Top 10 C–SAFE Initiatives in Monitoring & Evaluation

A product of the C–SAFE Regional Learning Spaces Initiative

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A more detailed and technical version of this document can be found on the C-SAFE website at www.c-safe.org

Background on C-SAFE

The Consortium for Southern Africa Food Security Emergency (C-SAFE) is coming to the close of its third year of implementing a coordinated, developmental relief program in Lesotho, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The Consortium implements relief and recovery programs to 1) improve nutritional status, 2) protect productive assets, and 3) strengthen household and community resilience to current and future shocks that affect their food security and livelihoods. C-SAFE consists of three core NGO members, (CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and World Vision (WV)) with CRS serving as the lead agency in Zambia, and World Vision serving as lead agency in Lesotho and Zimbabwe. The Zambia Consortium has one additional member – ADRA International. The regional C-SAFE program unit (RPU) is located in Johannesburg, South Africa.

C-SAFE's program was designed with the understanding that the severity of the 2002 food security emergency reflected the fragility of livelihoods throughout southern Africa and that any strategy seeking to successfully reverse this trend must address both the 'acute' and the underlying 'chronic' food insecurity. C-SAFE was thus founded on a broader and more diversified understanding of livelihood and safety-net recovery, and was intended to complement the ongoing developmental programming that C-SAFE members have undertaken in this region over the last several decades.

The 'Learning Spaces' Initiative

Given the novel approach of a regional NGO consortium and the application of the "developmental relief" strategy, C-SAFE presents a wealth of opportunities for both reflective practice within the consortium and dissemination of best practices and lessons learned to a broader stakeholder audience. In order to provide a forum for reflecting, capturing, disseminating and applying learning, C-SAFE developed the Learning Spaces initiative. The initiative has engaged in learning activities around themes such as Exit Strategies, Targeted Food Assistance in the context of HIV/AIDS, Adapting Food-for-Assets to an HIV/AIDS context, and others that have been prioritized by C-SAFE membership. All Learning Spaces documents can be found on the C-SAFE website at www.c-safe.org.

Top 10 C-SAFE Initiatives in Monitoring and Evaluation

As a multi-country, multi-agency program, C-SAFE was faced with the challenge of establishing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system that was *sufficiently standardized* to allow for regional tracking of key indicators and reporting on the impact of the overall program. Meanwhile, it was also imperative that the system was *flexible* enough to meet each of its participating agencies' individual information needs. In short, the data collected and the analysis produced needed to be helpful in informing programmatic decision-making not only at the regional level, but also at the country Consortia level, and for individual member agencies as well. This was not an easy task.

While 'innovation' is often cited as the secret to success, in the case of C-SAFE, it was the secret to its survival. In order to meet the challenges described above, C-SAFE's M&E teams were forced to think outside the box; to experiment with new approaches; and to purposefully create opportunities and fora for sharing ideas and learning from one another across agencies and across countries.

This challenge and the innovation that it prompted is documented here in the form of ten short descriptions of M&E approaches, tools, and techniques that C-SAFE either developed or adapted in order to meet the information needs of the program. This document is intended to give a brief description of each of the Top 10. A more detailed and technical version is also available which contains why each approach was established, what makes it innovative, what types of information it generated, some examples of how that information was used, and finally, what was learned by C-SAFE in implementing that particular innovation.

As a product of the Learning Spaces initiative, the aim of this document is to share better practices and lessons learned in Monitoring and Evaluation, with the ultimate goal of improving program quality both within the C-SAFE membership, as well as for other interested stakeholders.

1. Listening To Children

'Listening to Children' is an approach developed by C-SAFE as part of its larger End-Use Monitoring process to understand perspectives of children about School Feeding programs, and gain greater insight into the food security situation within beneficiary households. This approach was used principally in Zimbabwe to assess program performance in that country.

The Listening to Children tool was developed as an adaptation of the End Use Monitoring tool for the School Feeding program. Specifically, it was developed to:

- understand food insecurity from the perspective of children;
- help monitor trends in food security from one community to the next; and,
- monitor performance of the School Feeding program.

