M&E IN A COMPLEX OPERATING ENVIRONMENT:

Learning from CRS in Malawi

Susan Hahn
December 2012

CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPENDICES

ACRONYMS

CATCH   Consortium Administration and Technical Capacity Hub
C-MIS   Consortium Management Information System
CRS   Catholic Relief Services
DQA   Data Quality Assessments
FFP   Food for Peace
I-LIFE Improved Livelihoods through Increasing Food Security
IPTT   Indicator Performance Tracking Table
ITT   Indicator Tracking Table
IMPACT Integrated (HIV Effect) Mitigation and Positive Action for Community Transformation
M&E   Monitoring and Evaluation
MCHN   Maternal and Child Health and Nutrition
OVC   Orphans and Vulnerable Children
PLHIV   People Living with HIV
PVO   Private Voluntary Organization
TWG   Technical Working Group
VS&L   Village Savings and Loans
WALA   Wellness and Agriculture for Life Advancement

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I. Executive Summary

Designing and implementing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system demands discipline, focus, and constant attention to the myriad details that necessarily comprise the M&E activities. Good M&E, if done right, is the backbone of a project. It clarifies the intent of the project, measures progress and success, and supports staff by providing timely and accurate information they can use to better manage their activities. Done poorly, M&E is a burden to all and provides useless information to project staff and donors.

While the international relief and development community has invested heavily in evaluation activities to document project success (such as baseline and endline surveys), little attention has been paid to the nitty-gritty tasks of setting up and implementing a useful and used monitoring system. SMILER[1] was developed to provide such guidance; it is a practical and comprehensive approach to developing a project M&E system. SMILER is an acronym for Simple Measurement of Indicators for Learning and Evidence-based Reporting. But M&E is, of course, never quite that simple.

This paper is based on a learning exercise concerning the M&E system for a five year, $80.1 million program called Wellness and Agriculture for Life Advancement[2] (WALA) managed by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in Malawi in southern Africa. CRS manages a consortium of nine[3] Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) to implement interventions in eight sectors: health, agriculture and natural resource management, irrigation, village savings and loans (VS&L), agribusiness, livestock, disaster risk reduction, and governance. The goal of the project, supported by the U.S. government, is to improve food security in five livelihood zones in southern Malawi.

WALA M&E staff used the SMILER approach to design their M&E system. This paper describes the initial SMILER session in November 2009, plus the subsequent work to finalize and implement a comprehensive M&E system. The work of finalizing the system is divided into two phases: 1) building the system through a collaborative process with consortium member technical staff, and 2) managing changes that included turnover of management, technical and M&E staff; joint program activities with a new HIVAIDs project; and development of a shared database. This paper also describes various forms in the WALA M&E system using the SMILER approach, and describes the rationale, forms, and process to establish the database.

WALA operates in a complex environment; there are many elements and agents responding and adapting to each other. Nonetheless, WALA staff have established a functioning M&E system. The following paragraphs summarize the successes, challenges and lessons of their efforts.

WALA has a comprehensive M&E operating system in place. This is a success by any definition. WALA has methods for collecting all the data required through the assessments and evaluations, and via routine monitoring. In brief, there are: surveys for the baseline, annual and endline data collection; data flow maps for each sector linked with data-gathering and reporting forms; communication and reporting maps for the internal flow of data and use of those data; tools to continually assess the quality of the data and service delivery of the program; and a data

---

1 Hahn, Susan and Guy Sharrock. ProPack III, The CRS Project Package, A Guide to Creating a SMILER M&E System. Balti more: CRS 2010

2 "Wala" to shine or bring light in the local language Chichewa, is a term that resonates with rural communities in the targeted Southern Region of Malawi.

3 There are nine PVOs in the WALA project: CRS has overall management responsibilities, seven PVOs are implementing the project in designated areas, and one PVO provides technical support for agribusiness activities.

management system to provide information on participants and key indicators, as well as a pilot initiative using a mobile application.

WALA has successfully integrated two projects into one database that enables staff to have an accurate count of participants and the activities they participate in, without double counting. While the database is still a work in progress, it establishes a tested model for other CRS projects in the concepts and mechanics of designing and establishing a relational database.

The WALA M&E working group collaborated effectively with consortium technical staff to develop the M&E system. WALA staff got off to a good start with the SMILER coaching session and then full engagement with PVO staff to develop all the forms for the M&E system for each sector. Within a six month period, data flow maps and forms were developed for all sectors (livestock was added at a later date).

Timely implementation of the M&E system with nine partners is a challenge. Application of tools and processes in a complex environment include: staff turnover, data-gathering and reporting by community volunteers, organizing and managing data by implementing partners, and good use of data to review progress.

Agreement on the content of reports and adherence to it is a central requirement of an M&E system. While M&E serves a greater purpose than reporting to the project hierarchy and donors, reports are a key component of the M&E system. In WALA, the quarterly report format was set up to serve project staff and donors. But with staff turnover, and a degree of flexibility allowed by WALA, strict adherence to this format waned resulting in reports that contain different data, which are useful to the individual PVOs but not useful for analysis for the entire program.

Management and technical staff have leadership roles in ensuring the integrity of the M&E system. M&E is a support function to the project managers and technical staff who require useful and timely information. Managers and technical staff are eager to get the project up and running, and need information during that first year of project implementation just at the same time the M&E system is being developed. Yet, it takes time to set up a comprehensive M&E system for a large, multi-sector project. Parallel systems can be created to respond to additional technical information needs and to respond to ad hoc requests from stakeholders. While requests for other information have to be factored in, the basic commitments to collect the same data and to use common forms have to hold.

Management has a clear-cut role in ensuring adherence to the M&E system. A fully operational, useful M&E system requires close management oversight to make sure that staff are collecting the required data, using standard report formats, uploading data in the database, and analyzing the finding in regularly scheduled events, such as annual meetings. While M&E staff lead the process to design and implement the system, the managers make it happen.

SMILER supported the development and implementation of the M&E system for a complex program, but more remains to be done. Despite the challenges with SMILER, WALA staff have produced an impressive M&E system that supports a multi-sector program with nine partners. It has a fairly comprehensive set of data-gathering and report forms, and a clear mechanism for getting that information from the source to the final donor reports. Use of the data by project staff to manage the project continues to be challenging. The PVO quarterly meetings and the technical working groups are venues for discussing accomplishments and targets, but these management and technical staff could engage in a deeper analysis of the findings and implications for project direction. There are also more opportunities for analysis and rich discussion with staff who work directly in communities, and for discussion within the communities. To address this need, WALA is turning its attention to more meaning engagement in the M&E system by participants.

II. Introduction and Background

A. Wellness and Agriculture for Life Advancement – WALA

CRS Malawi was awarded a five-year Food for Peace (FFP) Title II Multi-Year Assistance Program that started in July 2009 and is being implemented by a consortium of nine PVOs. CRS leads this consortium with a management structure called the Consortium Administration and Technical Capacity Hub (CATCH). The consortium members, each implementing the program in a defined geographic area, include Africare, Chikwawa Diocese, Emmanuel International, Project Concern International, Save the Children U.S., Total Land Care, and World Vision International. ACDI/VOCA is also a consortium member that provides technical support in agribusiness activities.

