



INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (IMS) — CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES LEARNING REPORT

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«New technologies and data sources are helping us to make faster, more informed decisions and we are reaching more people with assistance every year. However, the ways in which data is collected, shared and used by individual organizations and across the humanitarian system can present challenges to the privacy and security of affected people.»

Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, United Nations in Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action, IASC, 2021.

«Gathering and analysing data – to study the consequences of crises and carry out activities in response – is an essential element of humanitarian work. It helps to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of such work, and enables accountability.»

Acquiring and Analysing Data in Support of Evidence-based Decisions: A Guide for Humanitarian Work, International Committee of the Red Cross, 2017

«Information Management is perhaps the newest and most rapidly growing area of humanitarian work.»

SOHP - THE STATE OF HUMANITARIAN PROFESSIONS 2020, Bioforce 2020

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Please note, while there is no single definition of Information Management Systems as such, for the purpose of this paper the following definitions are used to define IMS and delineate the scope of this document.

INFORMATION/DATA MANAGEMENT (*in humanitarian context*) is the capture, handling, storage, analysis and dissemination of data pertaining specifically to operations and to populations of concern, including demographic and statistical information. It involves information on needs and conditions as well as geo-referenced information. It also involves information on protection and sector-specific concerns related to needs, delivery and impact in a spectrum of issues, including health, nutrition, water/sanitation, core relief items, shelter, community-based response, registration, tracking and responding to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), as well as concerns relating to protection site management. Source: UNHCR Information Management Toolkit.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (IMS) (*working definition*) are principled, systematic and organized ways of dealing with the capture, handling, storage, analysis and dissemination of operational and programmatic information pertaining to humanitarian contexts, programmes and populations of concern. Information Management Systems can be defined and organized by outlining three interconnected disciplines:

- **People** (including adequate knowledge, skills and attitudes);
- **Processes** (workflows and tasks, with SOPs and guidance);
- **Tools** (on-line and offline platforms, surveys, questionnaires, apps, data handling software).

While data collections platforms, survey forms, databases or data handling applications are often central to an IM system, they should be considered primarily tools that enable qualified personnel to perform their tasks and duties that correspond with defined processes and procedures in a principled, systematic and organized (efficient) manner.

SCOPE OF INFORMATION MANAGEMENT (*in humanitarian context*) ranges given the different perspectives and different information needs. DRC's evidence framework outlines the scope of IM by distinguishing data and information with regards to:

- **Context** (context, situation, operational environment);
- **Needs** (specific to populations of concern) and;
- **Performance** (including programme performance and results).

This Learning Report acknowledges the key terms and definitions used in the humanitarian sector. The recommended sources that concern Information Management terminology and terms include:

[United Nations in Inter-Agency Standing Committee \(IASC\) Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action.](#)

[Protection Information Management Common Terminology.](#)

[UNHCR Information Management Toolkit.](#)

INTRODUCTION

Information Management Systems (IMS) have gained prominence in the humanitarian sector and are emerging as modes of strategic leverage for organisations who are able to tap into the potential of humanitarian data. Information management systems and data analysis are not just technical novelties but concern the very essence of humanitarianism, which should be founded on a strong evidence base, and be rooted in the principles of impartiality and do no harm.

Information Management across the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is crucial to ensuring that the data we collect can be turned into information, and personal and institutional knowledge that informs and strengthens how we provide support to the communities we work with. While no global harmonized approach has been established for DRC at the time of this publication, regional and country offices continue to pursue investment in IM system(s) to better tackle the challenges related to data and information management.

The need for further investment in IMS is being acknowledged at DRC, and several teams are engaging in a dialogue on the subject, yet progressing with a global approach has been challenged by the broad programmatic scope of DRC, multiple perspectives and distinct expectations in terms of what IMS should cater for primarily, as well as other on-going IT investments, most notably the implementation of the DRC Dynamics ERP system.

While there are clear short-term gains, with implementing contexts adjusted, and programme specific systems, in the long-term the proliferation of different tools and software presents a challenge of managing and connecting them, and ultimately may question the sustainability and efficiency of selected solution(s). This document intends to support informed decision-making with regards to IMS and discusses the country-level challenges and opportunities with a focus on programme and programme-related data.

RATIONALE AND PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT

The Global IMS landscape at DRC is a complex one, based on multiple information needs and encompassing a variety of approaches, standards and initiatives. Given the current level of investment in DRC's ERP system, DRC Dynamics- included but not limited to financial, time and IT infrastructure, it is not feasible to establish a comprehensive global harmonized programmatic IMS that will cater for all regional, country and field offices across all sectors, disciplines and departments. At the same time, local teams across DRC operations continue to explore and invest in tailored IMS solutions to match their specific needs. This creates exciting opportunities but is not an easy nor straightforward task. This coincides with teams that are piloting tools and platforms and collecting lessons-learned which have been collated to inform and support the further development of IMS solutions.

The purpose of this document is to:

- Collect various experiences, lessons-learned and resources with regards to Information Management identified by country programme and MEAL¹ teams.
- Provide colleagues with recommendations and practical tools that can be applied in the process of designing, developing and implementing IMS solutions.
- Strengthen the informal IM Community of Practice and enhance exchange and dialogue about IM experiences, challenges, and solutions.

This Learning is dedicated for a broad group of colleagues engaged in IMS processes, at all levels and primarily for field and country teams, programme staff and sector experts, MEAL teams, as well as support roles in legal teams, IT, Supply Chain among others. The accompanying Learning Brief is intended for a wider audience including country management teams, regional office staff as well as HQ colleagues.

METHODOLOGY

The information used to develop this learning report was based on a series of four technical discussions hosted by the MEAL team over the course of October 2020 and included participation from colleagues at HQ, Regional and Country Office level, who represented core areas of the organisation, including, Global IT, Global Protection, MEAL and Information Management. Furthermore, the document builds on existing organisational dialogue and processes including:

- IMS side-event in 2018, where initial lessons-learned and recommendations were formulated.
- MEAL network events in 2019 and 2020 where IM systems were presented and discussed.
- Guidance Note on Interim Solutions for IMS for DRC.

The document has been consulted and further developed with a group of professionals and represents currently available state-of-the-art expertise at DRC. The learning report and accompanying learning brief have been designed to be a useful and usable working document, with complimentary materials that can provide further support to operations located in the annex at the end of this document.

MEAL stands for Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning.

¹MEAL stands for Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning.