In collecting information for this learning document, respondents were often asked to state, 'what exactly was innovative about this approach?' The overwhelmingly reply was, "Just *listening* to children!" Deliberately soliciting information from children brought an entirely new perspective to the design and implementation of the C-SAFE program. By virtue of who they are – being sensitive and vulnerable to shocks including food shortages and disease outbreaks – children's perceptions are powerful indicators of the health, quality of life and well-being of communities. Unlike adults who may have a hidden agenda when responding to questions, children are honest and respond based on their level of understanding of the question and their knowledge of the subject matter.

Below is a summary of key types of information generated by Listening to Children:
- quality of school meals
- effect of School Feeding on home consumption patterns
- school attendance
- household demography and fee payment
- perception of vulnerability among children

C-SAFE has learned that instead of children remaining passive beneficiaries, they can become active and valuable partners, and help planners design appropriate tools and interventions. By describing food insecure friends, commenting that, 'they have small, long, and weak bodies,' or are 'timid and stand alone on the playground,' children proved perceptive of the realities in many food insecure communities, and in the process provided C-SAFE with useful hints for key initiatives.

2. Community Food Security Monitoring (CFSM)

Community Food Security Monitoring (CFSM) is a community-based information system that collects, analyzes, and disseminates food security information to help predict future vulnerability of a community to food insecurity. In settings where national food security data is less timely and/or reliable than is desired, the CFSM can provide vital information (from individuals closest to the source) for effective programmatic decision-making. CSFM was designed by C-SAFE Zimbabawe and highly praised by both USAID-FFP and other agencies alike. At the writing of this document, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) was in the process of replicating C-SAFE's model to conduct similar monitoring on a nation-wide basis.

Unlike extractive approaches to data collection common to most emergency programs, the CFSM engaged volunteer Community Based Workers as enumerators in the process. Not only did this strategy reduce enumeration costs, but also it facilitated easy and smooth data collection from communities since Community-Based Workers have a deeper understanding of the drivers and dynamics of their specific rural economies. As trusted members of the community, they are able to question and probe sentinel households on context-specific information which would not be easily extracted by staff enumerators.

Additionally, District Officers would engage Community-Based Workers in analysis of the data. This improved the Community-Based Workers' understanding of gaps and errors in their data collection, but more importantly it improved their understanding of the food security situation in their communities, and in the process facilitated the sharing of that information within the community. This extensive and frequent involvement of the community in data collection acted to empower them with information, and reinforced C-SAFE's understanding of the importance of community participation in all stages of project implementation.

The kinds of information provided by the CFSM are listed below. Data was collected frequently (monthly) given the dynamic conditions in C-SAFE countries, and the need for timely, accurate and reliable food security data.

- understand crop production patterns of staples and other key crops in a community;
- monitor crop performance, specifically the stage and condition of crops;
- monitor changes in the coping strategies employed by communities;
- understand livestock performance by tracking prices, diseases, grazing and water access, sale etc.; and
- track household cereal stocks and cereal sources.

3. Monitoring and Evaluation Working Groups

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Working Groups were at the heart of C-SAFE's M&E innovations and successes. Each C-SAFE country has an M&E Working Group, composed of M&E Officers from all participating agencies in the country. M&E Working Groups are usually led by the C-SAFE M&E Coordinator, employed by the lead agency in that country.

C-SAFE established the M&E Working Groups out of the need for coordination, harmonization, and standardization of M&E approaches in each of the three countries and across participating agencies. The Groups were mandated to:

- organize in-country data collection, analysis, and report writing;
- collaborate with C-SAFE Project Managers in the interpretation of findings and to determine appropriate approaches for improving program results;
- identify and learn from better M&E practices;
- elevate the status and increase recognition of monitoring and evaluation activities as integral and key components of all C-SAFE programming activities; and
- network with stakeholders such as WFP's Vulnerability Assessment Mapping (VAM) unit.

Innovation normally connotes novel and groundbreaking thoughts or ideas. While the formation of 'working groups' is not unusually groundbreaking; innovative tools, systems and approaches to M&E for C-SAFE were made possible *primarily* due to the forum that these groups provided, and the sharing and learning that they engendered.

