Intersections

MCC theory & practice quarterly

Summer 2024
Volume 12, Issue 3
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Humanitarian standards

MCC works in humanitarian contexts around the world with the goal of providing relief, development and peace in the name of Christ. Often, these are situations of incredible complexity where pathways to addressing the issues successfully are rarely clearly defined.

Both MCC and the local partners we support regularly face the challenges of working in such complex environments. Our work overlaps with governments (both local and foreign), non-state actors, local civil society organizations, international NGOs and local communities that operate in the same space. Many times, MCC shares similar values and objectives with these other actors as we provide assistance to people affected by crisis, but that is not always the case.

Humanitarian standards define core values or ethical principles and create an operational compass to guide humanitarian and development work. These standards provide a framework for upholding the human rights and dignity of affected populations and for maintaining impartiality, neutrality and independence in the delivery of assistance, ensuring that it reaches those most in need without discrimination. By adhering to these standards, organizations can prioritize the safety and well-being of affected populations, maintain accountability and foster trust within communities. For MCC, as a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, our commitment to these standards is rooted in our understanding that all people are created in God's image and in our response to Jesus' call to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty and work for peace.

Last year saw a rise in the number of new and protracted crises that have led to the resurfacing of humanitarian dilemmas around impartiality and neutrality, two key principles of humanitarian response. In Ukraine, Myanmar, Tigray and Gaza, government and military control over humanitarian interventions has awoken a debate among humanitarian actors on their ability and obligations to adhere to humanitarian principles in these complex settings.

An estimated 300 million people around the world in 2024 will require humanitarian assistance. Even more will need food security and livelihoods opportunities to guard against the persistent impacts of global climate

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change, quality education for their children, comprehensive healthcare services and human rights and peace programming to prevent further crises around the world. When governments cannot or will not address these complex humanitarian, developmental and peacebuilding issues, humanitarian organizations seek to fill the gap, often with limited funding.

This March witnessed the publication of the revised Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS). Since its initial launch in 2014, the CHS has named the core commitments that international agencies like MCC have used to guide their humanitarian relief, development and peacebuilding efforts. MCC uses the CHS to orient all new staff in international program and to shape MCC’s development of policies and procedures related to matters such as safeguarding, gender and social inclusion, and capacity building. The March 2024 updating of the CHS has notably re-focused these commitments on the accountability of international agencies to local populations, placing people in crisis at the centre of the standard.

This issue of *Intersections* offers reflections from authors from within MCC and from external organizations on the role of humanitarian standards and principles in programming with local partners, challenges of enacting standards and the road forward from here. All these articles reveal the tensions that exist in implementing principled humanitarian work and our responsibility, as humanitarian actors, to provide accountability to the local communities at the centre of this programming.

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Humanitarian standards: emergence and relevance

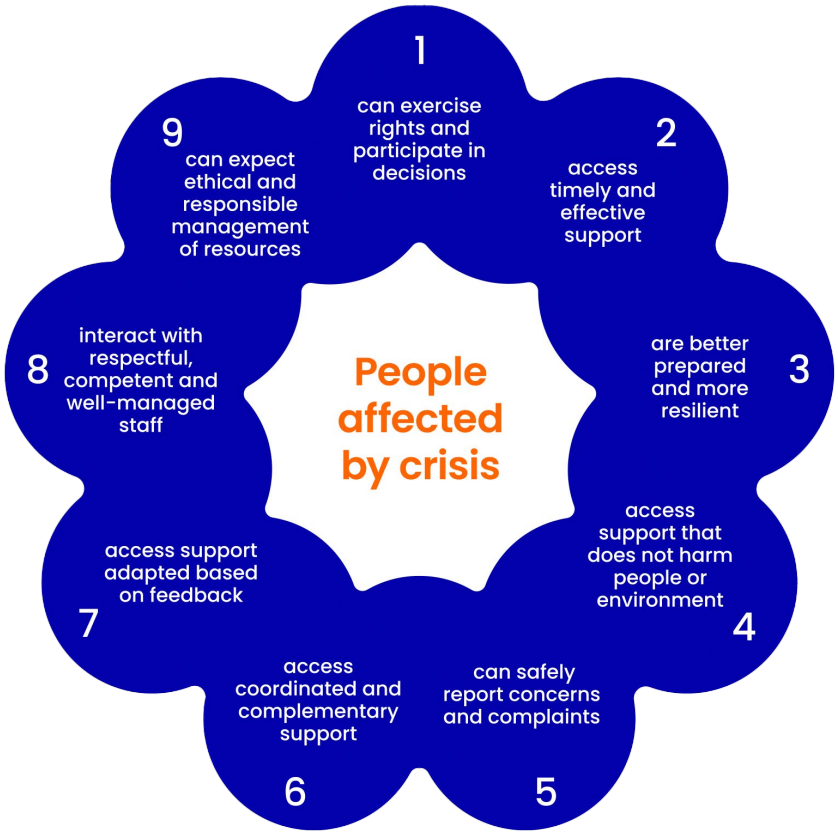
A principled approach to humanitarian action stretches back over a century-and-a-half. In 1864, the first of the Geneva Conventions (the basis for international humanitarian law) was signed by twelve European states. The establishment of the International Red Cross movement in 1876, with its seven principles, soon followed. The United Nations General Assembly adopted three guiding humanitarian principles—*humanity*, *neutrality*, *impartiality*—in 1991, followed by a fourth (*independence*) in 2004. The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief, established in 1994, now has over 600 organizational signatories.

But even as humanitarian principles have been widely endorsed and adopted, the weaknesses of a principled approach have been on display over the past decades. In the early 1990s, the Bosnian war and the Rwandan genocide highlighted many shortcomings in the humanitarian response sector. The inconsistent and arbitrary approaches of humanitarian actors, from the United Nations to local organizations in applying (or failing to apply) humanitarian standards have prompted much soul-searching from humanitarian actors, with numerous assessments conducted of failures to maintain humanitarian standards during wartime, giving rise to significant reform in the early 2000s. The United Nations Cluster system was launched

Learn more

UNOCHA. Global Humanitarian Overview 2024. December 1, 2023. Available at https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2024-enarfres#:~:text=In%202024%2C%20nearly%20300%20million,in%20East%20and%20Southern%20Africa.