KEY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ESTABLISHING IM SYSTEM(S) — LESSONS LEARNED FOR DRC COUNTRY AND REGIONAL OFFICES

Launching the IMS development process

There are a range of internal and external factors that will lead to the investment in Information Management Systems. For example, Country Operations management may want to have a timely and informative overview of their programme portfolios and the results. Teams and professionals often cater for the various reporting and information requirements, both internal and external, which may be cumbersome without functioning IMS. Skilled IM and IT professionals may also be a driving force for accelerated investments. Regardless of the initial motivation and strategies, it is vital for the entire project to explore and connect between the internal needs and external environment from the initial stages.



POLITICAL AND OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

CHALLENGES

Exploring and understanding the political and operational context in any DRC operation should inform the design of the IMS and its future use. Many governments as well as local *de facto* authorities disallow direct data collection from people of concern, while others restrict mobile data collection (e.g. disabled GPS tracking, or in other contexts biometric data collection is disallowed). The presence of UN run or promoted systems, both technical, like Primero², and procedural can have a potentially limiting influence on independent decisions. And the systems (or lack) within other organisations can have a bearing on questions of interoperability.

Technical requirements of different systems should match operational capacity and competencies e.g. access to electricity and Internet and availability of staff with proficiency in the use of different devices (often in English language).

Laws and practices governing personal data should be respected, regardless of how complex they are, while ensuring that DRC does not put the affected population, DRC staff, or others at risk through the collection, analysis, storage, use and disposal of data and information.

Assessing risks related to data protection is a requirement when understanding the context³.

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Explore government and local government policies in relation to data collection, data protection and use of data and information with a focus on existing and anticipated limitations.
- ✓ Verify what cluster reporting mechanisms, or cluster IMS working groups or existing guidance exist and which are obligatory and which ones are voluntary.
- ✓ Identify reporting needs vis-à-vis government, donors, HQ, cluster and other partners. Explore, discuss and, when feasible, engage in a dialogue with authorities in relation to reporting requirements, scope of data, and data sharing protocols.
- ✓ To ensure that the expectations of the wider organisation and donor reporting requirements can be fulfilled, DRC should negotiate funding of existing and newly developed IM solutions to ensure expectations by the donor and DRC are met.
- ✓ Assess risk related to data protection, potential impact of data collection, and opportunities arising from improved IMS.

²See <https://www.primerio.org/>

³See [PIM Principles](#), [IASC Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action](#) (Feb. 2021) and [Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action](#).



DONOR REQUIREMENTS

CHALLENGES

Information management within the humanitarian sector often entails balancing internally identified specifications or concerns with external requirements, particularly donor demands.

Donor requirements vary between different countries, ranging from the expectation of basic estimate figures of people reached per activity (and output level data), to robust data verifying outcome statements and theory-based intervention logic. Several donors, including DG ECHO, Dutch MFA, UNHCR and others require reporting against their own set of indicators, and their own data disaggregation standards, contributing to a more complex ecosystem. Furthermore, the same donor might have different requirements in different countries and they are likely to change over time.

Despite this, more frequently, donors are willing to accept organisational indicators as long as they are clear and accompanied with robust monitoring and information systems. The DRC strategy 2025 will aim to establish common results and a reporting framework which clarifies core indicators and thus improves the harmonization of indicators within and between countries and regions.

Donor requirements go beyond indicators and involve population and needs assessment data and analysis, data related to risks, Feedback and Complaints Response Mechanisms as well as operational and financial data. The Aid transparency agenda includes IATI reporting which links financial data with project information and results data and is increasingly becoming a standard requirement.

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Agree and standardise with existing and potential donors what level of data is expected to be reported on, taking into consideration Personally Identifiable Information (PII) that may be shared, records of distributions of cash or goods, referrals or IATI reporting.
- ✓ As much as possible, standardize programme processes, registration forms, templates and records as well as indicators to help establish IM workflows and standardized tools.
- ✓ Harmonize programme indicators, in line with the strategy and core needs.
- ✓ Utilising the common data standard of the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) to standardise reporting requirements can help ensure that there is a consistent way in which the data can be collected and allow for a more systematic type of analysis of the data published.
- ✓ DRC should advocate for harmonized indicators between donor agencies and support collective approach(es) that are also in line with key accountability principles as outlined within the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS).
- ✓ Designed IM systems should allow for the full range of modifications of the type of data collected, stored and processed. Data collection forms, or indicator templates, surveys should be easily modifiable given the fact that information needs might change rapidly.
- ✓ There is a growing number of contexts in which common IMS are being developed, both between humanitarian agencies and with other stakeholders (e.g. governments). This is especially prevalent in CVA interventions, not least those linking with national systems of social protection.

Aid Transparency

Since 2018 DRC has committed to ensuring that the data published is **useful** and **usable** in accordance with the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). IATI is a global campaign to ensure aid effectiveness through a data standard comprised of project, finance, and results data.

The initiative has in recent years been adopted as a reporting requirement for several of DRC's key donors: Danida- Denmark Ministry of Foreign Affairs, FCDO- UK Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office and Dutch MFA- Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In doing so, it has provided data publishers and users alike forward looking and timely data which can help inform upon decisions made across different projects, thematic sectors and across countries.

As it is a data standard, there is a constant need to consider how we as a humanitarian organisation implement programming, and how we reflect upon the results attained and how they support the people we serve.

SOFTWARE CONSIDERATION

CHALLENGES

Decisions and plans for developing an IMS should consider the existing software market. There is established learning across humanitarian organisations that **using off-the-shelf or third-party software and solutions** is generally the right approach for humanitarian organisations⁴. Developing a bespoke system, based on internal capacity of a humanitarian organisation often increases the risks, including delays to the implementation of an IMS. An **en suite** approach⁵ allows the integration of several different IT solutions or platforms, based on developed and tested software for specific uses which cover a defined scope of IMS.

However, the software market offers **limited product selection** for addressing specific information and data management needs. While there are plenty of project management solutions, systems to record and track the data of People of Concern are scarce. IT solutions rarely encompass both and thus create a dilemma in terms of the system scope. There is **no comprehensive solution for humanitarian INGOs** that would cater for the vast array of information needs. Software needs to be focused on use and tailored to specific needs – which calls for deliberate choices in terms of priorities. A typical dilemma concerns whether the system is centred around the **data of affected-people or project tracking focused** and to what extent these two approaches can be combined. Protection-focused, cluster- or sector-specific IMS tools or platforms are important options to consider⁶.

In the MEAL and Cash & Voucher Assistance (CVA) sphere alone, there has been a proliferation of solutions, each of which is somehow unique but none of which is all-encompassing.

