Innovations in Monitoring and Evaluation

How SMILER makes M&E more effective

Designing a system that works

Designing and implementing an effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system is crucial to a program's success. M&E is a system to collect information that enables staff to measure progress and impact. With this information, staff can make evidence-based decisions about project activities and report meaningful results to donors.

If done well, M&E is the backbone of a project. If done poorly, M&E is a burden to all and provides useless information. The international relief and development community has invested heavily in evaluation activities (such as baseline and final surveys), but it has paid relatively little attention to the

Staff used the SMILER approach to develop and implement M&E tools, such as surveys, flowcharts and a data management system. *Susan Hahn/CRS*

nitty-gritty tasks of setting up and implementing a useful monitoring system.

The CRS approach

To provide M&E guidance for projects, Catholic Relief Services created SMILER. It is a practical and comprehensive approach for developing a project's M&E system. You can download it at http://www.crsprogramquality.org/publications/tag/propack/.

SMILER stands for simple measurement of indicators for learning and evidence-based reporting. Although M&E is rarely thought of as "simple," SMILER breaks down the process into easily understood parts. It allows staff to collect, analyze and report on data in a systematic and productive way.

Spotlight on Malawi

In Malawi, staff from CRS and eight partners used SMILER to design an M&E system for a five-year, $80-million program called Wellness and Agriculture for Life Advancement.

Staff successfully developed and implemented an M&E system for this complex program. By following the SMILER approach, staff set up methods for collecting all the

Community volunteers gathered data and created reports to monitor the program. *Susan Hahn/CRS*

required data through monitoring, assessments and evaluations.

The program uses the following M&E tools:

- surveys for data collection (baseline, annual and final)
- data flowcharts that are linked to data-gathering and reporting forms
- communication and reporting flowcharts for using data internally and reporting to stakeholders
- tools to continually assess and improve the quality of the service delivery and data
- a data management system for capturing key indicators and information on participants (without double counting)

The M&E system makes the program more efficient and effective. Project managers have an accurate census of the target population. They use this to track which members of which households participated in project activities. M&E staff collected information about eight diverse interventions to track progress and to define ways to improve the program.

Lessons learned

While it is challenging to design and implement an M&E system in a complex operating environment, SMILER has proven to be an effective approach to develop a comprehensive and practical system.

CRS and partners were eager to get the project up and running quickly, but it takes time to set up an M&E system for a large, complicated project. To balance these priorities, managers learned the importance of their leadership roles in ensuring the integrity of the M&E system.

Looking ahead

Staff want to achieve a seamless connection between the SMILER system and ICT4D (information and communications technologies for development). They are discussing how to better integrate the two.

SMILER is endorsed by TOPS* and approved for Food for Peace grantees.

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NAME OF THE PROGRAM

Wellness and Agriculture for Life Advancement

YEARS

2009–2014

LOCATION

Malawi

FUNDING

$80 million from Food for Peace, Development Food Assistance Program

PEOPLE THE PROGRAM IS TARGETING

215,000 chronically food insecure households in five livelihood zones by 2014