The New Humanitarian. “How Humanitarianism Changed in 2023.” December 14, 2023. Rethinking Humanitarianism Podcast. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/podcasts/2023/12/14/rethinking-humanitarianism-how-humanitarianism-changed-2023



Visual representation of the Core Humanitarian Standard. Available here: https://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard.

during this period to promote better coordination among and common commitment by inter-governmental and governmental bodies and by non-governmental organizations to humanitarian standards. International humanitarian agencies banded together to develop and promote the Sphere Standards for food, water, health and shelter responses. Over the past quarter century, humanitarian actors have developed and promoted many more sets of humanitarian standards, covering important areas such as education, market assessments, livestock, protection and inclusion. A recent initiative, the Humanitiarian Standards Partnership, has sought to make these standards more accessible to practitioners.

From aspirations to audits: As sector-specific standards proliferated, international NGOs faced greater scrutiny of their operations. From the Joint Evaluation of the International Response to the Genocide in Rwanda, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) emerged with the goal of not only setting out organizational standards but, for the first time, promoting external audits to foster compliance with the HAP Standard.

“Standards themselves are meaningless without accountability.”

The growing number of initiatives to promote humanitarian standards in the early 2000s led to a period of consolidation and the drafting of the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability. Launched in 2014, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) aimed not only to simplify the various standards but also to place populations affected by disaster at the centre of the work. People in Aid and HAP merged to form the CHS Alliance in 2015, while the Humanitarian Quality and Accountability Initiative emerged as an auditing body that certified an organization’s compliance with the CHS. Denmark then became the first nation to require CHS certification for receipt of development and humanitarian assistance funding.

Learn more

Sphere Association. *Humanitarian Standards Partnership*. Available at: https://hspstandards.org/.

CHS Alliance. *2022 Humanitarian Accountability Report.* Geneva, Switzerland: CHS Alliance, 2022. Available at: https://readymag.website/weavercreative.co.nz/3974273/.

International Committee of the Red Cross. *The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*. Geneva: ICRC, 2015. Available at https://www.icrc.org/sites/default/files/topic/file_plus_list/4046-the_fundamental_principles_of_the_international_red_cross_and_red_crescent_movement.pdf.

"Code of Conduct of the ICRC." Available at https://www.icrc.org/en/document/code-conduct-employees-icrc.

"As organizations committed to placing communities at the centre of our work, we must as ourselves: What practices do we follow to assess our performance? More importantly: Who is evaluating us?"

Creating a common language, as well as a common aspiration, was an important part of World Renew's journey to certification against the Core Humanitarian Standard. World Renew's program reflects a wide range of approaches and programming methodologies. With that degree of diversity in operations, internal organizational procedures to monitor the quality of programmatic initiatives varied widely. While these monitoring mechanisms were, at their best, valuable and contextually adapted, the diverse approaches made it difficult to have a common conversation.

In 2015, World Renew completed a self-assessment using the Core Humanitarian Standard indicators applied in an internal audit. Those indicators, with their precise measures, helped colleagues speak to each other on a common platform. The process evaluated World Renew's organizational systems (looking at how good practice could be consistently maintained) rather than any one program or department. The audit highlighted World Renew's strengths and weaknesses and complemented contextual standards and project-specific evaluations. From this 2015 self-assessment, a clear mandate and work plan emerged for World Renew to make improvements in the policies and practices of the organization. An external auditor reviewed progress on World Renew's adherence to the Core Humanitarian Standard in 2020. By 2023, World Renew had achieved full certification of compliance with the CHS. While the audit process involved considerable work—collecting documents and arranging program visits so that communities themselves could speak to the auditors about the organizational practices they experienced—the external perspective and audit cycle built greater accountability into the process.

From standards to accountability: While the emergence of humanitarian standards is an important and positive development, they should not be viewed as a panacea. Standards are simply a tool, a plumbline against which work can be measured. Standards have given a point of common reference that allow for a more meaningful conversation within and among humanitarian organizations, but standards by themselves do nothing to improve the quality of a response or the accountability of humanitarian organizations to affected populations. Only a collective investment of time, resources and leadership will move the sector forward toward greater accountability to local communities.

The 2022 Humanitarian Accountability Report, which reflected on seven years of data from almost 100 organizations, observed that "Even the dedicated aid organisations most willing to improve their accountability by measuring against the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality & Accountability (CHS), are not—collectively—reaching a level that fulfils the requirements for any of the Nine Commitments of the CHS."

Humanitarian standards, indeed, the whole humanitarian system, are once again in a time of transition. Commitment by governments to humanitarian legal norms and principles can no longer be assumed. Communities and families don't live their lives in ways that neatly align with sectoral approaches. Standards developed in response to acute crises can seem lacking in contexts of protracted crises.

Standards themselves are meaningless without accountability. Organizations like Ground Truth Solutions are utilizing new technologies to hear voices of those affected by disaster, in turn centering their priorities in a

response. Collective accountability mechanisms have been established in major humanitarian responses where complaints can be filed in one centralized way, simplifying avenues for feedback. Suggestions have been advanced for creating an inter-agency ombuds mechanism for the humanitarian sector. When power imbalances are large, an ombuds mechanism, as an external body, could provide a neutral space for individuals to raise concerns. Ultimately, power needs to shift, so that communities and people served by humanitarian organizations can hold them accountable not only for *what* assistance is provided (e.g., technical standards) but for *how* that assistance is provided.

As organizations committed to placing communities at the centre of our work, we must as ourselves: What practices do we follow to assess our performance? More importantly: Who is evaluating us? Humanitarian standards aren't an answer in and of themselves to these questions, but they do provide humanitarian agencies with common tools as we work towards greater accountability.