The WALA[4] program aims to achieve improved food security for chronically food insecure households in five livelihood zones in southern Malawi through three strategic objectives:

1. **Human capabilities of 170,724 vulnerable households are protected and enhanced.** WALA will use behavior change strategies, food-based nutritional interventions and capacity building to prevent malnutrition and childhood illnesses. WALA will improve the nutritional status of children by focusing on growth and development of the child from conception through age two. Children under five showing signs of faltering will receive appropriate nutrition support in collaboration with health services.

2. **Livelihood capacities of 147,500 households are protected and enhanced**. WALA will target at least 70 percent of smallholder farm families participating in Strategic Objective 1 activities with a comprehensive package of services to improve agricultural production through irrigation, improved seeds and other interventions with proven effectiveness at raising rural incomes. VS&L groups will mobilize community resources in support of savings and credit needs. WALA will also enhance the business and marketing skills of 20,600 smallholder farmers by organizing them into marketing groups, and offering business skill development, value chain support and engagement with the private sector to raise incomes.

3. **The resiliency of 273 communities is protected and enhanced**. WALA will build capacity of 273 communities to better solve problems and provide for basic needs. WALA staff will strengthen community safety nets of 21,203 households through targeted food aid, establish trigger indicators for shocks and expand links to community structures to promote good governance.

Strategies for each strategic objective will incorporate interventions that support cross-cutting themes of HIV mitigation, gender equality, and environmental protection. WALA is supported by the U.S. Government under the Title II Food for Peace (FFP) initiative.

The WALA program follows I-LIFE[5] - Improved Livelihoods through Increasing Food Security. I-LIFE was a five year, $70 million, USAID funded Development Assistance Program that was implemented from October 1, 2004 through September 30, 2009. This project was implemented by a consortium of seven PVOs: Africare, CARE, the Catholic Development Commission of Malawi, Emmanuel International, Save the Children U.S., The Salvation Army, and World Vision International. The consortium was co-led by CRS, as grant holder, and CARE International. The co-leads established an independently housed Program Management Unit, with a Program Director for overall program coordination.

---

4   Description of WALA from Wellness and Agriculture for Life Advancement, Multi-Year Assistance Program Proposal, 2009.
5   Description of I-LIFE from Catherine Robins and Rupert Best, I-Life Malawi Development Assistance Program, Final Evaluation, 2009

The goal of the I-LIFE program was to reduce food insecurity among vulnerable households and communities in rural Malawi. To attain this goal it sought to foster both increased and diversified agricultural production and a steady and sustained move of farmers from subsistence toward commercial agricultural production. This focus was combined with actions to improve farming households' nutritional and health practices to reinforce their better food security status. Good governance practices to ensure the sustainability of development efforts were fostered through local institutional strengthening initiatives. The strategic objectives were: 1) livelihood capacities of vulnerable groups are protected and enhanced, 2) nutritional status of vulnerable groups is protected and enhanced, and 3) community and district capacity to protect and enhance food security is improved.

WALA was designed based on lessons learned from the I-LIFE experience, both in program interventions and in the M&E system.

B. SMILER M&E System Defined

SMILER is a comprehensive and practical approach to develop an M&E system for a project that supports learning and decision making based on evidence. (See Appendix A for a brief summary.) This approach enables staff to turn the M&E planning documents from the proposal into a useful M&E system. The SMILER approach usually starts with a "coaching" week that engages a small group of staff to draft the documents required in the M&E system. These documents are organized into an M&E Operating Manual. The draft system is vetted and tested before being finalized, although changes may be required through the life of the project.

SMILER was developed by CRS to attend to the issue of establishing robust monitoring systems for projects. Ample documentation exists for designing and implementing baseline surveys and evaluations, yet little existed on the nitty-gritty task of setting up a monitoring system that enables staff to track indicators to monitor a project, make timely decisions based on evidence, and report to stakeholders. The SMILER guide was published in 2010, a year after the WALA learning exercise, although much of the approach had been developed. The WALA coaching experience contributed to the final publication of the SMILER guide.[6]

C. WALA M&E SMILER Learning Exercise

Early in WALA implementation, the CATCH M&E team (Head of M&E/KM and Senior M&E Officer) planned to use the SMILER approach to develop an M&E system and requested support. A SMILER coaching session was held in November 2009, the fourth month of project implementation. Since that initial session, CATCH and PVO M&E staff developed a comprehensive approach to M&E to be used by the consortium partners in all project activities.

While the SMILER approach has been widely adopted within CRS, the actual implementation of a SMILER system had not yet been fully reviewed or documented. WALA seemed a good place to start because an experienced M&E team was in place that used SMILER from the start. WALA offered an excellent opportunity to learn lessons about the challenges of establishing and implementing an M&E system in a complex environment.

"The WALA SMILER learning exercise will document the process of establishing and implementing an

---

6   In the SMILER manual, two examples come from WALA: Example 6, the Conservation Agriculture Data Flow Map and Example 9, the CATCH Communication and Reporting Map. Table 6 on Follow-up Activities is also based on WALA experiences after the SMILER coaching session.

M&E system using the SMILER approach for a Title II program in CRS Malawi. The study will describe how the M&E system was designed, finalized, implemented, and used, along with successes and challenges at the various stages. As an integral part of WALA's SMILER M&E system, the study will also review the development and use of the Consortium Management Information System (C-MIS) database. Key learning points will be captured and shared with M&E colleagues to improve current practices around the use of SMILER." (See Scope of Work, Appendix B)

The purpose of this learning exercise study is to document the SMILER M&E system and to learn from the experience of WALA. This exercise was *not* designed as an evaluation of the WALA M&E system, but successes and challenges are discussed. The aim is to learn from the hard work and excellent practice of the WALA M&E team and others who have M&E responsibilities, including the community volunteers, and to share this information with managers, technical staff, and M&E practitioners.

Information was gathered in a two week visit to Malawi to work with the CATCH M&E team in the CRS Blantyre office, and a review of documents (Appendix C). Two implementing consortium members were visited in their field offices to meet with staff, and in their target communities to meet their community workers. Interviews were held with a wide range of staff from CATCH and consortium members (Appendix D). A debrief meeting was held with consortium program managers and M&E staff (Appendix E) to review the findings and gather additional information. This debriefing was part of a Technical Working Group (TWG) meeting for M&E staff, which also included training on C-MIS.

Food distribution is a significant part of the WALA program. While the forms to collect information on the transport and distribution of food are part of the overall management system for WALA, those forms are not included in this learning exercise.

III. The WALA SMILER M&E Story

A. Lessons Learned from I-LIFE

The I-LIFE project, the precursor to WALA, was implemented from 2004 – 2009 by a consortium including six of the nine WALA consortium members. The I-LIFE M&E system was developed by a consultant, but there was very little ownership and consequently it was not fully implemented by the consortium members. The I-LIFE mid-term evaluation noted significant challenges with the system and recommended that I-LIFE management hire a full time M&E coordinator. In year three of the grant period, an M&E coordinator was hired. With only two years remaining, the new M&E coordinator focused on 1) strengthening the existing system rather than revamping it, and 2) establishing a system to ensure quality data. He developed a Data Verification and Improvement Guide (Appendix F) and trained consortium M&E officers in its use. He and the Senior M&E Officer mentored staff and monitored data quality assessments at the consortium and PVO levels.