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Consult broadly with peers from other organisations as well as internally within DRC, including across countries, regions and HQ staff for advice and support.
- ✓ Get in touch with colleagues in specific sectors who are familiar with dedicated solutions for specific programmes e.g. Protection, Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance, Humanitarian Mine Action.
- ✓ Consider existing sectoral best-practice IMS that will cater for some of the needs and offers options of connecting between the various databases and platforms. Look into joint intersectoral platforms such as Primero for case management software.
- ✓ Keep up-to-date with the ongoing discussions and developments in the IM, IT or 'tech for good' discussions. Follow Nethope (<https://nethope.org/>), ICT works (www.ictworks.org/), or Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Tech (<https://merltech.org/>).
- ✓ Join and keep updated on the [Yammer group](#) where announcements, questions and comments that often concern existing IM solution thus providing insight into challenges and opinions about the solutions.
- ✓ Feasibility studies may be a worthwhile investment.
- ✓ **Remember:** In accordance with DRC best practice, certain software options are not recommended as storage solutions, these are: Dropbox, Google Drive, Google Docs.

Table 1 Overview of the 15 most popular software and tools reported by MEAL teams as of November 2020⁷

		Number of countries reporting to use the platform per function			Total number of CO reporting to use the software/tool
	Software/Tool	Data Collection	Data storage and processing	Data analysis	
1	Excel	9	17	23	23
2	Kobo	22	15	5	22
3	Power Bi	-	3	18	18
4	Sharepoint	1	14	-	14
5	OneDrive	1	6	-	6
6	SPSS	-	1	6	6
7	Google Tools	2	5	2	5
8	Powerpoint	-	-	5	5
9	ODK	4	2	1	4
10	ONA	4	3	1	4
11	Access	4	3	2	4
12	External hard drive		4		4
13	Word	2	3	4	4
14	Gis	2	2	3	3
15	Activity Info	2	1	-	2

⁴Statement confirmed by ALNAP members during informal consultations in 2018 and by individual agencies (See Terre des Hommes: <https://www.tdh.ch/en/media-library/documents/digital-case-management-tool>). See article in ICTworks "Stop Reinventing the Flat Tire with Custom Software Development": <https://www.ictworks.org/stop-reinventing-the-flat-tire-with-custom-software-development/#.X6khKuCo9EY>

⁵A software suite or application suite represents a system of connected software, programmes or IM systems/databases.

⁶This can include, but is not limited to, Child Protection Information Management System+, Gender-Based Violence Information Management System or other types of Protection related information management for emergency response operations (PRIMERO, <https://support.primero.org>)

⁷Table based on Compliance Self-Check process, with participation of the MEAL teams and completed in November 2020.



DEFINING INFORMATION NEEDS

CHALLENGES

When determining the scope of IMS it is important to define data, information and analysis needs concretely and define the purpose of the IMS⁸. Investment decisions should be accompanied by defined requirements for the system, with a clearly stated and strong focus on the **minimum requirements**. Given various perspectives and expectations this can easily become either unclear or overambitious.

Putting in place an Information Management System (IMS) should be based on a **defined purpose**⁵ and followed by an adequate design phase. Project development, including software selection, configuration and testing should be based on clearly identified needs of end-users and planning that process alongside implementation is a challenge on its own.

A broad range of perceived needs and an over-ambitious comprehensive scope of imagined IMS can be a serious obstacle to pursue the project at all. Focusing on critical needs might help with a successful design and implementation within a reasonable time frame and with financial resources committed. This could concern the ability to report specific data externally in regular donor reports, reports to authorities, allowing referral management or tracking participants numbers. Differences in programming across countries need to be well reflected in the requirements. In some contexts, a system should allow for registration of “mass” activities and mass distributions, while in other countries this would be based on individual registration and tracking of people and families participating or benefiting from DRC programmes (or a combination of both).

There is a tendency in CVA interventions, for example, to over-collect and under-analyse, or alternatively, analyse expenditure data more to pass judgment on recipients’ use of CVA than to reflect on possible flaws in programme design or implementation. See [PIM Principle ‘Defined Purpose’](#).

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Assessing needs should be comprehensively done. While a single system may not address all country needs, having a broader picture at this point may help address issues of duplication. Several fragmented systems are costly, hard to maintain and may not be effective. Harmonisation is a key factor to consider here.
- ✓ The minimum requirements will vary depending on the programmatic scope, project portfolio and overall country office strategy. They should be defined specifically for the dedicated offices and teams.
- ✓ Some needs will be critical, potentially IT security, data protection or programmes involving large quantities of sensitive data. Critical needs must be highlighted.
- ✓ Identifying a longer list of requirements and functions can be accompanied by qualifying these needs as ‘must have’ and ‘optional’. Tender documents can be designed to assess whether and to what proposed solutions meet full scope of critical (must have) needs and what other needs are covered.
- ✓ Utilising an Agile approach to system development, creating system iterations of ever increasing complexity over a longer period, can help you organise your requirements list, and manage team expectations.
- ✓ Given the dynamic character of the humanitarian sector as well as the changing nature of needs and programmes, the systems and solutions will be changing. Setting up a flexible system to track new requirements early on is also helpful to develop the desired solution step by step.

Use case of defining Information needs

A Protection Coordinator in a selected country identifies the need to harmonise information management processes and systems for protection programming data that is being gathered in the country through needs assessments and protection monitoring. Protection and IM colleagues across the various locations of the country operation use different ways and tools to collect and process data, which the Protection Coordinator cannot easily analyse at the country level. Along with the idea of harmonising processes comes the decision to digitalise data collection and processing to the extent possible, where electricity and internet access remain scarce in various parts of the country. The Coordinator decides to look externally for a company to support this process of harmonisation and digitalisation and drafts a ToR for this purpose. What remains unclear is to what extent the current systems are functioning in the different locations, whether the data collected is relevant and meets its intended purpose and what the protection and IM colleagues implementing the protection monitoring and needs assessment activities think of the harmonisation and digitalisation. The importance of **defining and clearly articulating the purpose** of the information management system before creating a new system is key, as it requires a thorough consultative design process that includes colleagues who are involved in the data collection and processing. In this case, the purpose of designing a new IM system was to ensure easier processing and analysis at the national level, however the purpose was not clearly defined and did not take into account the needs, capacities, and purposes for data collection at the area level. If the intended purpose is not ironed out in the design stage, in collaboration with all people both inputting to and making use of the system, then ensuring the system is fit for purpose becomes very difficult and it will most likely fail.

⁸See [PIM Principle ‘Defined Purpose’](#).

Table 2 Excerpts from user requirements identified for IMS in DRC Turkey (selection of examples from 70 user requirements).