By working towards a harmonized M&E system in each country, the various agencies collaborated in a manner not previously experienced. In coordination with the regional M&E advisor, the Groups provided the ideal platform for standardization of the tools, and in the midst of budgetary constraints, helped to facilitate the sharing of resources.

The M&E Working Groups also presented opportunities for M&E Officers to learn from one another and to increase their collective knowledge of various M&E methodologies and approaches. Some groups even established 'goal owners' to maximize learning in specific areas (i.e. EUM, School Feeding, Food-for-Assets). Goal owners had skills, knowledge and a particular interest in relevant M&E technical areas, and at working group meetings, they led discussions on M&E techniques related to their topic. The Working Groups served as much more than coordinating bodies. They enabled the transfer of knowledge and skills across countries and between agencies, helping to raise the capacity of all agencies to a common level.

4. Community & Household Surveillance (CHS) System

The Community and Household Surveillance (CHS) system is a regional M&E initiative covering six southern African countries (Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Swaziland). The CHS was designed as a joint venture between the Consortium for Southern Africa Food Security Emergency (C-SAFE) and the World Food Program (WFP) to meet their common objectives in monitoring food security and livelihood trends in southern Africa.

In addition to its utility as a monitoring system, the CHS breaks new ground in structuring partnerships between NGOs and WFP. A partnership of equals, the NGO consortium and the WFP each brought their own resources to the table, using a process of negotiation to agree common methodologies and survey tools at the regional and country levels.

The CHS household questionnaire investigates household demographics, migration, income and production, borrowing, agricultural production, access to food aid, household food stocks and sources, food consumption, coping strategies, assets and livestock ownership. The country reports describe the trends in vulnerability across various vulnerable groups, and also place emphasis on differences between food aid beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

Unlike traditional 'partnerships' between WFP and NGO's – which typically resemble service agreements (i.e. WFP provides resources to the NGO to carry out the distribution of commodities) – the CHS strives to move towards a more mutually beneficial partnership concept. Costs, decisions and responsibility for design, implementation and capacity building are shared by both entities at both the country and regional levels.

Agreement by consensus is difficult under most circumstances, and the CHS has been no exception. Both C-SAFE and WFP had specific ideas on what the monitoring system should look like, including which indicators should be incorporated to best monitor their respective programs. The process of negotiating through important decisions was often arduous, and occasionally led some to question the added value of 'partnering' if numerous concessions had to be made on important design issues. Despite these challenges, both parties also found many aspects of the partnership to be rewarding. Namely, the system itself was perceived as more robust given the wide range of expertise that contributed to building it. And, as importantly, some powerful lessons were extracted in terms of how to build an effective partnership between NGO's and UN agencies. While CHS continues under WFP, the regional partnership ended with the scale-down of C-SAFE's regional office in September 2005.

5. CHS Feedback Factsheet

The CHS Feedback Factsheet (also known as the Community Feedback Factsheet) is a public relations / communications tool designed and used by C-SAFE Zambia, in collaboration with their partner – WFP Zambia. As with many survey reports and M&E documents in general, the Community & Household Surveillance (CHS) reports suffered from limited readership due to their cumbersome length and technical nature. The CHS Feedback Factsheet was therefore designed to condense, crystallize, and share key findings from the myriad of data generated by the CHS. It's a short, snappy summary of the CHS findings, geared in language and length to the layman, so that the information could be absorbed and used by program staff, District Officials, communities and other relevant stakeholders.

The Factsheet largely reflected information from the CHS, but the topic profile varied from one edition to the next. This was deliberately done to highlight key findings that Project Managers/stakeholders needed to know and understand. Topics included:

a. Household demographics
b. Food Security outcomes, (i.e. Coping Strategy Index, and Food Consumption Index)
c. Livelihood strategies
d. Agricultural production and chronic illness
e. Targeting information
f. Status of children

The CHS Feedback Factsheet sought to ensure that stakeholders would have access to key findings from the CHS. But instead of just detailing the findings from the CHS report, the Factsheet was designed with "public relations" in mind. Its goal was to get the attention of its readers, and it did this by selecting topics, fonts, colors, and formatting that would be appealing to its audience. Additionally, the document was designed to be relatively short (4-5 pages in length) to ensure that it could be easily read in one sitting.