Rather than standardize the forms, the Technical Lead-M&E worked to standardize the information. The consortium members had been submitting a quarterly report to the Project Management Unit, but the data and narrative were different for each PVO. An Indicator Tracking Table (ITT) was created to collect standard information, i.e., a set of performance indicators that all PVOs would collect and report on. The ITTs were submitted by consortium members on a quarterly basis. The M&E team reviewed the quality of the data in the ITTs, provided feedback, and revised the ITT as needed. The M&E officers presented an analysis of performance data and their quality for program managers at quarterly consortium meetings.

The final evaluation of I-LIFE[7] praised components of the M&E system. "I-LIFE has developed a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system, in which monitoring data from partner PVOs is generated regularly and consistently, with provision for regular data quality checks and frequent feedback to field managers at program and sector level." The evaluation team noted that future programs should have consistent M&E staff "with a 'goal owner' for all program M&E activities and sufficient authority to ensure that procedures and methods are followed consistently."

The I-LIFE M&E coordinator also learned lessons from the experience in the project and the final evaluation that he brought to the WALA program.

- Develop a comprehensive M&E system early in the first year involving partner program and M&E staff
- Ensure that an enabling environment is in place to implement the system, such as budget for printing forms for data collection and reporting, training cost, and mentoring and monitoring support from M&E officers to field staff
- Pilot test and refine the M&E tools
- Train staff who will collect and report data for the M&E system
- Scale up the system with regular mentoring and monitoring support from M&E coordinator and officers
- Perform a six month review of the implementation of the M&E system, revise the forms as needed, and identify and fill gaps in the enabling environment

B. WALA SMILER Coaching Session

The WALA project started in June, 2009. To implement the I-LIFE lessons, the WALA M&E planned a SMILER coaching session for November, 2009. M&E officers from CATCH and the PVOs participated in the coaching session. A few of the PVO M&E officers were not able to attend because they were engaged in the data-gathering exercise for the baseline survey.

There were two major challenges during the SMILER coaching week (both are now addressed in the SMILER Guide). First, while it is important to start M&E early in the implementation phase, the timing for WALA was a bit too early. The detailed planning for the sector interventions had not yet been done so it was difficult to develop data-gathering forms. Second, only the M&E staff were invited to the coaching session. The team learned that management and program staff as well as M&E staff have important roles in the coaching session. During the WALA coaching session, a few technical staff were available and they were invited to participate in relevant sessions.

Despite the challenges, many of the documents were created during the SMILER coaching week along with a plan to complete the other components. The following documents were drafted or reviewed.

- Getting Organized
    - o Table of Contents
    - o Purpose Statement
    - o Stakeholder Analysis
    - o M&E Working Group
- Setting Up
    - o Results Framework, Performance Monitoring Plan and Indicator Performance Tracking Table

---

7   Robins and Best, I-LIFE Malawi Development Assistance Program, Final Evaluation.

- Forms and Formats
    - Data Flow Maps – Maternal and Child Health and Nutrition (MCHN), Agriculture and and Irrigation
    - Communication and Reporting Maps – for the implementing PVOs and CATCH
    - Learning to Action prompts

Using the Table of Contents, remaining tasks were listed along with a timeframe and assigned responsibilities. A documentation manager, the Senior M&E Officer, was assigned to manage the process to finalize the forms and ensure they were kept up to date in the M&E Operating Manual.

C. Finalizing the M&E System

The process to finalize the M&E system is divided into two phases, although there is overlap in time between the two. The first phase describes the follow up from the SMILER coaching session, primarily to complete the data flow maps, the data-gathering forms and report formats. Phase two is a description of the many challenges to finalizing that system and implementing it: significant changes in management, M&E, and technical staff; integration of a separate project that was intertwined with WALA both programmatically and in M&E; and development of a database to be used by both projects.

1. Phase I: Building the M&E System. Between November 2009 and April 2010, the M&E team worked to complete the system. This process is fluid and dynamic in any M&E system and this was especially true in WALA with nine PVOs in the consortium. The M&E TWG met with the various sector TWGs: agriculture, irrigation, health, and others to introduce them to the SMILER. Task forces, composed of M&E staff and technical staff, were formed to complete the data flow maps, data-gathering tools and report formats for each sector.

The clear goal for the CATCH M&E team was to have a standard approach. The *ad hoc* system of I-LIFE presented many challenges in gathering data and writing reports. While an ITT existed and all consortium members submitted the data, each collected data with a different process and different forms. In the SMILER coaching week, participants agreed to have a "consortium-wide uniform M&E system with partner flexibility to complement." This principle was much discussed and agreed upon when writing the M&E purpose statement during the coaching session.

Developing one coherent set of data gathering and reporting tools for WALA with nine PVOs was not, however, a simple process. This exercise was an "eye opener" for the CATCH M&E team. First, it was a mixed blessing to follow I-LIFE. While much was learned from that experience, some technical staff wanted to carry on with the M&E system they used in I-LIFE; it was a struggle to get all the technical staff to accept the SMILER approach. Not only did these technical staff want to use their own forms, some thought that SMILER was "different from M&E." In fact, some I-LIFE forms were used, but revised for WALA; other forms had to be developed from scratch. Regardless of the starting point, it took time to convince some staff that SMILER was M&E, and to get agreement on one set of forms to be used by all.

Second, the detailed implementation plans for the sector interventions were still being developed during this timeframe. The priority for the technical staff was to develop their action plan, not to work on the M&E system. Third, while the M&E team attempted to be as inclusive as possible, getting full representation from all the PVOs was difficult. The M&E team worked with at least three or four PVO sector staff and ensured that those not included in the draft design had an opportunity to review the data-gathering and report forms before they were finalized.

Lastly, keeping track of the forms as they were drafted and revised by different groups was

challenging. The Senior M&E Officer, as WALA documentation manager, developed a communication protocol for reviewing and revising drafts. He also used a dating system in the footer in each form to clarify which draft was the latest version.

Data-gathering forms were field tested in selected PVOs. As of April, MCHN and VS&L tools were already in use across all PVOs. Agriculture tools were developed but the agriculture technical team was not certain on how they would roll out watershed management, agriculture, and natural resource management in the communities. Without a clear approach on these initiatives, it was not possible to finalize performance indicators and data-gathering forms.

The M&E team also worked on an ITT – the list of performance indicators to be tracked in all WALA PVOs. In August, a workshop was held to develop the initial list. A large number of indicators were proposed by the technical staff, especially for the MCHN sector. But at this point, the ITT was not finalized.

2. Phase II: Managing Change. While there is an overlap in time between phase one and two, three major events had a significant impact on the roll out and use of the WALA M&E system.

a. Changing staff. There was significant change in CATCH management and M&E staff. The following table shows these key positions, and the departure date of the initial WALA staff and the arrival date of the new staff.

Position	Staff left post	New staff arrived
Chief of Party	December 2010	January 2011
Deputy Chief of Party – Programs	August 2011	January 2012
Head of M&E / KM	June 2010	September 2010
Senior M&E Officer	November 2010	February 2011

These types of transitions are never easy for any project but were particularly challenging for a large, complex project like WALA. Handover of materials and work priorities are more taxing when there is a gap in time between the departure of one staff and the arrival of the replacement. In the case of M&E, the SMILER files were handed over and used, but the new team walked into the on-going M&E challenges and set priorities accordingly.