Priority	Components	Proposed features	As a(n)...	I...	be able...	So that...
1	Data collection	Develop standard forms in a digital format	System Admin	Must	To develop convert paper forms into digital version on XLS format	I can upload them to any ODK based digital data collection tool for data collection on mobile devices
1	Data collection	Ensure data privacy according to regional and country level policy (GDPR/KVKK)	System Admin	Must	To include questions on consent	No data is collected without consent of individuals
2	Data collection	Access to data collection forms for beneficiary registration and follow-up	Data assistant	Should	To capture GPS information	I can collect information on project location, or polygons of land areas where relevant.
1	Data collection	Track beneficiaries across projects and sectors (case management)	Data assistant	Must	To add beneficiary monitoring data for selected activities and indicators	I can add results data against the project activities and indicators
1	Data analysis	Import data from data collection tool to the application	System Admin	Must	Align the standard forms with the data fields in the application	The forms data can be easily match with the application, without having to do manual matching
1	Data analysis	Ensure data privacy according to regional and country level policy (GDPR/KVKK)	System Admin	Must	To mark certain fields as sensitive in the forms e.g. beneficiary personal information	I can control who has access to the data and when data is exported the sensitive information can be redacted
1	Data analysis	Maintain master beneficiary list	System Admin	Must	To maintain a master beneficiary list with each record having a unique ID	No duplicate beneficiary is recorded
2	Data analysis	Maintain master beneficiary list	System Admin	Should	Perform duplicate checks on data in the application	So that we can identify if two beneficiaries have been entered as duplicates
3	Data storage	Both online and offline capability	System Admin	Would like to	To access data offline via offline caching or offline-enabled strategies	I can have access data in the application for viewing purposes when I do not have internet access
1	Data storage	Ensure data privacy according to regional and country level policy (GDPR/KVKK)	Project staff	Must	To ensure personally identifiable information are restricted to only administrations view	I can ensure beneficiary privacy is protected
2	Data storage	Ensure data privacy according to regional and country level policy (GDPR/KVKK)	System Admin	Should	To ensure that a Data Privacy Impact Assessment (DPIA) is conducted	I can be aware and inform all key stakeholder of the potential impact the application can have on data privacy.
1	Data visualization	Real-time dashboards showing data from project level to country and regional level	Project staff	Must	To access online real-time dashboards to linked to the application	I can see indicator results and reach data to understand implementation progress
2	Data visualization	Real-time dashboards showing data from project level to country and regional level	SMT and Regional staff	Should	To access dashboards showing achievements in comparison with financial data in the long term	It can support grants follow-up and assist in reporting on value-for-money
3	Data visualization	Real-time dashboards showing data from project level to country and regional level	Project staff	Would like to	Dashboard templates are available for team members to reuse for different reporting purposes	Dashboard templates are available for team members to reuse for different reporting purposes.
1	System requirement	Both online and offline capability	System Admin	Must	To host the application and database in the cloud	It can be accessed as an application through a web browser while I have an internet connection
1	System requirement	Application compatibility	System Admin	Must	To have the front-end web application be agnostic to any browser	I can access the application from any browser
2	System requirement	Language options	System Admin	Should	To setup multi-language option for the web application especially (English and Arabic)	I can view the app in the chosen language
3	System requirement	Application to integrate with other internal systems	System Admin	Would like to	To include data model references to the Protection database (Primero)	I can ensure we are mapping how fields might interested in future integrations
2	System requirement	Ensure data privacy according to regional and country level policy (GDPR/KVKK)	System Admin	Should	To run automatic data backups to a cloud-based replication database	I can ensure no data is lost

IM STRATEGY AND INVESTMENT PLANS

CHALLENGES

One of the larger challenges for any process of engaging with the development and investment in IMS is connecting the internal information needs with the external environment and building consensus about and buy-in for future IMS solutions. While initial agreements are oral and based on meetings and workshops, they should quickly be transferred into a simple and straightforward strategy and investment plan.

If strategies or plans fail to be clear, focused, concrete and accepted, the risk of not succeeding is greater. Furthermore, if investment plans are vague the process will be further affected. Investment often requires allocating sufficient funds for the next stages. Investments also require assigning responsible project/programme managers in charge of the overall implementation as well as allocating staff time and clarifying their responsibilities to support the process.

Uneven level of skills/competencies among staff, including technical and managerial staff will further exacerbate the work on IM solutions. Thus, awareness raising, basic but essential communication, and the need to engage management, programme, grants and support services colleagues is crucial.

Lack of clarity about the global IM ambition should not stop regional and country level strategy development. All in all, vague strategies or plans and lack of clear resources at proposal and implementation stages will lead to further delays.

Existing programmatic or monitoring and evaluation staff capacities as well as existing system(s), whether digitalized or not, should inform any further development and when system(s) are already in place, it might be worth an upgrade with additional features and functions, where technically possible. When there is no digital software in place, the foundation for the development of the IMS solution could draw on the existing capacity of data collection, protection monitoring, or data analysis.

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Based on a context analysis define the basic parameters, limitations and opportunities for improving IMS and how that may position DRC vis-à-vis other partners and constituencies.
- ✓ Use ongoing or planned evaluations to feed into the decision-making process. Add IM to the scope of ongoing evaluations of overall programme effectiveness frameworks to identify gaps and weaknesses.
- ✓ Discuss with your peers from other countries how they have approached IMS design and request a demonstration of the system use, if available.
- ✓ Invest in education for MEAL staff often directly involved in data collection and analysis.
- ✓ Plan the development and implementation of IMS as a project with a defined specific purpose. Deployment of the system should be integrated with the programming and country workplans. Implementation of an IMS requires dedicated resources in terms of time, staff, training, communication, financial and organizational means.
- ✓ Recruit and/or appoint a specific IM specialist to manage the process/project.
- ✓ Prepare an IMS strategy and an investment plan which outlines how resources are mobilized.
- ✓ Allocate funds in grants/project proposals and develop a co-funding strategy with a long enough time-span, taking into account likely delays. Include IM in the budget, with costs for consultancy, design, roll-out, development and maintenance.
- ✓ Launch essential awareness raising and communication for management, programme, grants and support services colleagues.
- ✓ Keep researching fundraising opportunities for IMS development, upgrades and maintenance.





TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS AND PROCUREMENT PROCESSES

CHALLENGES

Selecting a technical solution has the potential to unravel a number of dilemmas, and further considerations in determining which requirements are included and which are not. This can further pose a range of implications with regards to resource allocation and feasibility for the organisation.

