technology procurement, adoption and implementation
- Preposition technology components and providers with Mercy Corps' 5,000 person, global team to **propel the broader humanitarian community toward more transparent, effective and accessible management of beneficiary information**

## Context

Beneficiary identity and information management is a hot topic within the humanitarian sector. In the past year, GSMA, the World Bank, and the UN have all put forth ambitious proposals regarding the potential proliferation of digital IDs, while institutional donors such as DFID, ECHO, and USAID are increasingly expecting more secure and efficient ways for the humanitarian sector to capture, analyze, and exchange data. There is increased dialogue on real challenges faced within information management, including how to manage [sensitive information](#), responsible use of [biometrics](#), and how to balance the mandate to “[do no harm](#)” with demands for innovation.

Collaboration and coordination are also becoming expected hallmarks of quality cash transfer programs.<sup>1</sup> Thus Mercy Corps, along with our peers, are increasingly required to harmonize data collection tools, share programmatic information with UN agencies, local organizations, and in some cases, directly exchange beneficiary information with service providers such as mobile network operators (MNOs) or financial service providers (FSPs).

However, this sector has been driven by principles of “just good enough,” resulting in hastily designed technology systems that are rigid, disjointed, and ultimately hard to scale. This becomes even more evident when considering technologies that support humanitarian CTPs, where a combination of flexible and reliable technology components (and providers) are often overlooked in favor of perceived quick-fix, all-in-one platforms backed by a single provider. In order to take advantage of the rapidly evolving market of information management and financial technologies, we must promote system designs that can readily integrate with third-party platforms in secure and cost-effective manners.

## Project Background

In 2016, with the generous support of Cisco Foundation, Mercy Corps conducted a landscape analysis of existing technology products and processes that support beneficiary information management. Through this initial review (available upon request), it was clear Mercy Corps’ and our peers’ diverse implementation needs could not be met by a single technology product or vendor. It was also clear Mercy Corps and most humanitarian organizations are best positioned as technology users—**not** software developers.

In May 2017, with the support of Cisco Foundation, Microsoft and Tableau Foundation, Mercy Corps began working to operationalize the recommendations presented in our landscape analysis. We proposed bringing together a core set of service providers to develop an initial “plug-and-play” ecosystem of complementary technology components to better meet our field teams’ beneficiary information management needs within humanitarian response, with an initial focus around cash and voucher programming. Historically, these integrations are bespoke, expensive, and time-consuming, especially when driven by non-technologists and project-based procurement. Therefore, this project aims to make foundational investments in complimentary technology platforms, in order to advance integrations in a way that helps agencies avoid reoccurring setup costs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mercy Corps uses the term “Cash Transfer Programming” (CTP) in its publications to refer to cash and voucher programming collectively.

## The Idea

Technology is never the silver bullet, in and of itself. So we are taking a slightly different approach to improve Mercy Corps' ability to stand-up and use quality technologies to support beneficiary identity and information management. We are focused on improving our capacity within three areas identified as root causes of frustration and bottleneck when setting up these systems:

- 1) **Technology:** We are making smart investments to improve existing software and hardware in partnership with providers, to make multi-component system integration and rollout easier and more cost efficient for program teams.
- 2) **Procurement:** We are conducting internal reviews of cross-departmental processes related to the procurement of program technologies to include products (and partners) that support mobile data collection, biometrics, data visualization, and electronic vouchers and bulk digital payment platforms. In conjunction, are working with key partners to explore more efficient contracting models.
- 3) **Field readiness:** We will build staff capacity around system setup, maintenance, and general project management for technology systems – from solution conceptualization to rollout.

Mercy Corps has brought together a core set of technology service providers to develop an initial “plug-and-play” ecosystem of complementary components to better meet field teams' needs. We are initially grounding this work around cash transfer and voucher programs as they comprise 48% of Mercy Corps' humanitarian portfolio (as compared to 7% of programming across the humanitarian sector as a whole).<sup>2</sup>

## Rationale

This effort does **not** intend to build any new products, but rather to **preposition integrations across existing tools and platforms using open standards**. The premise is that if we develop a relevant technology suite to address a particular implementation ‘vertical’ (i.e. each step of information management within a cash or voucher program, from collection of beneficiary data to verification to visualization and analysis), we will be able to apply relevant products in a more timely, cost effective and efficient manner. Starting with an initial core coalition of willing partners, the goal is for this product ecosystem to expand with new partners over time. Continued expansion will reduce reliance or ‘lock-in’ for humanitarian organizations with any single provider or platform.