There were also changes in CATCH Technical Quality Coordinators[8] (TQC), staff who are central to the M&E system. Of the seven TQCs interviewed for this learning exercise, only one has been in WALA since the beginning. Two TQCs have been with WALA since 2010; three since 2011; and one was hired in 2012. One position is currently vacant, but two people previously held that position. PVOs also had a similar turnover of technical, management, and M&E staff.

b. Engaging with IMPACT.[9] On July 1, 2010, the IMPACT project started, a four year program to provide 'wrap around' services for 58,017 orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and 41,505 people living with HIVAIDs (PLHIV) in selected districts in Southern and Central Regions of Malawi. The

---

8 CATCH includes a senior technical person, called the Technical Quality Coordinator, who oversees the work of each sector the relevant PVO technical coordinator.

9 IMPACT stands for Integrated (HIV Effect) Mitigation and Positive Action for Community Transformation.

project is in basically the same geographic area as WALA, builds on the WALA infrastructure, and relies on WALA staff from six of the seven implementing PVOs, as well as including three new Church partners in three new districts.

IMPACT builds on four activities that are already part of the WALA program: the Care Group Model,

Community-Led Complementary Feeding and Learning Sessions, Government of Malawi expansion of the Community Integrated Management of Childhood Illness, and VS&L. The OVC activities include: protection, child rights, education, and support to families hosting OVC. For PLHIV, IMPACT provides a continuum of care that increases access to HIV testing and counseling for adults and children, supports Malawi's transition to community-based pre- antiretroviral treatment services, and reinforces the importance of adherence and follow up for clients on antiretroviral treatment, and Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission.

Importantly, the WALA M&E staff are responsible for M&E in IMPACT at the PVO level. There are no IMPACT M&E staff for the six PVOs implementing both IMPACT and WALA. There is, however, an IMPACT M&E TQC[10] based in Lilongwe, and an IMPACT M&E officer based in Blantyre who is responsible for the database.

c. Introducing Consortium-Management Information System. C-MIS is a database for WALA and IMPACT. The two programs are designed to be complementary and have overlapping M&E systems. Both projects use the same structures and frontline M&E officers in the PVOs. Some indicators and reporting forms are common to WALA and IMPACT. The common database was developed to store and process data. Decisions around the database took time and effort on the part of WALA and IMPACT staff. There was an engaged discussion around the prospect of a joint database and of the different approaches for developing an identification system for villagers and participants.

D. WALA SMILER M&E System

WALA has a comprehensive M&E system. The system is described below along with some of the challenges in establishing and implementing it. As described in Phase I and Phase II of the SMILER story, the second M&E team to arrive at WALA attended to a different set of priorities (IMPACT, C-MIS and other M&E activities) and maintaining all of the documents in the SMILER system was less of a priority. Some of the documents, the Table of Contents for example, were updated as part of this learning exercise. The SMILER graphic is on the next page and all of the WALA SMILER documents are in Appendix G.

1. Getting Organized (Appendix G, Component 1)
a. Table of Contents. A table of contents was developed in the 2009 coaching session. Staff continued to use it to document the development of data flow maps, data-gathering forms and report formats. A status column, in the earlier version, helped keep track of the various items that needed attention and noted the dates of the various versions.

b. Purpose Statement. A purpose statement was also developed in November 2009. Many of the eight points listed involved collecting relevant information to adequately monitor progress, make decisions and engage in learning activities. One point, however, was a topic of discussion during the 2009 meeting: *"Consortium-wide uniform M&E system with*

---

10 The M&E coordinator for IMPACT was a participant in the 2009 WALA SMILER coaching session and used the SMILER approach to develop the M&E system for IMPACT. The full IMPACT M&E Operating Manual is available and kept up to day.

partner flexibility to complement." In the I-LIFE project, described earlier, the Technical Lead-M&E was able to standardize the kinds of data being collected, but not the forms that were used to collect the data. For WALA, he was determined that the PVOs adopt a single system of collecting data, although each PVO would have flexibility to add elements as needed.

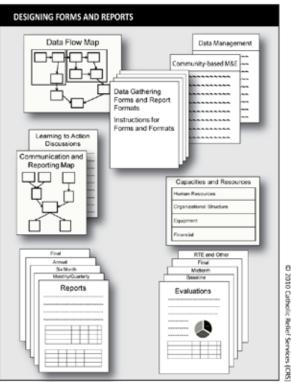The M&E purpose statement was reviewed by PVO program managers and M&E officers in September 2012 as part of this learning exercise. They reviewed the points to see if they were still relevant, and more importantly, how effectively they guided the development of the actual M&E system. There was general agreement that these points were fairly successfully implemented. There was also a discussion about this point: *"Consortium-wide uniform M&E system with partner flexibility to complement."* Some program managers felt that WALA was too prescriptive in the M&E system. The rationale for a uniform system, articulated in the purpose statement, was not sufficiently emphasized as the M&E system was developed and so new staff did not understand or appreciate the earlier agreement on the need for a common set of data-gathering forms.

c. M&E Working Group. A Terms of Reference was established for the M&E working group during the 2009 coaching session. (In the WALA management system, each technical area, including M&E, has a technical working group.) The M&E TWG has been active since the beginning; it was a mechanism to draft, finalize, and roll out the SMILER M&E system, and to develop C-MIS database. The TWG is also the mechanism used to train M&E staff in the M&E tools and the functions of the database. The TWG meets

quarterly with the flexibility to meet more frequently as needed. Some of the major challenges this group has dealt with include: registration of households in WALA program areas, managing the beneficiary identification codes, frequency of care group reporting, and training on the M&E and C-MIS tools. Turnover of M&E staff has been challenging for the work of this TWG. Within CATCH, the Head of M&E/KM and Senior M&E Officer both left in 2010. Among the seven implementing PVOs, only one M&E officer had been there from the beginning. During the TWG September 2012 meeting, two M&E officers were new.

d. Stakeholder Analysis. During the November 2009 coaching session, a list of project stakeholders was developed, although the information needs and reports were not filled in. Instead, WALA developed a Knowledge and Learning Strategy (Appendix H) that lists stakeholders, describes a strategy to capture knowledge, and develop an evaluative culture to ensure evidence-based learning; the strategy articulates goals, objectives and expected results. One product from this strategy is the WALA newsletter, called *Let's Shine*, which is distributed to external stakeholders such as USAID, Government of Malawi ministries and departments, and WALA partners and internally (Appendix I).

2. Setting Up. The SMILER documents in this section are standard M&E planning tools. They are central to any proposal submitted to FFP and WALA's case was no exception. They undergo serious review and revisions during the proposal review process. (See Appendix G, Component 2, for these documents.)

a. Results Framework. This is the one page graphic of the higher level objectives of the project. The WALA Results Framework shows the higher level objectives on one page, and separate pages for each of the three Strategic Objectives that list activities. (FFP does not require outputs, which are standard in the CRS approach.)

b. Detailed Implementation Plan. This is a table that lists specific activities that will be accomplished during that timeframe. This table is done each implementation year, assessed in an annual review process and then updated for the following year. These are included in the Annual Results Report and the Pipeline Resources Estimate Proposal submitted to FFP every year.

c. Indicator Performance Tracking Table (IPTT), Performance Monitoring Plan, and the Indicator Tracking Table. The IPTT is a list of indicators, agreed upon with FFP in the review and approval process, to be tracked and reported on; they are usually the higher level impact indicators and other key results indicators. Some of the IPTT indicators are mandated by FFP, others are recommended. The Performance Monitoring Plan is a table that gives information about each of the indicators: what they mean, and how and when they will be collected and analyzed.