This approach also improved readership among communities. When the Factsheets were disseminated to key community members, they clearly had a positive impact. Some District Officials were initially reluctant to support data collection in their districts. However, after disseminating the Factsheets, those who had been reluctant to cooperate earlier, became supportive and willing to facilitate the next round of data collection. Communities too would gather together, and with help from someone who was proficient in English to translate, they would share / discuss the information. Through the Factsheet, C-SAFE has learned that while the unabridged CHS reports were beneficial to certain groups, the majority of audiences preferred a more digestible, summarized version.

6. End Use Monitoring

End Use Monitoring (EUM) is intended to verify that commodities, processes, and services rendered during a food distribution meet expectations, and are of the highest possible standard. In many countries, some version of EUM is utilized by NGOs to gather basic information at the distribution point. But rarely is the information gathered and statistically analyzed in a detailed and comprehensive manner, and presented back to programming staff to ensure that it is immediately useful to managers for timely, programmatic decision-making.

C-SAFE's EUM does just that, and takes this approach one step further. The EUM questionnaire is readily (and continuously) adapted to the needs of the program. When C-SAFE Zambia wanted to better understand how their Targeted Food Assistance program was affecting their beneficiary households, the Zimbabwe EUM was modified and adapted to their needs. When the three C-SAFE countries wanted to better understand how food rations were affecting the chronically ill (proxy for PLHA) and households hosting the chronically ill, questions (which were developed in focus groups in Malawi), were piloted in Zimbabwe, and then rolled out in the revised EUM to the other countries. When C-SAFE Zimbabwe needed to monitor their recently expanded FFA program and School Feeding, the General Food EUM was adapted to their needs, and again later for C-SAFE Lesotho. And finally, when C-SAFE Zambia wanted to find out what community members knew and thought about the upcoming closing of the C-SAFE program (and by extension C-SAFE's exit strategies), questions were added to their tool to query the opinions of communities.

The emphasis of C-SAFE's End Use Monitoring approach is on utility. The questionnaire reflects the issues that program managers grapple with, and it is updated as needed. The data is analyzed directly after data collection so that adjustments based on the new information can be made to the program as quickly as possible. And lastly, the information is conveyed in both written (brief summarized report) and verbal/interactive (power point) formats to ensure that it is easily accessible to managers. The EUM approach is also significantly less expensive than PDM, since data is collected from hundreds of households at the distribution site (as compared to post distribution monitoring via a house to house survey).

In one country, the EUM revealed that long distances to distribution sites forced beneficiaries to travel by night and exposing risks such as attacks and theft. In another, 'under the tree registrations' were unknowingly excluding the poorest of the poor since they did not have clothes they felt were adequate for attending these meetings. Once identified, these and other issues were quickly addressed by C-SAFE staff.

7. Quarterly M&E Meetings

Spanning three countries with three to four member agencies per country, designing C-SAFE's M&E system was a complicated endeavor. The Consortium was faced with the challenge of establishing a system that was sufficiently standardized to allow for regional tracking of key indicators, but it was also imperative that the system be flexible enough to meet each agency's individual information needs.

This required significant coordination across the three countries, but more importantly, it required an emphasis on innovation, sharing of ideas, and learning from one another's better practices in order to meet the challenge. The solution? C-SAFE created an ongoing forum for the gathering of M&E staff across the C-SAFE countries, designed specifically for 1) planning; 2) team building; and 3) learning. The C-SAFE Quarterly M&E meetings became this forum.

The meetings were three days in duration and were hosted on a rotational basis by each country team. The intent was to build a community of knowledge and information sharing around monitoring and evaluation. The format of the meetings was designed by the M&E Regional Technical Advisor for C-SAFE, and described by her as a three-legged stool, each leg being equally vital in holding C-SAFE up to its M&E challenge. The three-day meeting agenda was composed of sessions that were clearly categorized and labeled 'P' for Planning; 'B' for team building and 'L' for learning.

