***SMILER:***

**A Food Security and Nutrition Network M&E Task Force Endorsed Tool**

1. **Purpose:**

SMILER is an approach to establishing a comprehensive M&E system. Based on the M&E planning documents in the project proposal, SMILER breaks down the tasks to develop the M&E operating system into easily understood parts. SMILER helps linking the project’s objectives and their indicators to a system to collect, analyze, use, and report on data. SMILER includes mechanisms to turn data into useful knowledge that informs sound project decision making and ensures that all staff have a clear understanding of the project monitoring system and their role in its implementation.

1. **Evidence for efficacy of the Method / Tool:**

Baseline and final surveys are used in international relief and development projects to document positive change in the lives of the poor and disadvantaged. A robust system to monitor project progress is, however, often neglected. Those that exist tend to be ad hoc and insufficient to sustain ongoing learning and performance management during project implementation. Few manuals exist on the nitty-gritty task of setting up a project monitoring system for performance management and reporting purposes.

Catholic Relief Services has found that using a SMILER framework to establish an M&E system brings greater clarity, consistency and rigor to documenting progress, managing performance and reporting on accomplishments. Staff who have developed the SMILER M&E system have a good understanding of the various components of the system and their role in it. They often feel confident that they could manage a SMILER process for another project. M&E regional staff are using the SMILER approach in all country programs. A 6-month check list is now in use to support the finalization of the M&E system and its roll out.

1. **How the tool is used:**

**Overview:** Staff design the M&E system for their project using the SMILER framework in an early phase of project implementation. During a one week SMILER coaching session, a small group of staff will develop the documents required for the M&E system. As documents are produced, they are labeled, dated and put into a project M&E Operating Manual, which is both hard and electronic copy. Table 1 presents a brief description of the documents in each of the three components. It is often the case the not all of the documents are completed within that week, but by the end of it, staff have a list of what needs to be done and who is responsible. The output for the SMILER coaching week is a draft that is vetted with partners and stakeholder.

**Level of skill needed:** The SMILER coaching session is usually led by someone who has already participated in a SMILER coaching session and is comfortable leading the process – a SMILER coach. Staff who have not yet participated in a coaching week but who want to lead a session can use the SMILER guide to organize it, but they may want to discuss the approach and practice with staff who have experience in leading one.

**Time/staff required**: SMILER coaching sessions are attended by staff and partners who are working on the project. Sessions are most effective when participation is limited to five or six people so while all CRS and partner staff have a role in reviewing, testing and then implementing the M&E system, not everyone will participate in the SMILER coaching session. Table 2 shows other steps that can be taken to make the best use of the SMILER coaching session.

1. **Challenges to implement SMILER system:**

Consortium-managed, large, multi-sector projects are complex and it takes dedicated staff and time to finalize, test and roll out the M&E system. One person, usually an M&E officer, is designated to manage this process. It can be challenging, with multiple partners, to manage the changes and to assure that all have the final version of data gathering and reporting tools.

The M&E system needs to be fully supported by technical, project and management staff from the early design stage through implementation. If that is not the case, parallel data-gathering systems may develop to meet individual information needs.

Using the SMILER approach helps ensure that there is a comprehensive, coherent approach to collecting and reporting on data. There are issues common to many M&E systems such as data gathering at the community level, data verification, and accuracy of reporting. All of these issues continue to need attention and having a clearly defined M&E operating system in place helps staff address these implementation issues.

1. **Resources:**
2. [*ProPack III - A Guide to Creating an M&E System*](http://www.crsprogramquality.org/storage/pubs/me/ProPackIII.pdf)*.* This guide helps project staff use SMILER to turn M&E plans, described in their proposals, into M&E systems that produce relevant and reliable information for project stakeholders and encourages learning and sound decision making. Most M&E guides explain data-gathering methods such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, and other methods. The SMILER guide describes the process of developing an M&E system in which data are systematically collected, reported and used to make project decisions.
3. [Webinar](http://www.crsprogramquality.org/home/2012/7/24/new-webinar-on-crs-approach-to-developing-me-systems.html) on SMILER from AEA coffee-break demonstration series