The ITT is a table to track performance indicators that WALA staff deem important to track on a quarterly basis to monitor and manage the program; ITT indicators are to be submitted as part of the PVO quarterly report.

A workshop managed by FANTA (Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance)[11] was held in August 2009 to review and strengthen the Results Framework, to finalize the indicators listed in the IPTT, and to fill in more detail in the Performance Monitoring Plan. This work included the application of an environmental lens to relevant indicators and devising options for collecting annual outcome-level indicators among beneficiaries. The workshop also looked at WALA's trigger indicators, and strengthened plans for the baseline study.

---

11 FANTA works to improve and strengthen nutrition and food security policies, strategies, programs and systems through technical support to the United States Agency for International Development and its partners.

The following table shows the data gathering methods for the 40 IPTT indicators, those that are collected by surveys and routing monitoring.

Data Gathering Method for IPTT Indicators	# of IPTT Indicators
Surveys – baseline and endline	22
Annual Survey – collects 15 (of the 22) IPTT indicators that are also in the baseline and end line	
Routine monitoring – included in the ITT	18
Total IPTT Indicators	40

There is some overlap between the indicators in the IPTT and those in the ITT. There are 71 ITT indicators, with the MCHN sector being the most demanding. The last column in the table below shows the number of indicators collected for each program section. Of that total, column 3 shows how many are from the IPTT, and those selected by WALA staff for their own management purposes are in column 2.

WALA Sectors	ITT- WALA chosen Indicators	ITT Indicators also in IPTT	ITT Indicators TOTAL
MCHN	24	3	27
Agriculture	4	2	6
Irrigation	4	1	5
Livestock	5	-	5
VS&L	5	2	7
Agribusiness	6	2	8
DRR / Governance	-	3	3
Food distribution	2	1	3
Cross Cutting	3	4	7
Total	53	18	71

The PVOs submit quarterly progress reports; the ITT is designed to be a central part of that report. In WALA, however, the quarterly progress report has become disconnected from the ITT, which is usually submitted after the quarterly report is submitted. There was a format for the quarterly report and PVOs were allowed to add their own data and information. Over time, and with delays in tallying the ITT data, the PVO quarterly reports have morphed into PVO-specific formats with varying amounts of data and information.

3. **Designing Forms and Reports** (See Appendix G, Component 3)
a. Data Flow Maps, Data-gathering Forms, Instructions and Reports. All technical areas have data flow maps, data-gathering and report formats. These forms were largely developed in Phase I as described above. The WALA system was influenced by the role of the TQCs, the role of the volunteers collecting the data, and the training program.

1) Role of the TQCs. These CATCH technical staff are central to the implementation of the M&E system and to a vigorous use of the data. Those that were around in early 2010 engaged in the development of the monitoring system, although some were preoccupied with their sector action

plan. Nonetheless, each sector has a slightly different M&E story based on the role of the TQCs.

MCHN. The current TQC, the second for WALA, found the existing system when she arrived and continues to use it. Forms are based on those used in I-LIFE and modified for WALA; data collected are recommended for the Care Group model. While there are challenges with the data gathering, forms are being used and some MCHN activity data are entered in C-MIS.

Agriculture and natural resource management. This program area has multiple interventions in crop production, watershed management, and producer groups. The TQC post is currently vacant and once hired, this would be the third TQC on the project. While a monitoring system is in place, the M&E team does not have good information on how well it is working. The forms in the M&E Operating Manual do not cover all of the interventions. In the void, some PVOs have developed their own data gathering system.

Irrigation. The TQC worked on I-LIFE and a second irrigation-only project called Water for Irrigation and Life Advancement (WILA). He has a team of PVO field agents that he has known through these projects and has a data-gathering and reporting system based on those efforts. While he was engaged in the SMILER exercise to develop the data flow map and the forms, he continues to use his system.

Livestock. This TQC position was filled in 2011 as there was a growing need for technical support in livestock emanating from successes in VS&L and agribusiness. With assistance from the M&E unit, the TQC developed two report forms that he requires of the PVO agriculture coordinator or the agribusiness coordinator since either one may supervise livestock activities. The TQC has not provided the PVOs with forms for the field staff to collect the source data and assumes that each PVO has developed such forms.

VS&L. CRS has a set of forms to be used in the VS&L activities (CRS uses the term SILC – Saving and Internal Lending Committees). The TQC, who started in April, 2012, has adopted the system. With it, he has sufficient information for WALA and for the CRS SILC database managed in Nairobi.

Agribusiness. The TQC is a staff member of ACDI/VOCA, and he provides technical support to WALA consortium members. When he started in 2010, he found that the M&E system had data flow maps and forms so he developed them for agribusiness. He produced an M&E Operating Manual with all of the forms and instructions on filling them out.

Disaster Risk Reduction and Governance are connected with the government's efforts to establish the Village Civil Protection Committees. The government has forms that these committees are to fill out and CRS participated in the task force that designed these forms.

2) Data sources and reporting hierarchy. As can be seen in the data flow maps, there is a hierarchy of people responsible for collecting, verifying and reporting data. There are several levels for each intervention; this is a common practice in development activities. In WALA, villagers organize themselves into groups with one community volunteer in a lead position. The next level is the promoter[12] who supports and oversees the work of the volunteers. Each PVO has a supervisor to monitor the work of the promoters. These supervisors are managed by the PVO technical coordinator,

---

12 The names of these positions vary depending on the sector and the PVO.

usually one per sector in each PVO. (See Appendix J for a list volunteers for each sector.)[13]

As is the case for the monitoring system in many development programs, the volunteers collect the source data. The village groups and the volunteers are each equipped with a "hard cover" (a notebook that has a hard front and back cover) to record their daily activities and data for which they are responsible. They may also have specific forms to fill out for their activities. There are significant challenges with these data-gathering methods.

- Low rates of literacy – many of the volunteers have had little schooling and some find it difficult to fill out the forms. In some cases where the volunteer is illiterate, other members of the group or the volunteers' own children may fill in the forms.
- Transferring data from hard cover to report – the promoter transfers information from the hard cover to a paper form. The health volunteers, for example, fill out Form 003 on a monthly basis and this information is summarized and transferred to Form 004. This requires careful counting and recording. (WALA explored the possibility of producing these forms in a booklet that makes carbon copies. This would enable the volunteer to tear out one copy for the promoter and keep a record in the booklet. However, these were prohibitively expensive, even when mass produced, for 12,000 health volunteers.)
- Supervision – volunteers are supervised by a promoter. They are supplied with a bicycle, which needs repairs. Depending on the sector, promoters may oversee the work of 10 – 15 volunteers with their groups. Volunteers could use closer supervision. In addition to supervising activities, promoters check the accuracy of data, but PVO staff were not sure of how much data checking was actually done.
- Stationary – having proper stationery is essential for the volunteers and promoters in undertaking their assigned tasks. When asked about what help improve their work, volunteers often commented that they did not have all the stationery they needed. Both volunteers and promoters had piles of loose paper but no binder to keep them in.