Various approaches exist ranging between: a) hiring a dedicated developer (EAGL RO); b) contracting a consultant or consultants to develop a bespoke system (DRC Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Turkey); c) subscribing to a Software as a Service package (DRC Yemen and Jordan) with varying degrees of customisation available; or d) picking an off-the-shelf product. Each comes with dilemmas e.g. bespoke systems have the potential to be better tailored but humanitarian organisations rarely have sufficient skill-sets and staff capacity to cover all aspects of the system design, development and implementation, and maintain it over time. Out-of-the-box systems offers greater support and stability of the system, and potentially greater user acceptance, but require licensing agreements and often limit the scope of the system and customisation in line with requirements.

This is likely to result in maintaining several databases, platforms or systems. With the proliferation of systems, and new challenges, the need arises to establish cross-sectoral analysis options, frameworks or supportive platforms.

The procurement standards oblige teams to carry out tenders, and getting high quality bids might be tricky in some contexts/countries. At the different stages of the process, it might be inevitable to hire external support and consultants, which on its own is challenging. Additionally, procurement processes may require significant time investment over a relatively long period of time compared to project timeframe.

When deciding about the investment, consider maintenance of the system in the future, both in terms of staff, technical capacity and resources. *This includes budgeting for licensing, staff, training as well as other potential costs.*

These recurrent costs should be budgeted from early on for a period of 1-2 years. When entering into a third-party partnership or delivery agreement, interested parties should push for favourable **support conditions** where possible, such as third-party service support for IT solutions implementation and maintenance.

Out-of-the-box solutions are unlikely to meet all IM requirements, with competing interests between DRC and the IMS service provider as to which adaptations are included and which are subject to added fees.

In addition, Financial Service Providers (FSP), contracted to deliver CVA, often offer IM platforms as part of an interoperable package, but this risks DRC being tied into certain delivery mechanisms, and data sharing obligations which are not ideal.

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Consider various set-ups for developing IMS. Developing bespoke systems and hiring a dedicated developer is generally not advised unless there is a clear capacity and funding secure for years to come. Engaging a team/group rather than an individual proofs to be a more sustainable solution and is always recommended.
- ✓ Start the procurement process early and avoid prolonged preparations, especially if IMS development is tied to a specific project.
- ✓ Build systems based on **existing programmatic or monitoring and evaluation staff capacities as well as existing system(s)**, whether digitalized or not. Invest in sustainable solutions that will work beyond contract duration of individual staff.
- ✓ Consider system development and adaptations in the future and ability to expand the scope, including scalability options, and the use of APIs.
- ✓ Having a demonstration stage in the hiring process helps to filter out the options that are applicable.
- ✓ Many context/program specific systems meet needs more directly, i.e. inter-agency coordination.
- ✓ Consider use of software products such as: PowerBi (with reduced licensing costs for DRC) and programming via APIs to connect various IM solutions and platforms.
- ✓ Whenever feasible use inter-agency coordination and standardised systems (Microsoft, KoBo). Always consider data privacy and protection protocols prioritising the do no harm approach for People of Concern and the principle of “do no digital harm”.
- ✓ Recurrent costs should be budgeted from early on for a period of 1-2 years.
- ✓ When entering into a third-party partnership take care of delivery plans for support conditions and maintenance.
- ✓ Consider IT security certificates.
- ✓ Provision of appropriate infrastructure and support (Internet, cloud storage...etc)
- ✓ Use of focal points overseeing system development at CO/RO level
- ✓ IMS technical solutions can be applied throughout and beyond the programme cycle to improve programme efficiency and effectiveness, e.g. in CVA interventions, IMS can support tracking of CVA, modality decision-making, market system analysis, expenditure/usage analysis and value for money analysis to name just a few.

It is worth investing time in **product selection**, including partaking in product demonstrations of the software/proof of concept based on the respective requirements. **Information sharing and lessons-learned from DRC operations** are also useful resources. Selection may also include negotiating terms of the contract, which is possible in most cases. Licensing agreements should be negotiated prior to deployment of the system, which includes negotiating the cost, as well as continuous support of the vendor. This is particularly important during implementation which could take from several weeks to several months to get the system up and running, once the product is configured, tested and ready for use. In cases of contracted development, a mutually-agreeable statement of work (SOW) should be written to define, in clear terms, all benchmarks, deliverables and payment terms privy to the contract agreement.



TESTING AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

CHALLENGES

Design and development of the IMS happens in parallel to humanitarian programme implementation and requires some level of time commitment to ensure it can be successful in the future.

Pilot testing is an approach that can help to identify and refine issues. If testing is not emphasised and carried out it is likely to lead to further problems at the later stage.

Investment in IMS can be most successful if guided by a “**start small**” approach, with an emphasis on critical parts of the system and simple solutions, rather than a complex and comprehensive approach. Planning for core modules and add on functions may pay off when the operation has the potential for scaling up and fundraising for the IMS development.

Poor planning of implementation and a lack of phased approach may easily lead to implementation fatigue during the early stages, especially if there are bugs or unresolved technical issues.

If technical problems are present, i.e. poor Internet access, poor data synchronization, data processing errors, the whole process may be put on hold.

Insufficient internal capacity to set the processes in motion may further cause frustration. This includes but is not limited to digitalizing forms, holding trainings and integrating with Microsoft Office package apps e.g. PowerBi, Access and etc..

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ In the initial stages identify the type of data, the sector, field location or project which allows for testing envisaged IM solutions.
- ✓ Piloting and testing are likely to help understand the core gaps and needs and inform next steps.
- ✓ Demonstration sessions allow for operations to have an insight into the full potential of core and additional functionalities.
- ✓ One tested approach (Iraq) is to sequence development of tools workflows, forms and data processing sector by sector, starting with the ones that have defined SOPs and an established practice amongst staff⁹.
- ✓ A pragmatic approach to developing a system is to digitalize and document the existing practice and follow programme and implementation teams in their everyday work and design solutions that are flexible; these should be mirrored as much as possible within the current practice. IM systems must match on-going activities and required information outputs.
- ✓ Check connectivity assessments with your local IT colleagues or get in touch with HQ IT.
- ✓ Finally, a smart approach also includes setting up a simple Excel file to plan for potential future tools, functionalities or developments, as the system and needs must be flexible and evolving. Collect feedback from early or future users aimed at improving systems continuously. (Yet, data collected for a specific sector needs should connect with the other database)

⁹(Yet, data collected for a specific sector needs should connect with the other database)



FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES CRITICAL TO SUCCESSFUL IMC IMPLEMENTATION

CHALLENGES

It is not uncommon that resources, including envisaged **time and funds**, do not allow for full-scale implementation on IMS. While the scope might have been defined well and decisions have been taken, often new factors arise which require adaptation. During development processes teams often face changes in programme activities, portfolio, and modalities of implementation which might complicate the deployment of IMS. At this stage, senior management take a decision to **invest in what is critical for an effective operation**. Limited support from senior management (in terms of allocating resources and leadership support) may hamper the process.

