

1.6. REPRESENTATIVE LONG-TERM COMMUNITY PHONE SURVEYS

INTERNATIONAL CARE MINISTRIES (ICM) PHILIPPINES



How this story represents an international-local faith partnership in MEAL



International element
International Christian faith-based poverty alleviation organisation



Local faith element
Partnerships with local pastors



Project country
Philippines



Website
<https://www.caremin.com/>



The organisation and project

International Care Ministries (ICM) is a Christian faith-based organisation that operates mostly in the Philippines. Aimed at tackling ultra-poverty, ICM was founded in 1992 and received funding and strategic direction from philanthropists in Hong Kong. Today, the organisation has offices in the Philippines, Hong Kong, and the US. ICM is primarily a development organisation. Its core strategic programme, 'Transform,' aims to alleviate poverty by focusing on values, health, livelihood, and education. Transform is implemented in partnership between ICM and

local pastors. A key part of the programme are weekly classes that bring together the poorest families in a community. ICM had been running the same programme for more than 10 years when the coronavirus pandemic brought the weekly classes to a halt. Faced with the unprecedented situation in the early months of the pandemic, ICM decided to temporarily focus more on reactionary, relief-focused work. Decisions needed to be made about what actions the organisations should take, and how they should help. When food security was identified as a possible major need, ICM, which had warehouses with food stores, decided to give

away as much as possible of this stock, if food insecurity indeed turned out to be a concern.

MEAL approach and rationale

ICM values both research and MEAL and aims for its operations to be data driven. The organisation uses multiple monitoring points, data sets, and usually surveys around 40,000 households a year, with a team of six full-time researchers spending six months of the year undertaking field-based surveying. However, the spread of the coronavirus cut off the organisation's usual data streams in February and March 2020, which effectively shut down the organisation's conventional MEAL operations. ICM saw a need for reliable data coming from the communities they work with, so they set up a representative sentinel project with the aim of getting an immediate sense of community needs and regular up-to-date information during the crisis. The project was rolled out to over 600 people in June 2020, following a 3-week pilot involving ICM staff, and remained ongoing in November of 2020. ICM's core programme relies on their partnership with local faith actors, so the organisation decided that 250 of the 600 sentinels should be recruited from amongst these pastors. Another 250 participants were saving group members¹³ who were representative of the organisation's main beneficiaries, and the remaining 100 sentinels were staff members from amongst the ICM team. The team made weekly calls to the sentinels from the last week of June 2020. In October, this was changed to monthly calls. Sentinels were asked about whether they were receiving any government aid, how many meals they were eating daily, and about the situation in their communities. Every third week of the month, the ICM team would do a longer

survey on the other impacts the pandemic was having on their respondents, focusing on income, employment status, church attendance, savings groups activities, education, and the transmission of the virus.

Data analysis and dissemination of findings

The team sent out a weekly summary report after every survey round with basic statistics about each of the questions to the ICM operations team, with a view to validating results and checking if survey findings were aligned with the operations team's insights from their work with communities. This close collaboration with the operations team turned out to be particularly beneficial. It allowed the operations team to adapt the work they did on the ground. It also provided the MEAL team with an opportunity to correct their data based on the input from the operations team and follow-up calls with the sentinels. Initially, the team's data analysis was geared towards an internal audience, with dissemination taking the form of summary reports and statistics. However, the team later tailored their approach by starting to prepare papers aimed at a wider audience, comparing their findings to evidence generated by other organisations in the Philippines, including census data to be able to make policy recommendations. ICM's strategy team then started collaborating with the government, to provide them with insights on relevant parts of their findings, such as on education. Internally, findings of the surveys were used to reallocate resources to support affected

13 ICM helps communities set up savings groups as part of their projects. These are self-governed financial security groups, which receive support in the form of advice (and sometimes grants) from ICM. ICM sees elected saving group leaders once a month at the trainings facilitated by the organisation. ICM-supported saving groups are not allowed to be headed by local faith actors, to avoid conflict of interest and access issues.



communities, including the pastors ICM works with (who often found themselves in food insecurity during the early months of the pandemic) and to start new projects. Additionally, there was a feedback loop leading back to the pastors who were updated about the findings of the survey and action taken in their communities. In some cases, the pastors would help ICM get clearance from the local authorities for food distribution.

Lessons learned

Faith engagement in a crisis

Working with faith leaders provided the ICM MEAL team with insights into the situation on the ground, which they would otherwise have struggled to collate. Local faith leaders continued to meet members of their communities during the intense early months of the pandemic. Their understanding of what ICM beneficiaries were experiencing during that time was therefore broader and deeper when

compared with secular community leaders, such as the heads of the saving groups, whose access to communities was restricted. The MEAL team felt that surveying during a crisis made the respondents more enthusiastic about the project, as they saw the immediate need of getting data about communities that ICM would not have any direct access to without the help of the pastors. Moreover, the team believed that the identity of ICM as a faith-based organisation was significant in collecting good quality data. For example, enumerators were reminded at the start of the project that they were representatives of a faith-based organisation, and that the project was not simply about getting data, but also about the relationship with the pastors with a view to giving hope and establishing community.

Value of long-term relationships

Due to the long and intense nature of the survey project (which in the early weeks of the pandemic entailed 600 weekly calls lasting between 30 minutes and an hour), some of ICM's enumerators established strong relationships with their interviewees. In the past, pastors had occasionally been sceptical of the survey work of the ICM MEAL team because they did not see the immediate benefit. This time however, the MEAL team had the impression that the long-term nature of the survey made the pastors feel like the organisation had a genuine interest in how they and their communities were doing, which made them see the value of the survey. The strong relationship between the pastors and the enumerators also had a positive impact on the interviewees' candour.