Data quality assessments point out issues in these volunteer-based data-gathering exercises. Some TQCs also question the reliability of some of the data. PVOs are working to improve them with better organization and supervision. WALA also plans to work on a 'Participatory Planning and M&E system' at the village level, which could reinforce the volunteer data collection process.

The PVO technical coordinators are the next level of supervision and they compile a quarterly report based on information from the supervisors: these sector reports are then compiled into the PVO quarterly report. In the PVO quarterly report, the sector data may be consolidated rather than contain the full information from the coordinators. Some of the TQCs receive the sector report directly from the PVO technical coordinator and are able to review the details; other TQCs only see the PVO quarterly report so may be missing the details.

3) Training. WALA has used a cascade approach to train those implementing the M&E system. CATCH staff train the PVO staff, and they in turn are responsible for training the program and technical staff in the M&E system, and training the volunteers and promoters in collecting the data. Other than MCHN

Form 003, few complaints were heard about the difficulty of the forms. But given the challenges of getting quality data, refresher training and closer supervision are appropriate priorities for staff.

---

13 This table underestimates participants and village groups. The data are from C-MIS and not all participants and groups are yet registered in the system. Agribusiness, for example, claims 25,000 participants, but only 15,000 are currently registered in C-MIS.

Some differences of opinion exist between M&E staff and technical staff as to who is responsible for attending to these issues.

b. Assessments and Evaluations. The WALA M&E team has been rigorous about the methods and timeliness of these studies. The baseline and annual surveys were managed by CATCH with PVO M&E team support. The mid-term evaluation was carried out with three international consultants. The CATCH M&E team also conducted a study on crop diversification to understand the problems farmers were facing in diversifying their crops in the WALA operational areas, and supported a study on seed security. The following table lists the major studies accomplished and those planned.

Study type	Data collected	Dates	Final Report
Baseline Survey	Population based household survey on IPTT indicators; 2,044 household and 1,502 children	Oct – Nov 2009	April 2010
Annual Survey FY 11	Beneficiary based household survey on IPTT indicators; 1,096 households	Sept – Oct 2011	December 2011
Mid-term Evaluation	Document review and qualitative survey methods	Jan – Feb 2012	April 2012
Annual Survey FY 12	Beneficiary based household survey on IPTT indicators, 1,346 households	Aug – Sept 2012	October 2012
End line Survey	Population based household survey on IPTT indicators	Aug – Sept 2013	
Final Evaluation	Document review and qualitative survey methods	Nov 2013 – Feb 2014	
Trigger indicators	# of indicators collected by SMS	Ongoing	
Special studies	Topics under consideration – social and economic impact of small scale irrigation; dynamics of pass-on scheme; gender issues in VS&L; VS&L Private Service Provider model; benefits of seed distribution; conservation agriculture: what is preventing the farmers from adopting/expanding?		

c. Community-based M&E. Community members are actively participating in the monitoring activities of the WALA program. Each intervention is based in community groups with one community member in a lead role: lead mother/father, care group volunteers, lead farmer, chair of water committees, VS&L president, etc. Although this structure is in place, it would be incorrect to say that a community-based "participatory monitoring and evaluation" system is in place. The WALA proposal committed to implement a system in which program participants are defining their own performance indicators and tracking success based on those. The mid-term evaluation found this to be a weak area and WALA management has agreed to address this. A consultant is being engaged to review current participatory monitoring and evaluation practices, to develop tools that will address the gaps, and to strengthen the capacity of staff from CATCH and PVOs to ensure full use of such participatory tools.

d. Communication and Reporting Maps and Learning to Action Discussions. These maps enable the project staff to ensure that all of the stakeholders are receiving the information they require

on a timely basis. In the SMILER coaching session, CATCH developed a map that shows the flow of reports through the WALA system and the point at which the information is shared with external stakeholders. At the same session, five of the seven implementing PVOs developed communication and reporting maps. These maps show how reports flow through each PVO system along with timing and the assigned responsibility for each report.

Learning to Action Discussions are part of the SMILER Communication and Reporting Maps; identifying opportunities to discuss the data and implications for subsequent project implementation. The WALA Knowledge and Learning Strategy address these issues but much remains to be done. The new Knowledge Management Officer has just started and this strategy will be her guide.

The management and M&E staff of the PVOs described a practice of reviewing their quarterly progress reports. This type of review is supposed to take place at all levels, but most were not certain that discussions were held regularly. CATCH has plans to hold an annual review with all PVOs to discuss their annual reports. Results from the previous year are discussed and targets are set for the following year.

e. Data Quality Management
1) Data Quality Assessment. CATCH has developed a process and set of tools to assess the quality of data. CATCH is responsible for implementing the DQA. Specific tools are noted in the box below; see Appendix G, Component 3.

DQA Tool	Description
M&E and Knowledge Management Unit Agenda for Cross Visits	Guidelines to support the M&E team to perform DQAs in a systematic way
M&E Knowledge Management Unit Cross Visit Reporting Form	Template used to record DQA observations for documentation and sharing
Monthly Data Quality Assessment by WALA Partner M&E Unit	Stepwise guide to conduct monthly DQAs by PVO M&E staff

The DQAs have raised issues that are common across the PVOs. Action plans have been developed at the PVO level to address the concerns. At the volunteer level, there are challenges with the data in the hard covers: missing information, particularly the household ID; questionable data; inconsistent data; and volunteers lacking hard covers and pens. Data in the reports are not verifiable: the data are not linked to a source document; some data lie outside the expected range or are inappropriately summarized; and information is missing. PVOs are also challenged to manage all the data coming through the office. General organization of M&E unit, filing, and record keeping systems can be improved. There is a debriefing session at the end of each DQA, findings are discussed with the PVO staff, and recommendations developed. A follow up list of actions is created for the PVO and for CATCH.

2) Quality Improvement Verification Checklist. While not an M&E data quality tool, this checklist was developed by the M&E team with the program technical staff. The forms (Appendix K) provide a structured approach to assessing whether the key services are being delivered based on quality standards. Checklists exist for MCHN, Agriculture, Irrigation, VSL, and Agribusiness. The tool consists of a list of key services, each with a set of quality standards. The degree to which the standard is met is scored on a scale along with one major observation; each has instructions on how to score. There is also a summary sheet so scores can be compared. These

forms were finalized in March 2012 and the PVOs have begun to use them. Information is to be collected on a quarterly basis from sampled locations using the LQAS methodology. The results are reviewed at PVO level and actions are taken to address programming gaps.

4. Data Management – Consortium-Management Information System
C-MIS is a database that captures key information for both WALA and IMPACT. Appendix L is a one page description of how C-MIS serves both projects. While the system is appreciated and has great potential, it was not so obvious in the beginning that this was a good idea. Key points were much debated, including whether the database should be joint or whether each project should develop its own.

a. Designing the system. IMPACT and WALA staff initially disagreed on the merits of registering 100 percent of households in each of the targeted villages. IMPACT resisted this comprehensive registration feeling that they did not need this information. (Now they find this registration useful as they return to communities to add more beneficiaries.) WALA argued for 100 percent household registration at village level because these data would show level of participation in WALA and IMPACT activities and, more importantly, document the integration of WALA and IMPACT services used by participants. The 100 percent registration generates unique identification numbers for each household and enables the program to calculate the total number of beneficiaries without double counting those who participate in more than one activity.