Adequate staff support for IMS is necessary, including staff with programmatic and technical competencies in IM. The division of labour helps smooth implementation and prevents the potential of unexpected workloads for MEAL or Programme staff affecting both areas of work. The involvement of field staff and showcasing the use of the system is a practical step to ensure successful adoption of the solution.

If programming involves partners, it is important to consider whether and how they are going to use the system. Additionally, if data needs to be shared amongst partners, there should be a data protection agreement in place which reflects the respective parties' arrangement with respect to gaining People of Concern consent, governance, processing and sharing (if necessary) of personal data.

Over-dependence on technical solutions risks diminishment of necessary human involvement throughout the IM process (e.g. analytical framework definition, system design, data collection, analysis interpretation).

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Ensure Senior Management ownership and support. Management ownership and support is needed throughout the implementation of the project and should follow any investment decisions. This includes mobilization of CO personnel, readiness for changing practices and dedication of time for deploying the system.
- ✓ Invest in what you need. It's not uncommon for such projects that resources, including dedicated time, do not allow for a full-scale wish-list. In such cases, invest in what is critical for effective operation.
- ✓ Demonstrate benefits of the IM solutions to the management continuously to keep management supportive to the investment.
- ✓ Take care of good documentation during design, including documenting decisions. Handover becomes easier in case of staff turnover and changing to global systems. Documentation of the process and requirements should be prepared during the design, implementation, as well as the decision-making process. In cases of staff turnover, such documentation becomes critical for successful completion of investments and its effective maintenance.
- ✓ Put in place adequate staff with the necessary competencies to support an IMS project. It concerns a set of skills and the division of labour, including programme, MEAL and IT personnel.
- ✓ While sectoral and functional needs may require several systems limit the number to minimum, preferably with EU hosting.
- ✓ When working in partnerships take care of MoUs and specific provisions in terms of informed consent and data sharing.
- ✓ Develop analysis layers (E.g. PowerBi) or databases that allow cross-sectoral data analysis.
- ✓ Identify the training needs the IMS solution involves beforehand and adequately plan training sessions & capacity building support.





ROLL-OUT, TRAININGS AND ORGANISATION CULTURE

CHALLENGES

Any new investments and change of practices require a roll-out strategy, support for launching the new system, and addressing and managing potential discomfort and/or resistance of the personnel affected by change.

The overall learning is, that there is an under-estimation as to how much these processes cost and how much time and effort they require to be fully implemented.

Regardless of the consultations and attention to processes, iterative design of the system may not equal staff acceptance. Shock and resistance may emerge to a varying degree and will need to be addressed, via different means including leadership communication, trainings and skills and attitudes development. Organisational culture can both positively and negatively affect the process.

Trainings should combine both technical features as well as changes in programming, procedures and SOPs. Roll-out should contribute to building of the capacity of the CO to integrate IM solutions rather than overburdening it and in the end enhance efficiency, relevance and effectiveness of programme response.

Insufficient skills will play a major part in it and if capacity building for staff to use tools is limited it will threaten implementation and will affect the use of the system.

Subsequently, staff turnover needs to be factored in and trainings should be embedded into overall on-boarding.

Another challenge is to attract staff with IM skillsets in humanitarian sector to help manage and roll-out the system and many of the skilled staff expressing preference for work in the private sector.

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Allow good time for implementation and address change management. Ensure leadership support for IMMS roll-out strategy.
- ✓ Plan trainings that combine both technical features as well as changes in programming, procedures and, SOPs.
- ✓ Do not overestimate your staff IM capacity. Even if you think that the system that you are creating will be intuitive and accessible it will create problems. Refresher training or support may be needed.
- ✓ Some staff might not be keen on accepting technology: case workers, partners, lawyers. Make sure all staff receive tailored on-boarding.
- ✓ Roll-out should contribute to building of the capacity of the CO to integrate IM solutions rather than overburdening it.
- ✓ Incorporate IMS training into onboarding processes adequate for the post.
- ✓ Prepare a user manual and plan for necessary trainings to maintain the use of the system.
- ✓ Identify barriers to adopting the systems and work out change management strategy together with country management.
- ✓ Strengthen initiatives that strengthen evidence-based and data-driven organisational culture.





DATA RESPONSIBILITY AND DATA PROTECTION

CHALLENGES

Do No Harm implies that humanitarian organisations protect the data of People of Concern. Yet, data protection is a complex matter and is subject to different laws and regulations. Teams involved in IMS face various challenges ranging from legal questions to operational aspects. Some of them include: identifying which data protection protocols to follow across the operations (GDPR¹⁰ vs. Cloud Act); considering hosting arrangements which are not consistent and require HQ guidance; or lack of standardised approaches, leading to colleagues creating workarounds and last but not least access to systems creating risk for data being collected and stored incorrectly. Beyond data protection, the humanitarian sector must face a broader challenge of data responsibility. The recent (February 2021) IASC Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action¹¹ has identified a number of challenges which correspond with the problems faced by many DRC operations i.e. lack of common definitions and related inconsistencies in understanding and use of terminology among humanitarian organizations about data responsibility; gaps in existing guidance and standards, particularly regarding the responsible management of sensitive data. The guidance points to an absence of shared and endorsed tools and processes for implementing data responsibility in practice and lack of capacity for responsible data management among many humanitarian organizations and their staff.

Support for data responsibility, and data protection policies and tools is limited in the humanitarian sector as well as within DRC, forcing country operations to develop their own policies, tools, and protocols.

OPPORTUNITIES

- ✓ Invest time in education for yourself and your teams about data protection in the humanitarian sector. Explore Handbook on Data Protection.
- ✓ Get familiar with the IASC Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action, including recommended actions and proposed approaches and tools e.g. Data Responsibility Diagnostic Template.
- ✓ Explore the PIM guide and the Data Sharing Agreements¹².
- ✓ Perform Data Protection Impact Assessments and repeat them periodically.
- ✓ Include data protection considerations in SOPs and guidelines for IMS.
- ✓ In case of FRCM IMS invest in software that can set limits on the amount and type of information users can gather and access so staff in different locations and across different roles will have different permissions.
- ✓ Follow organisational developments, including the scheduled and coordinated roll out of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) across DRC operations. This should enhance the way in which data protection policies are handled and clarify the different data points and jurisdictions to be followed.
- ✓ The hardware used to run IMS systems (e.g. laptop, phone, tablet, server etc) must also be adequately protected.
- ✓ Tap into the opportunity of the consolidation exercise of the different systems that are in use within DRC's corporate IT infrastructure. Prioritize the use of Microsoft products, such as SharePoint.