We have grounded inputs and efforts within Mercy Corps first, using our diverse programming across 40+ countries to inform design and approach. We also conduct our work in visibility of existing collaborative venues where possible – such as country-level cash working groups and consortiums, including the Collaborative Cash Delivery (CCD) platform, a consortium of 20 leading NGOs committed to better coordination around humanitarian cash responses. Once guidance is refined and platform integrations are in stable state, we will focus on sharing this approach with other humanitarian actors to further scale our integration investments and broadly influence improvements across the sector.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP). Walking the Talk: The Grand Bargain & Cash Transfer Programming. <http://www.cashlearning.org/news-and-events/news-and-events/post/459-walking-the-talk-the-grand-bargain--cash-transfer-programming>

## Field Testing

The start-up of a complex program in northern Uganda in Fall/Winter 2018 serves as the initial informing use case, where product integrations, procurement guidance, and an initial capacity building package are being developed. The program based in Karamoja is also mandated to exchange beneficiary data with World Food Program (WFP), providing a unique opportunity to explore how NGOs and UN agencies can safely and effectively coordinate data exchange between their distinct technology systems. Outputs will then be further trialed and refined in three other countries throughout 2019. A further six countries will host pilots by July 2022 for a total of ten pilots supported by the project, which will in turn inform the design and iteration of project outputs.

While this work is primarily focused on distilling needs into sound solution designs (the ‘what’), considerations around capacity building (the ‘how’) are equally important to actual field uptake. This includes both building capacity around tools so staff are comfortable managing technology in-field with remote support, as well as contractual prepositioning of service providers where needed, including commercial framework agreements, to facilitate quicker deployments.

## Technology Partners

Technology partners are working together to create reusable integrations that require limited technical expertise to setup. They are also working with us to explore how to streamline procurement processes to ensure products are easily accessible to field teams. At present, our initial technology partners include:

- [Dimagi \(CommCare\)](#), for ODK-based mobile data collection with case management functionality
- [Simprints](#), for fingerprint biometrics
- [Dev Society](#), for open API proof-of-concept that will help future proof integrations
- **2-3 Digital Payment / E-Voucher Platforms** (TBD, pending tender selections)

## Driving the Community Forward

**Revising the Business Case:** By having fairly unrestricted space to learn more about each other’s products, services, and business models, our technology partners have started to think differently about how to support NGOs in a more collaborative, cohesive manner. They are starting to bid together on traditional tenders / RFPs, which has inherently included the development of joint pricing plans. One ideal outcome being that if contracting and pricing is streamlined and simplified, NGOs will be more incentivized to work with a combination of technology partners and specialists when standing up relevant, responsive systems.

**Raising Awareness:** While we have initially grounded operational efforts within Mercy Corps, the problems we are unpacking with this project are endemic to most agencies promoting technology use within their humanitarian CTPs. We continue to share our learnings with institutional donors, particularly about the implications of funding rigid single product approaches and questionable “digital identity” schemes. Most recently, we were asked to speak alongside GSMA, Oxfam, and Caribou Digital to DFID’s Humanitarian Advisors cadre on some of these topics. We also serve on advisory groups for ID2020 and GSMA’s Mobile for Humanitarian work. As the first phase of our work is finalized, we will continue to use these outlets to share our learnings around tackling technology issues alongside procurement and capacity building bottlenecks. All integrations we have invested in remain open source and/or owned by the providers themselves (meaning anyone has access to them, not just Mercy Corps).

## CONTACT

### JENNIFER SCHMIDT

Director | Corporate Partnerships

[jschmidt@mercycorps.org](mailto:jschmidt@mercycorps.org)

### ROSA AKBARI

Sr. Advisor | Technology for Development

[rakbari@mercycorps.org](mailto:rakbari@mercycorps.org)

### GABRIELLE FOX

Advisor | Technology for Development

[gfox@mercycorps.org](mailto:gfox@mercycorps.org)

### About Mercy Corps

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.



45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204  
888.842.0842  
[mercycorps.org](http://mercycorps.org)