A second point of much discussion was the numbering system for households. IMPACT had started with a system to give continuous numbers to households regardless of location. WALA supported a system with unique identification numbers for the household, village, Group Village Headman, and district. This style was adopted and forms were developed to give three digit identification numbers to these groupings. With this system, C-MIS reports identify households by their exact location. Identification numbers are also given to each PVO and field agent, so data can also be analyzed using those variables.

A third discussion was the method of giving numbers to households. Giving each household a card with a number is one option. WALA staff opted to put a sticker with the household number on the outside wall of the house. While this system basically worked, there were occasions when the sticker fell off or the number got lost in other ways.

Data cannot be entered into C-MIS without the household identification number. If the sticker is gone and household members do not know it, the reporting staff can't fill in the number. Or it may be the case that the reporter is not conscientious in the use of the household numbers. If the number is lost, it can be found through the C-MIS master list of all households. The field staff can use this list to figure out which household has which number. Nonetheless, this issue of missing household identification numbers when entering data on participants is an ongoing challenge.

Data for C-MIS are gathered by volunteers, promoters, and PVO staff, depending on the form. (See data flow maps – the blue highlighted forms are entered in C-MIS.) These forms are given to the PVO M&E unit for entry into a PVO computer with the C-MIS database by a data entry clerk. The file is sent to Blantyre for entry into the WALA C-MIS database. Because each PVO has its own computer and database, it can produce reports on its own activities. C-MIS generates some standard reports and staff can also request specific reports.

b. C-MIS Milestones. The discussions on a joint WALA - IMPACT database started in December 2010. The following table shows some of the key dates in the development and rollout of the system.

Date	Activity
December 2010	• First meeting to discuss joint database - agreement to go ahead • Decision on numbering system - unique for PVO, District, Traditional Authority, Group Village Headman, Village, Household and household member
January 2011	• Presentation of C-MIS Prototype at M&E TWG
February 2011	• Household registration training for all M&E Officers and selected sector coordinators. Assigned responsibility to training other sectors coordinators and field level staff • Rollout household registration in all WALA areas
March 2011	• C-MIS rollout in IMPACT with three church partners in IMPACT
June 2011	• C-MIS User Manual released
May – August 2011	• Rollout to all partners
January 2012	• First full C-MIS quarterly reporting for IMPACT – all partners on C-MIS
September 2012	• Revised C-MIS User Manual released
Ongoing	• Completion and rollout forms for collecting data on ITT indicators
Forthcoming	• WALA Annual Report to include only numbers in C-MIS system

Many CRS country programs have taken interest in the C-MIS database and it has been reviewed in several meetings in 2012. It was presented at the Information, Communication and Technology for Development conference in March, an M&E Global Learning Workshop in June, and viewed in an M&E webinar in September.

c. C-MIS Forms and Function. There are three types of data collection forms that are used in the C-MIS system: forms to assign identification numbers; forms to capture which households are participating in which activities; and forms to capture project information. There are a full set of forms for the first two types. Forms to capture project information, however, have yet to be completed. Appendix M gives a full list of all of the forms in the system.

C-MIS forms to assign identification numbers. There are two groups of forms that assign identification numbers (Appendix N).The first are those forms that are general to all sector interventions: Household Registration Form, Beneficiary Village List, and the Development Promoters Registration. These identification numbers enable WALA to track all activities by these critical identifying variables – partner, exact location, and field worker. The second group of forms register an identification number for groups that are formed for a specific activity, such as a Care Group, a VS&L group, etc.

Forms to capture participants engaged in project activities. These forms are designed to register which households participate in the various project activities. Each activity has a separate registration form that collects household identification, who in the household is participating with age and sex. These forms also contain some sector-specific information. The health form, for example, collects some health information. These group registration forms also use the identification numbers (see above paragraph) to identify the location and volunteer for each specific group. (See Appendix O for a list of these forms and the information collected)

Forms to capture project activities. To date, there are only a few forms that are designed to capture project activities (see last column in Appendix M). Data in MCHN Form 003, for example, are to

be entered into C-MIS. All training activities are also to be entered (see Form 015, used for all sector activities, in the SMILER M&E System). WALA staff are working on forms to collect all the data required to fill out the ITT. There are some sectors that may be easily handled. VS&L and agribusiness, for example, each have a separate database, so staff are assessing whether it is possible to upload these two databases into C-MIS rather than creating a separate set of forms.

It has been a slow process to get PVO volunteers and staff to use the C-MIS forms. The current C-MIS database does not reflect the true number of participants in the various WALA activities. It may be the case that the forms have not been filled out, or the forms have not found their way to the PVO office, or the data have not been entered and then sent to Blantyre. At some point soon, CATCH plans to use only C-MIS data in the reports. With this switch, PVOs and technical staff are concerned that their true numbers will not be recorded and thus are motivated to input data into C-MIS. During this transition, it may be challenging for CATCH staff to describe high numbers one quarter (based on the paper system) and possibly lower numbers the next (based on the incomplete C-MIS).

As C-MIS takes root, staff are already starting to view C-MIS as being *the* M&E system. Even when fully operational, C-MIS will contain only part of the data being gathered in the WALA M&E system. Nonetheless, there is a growing acceptance of the merit of the database and acknowledgement that the effort is valuable.

IV. Successes, Challenges, and Lessons

WALA has a comprehensive M&E operating system in place. This is a success by any definition. WALA has methods for collecting all of the data required for the IPTT and the ITT through the assessments and evaluations, and via routine monitoring. The baseline and annual surveys have been thoroughly planned and staff have a high level of confidence in the results. There are data flow maps for each sector linked with data-gathering and reporting forms. WALA has communication and reporting maps for the internal flow of data and use of those data. M&E staff have developed and operationalized tools to continually assess data and program quality. Finally, there is a data management system, C-MIS, generating information on participants and key indicators, as well as a pilot initiative using a mobile application. The list below captures the primary elements of the WALA M&E system.

Assessments and evaluations
- Baseline and final survey
- Mid – term evaluation
- Annual surveys
- Final evaluation

Monitoring System
- Data flow maps
- Data Gathering Form and Report Formats, with instructions

Communication and Reporting
- PVO Communication and Reporting Maps
- Knowledge and Learning Strategy

M&E Quality Monitoring Process and Tools
- M&E Technical Working Group
- Data Quality Assessment
- Quality Improvement Verification Checklist

Information and Communication Technology
- C-MIS database for beneficiary numbers and PVO indicator tracking table indicators
- Mobile solution pilot to monitor household hunger

The WALA M&E Working Group has served a very useful purpose – monitoring the M&E system. It has become the venue for discussion, problem solving, and training for the PVO M&E staff and data entry clerks.

WALA has successfully integrated two projects into one database that enables staff to have an accurate count of participants and the activities they participate in, without double counting. While C-MIS is still a work in progress, it establishes a tested model for other CRS projects in the concepts and mechanics of designing and establishing a relational database. There is a comprehensive approach to establishing identification numbers for partners, staff, and location, and for participants in the various initiatives. The WALA database will eventually include forms for the IPTT and ITT indicators collected in the routine monitoring of the project. WALA has a full set of identification forms that others can use and modify for their projects.