GDPR and additional data protection regulations

Data protection concerns and upholding of policy across different jurisdictions, at DRC, we are in the process of scaling up the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) across global operations. Where operations are implementing programmes and may be provided with additional data protection acts to uphold, best practice is to align with GDPR, until there is a political agreement that encourages a differentiated approach.

Key definitions in relation to data responsibility and data protection

Data responsibility¹³ in humanitarian action is the safe, ethical and effective management of personal and non-personal data for operational response, in accordance with established frameworks for personal data protection.

- **Safe** | Data management activities ensure the security of data at all times, respect and uphold human rights and other legal obligations, and do not cause harm.

- **Ethical** | Data management activities are aligned with the established frameworks and standards for humanitarian ethics and data ethics.

- **Effective** | Data management activities achieve the purpose(s) for which they were carried out.

¹⁰General Data Protection Regulation.

¹¹United Nations in Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action, IASC, 2021.

¹²IASC Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action (Feb. 2021) and Handbook on Data protection in humanitarian action <https://www.dropbox.com/s/9ppuuk8g9iqfg26/Handbook%20on%20data%20protection%20in%20humanitarian%20action.pdf>

Personal Data: Any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person ('data subject'). An identifiable natural person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of that natural person¹⁴.

Sensitive Data: Data classified as sensitive based on the likelihood and severity of potential harm that may materialize as a result of its exposure in a particular context. Both personal and non-personal data can be sensitive. Many organizations have specific classification systems regarding what constitutes sensitive data in order to facilitate data management practices.

Data protection: The systematic application of a set of institutional, technical and physical safeguards that preserve the right to privacy with respect to the processing of personal data¹⁵.

(Data) Privacy: An individual's control or influence over what information related to them may be collected and stored, by whom, and to whom that information may be disclosed.

Data security¹⁶ : A set of physical, technological and procedural measures that safeguard the confidentiality, integrity and availability of data and prevent its accidental or intentional, unlawful or otherwise unauthorized loss, destruction, alteration, acquisition, or disclosure.

SECTION 2: IMS PROCESS AND PHASES

One way of looking at establishing IMS is through the different stages of the process. During a practitioners' workshop in 2018, they were defined as the exploration phase, development and implementation and finally, rollout and maintenance phases. It is to be noted that there are other terms and descriptions from The Humanitarian Sector and IT sector respectively to describe the phases identified. It is important to consider how these phases help to inform us in understanding the complexities and response actions at the later stages of the IMS process, thus improving overall preparedness, development plans and capacities to tackle them early on. However, the boundaries between different phases blur and development of tools (such as IT platforms or systems), piloting as well as implementation are iterative processes often progressing at a different pace for different sectoral or technical teams, with improvements and adaptations taking place over a period, that is typically longer than initially envisaged.

"IMS phases blend into each other. A lot of challenges for design and development of the IM system relate to initial exploration and needs identification. The success of the system implementation is determined by the success or failure of the previous step. Regardless of the applied methodology, the process often involves conversation with teams about their needs, their working environments, their workflows."

James Norris, Global MEAL network event, November 2020

¹⁴UN OCHA, OCHA Data Responsibility Guidelines (Working Draft) (2019), <https://centre.humdata.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/OCHA-DR-Guidelines-working-draft-032019.pdf>.

¹⁵Definition developed by the UN Privacy Policy Group (2017)

¹⁶The Centre for Humanitarian Data. Glossary: <https://centre.humdata.org/glossary/>.

1. Explore political context and government approach to data collection (e.g. disallowance of data collection in Iran, Syria)
2. Factor in technical capacity and connectivity (need for offline access)
3. Recap donor needs and requirements (including IATI reporting)
4. Assess data sensitivities and data protection risks

Understanding the software market:

5. Consider limited product selection (limited choice but tested by other NGOs)

6. Focus your needs and don't count on comprehensive solution (focused use, tailored for specific needs which requires deliberate choices)

Exploring internal needs and matching with the context

7. Explore gaps and needs for improved Information Management and match it with the context

8. Define minimum requirements, set it clearly, focus on the minimum requirements and define your critical needs.

9. "Start small" – focus on the critical parts of the system and simple solutions, rather than complex and comprehensive approach.

10. Use existing capacity and systems available in a country (e.g. data collection tools) and/or build additional features and functions on top of that.

11. Take care of budgeting for development and maintenance, including licensing agreement, negotiating development budget and continuous support from IT.

1

EXPLORATION PHASE:

2

IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS AND SELECTION OF IM SOLUTION

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

from the internal IMS working group, Istanbul 2018

4

IMPLEMENTATION, CHANGE MANAGEMENT AND MAINTENANCE

3

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT PHASE

17. Address shock and resistance which relates to all aspects of change management and working with the personnel affected by change.

18. Consider maintenance of the system in the future, both in terms of staff, technical capacity and resources. This includes budgeting for licensing, staff, training as well as other potential costs.

12. Ensure Senior Management ownership and confirm the purpose and scope.

13. Invest in what you need: instead of pursuing with a wish-list, invest in what is critical for effective operation.

14. Take care of good documentation during design, including documenting decisions. Handover becomes easier in case of staff turnover and changing to global systems.

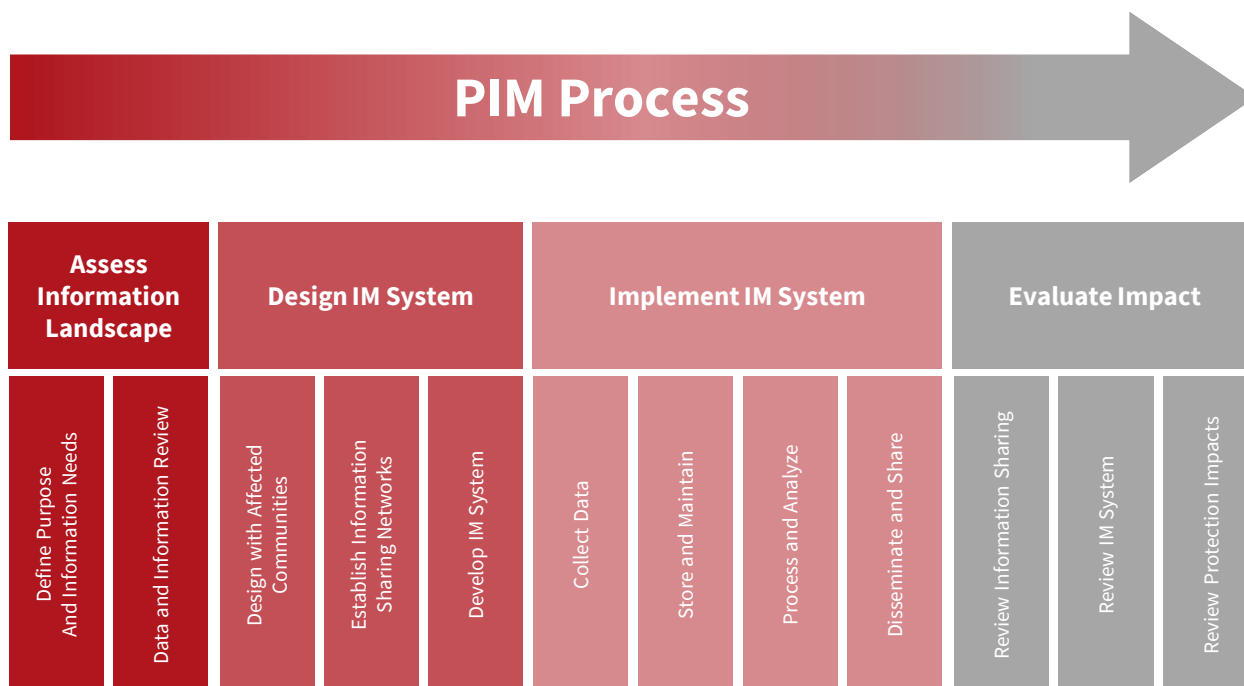
15. Put in place adequate staff with the necessary competencies to support an IMS project. It concerns a set of skills and the division of labour, including programme, MEAL and IT personnel.