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Humanitarian response through food: adapting food baskets for cultural appropriateness in southern Africa

Food is a cornerstone of humanitarian response, especially in southern Africa, where food insecurity is exacerbated by climate change and conflict. International and local organizations dedicate substantial resources to providing food baskets to vulnerable populations. However, standardized food baskets often fail to reflect the eating habits and cultural contexts of the communities they aim to support. Furthermore, the selection of food components can undermine climate change adaptation strategies promoted by governments and non-governmental organizations in drought-affected communities. These strategies emphasize using Indigenous knowledge systems to grow culturally appropriate and traditional drought-resistant crops with sustainable water and soil conservation techniques. Thus, it is imperative to critically examine and improve the composition of food baskets to ensure they are culturally and contextually appropriate while adhering to Sphere and World Food Programme (WFP) standards and considering donor resource constraints.

Historical context and shifts in food aid practices: Historically, food aid involved shipping staple foods like maize, wheat and beans from distant countries, predominantly Canada and the United States. While this method ensured basic sustenance, it neglected the diverse cultural preferences and dietary practices of local communities. A significant shift occurred in Canada in 2008 when food aid was untied from Canadian-produced staples, marking a move towards buying food commodities locally or regionally. This change aimed to increase the cultural appropriateness of food while promoting local markets.

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However, despite sourcing food commodities domestically or regionally, the composition of food baskets remains largely unchanged. Traditional international standards and expectations continue to dictate the contents of food baskets, resulting in generic rations that minimally adapt to local food preferences. To truly address food insecurity and promote sustainable development, a shift from a one-size-fits-all approach to one that recognizes and respects the unique cultural contexts of each region is necessary.

Decolonizing food baskets: Decolonizing the composition of food baskets is crucial for achieving cultural appropriateness. This process involves valuing Indigenous knowledge systems and local eating habits. It aligns with the localization agenda and the call to decolonize aid. Actively involving all members of local communities in participatory processes for determining food baskets can provide invaluable insights into preferred foods, cooking methods and delivery mechanisms.

Empowering communities to design their food rations allows for a tailored approach that respects their agency and self-determination in the face of climate change. For example, in the Binga district of Zimbabwe, most food aid agencies provide a basket composed of maize meal, sugar beans and cooking oil. While this food basket meets the energy requirements for people, it does not reflect the local eating habits, culture and climate change adaptation strategies being promoted. Instead, the communities in Binga prefer a food basket that includes sorghum mealie meal, a local drought-resistant cowpea variety, dried fish and peanut butter. Interestingly, the current food basket does not include dried fish, despite the Tonga people of the Binga District in Zimbabwe often being called "people of the river" due to their historical and cultural connection to the Zambezi River, which significantly influences their lifestyle and dietary habits, including their fish-eating practices.

Reframing food basket composition: Reframing conversations around food baskets to consider culture, eating habits and food groups allows for greater flexibility and adaptation to local contexts. Additionally, attention should be given to including condiments, spices and flavorings that enhance meal palatability. By incorporating these elements, food baskets can better align with the cultural preferences and traditional culinary practices of recipient communities. This not only promotes cultural appropriateness but also increases the likelihood of the provided food being consumed and enjoyed rather than exchanged or sold for preferred food commodities.

Community-centered decision-making: Placing food aid recipients at the center of the decision-making process is essential. Rather than imposing pre-determined food baskets, humanitarian organizations should engage communities in dialogue about their preferred food choices and delivery methods. This approach encourages a sense of ownership and responsibility while fostering a deeper understanding of local needs and aspirations. Involving communities from the outset ensures that food assistance programs are sensitive to cultural norms and values, ultimately contributing to the overall well-being and resilience of the population.

Combining cash transfers with food assistance: In addition to adapting food basket composition, exploring innovative approaches that combine cash transfers with food assistance has significant value. Cash transfers provide individuals and families with the autonomy to make their own food

choices based on specific needs and cultural preferences. This approach respects the dignity of recipients and supports local markets and economies. By balancing cash transfers and in-kind food assistance, humanitarian organizations can offer more tailored support while considering the unique circumstances of each community and the availability of local food sources.

Humanitarian response through food is crucial in addressing food insecurity in Southern Africa. However, ensuring the effectiveness and cultural appropriateness of food assistance programs requires adapting food baskets to local contexts. By embracing a decentralized and decolonized approach that respects cultural practices, engages communities in participatory processes, focuses on food groups and embraces innovative approaches such as cash transfers, humanitarian organizations can revolutionize food aid delivery. The goal is to provide nourishment that respects the cultural diversity, autonomy and dignity of those receiving assistance, ultimately promoting sustainable development and resilience in the region.

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“By embracing a decentralized and decolonized approach that respects cultural practices, engages communities in participatory processes, focuses on food groups and embraces innovative approaches such as cash transfers, humanitarian organizations can revolutionize food aid delivery.”

Integrating standards for gender-based violence interventions in humanitarian action

In the complex landscape of humanitarian crises, organizations like MCC can play a crucial role in supporting our partners as they provide humanitarian relief and development assistance. MCC programming in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq (LSI) involves various sectors, including food security, agriculture and livelihoods, health, education and WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene). Amidst the ongoing challenges posed by complex crises, MCC aims to address gender-based violence (GBV) through its humanitarian relief and community development programming.

MCC in LSI cultivates relationships with local organizations that approach humanitarian relief and development work in a holistic way, attuned to complex social norms around gender and GBV in communities affected by crisis. The MCC team in LSI has worked with partners to integrate a gender-sensitive response into each project component. The priority focus is on raising awareness and educating partner organizations on prevention of GBV in the communities where they work, discerning with them how to build GBV response into project plans and reflecting with them about the vulnerability selection criteria for project participants (the people who will benefit from the project and who will help shape, monitor and evaluate the project).

“Having these tools alongside clear guidelines in emergencies provides clarity for both MCC staff and partner staff to uphold the safety and dignity of all individuals involved in our programming.”

The Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) has developed a wide variety of helpful standards and tools for humanitarian responses used by international NGOs and local humanitarian actors alike. That includes standards for how to integrate GBV response into humanitarian initiatives. As useful as these global standards are, they must also be adapted to reflect unique cultural and social contexts, so that humanitarian interventions meet the distinctive needs of vulnerable people in different contexts. MCC LSI has adapted the IASC tools to be relevant to each country context and part-

Afterschool training in November 2023 in knitting and handicrafts for girls organized by Zakho Small Villages Project (ZSVP) at the Darkar camp for internally displaced people in Duhok, Iraq. The project addresses gender equality and raises awareness among camp members about gender-based violence that may arise due to ongoing displacement and residing in internally displaced persons camps long term. (Jehan Omar)

ner capacity. Having these tools alongside clear guidelines in emergencies provides clarity for both MCC and partner staff in upholding the safety and dignity of all individuals involved in our programming. Such tailored responses help to minimize the risk of exploitation and abuse of project participants within the humanitarian settings where we work.

The IASC standard: The IASC Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action serve as the standard for humanitarian actors and communities affected by armed conflict, natural disasters and emergencies. The key goals of the standard are:

1. ***Risk reduction***: To reduce the risk of GBV by implementing GBV prevention and mitigation strategies across all areas of humanitarian response, from pre-emergency through recovery stages. While this can look different to each partner and is heavily dependent on the country context, standards promote the prevention of and response to gender-based violence in all aspects of humanitarian work. This includes establishing complaint and feedback mechanisms, GBV reporting mechanisms, providing access to medical and psychosocial support for survivors and training partner staff to identify and address GBV risks within their programming.

2. ***Promoting resilience***: When adapted and applied, the IASC standards strengthen national and community-based systems that prevent and mitigate GBV and enable survivors and those at risk of GBV to access care and support. The standards are a touchstone for advocating for equitable access to humanitarian assistance and services for all individuals, regardless of gender, ethnicity or other factors. Taking the standards seriously promotes greater participation of affected communities in relief and development programs, ensuring their needs are heard and addressed effectively.

3. ***Community recovery***: Supporting local and, where possible, national capacity is key. Lasting solutions to GBV require systemic change. By integrating GBV considerations into long-term development strategies, MCC contributes to positive change beyond immediate humanitarian relief efforts.

Practical Implementation: The MCC LSI team has integrated the IASC standards for GBV intervention into expectations for how LSI team members conduct field visits in a culturally sensitive manner. For example, after the February 2023 earthquake in Syria, MCC LSI developed guidance for field visits that incorporated the IASC key standards for GBV intervention. This guidance included culturally sensitive questions for the team visiting Syria to ask those impacted by the earthquake. The focus of the questionnaire was on inclusivity, gender equality and the safety of MCC staff, partner staff and project participants during the post-earthquake needs assessment. Such questionnaires have now become standard for the MCC LSI team for all visits with partners and project participants, with the MCC team briefed beforehand to ensure that the IASC's GBV standards remain a priority.

Another example comes from programming in Iraq, where MCC LSI applied the IASC guidelines to mainstream GBV awareness and prevention in the livelihoods programming approach implemented by Zakho Small Villages Project (ZSVP), an MCC partner working with small agricultural

communities in northern Iraq and Kurdistan. The guidelines created with the partner were simple, centering GBV awareness and increasing staff understanding of how prevention can be integrated into the programming approach: these guidelines now inform all ZSVP engagement with project participants during partner visits, regardless of the visit's purpose.

Challenges and Progress: While strides have been made in integrating GBV into humanitarian and development efforts, consistent implementation across regions remains challenging. Resource constraints, limited awareness among local stakeholders and complex political dynamics hinder effective adoption. However, MCC's commitment to integrating gender and protection principles ensures a more equitable and rights-based approach to humanitarian action. Overall, humanitarian gender and protection standards have significantly improved the quality and effectiveness of MCC's relief and development work in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

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Learn more

IASC. *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action*. Available at: https://gbvguidelines.org/en/.

Appropriate, relevant and effective: standards for humanitarian assistance initiatives

Communities whose lives are devastated by war, deteriorating economies and events such as earthquakes and hurricanes endure devastating losses, including loss of shelter, the ability to earn a living and access to food and essential supplies to maintain hygiene. One way that humanitarian organizations such as MCC and its global partners accompany these communities is through distribution of needed food and non-food items (NFIs). Some of these humanitarian aid distributions involve purchasing food and other essential items locally where the crises are unfolding. Additionally, some humanitarian organizations, like MCC, ship material resources for distribution to communities whose lives have been upended by crisis.

Whether its humanitarian aid distributions involve locally purchased items or material shipped from the United States and Canada, MCC is committed to global humanitarian standards related to such humanitarian interventions. Specifically, MCC works with partners enmeshed within communities facing crises to ensure that MCC-supported humanitarian aid distributions are appropriate, relevant and effective. Such efforts require close consultation with communities affected by crises about their specific needs, preferences and cultural values related to food and other matters. Communities needing assistance and protection are best placed to identify the risks, vulnerabilities and needs that shape their lives: deliberate involvement of diverse members of the community in planning, monitoring and evaluating material aid distributions helps guarantee that material aid distributions are effective in addressing community members' needs. While crisis has disrupted their lives, community members still possess skills and knowledge, including knowledge about cultural prohibitions and preferences. Drawing on these capacities in planning, monitoring and evaluation is an essential element for effective humanitarian responses.

Learn more

Sphere Association. "Shelter and Settlement Standard 4: Household Items." *Sphere Handbook*, 2018. https://handbook.spherestandards.org/en/sphere/#ch008_006

Recent MCC humanitarian assistance initiatives in Cuba and Ukraine illustrate how MCC and its partners work to ensure that their material resource distributions are appropriate, relevant and effective. The Cuban context represents one scenario in which material resources exported from the United States or Canada are a valid alternative to locally purchased supplies. Even before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Cuba had entered a recession, due to a decrease in agro-industrial production, internal inefficiencies and increased sanctions from the United States. With the pandemic, the country's primary source of income, tourism, plummeted and has yet to recuperate. MCC's Cuban partners report that they "have never seen such bad conditions."

The U.S. embargo on Cuba, the conditions of which have become much tighter over the past seven years, exacerbates the country's economic crisis. Meanwhile, the Cuban government has reluctantly recognized the significant deficit of food crops cultivated on the island, including a lack of basic crops such as rice, corn, plantain, beans and other sources of protein, even recently declaring the food deficit a situation of national security. Over 80% of food products consumed on the island are imported; the government's current capacity to provide food through standard monthly food packages is limited and families are forced to search for supplementary food sources. MCC partners say they have gone for six months or more without seeing basic items like toothpaste, eggs or animal protein in the market. Although Cubans continue to receive health and education services from the government, economists estimate that 30% of the Cuban population lives in poverty, with growing food insecurity.