**Table 1. SMILER Components and Documents**

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| Component | Documents to complete and insert in the M&E Operating Manual |
| 1. Getting Organized | * Table of Contents – list of all of the documents in the M&E Operating Manual * Purpose Statement – short list of broad objectives of the M&E system * Stakeholder Analysis – list of people and groups who have a stake in the project along with their specific information needs. This analysis ensures that the M&E system responds to their needs * M&E Working Group – list of people who will oversee the implementation of the M&E system and work out problems |
| 2. Setting Up (these documents are usually completed as part of the project proposal) | * Results Framework – one page diagram that shows the hierarchy of objectives[[1]](#footnote-1) of the project at a glance * Proframe / M&E Plan – Proframe[[2]](#footnote-2) is a table that lists the objectives, indicators, measurement methods and critical assumptions; M&E Plan provides additional detail * Indicator Performance Tracking Table – table listing each of the indicators and targets entered by year, along with achievements by year; allows for annual tracking of targets * Detailed Implementation Plan – table in which specific detailed tasks are listed along with an M&E calendar; these documents guides day to day implementation |
| 3. Designing Forms and Formats | * Data flow maps – one-page diagram(s) that shows the flow of data-gathering and report forms and how they relate to each other * Data-gathering forms – forms to be filled out by project participants or staff to collect data * Reports – documents completed by project participants or staff to report to the next level of management and to the donor * Instruction sheets – guidance on how to complete each item in the data-gathering forms and report formats * Community-based M&E – plan on how to effectively engage community members in the collection and analysis of the data to ensure their voice informs project management and direction * Data Management – plan for the system to manage project information, e.g., spreadsheets, data management software, information and communication solutions * Communication and reporting map – diagram that shows the flow of reports and communication to the list of stakeholders * Learning to Action Discussions – prompt questions that ensure a thorough analysis of the data and its use in making project decisions * Capacities and resources – review of the human and financial resources for the M&E system and plans to amend as needed * Reports and Evaluations – already in the data flow maps representing key outputs of the entire M&E process |

**Table 2. Tips on the M&E SMILER Coaching Session**

1. **Each experience is different.** This guide contains basic steps to complete the M&E system, but different paths are taken each time the approach is used. These differences are based on the specific M&E demands of the project, the amount of work already completed, and the clarity of the M&E plans written during the project design phase.
2. **The SMILER M&E system is best developed in the early stages of project implementation.** The earlier the M&E system is developed, the better. It will take time to finalize the system, test the tools, and train staff, so it is important to start the process as soon as possible.
3. **Project staff must be familiar with the project** **before beginning the SMILER process.** If they are not, they will find it difficult to make meaningful contributions to the development of the M&E system.
4. **Practice has shown that a week is an appropriate amount of time for a SMILER coaching session.** A week, however, may not be sufficient for large, complex projects. In those cases, activities to finalize the system will be clearly spelled out by the end of the week. Small, short-term projects may take less time.
5. **A coach will manage the SMILER process.** A coach is someone who has been through a SMILER session and is comfortable managing the process. Speak with your Country representation to request a coach if your office does not have in-house experience managing a SMILER session.
6. **There is no fixed agenda for the week; it is a fluid and iterative process.** Other than a brief orientation to SMILER at the start of the coaching session, the agenda for the rest of the week is determined on a day-to-day basis. Though there are key steps to complete, the actual process will vary with each project.
7. **The coach engages fully with the work.** The coach is part of the working team. The coach will ensure the overall progress and determine the day-to-day activities in consultation with participants. In addition, the coach works with the team on forms, maps and other documents. The role is one of full participation, not just directing the process.
8. **The goals of the coaching session are to 1) develop the working documents of the M&E system, 2) compile those documents in a SMILER M&E Operating Manual, and 3) train staff.**  Developing the detailed M&E data-gathering and reporting system is the primary purpose; the learning takes place in designing the system. The role of the coach is to use the time efficiently to design as much of the detailed M&E system as possible and to ensure that participating staff have the knowledge and skills to complete the task once the coaching week is finished.
9. **SMILER coaching sessions involve small groups of five or six staff**, perhaps fewer for small projects. While it is important to choose staff who hold key positions in the project, it is more important to engage staff who have an aptitude for this sort of work, i.e., staff who have some understanding of M&E, don’t get lost in details, can see the big picture and are comfortable with flexible and iterative processes. The M&E SMILER team should be composed of **project management staff, technical staff and M&E staff. M&E staff alone cannot develop an M&E system.**
10. **Expectations of those staff not participating in the SMILER session need to be managed.** There is a role for all CRS and partner staff in M&E, but not necessarily a role for all in the coaching session. By the end of the session, you will have a nearly complete M&E system, but it will still be a draft. Other CRS and partner staff can review and revise the draft, test out the forms, collect and analyze data, fine tune the system, and participate in the M&E working group; these steps increase the ownership of the system by all project staff. While the SMILER coaching session works best with a small group, there is a significant role for others to play once the initial work is done.

1. The CRS hierarchy of objectives are: Goal, the longer term change to which the project will contribute; Strategic Objective, the benefits achieved and enjoyed by participants at the end of the project; Intermediate Result, change in behaviors based on successful delivery of outputs; Outputs, the goods, services, skills, attitudes, knowledge delivered to participants; Activities, tasks to be undertaken to deliver outputs. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Proframe is the CRS version of a logical framework, or logframe, which is a commonly used tool in international work. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)