16. Identify the training needs the IMS solution involves beforehand and adequately plan training sessions & capacity building support.

The PIM Process (Protection Information Management)

Working through the PIM process steps allows colleagues to ensure that the design, delivery and coordination, of a protection information management process or activity, such as protection monitoring or case management, has taken into consideration the necessary steps, to ensure the best possible result. The PIM process is equally applicable for other sectoral or technical areas of work, with its emphasis on a shared and collaborative approach to data processes, including with a clearly defined purpose from the outset, engagement with affected communities in the design and throughout the process, establishing clear data sharing frameworks at the outset and evaluation and learning from the data systems and process.

It is important to note that the four higher-level steps of the PIM Process — Assess information landscape, Design IM systems, Implement IM systems, and Evaluate impact— are prescriptive. In other words, they should be followed in this sequence. However, the sub-steps falling under these steps may be followed in a prescriptive or a non-prescriptive manner, i.e. they do not necessarily require step-by-step implementation/adherence.





SUPPORT OPPORTUNITIES AND AVAILABLE RESOURCES

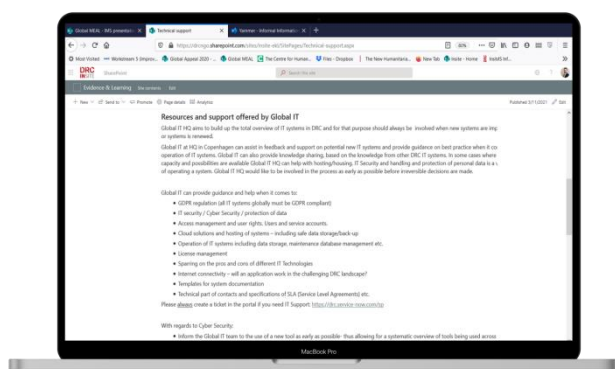
Division for Effectiveness, Knowledge and Learning

The Global MEAL team hosted in the Division for Effectiveness, Knowledge and Learning aims to facilitate organisational dialogue on Information Management, including systems design and development, as well as data collection and analysis.

Global IT

Global IT HQ aims to build up the total overview of IT systems in DRC and for that purpose should always be involved when new systems are implemented or systems are renewed.

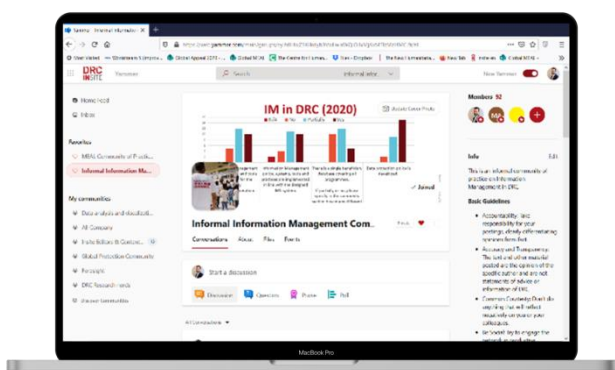
Access technical support on INSITE



Global Protection Unit

The Global Protection Unit (GPU) continues to play a key role in the development of resources (guidance, tools and advice) and capacity building around the Protection Information Management (PIM) Initiative, which is an inter-agency initiative co-led by DRC and UNHCR. The GPU works closely with UN and NGO partners to maintain a PIM Community of Practice, develop new PIM-related guidance and tools, and provide capacity strengthening to colleagues around the world.

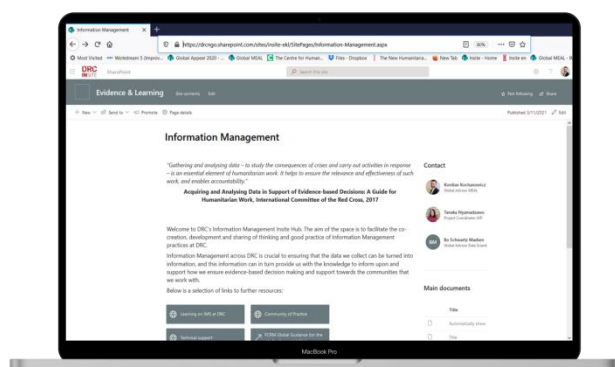
Follow the news and updates on INSITE and Yammer



Cash & Voucher Assistance (CVA) Leads

The Global CVA Lead and, where available, Regional and Country CVA focal points are available to support the development and use of IMS in support of CVA programming, including CVA delivery, market system analysis and monitoring, modality selections or other as relevant.

Access most recent publication on IM





FURTHER RESOURCES:

- Follow [DRC HQ Insite page](#) and [Sharepoint space](#) dedicated to IM tools, support and additional resources which can be [accessed here](#).
- Join and follow announcements, questions and comments on [DRC's Informal Information Management Yammer Group](#).
- For discussions in the wider community, follow: Nethope (<https://nethope.org/>), ICT works (www.ictworks.org/), or Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Tech (<https://meritech.org/>).



Give feedback and get in touch

Whether you have found this resource useful or not, we would love to hear back from you.

Please send us your feedback: [Take 1-2 minutes to fill in this 10-question survey](#).

Feel free to reach out to: mel@drc.ngo

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