When basic food and other supplies are absent from the local market, imported material resources from outside the country become an appropriate form of humanitarian response. In shaping its material resources response, MCC consulted closely with and followed the lead of the Brethren in Christ (BIC) church in Cuba. With around 200 congregations spread across the island, the BIC church in Cuba has legal status and is well-respected by the government. Many of the BIC's regional church groupings have local emergency committees comprised of both women and men: these regional groupings take the lead in planning how to distribute MCC resources most effectively and efficiently, identifying community members (both connected to the church and others) most in need of assistance, and then leading the distributions. MCC highlighted the types of material resources MCC offers to the church's emergency committees, who in turn consulted with community members about their priorities. Out of the selection of the items offered by MCC, they chose MCC's relief kits and canned meat as the most appropriate and relevant resources to meet the needs of the most vulnerable families in their communities.

"When basic food and other supplies are absent from the local market, imported material resources from outside the country become an appropriate form of humanitarian response."

From June 2022 through March 2023, MCC and the BIC church in Cuba collaborated to provide humanitarian resources for vulnerable families in 14 provinces in response to economic turmoil. The initiative aimed to address the needs of the most economically vulnerable members of society. During this period, MCC distributed 3,795 relief kits (a five-gallon bucket of essential hygiene supplies), reaching 16,737 people. In addition to reaching the most economically marginalized members of communities within and around BIC congregations, pregnant women waiting in the maternal hospital and the elderly at day programs in Palmira, Cienfuegues, also received kits, as well as families in Pinar del Rio and Havana whose lives were devastated by Hurricane Ian in September 2022.

A woman in a village previously under Russian military control in Ukraine's Kherson region is ready to transport by bicycle the food package and MCC relief kit distributed by MCC partner Uman Help Center. (Uman Help Center).

During this same period, MCC and the BIC distributed 24,000 cans of MCC meat to 27,050 people, providing vulnerable individuals and families with a much-needed source of protein. The BIC gave priority in these distributions to children, youth, the elderly and people with special needs. Before MCC includes canned meat in material resources shipments, it asks partners for a description of how that meat will be prepared and served to fit with local culture. This planning assures that the MCC canned meat is used in ways that fit the cultural methods of food preparation to which recipients are accustomed.

Eliezer Valdez Suárez, a member of the Cuban Missionary Society and an ordained minister for 20 years, helped distribute these material resources. He reports that "every time we arrived to one of the provinces, we saw smiles from ear to ear on the pastors, because they saw that the heavens had opened. Because they weren't just those little cans of meat that you could confuse with cans of tuna! But also the buckets, more than the bucket itself—because people here also use the bucket itself, you know—the towels, all of the personal hygiene products inside—they came at a moment of tremendous crisis, and, where there was nothing in our country for us to buy."

In most emergency situations, material resources shipped from Canada and the United States would not be the most effective humanitarian response in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. For most emergency responses, MCC and its partners usually purchase and distribute food and other resources available in the local context (even as in some contexts, like Guatemala, MCC collaborates with churches to pre-position material resources to be available for distribution shortly after disasters strike). Material resources shipped by MCC usually are components of responses to protracted situations of humanitarian need. For example, material resources have been a critical component of MCC's partnership with Ukrainian churches and community-based organizations to address the needs of internally displaced Ukrainians since Russia's full-scale invasion of the country in February 2022. From the escalation of the war in February 2022 to the present, mil-

lions of people have fled for safer places. Some have fled abroad to other countries, though the vast majority of displaced people fled to the regions of Ukraine where missile attacks are rare. Central and western Ukraine have received the majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs). As fighting approaches, people leave everything they have, often running away even without basic necessities.

With the war still active, millions of Ukrainians are IDPs, with that figure constantly changing. The war has generated economic upheaval, inflating prices for energy, medicines, food and other essential supplies. IDPs, along with many host community members, face great difficulty in providing food and basic supplies for themselves and their families. In addition, many displaced people confront the loss of employment and income. Children in state-supported orphanages and the elderly in nursing homes face challenging conditions as state funds are stretched in the face of inflation.

“Ensuring that MCC’s material resources are used in appropriate, relevant and effective ways requires close collaboration by MCC’s partners with other actors, such as government agencies, and deliberate consultation with the communities undergoing crisis.”

In a context such as Ukraine, in which food and other essential goods are available in the market but at inflated prices and often of inferior quality, MCC material resources shipped from Canada and the United States become part of an appropriate humanitarian response. For example, over the past two years, MCC has partnered with the Uman Help Center to distribute comforters, relief kits, hygiene kits, infant care kits and sewing kits to thousands of IDPs and vulnerable host community members in the Uman, Cherkasy, Kherson and Mykolaiv regions of central and southern Ukraine.

Several aspects of these humanitarian distributions combine to ensure that they are appropriate, relevant and effective. Uman Help Center coordinates with the Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior to avoid duplication of assistance and to direct support to the most vulnerable members of society. The distributions then include not only IDPs but also vulnerable members of host communities: such advance planning minimizes tensions between IDPs and host communities, strengthening social cohesion. MCC sends materials based on Uman Help Center’s assessment of what goods would be most difficult for people to obtain at a reasonable price in the local markets where inflation is spiraling. That assessment includes consultation with IDPs and host communities, both in the planning phase and in ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Recipients of MCC resources report to Uman Help Center that the quality of MCC material resources is superior to that of comparable products available in local markets.

The material resources generated by churches and other volunteers in Canada and the United States can be vital elements of MCC’s global humanitarian responses. Ensuring that MCC’s material resources are used in appropriate, relevant and effective ways requires close collaboration by MCC’s partners with other actors, such as government agencies, and deliberate consultation with communities undergoing crisis.