The WALA M&E working groups collaborated effectively with PVO technical staff to develop the M&E system. WALA staff got off to a good start with the SMILER coaching session and then full engagement with PVO staff to develop all the forms for the M&E system for each sector. Within a six month period, data flow maps and forms were developed for all sectors (livestock was added at a later date). Work on M&E, however, was in direct competition with work on detailed action planning and start up activities. Nonetheless, M&E staff worked well with the technical staff from the PVOs to develop data flow maps and a set of forms for project interventions.

Timely implementation of the M&E system with seven implementing partners is a challenge. A first set of challenges is in the day-to-day application of tools and processes in a complex environment. These challenges are not unique to WALA and need to be managed in any system. **Staff turnover**, within CATCH and within the PVOs, is hugely disruptive particularly with a time gap before the replacement is hired. Turnover of materials and processes, especially with the hiatus, is patchy. New M&E priorities and issues evolve and demand the attention of new staff; attention to the basics can get relegated.

Much of the data-gathering is in the hands of **community volunteers** who often have low levels of literacy and require frequent refresher training and supportive supervision. Because these requirements are not always met, (and there is varied opinion about who is responsible) information gathered by volunteers may be incomplete, inconsistent, and of questionable quality. In addition, many volunteers voiced the need for replenishment of basic stationery for their work. Despite these difficulties, there are many exemplary volunteers working in the WALA project and they do their best to provide timely and accurate data.

PVO offices are not well equipped to manage the amount of data streaming through their offices for the seven intervention areas under the WALA program. These offices require basic processes to record the arrival of forms in the office and their entry into C-MIS, and a basic protocol for storing and archiving the forms.

PVO consortium members use the data from the routine monitoring to measure their own progress and to write the quarterly reports. There are varying degrees of confidence in the data among the PVO consortium members. CATCH would be hard pressed to report the sum of the monitoring data from the seven implementing PVOs with full confidence. There is a high level of confidence, however, in the survey work that has been done by CATCH and the PVOs, much of which is used for the annual reports.

Agreement on the content of reports and adherence to it is a central requirement of an M&E system. While M&E serves a greater purpose than reporting to the project hierarchy and donors, reports are a key component of the M&E system. These reports should, in fact, serve both – use of the data for project management and decision making, and for donor reporting requirements. In WALA, the ITT and the quarterly report format was set up to serve that function. The ITT includes 18 IPTT indicators that are tracked in the monitoring system, in addition to indicators that technical and program staff deemed important to track. With the ITT data and the complementary narrative, staff from CATCH and the PVOs could discuss WALA program results in a consistent and coherent manner, and document overall progress. But with time and staff turnover, the role and importance of the ITT and quarterly narrative report has diminished; PVO quarterly reports currently differ in content and quality, and the ITT, in most cases, is submitted as a separate document after the quarterly due date.

Management and technical staff have leadership roles in ensuring the integrity of the M&E system. M&E is a support function to the project managers and technical staff who require useful and timely information. Each has a different role in the project and while their priorities are overlapping, they are also in competition for time and resources. Managers and technical staff are eager to get the project up and running, and need information during that first year of project implementation just at the same time the M&E system is being developed. Reports are due and additional information requests may come from donors and stakeholders. Yet, it takes time to set up a comprehensive M&E system for a large, multi-sector project that is vetted and agreed by nine PVOs. Parallel systems can be created to respond to additional technical information needs and to respond to ad hoc requests from stakeholders. While requests for other information have to be factored into the full M&E system, the basic commitments to collect the same data and to use common forms have to hold, and management and technical staff have a critical role to ensure compliance. Data-gathering processes and forms can change if needed, and these decisions are best taken with discussion of M&E, management, and technical staff.

Management has a clear-cut role in ensuring adherence to the M&E system. A fully operational, useful M&E system requires close management oversight to make sure that staff are collecting the required data, using standard report formats, uploading data in C-MIS, and analyzing the finding in regularly scheduled events, such as annual meetings. While M&E staff lead the process to design and implement the system, the managers make it happen.

The SMILER system supported the development and implementation of the M&E system for a complex program, but more remains to be done. M&E staff got off to a good start in the November 2009 coaching session: gained a clear understanding of the approach and tools in the SMILER process; developed several of the SMILER tools; and developed a list of tasks to complete the M&E system and a process to do that. Over the next few months, the data flow maps and set of forms were developed for most of the interventions and most of those forms continue to be used. That initial set of documents, found in the M&E Operating Manual, was turned over to new staff. With staff turnover and other pressing M&E priorities, however, some of the SMILER techniques became less important, such as updating the M&E Operating Manual and ensuring use of data.

Use of the data by project staff, the Learning to Action Discussion, continues to be challenging. The PVO quarterly meetings and the technical working groups are venues for discussing accomplishments and targets, but management and technical staff could engage in a deeper analysis of the findings and implications for project direction. There are also more opportunities for analysis and rich discussion with staff who work directly in communities and within the communities. To address this need, WALA is turning its attention to more meaning engagement in the M&E system by participants.

Despite these challenges with some of the SMILER techniques, CATCH and PVOs M&E have produced an impressive M&E system that supports a multi-sector program with nine partners. It has a fairly comprehensive set of data-gathering and report forms, and a clear mechanism for getting that information from the source to the final donor reports. Staff have implemented surveys providing accurate baseline data along with annual updates and a mid-term evaluation. Importantly, staff have developed and are implementing a system to track the quality of the data and attend to weaknesses in the system.

V. SMILER – New Developments

Review of SMILER implementation at the six month mark. The SMILER coaching session is a one week exercise with a small group of staff to develop the draft M&E system. At the end of the coaching session, participants develop a list of remaining tasks and assigned responsibilities. CRS East Africa region has developed the practice of reviewing progress six months after the coaching session. A team composed of regional and country program staff with work with project staff to monitor progress in the development of the system, use of the tools, enabling environment, communications with partners, and other factors. Strengths, weaknesses and gap are identified. An action plan with assigned responsibilities and due date is developed.

SMILER is endorsed by TOPS for use in FFP programs. TOPS if a technical support agency funded by USAID, Food for Peace. The role of TOPS is to strengthen the capacity of FFP grantees and improve the quality and effectiveness of food aid implementation. While TOPS develops manuals and guidance in project design and implementation, TOPS also endorses existing manuals that are useful in FPP programs. After a review by the TOPS M&E task force, SMILER was endorsed for use by FFP grantees.

M&E and Information Technology staff are seeking a seamless connection between SMILER and Information, Communication and Technology for Development (ICT4D processes). In CRS, some project staff have enhanced their M&E efforts through a thoughtful use of ICT4D. To this end, discussions are underway to determine how the mapping processes involved in SMILER coaching sessions can better integrate with those used by information technology staff when constructing ICT4D solutions.

Cover photos
Right: Community volunteers gathered data and created reports to monitor the program. Susan Hahn/CRS
Left: Staff used the SMILER approach to develop and implement M&E tools such as surveys, flow charts and a data management system. Susan Hahn/CRS