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On the crime of famine in Gaza

The people of Gaza are facing catastrophic levels of hunger, with a huge proportion of the population on the brink of famine. The speed of this descent towards famine is unprecedented in recent history. After only a few months, almost the entire population of Gaza struggles with crisis levels of food insecurity, with 1.1 million of Gaza's 2.3 million population facing catastrophic levels of hunger, including 31% of children under the age of two suffering from acute malnutrition. As Alex de Waal argues, prior to Israel's attack on Gaza humanitarian professionals had never "seen such a high proportion of the population descend so rapidly toward catastrophe" (*The Guardian,* January 31, 2024). In March, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC)—an independent agency that monitors global food insecurity—indicated that famine was imminent in northern Gaza.

As a humanitarian agency, MCC adheres to the principle of humanity—that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Based on that principle, MCC and other humanitarian agencies have a duty to prevent and alleviate human suffering. As a Christian agency, this principle of humanity is informed by our belief that everyone is created in God's image and that as disciples of Jesus we are called to demonstrate love and compassion for all, especially the most vulnerable. As an organization of Anabaptist churches, we condemn all violence and continue to call for a ceasefire and just peace in Palestine and Israel. Our duty, along with all humanitarian organizations, is to alleviate human suffering.

MCC's history in the Gaza Strip began in 1949 with sending Titus Lehman to work as a nurse in the refugee camps operated by the American Friends Service Committee around Khan Younis. MCC then resumed work in Gaza in the early 1990s, supporting educational and food security initiatives carried out by the Al-Najd Developmental Forum, the Culture and Free Thought Association and the Near East Council of Churches. Since October 2023, MCC has collaborated with these partners in Gaza to respond to the acute humanitarian crisis created by the Israeli military's massive military campaign that began after the attacks by Hamas militants on October 7 that killed over 1,100 Israelis. Since October, over 1.9 million Palestinians have been uprooted from their homes (many multiple times), more than 60% of homes in Gaza have been destroyed or damaged and over 35,000 people killed and 80,000 injured. Israel's tight restriction of the movement of people and goods into and out of the Gaza Strip, which predates October 7 by decades, has been tightened further since October, preventing critically needed humanitarian assistance from reaching those in need. Israel and the international community are obligated to prevent famine and genocide in Gaza.

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, notably argued that famine is not caused by a lack of availability of food, but rather one's access to it. The case of Israel's attack on Gaza illustrates well Sen's entitlement theory (a theory that describes the various channels by which people can access food based on their rights and opportunities). Israel's current invasion of Gaza and the Israeli-imposed economic embargo on Gaza have caused all entitlements to fail. The destruction of agricultural resources and livestock (production-based entitlements); the collapse of economic activity due to the destruction of infrastructure and Israel's tightening of its embargo on Gaza (trade-based entitlements); skyrocketing unemployment,

Al-Najd Developmental Forum staff distribute emergency food to internally displaced families in central Gaza. (Al-Najd Development Forum/Bashar Al Arja)

"Famine is not caused by a lack of availability of food, but rather one's access to it."

Learn more

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"People do not starve; they are starved—they are starved by acts of commission and omission."

massive civilian casualties and displacement of 75% of the population (labour-based entitlements); and finally, severe, if not complete, restrictions on access to humanitarian assistance (transfer-based entitlements)—all these Israeli actions have predictably led to Gaza's population facing famine.

Before and during Israel's invasion of Gaza, MCC and its partners have sought to address Gazans' access to food. Prior to the current crisis, MCC supported rabbit raising and kitchen gardens for food consumption (production) carried out by Al-Najd Developmental Forum in Gaza City and vocational training for youth (labour) operated by the Near East Council of Churches (NECC) in Qarrara village in the southern Gaza Strip. During the crisis, MCC has joined partners in providing cash transfers to purchase locally available food (market/transfer) as well as distributing locally purchased food in Gaza and, more recently, MCC aid shipments from Jordan (transfer). Due to Israeli military action, animal and food production projects implemented by Al-Najd have been completely destroyed. The NECC vocational training center has been severely damaged, its students no longer able to attend classes. While at the beginning of the crisis, it was possible to purchase food in Gaza for distribution or to provide cash to families, these interventions are almost no longer possible given the lack of food available on the market.

In March, MCC was able successfully to import its first truckload of food into Gaza, shipped overland through Israel. As a member of Canadian Foodgrains Bank, MCC accessed funding from the Humanitarian Coalition and the Government of Canada following a matching appeal for Gaza. There are currently only three land crossings into Gaza—the Rafah crossing from Egypt and the Karem Abu Salem and Erez crossings from Israel. All crossings are heavily controlled by Israeli forces with limitations on the number and types of assistance allowed into Gaza. Prior to the current crisis, an average of 500 trucks were allowed into Gaza per day. Despite the overwhelming need for food, medicine, medical equipment, shelter and fuel, the number of truckloads allowed into Gaza during the current fighting reached lows between 0-50 trucks/day and in March and April recently increased to 150-200/day. Now, at the time of this writing in May, the Israeli military has closed all crossings to Gaza, with virtually no aid entering the Strip. Israeli settlers, meanwhile, have been attacking aid trucks headed to the crossings into Gaza, destroying the food supplies they carry.

MCC is working with our local partners in Gaza as well as with a Jordanian agency that has been cleared to import humanitarian aid into Gaza. During MCC's first food shipment, and after procurement of food and inspection was completed, it took almost one month for food to reach our partners and the people in Gaza. These delays are common as there is a backlog of assistance that needs to be cleared by Israeli authorities. With current crossing closures from Israel into Gaza, that backlog continues to increase. MCC assistance faces long queues, repeated inspections as shipments travel from Jordan to Gaza through multiple Israeli checkpoints with repeated unloading and reloading before entering Gaza. The dangers to humanitarian initiatives are not over once aid enters Gaza. Humanitarian aid workers, and the populations they serve, face daily security threats. Over 200 humanitarian workers have been killed by the Israeli military during the current crisis. MCC waits to deliver further food into Gaza, but these shipments are delayed due to closure of crossings imposed by the Israeli military.

As Stephen Devereux argues, famine in the twenty-first century is ultimately caused by the failure of transfer-based entitlements—the failure of governments (and in this case, occupying forces) and the international community's inability, or unwillingness, to provide humanitarian assistance. People do not starve; they are starved—they are starved by acts of commission and omission. While the outcome of famine looks like malnourished children, the agony of parents unable to feed their family, and ultimately premature death, the cause of famine looks like food waiting in a warehouse, long queues of trucks held up by checkpoint closures and humanitarian air drops that distract from a manufactured crisis.

The crime of withholding food or using food as a weapon of war is all too common—whether that be most recently in Gaza, Ethiopia, Myanmar or South Sudan. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in January that Israel, in accordance with the Genocide Convention, "must take immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of humanitarian relief to Gaza." Then in March, the court ordered that Israel must take all measures to ensure unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid, given the famine conditions. Now in May, in light of the Israeli military's assault on Rafah and its closure of the crossings, the ICJ has once again ordered that Israel shall take "all necessary and effective measures to ensure, without delay, in full cooperation with the United Nations, the unhindered provision at scale by all concerned of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to Palestinians throughout Gaza."

MCC and other humanitarian organizations, including local partners in Gaza, stand ready to provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza. The question is whether the people of Gaza will be granted access to it.

Bruce Guenther is MCC's director of disaster response. He lives on Treaty One territory in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Learn more

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Sanctions in Cuba: an obstacle to humanitarian efforts

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) sent four 40-foot-long shipping containers to Cuban ports last year to its partners on the island. In total, MCC delivered 48,000 pounds of canned meat and 4,030 hygiene kits in 2023, the most MCC has ever sent to Cuba in one year. One recipient of the resources reported that it "arrived like manna from heaven."

The needs in Cuba are immense. Many basic goods such as toothpaste, soap and shampoo have become luxuries. Medical supplies can be equally scarce. Goods that are available cost a small fortune due to the high rate of inflation. In March of this year, the Cuban government requested assistance from the World Food Programme to deal with shortages of powdered milk usually subsidized by the government. Cubans in Santiago, on the eastern coast, took to the streets to demand "power and food" as communities also face rolling energy blackouts.

The causes of the economic downturn in Cuba are varied and multifaceted, including natural disasters and misguided policies. One important factor was the COVID-19 pandemic which severely reduced tourism to the island

“Sanctions inhibit the scope and speed of humanitarian response while also putting the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence at risk for humanitarian organizations.”

nation for a time. Cuba has become increasingly reliant on international visitors and, without cruise ships full of old-car-fanatics and beachgoers, Cuba’s economy took a large hit.

Additionally, currency reform efforts that imply all imported items should be purchased with foreign currency have created two tiers of money and a complicated system of exchange. Cubans navigate these economic realities as they deal with the lack of food and medicine. Government officials, on the other hand, are often insulated from these effects—partially due to corruption—which contributes to maintaining the status quo. Even after considering all these interconnected factors, however, the most longstanding and insidious causes of economic contraction in Cuba can be traced to U.S. foreign policy.

Political history: In the post-World War II context, the focus of U.S. foreign policy shifted to countering the threat of communism. Under President Harry Truman, U.S. economic sanctions were imposed on North Korea with the stated goal of containment and coercion for external pressure to affect political change. When Cuba began to change politically and socially, the U.S. used similar tactics to protect U.S. interests. Following the Cuban revolution in 1959, U.S. economic sanctions were placed on Cuba in an ever-increasing manner, targeting the sugar, nickel, tourism and medical research industries. The targeting of Cuba’s medical services and research programs has hurt Cuba’s medical engagement with other countries in need of these medicines and developments.

How sanctions work: Put simply, sanctions are financial penalties or restrictions imposed on individuals or countries with the goal of forcing change. In the case of Cuba, the stated aim of U.S. policymakers is often to promote religious freedom and free markets: the assumption within this policy is that these desired changes will only materialize through popular resistance against the current Cuban government. Many Cubans would highlight that, since the early 1990s, religious freedom has been codified into the Cuban constitution. MCC’s Brethren in Christ partners in Cuba can operate without impediment.

The imposition of sanctions heavily restricts Cuba’s ability to trade freely with businesses in the U.S. and is often referred to as an “embargo” or “blockade” due to the downstream effect on engagement with other nations as well. Over the past 60 years, this sanctions-based strategy has not changed political realities in Cuba, even as it has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis and created a push for migration out of Cuba.

Sanctions inhibit the scope and speed of humanitarian response while also putting the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence at risk for humanitarian organizations. In most cases, before MCC can do humanitarian work in sanctioned countries, an application to the U.S. Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) must be submitted and approved. While Cuba does not need sanctions approvals, MCC must abide by any restrictions imposed by Treasury, the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Congress. While MCC has successfully delivered several shipments of canned meat and relief supplies, navigating the banking system has proven to be much more difficult.

Learn more

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Pastor Imer Cordobez Pérez of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church stands with MCC relief buckets in the city of Pinar del Rio in western Cuba. MCC partner Centro Cristiano de Reflexion y Dialogo (CCRD, the Christian Center for Reflection and Dialogue) worked with the church to identify vulnerable families, both church members and community members, in the province of Pinar del Rio after Hurricane Ian hit the island in September 2022. Families received relief buckets through MCC. (MCC photo/Annalee Giesbrecht)

After Hurricane Ian devastated western Cuba in 2022, MCC, together with European funding agencies, sought to ship construction supplies for housing reconstruction; none of these materials were available in Cuba. Although the activities were well within U.S. restrictions, banks in the U.S., Canada and Europe were nervous to wire needed funds needed if the word "Cuba" was on any of the paperwork. Suppliers from other Latin American countries were found to provide the needed construction materials.

The U.S. embargo on Cuba has predictable spillover consequences, including one known as overcompliance. Overcompliance is the tendency for financial institutions such as banks to eschew services for humanitarian organizations working in Cuba, even if the projects have been approved. Since humanitarian work constitutes a relatively small section of financial institutions' portfolios, banks have no incentive to navigate U.S. sanctions law or to risk incurring legal penalties. Peter Jeydel of Steptoe LLP explains that:

> Even when an organization has a specific license authorizing exactly what it plans to do, there may be questions about whether the organization's activities have in fact been limited to what was intended and authorized by the specific license. Banks typically do not want to devote resources to confirming the details of the activities underlying each transaction they are asked to support, as that would be prohibitively costly in most cases.

Jeydel notes that this is true even when the activity is entirely lawful because there is no requirement for a bank to facilitate a specific transaction. Practically, this slows and limits what MCC and other organizations can do in Cuba.

The effects of U.S. sanctions were further intensified by the designation of Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1982. Lifted in 2015 but reimposed in 2019 by the Trump administration, this designation further restricts engagement with Cuba and contributes to the chilling effect on

"As MCC walks alongside God's children in Cuba, we also seek to hold government officials accountable for the suffering caused by sanctions and call for the reform of such harmful policies."

banking and diplomacy. There was hope the Biden administration would return to a policy of engagement begun under President Barack Obama but, thus far, there has been little change.

The removal of Cuba from the State Sponsor of Terrorism list would be a welcome first step toward easing U.S. sanctions and normalizing relations with Cuba. Legislation such as the Freedom to Export to Cuba Act would remove even more barriers. These measures of goodwill could go a long way toward renewing U.S.-Cuba diplomatic ties and beginning a constructive dialogue about key regional issues like forced displacement and allowing humanitarian agencies, like MCC, to normalize their programming in the country.

When MCC partners in Cuba receive a can of meat or a bar of soap, they express gratitude that God has not forgotten them. As MCC walks alongside God's children in Cuba, we also seek to hold government officials accountable for the suffering caused by sanctions and call for the reform of such harmful policies.

Zachary Murray and Galen Fitzkee are legislative associates with MCC U.S. National Peace & Justice Ministries. They are based in Washington, D.C.

MCC experiences in sector coordination

Humanitarian response often involves diverse international and national actors, each with unique mandates, yet addressing the same crisis. Adhering to Core Humanitarian Standard 6, coordination among humanitarian agencies is expected to ensure effective and complementary assistance is provided. While the United Nations (UN) Cluster system aims to improve coordination, it excludes some actors, highlighting the need for more inclusive approaches that integrate local perspectives.

"MCC's role in building local ties can give voice to the injustice and power imbalance present within higher-level coordination, highlighting the value of both MCC and our partners' experience and expertise."

Despite evidence that local actors and organizations are most often the drivers of humanitarian response, the formal humanitarian system often fails engage them effectively. Dominant power structures and a resistance to change can foster inefficiencies and competition, creating barriers to constructive and fruitful engagement between those within and outside the current formal system.

However, though there is a clear role for coordination in humanitarian response, the current system and structures for coordination are far from perfect. The power dynamics inherent in the current system create an imbalance of power, with power being held by the UN and international NGOs and a noted lack of power held by national or community-based NGOs. The current structure for coordination is very top-down, rather than a process in which all members at the table are equally valued in decision-making.

To explore the place of inter-agency coordination within MCC, we developed a ten-question survey regarding MCC and MCC's partners' participation in disaster response coordination between 2013 and 2018. The survey was sent to all MCC country directors. We also carried out interviews with

country directors identified as having more extensive disaster response projects in that five-year period. These country programs represented all regions of the world where MCC has programming, two from Latin America and the Caribbean, two from Africa, two from Asia, two from Middle East and one from East Europe. We also interviewed three members of MCC's planning, learning and disaster response department.

Multiple learnings and findings emerged from this research. First, it became clear that MCC is not extensively involved in coordination at the level of the UN Cluster system outside of a few country programs that had had major disaster or emergency responses during the time under review. Even in places where MCC was involved in high-level coordination, the usefulness of that involvement was typically viewed as creating access to information rather than as some form of collaboration with other organizations. MCC partners, and even MCC itself, in most instances has only participated in UN clusters or coordination with the World Food Program due to a direct donor requirement from funders such as Global Affairs Canada or Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

The list of barriers to coordination, or ways in which higher-level coordination was perceived as less effective use of MCC's time, energy and resources, was significant. Not only is MCC not actively participating in higher-level coordination with other agencies in most contexts, in some instances engagement with this kind of coordination was perceived by MCC staff as problematic. MCC staff critiqued Cluster meetings as focused on dispensing information rather than facilitating collaboration and as perpetuating biases of legitimizing the responses of international organizations while further marginalizing local NGO response.

MCC participants in our study reported that they valued coordination at the more local level—whether with other local NGOs, with local levels of government, or some combination thereof. Most MCC staff surveyed responded that they view coordination as networking, which takes place through MCC's partnerships with local partners. MCC-facilitated partner gatherings were also seen as a highly constructive way in which MCC and its partners can share with and learn from each other, as well as make connections for potential collaboration and coordination.

If we know that local coordination is the most accessible form of coordination available for partner organizations, how does MCC find ways to strengthen and foster this form of coordination? Furthermore, how does MCC continue to advocate on behalf of its partners to international donor agencies, urging them to recognize local coordination as legitimate and effective? MCC's role in building and fostering local ties can offer an alternative to the injustice and power imbalance present within higher-level coordination mechanisms, an alternative that more clearly values partners' experience and expertise.

Ruth Plett is the MCC Canada senior director of equity and domestic program. Darrin Yoder previously served as regional disaster response coordinator with MCC in Nicaragua. This article was adapted from research conducted for the Humanitarian Action Leadership program at Eastern Mennonite University in 2018.

“The current structure for coordination is very top-down, rather than a process in which all members at the table are equally valued in decision-making.”

In February 2023, Passy Kubanka Pasu and Mado Kusamba, displaced women in the Kasai region of DR Congo, examine sacks of seed corn that Germaine Kambundi, not pictured, grew and will plant in a future growing season. (MCC/Fairpicture/Justin Makangara)

Intersections: MCC theory and practice quarterly is published by Mennonite Central Committee's Planning, Learning and Disaster Response Department.

Editor: Alain Epp Weaver. Opinions expressed in this newsletter reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of Mennonite Central Committee

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Intersections: MCC theory and practice quarterly can be accessed online at mcccanada.ca in Canada or mcc.org in the U.S.

ISSN 2376-0893 (print) ISSN 2376-0907 (online)

Mennonite Central Committee

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