Learning sessions were the most exciting according to many of the participants. Day three of each meeting was dedicated to a field visit to observe an M&E innovation or better practice in action. In Lesotho, for example, the country teams visited the highly praised keyhole garden project to see how the M&E teams were monitoring progress, and in Zimbabwe they visited a School Feeding project to participate in an End Use Monitoring focus group with school children (see Listening to Children -- #1 in this document).

Having a multi-country, multi-agency format presents plentiful opportunities for experimentation and piloting. One of the most valuable approaches that evolved at the quarterly meetings was the piloting of new tools or techniques by one country team on behalf of the others, saving time and effort expended in rolling out a new approach in all three countries when it had not yet been fine-tuned and perfected.

As one of the M&E officers from Lesotho commented, 'The quarterly meetings were more than just meetings. They were fun, interesting, challenging and most importantly—they gave us an opportunity to learn and improve our skills.'

8. MAP Monitoring & Evaluation

Learning in Monitoring and Evaluation

MAP is the *Market Assistance Program* – a program designed to reach the urban poor of Bulawayo and Harare, Zimbabwe, with commercially available food at a time when food markets in the country are in turmoil. The project, created by C-SAFE and piloted by CRS, uses the novel approach of boosting food availability through the use of market mechanisms. The MAP was created to address the needs of Bulawayo's urban poor – those who, despite regular incomes, are unable to secure adequate food supplies due to the political and economic turmoil gripping Zimbabwe and their effect on commercial food production and availability. Instead of free food distribution, MAP imports sorghum, a less preferred staple in Zimbabwe, and sells it at subsidized prices to the urban poor.

An effective monitoring and evaluation system has been critical to the success of the MAP, a project that was designed and managed by staff with experience in commercial markets. The Project Manager had a private sector background and was very specific about the information needs required for sound programming. With the spotlight on the MAP, the C-SAFE M&E staff responded by establishing an M&E system that was both sophisticated and impressive.

The need for sophisticated monitoring, from the Project Manager's perspective, was based on the following principles: 1) the usefulness of frequent feedback from 'customers'; 2) a need to understand how they are using the product; 3) the need to track customer satisfaction; and, 4) the need to track compliance of MAP partners (the sorghum retailers). The M&E tool sought to:

- Examine income and expenditure patterns of targeted households;
- Describe and understand demographics of beneficiary households;
- Monitor and track pricing and supply of sorghum meal and other cereals; and
- Monitor product leakages on the market.

The MAP project alone had eight full time ennumerators and two supervisors collecting weekly data. As an NGO project positioned in a commercial setting, establishing the price of sorghum at the right level was inherent to the project's success. And without frequent information from city dwellers, the price of the sorghum could be set too low (prompting hoarding), or too high (making it too expensive for the MAP's target group).

M&E data clearly plays a vital role in informing programmatic decision making for the MAP. The project warranted a system that monitored the opinions and behaviours of the 'customers' in order to make regular programmatic adjustments. While the MAP is not a conventional food aid program, there may be interesting lessons here for using M&E data to better understand the *'customers'* of NGOs (i.e. vulnerable households and communities) and to inform targeting practices for food aid programs in general.

9. Measuring Coping Strategies to Understand Vulnerability

Since its inception, C-SAFE has understood that households and communities employ *coping strategies* – adjustments in behavior – to adapt to food shortages. By measuring the severity and frequency of these coping strategies, we can begin to develop an understanding of the vulnerability of those households.

The principal tool used by C-SAFE for measuring coping strategies is called the Coping Strategy Index, most often referred to as the CSI. During the life of C-SAFE, the M&E staff have integrated and adapted the CSI to several ongoing monitoring tools. Examples of *integration of the CSI* include building it into the Baseline Survey, the Community and Household Surveillance (CHS) system, the Community Food Security Monitoring (CFSM), and finally, into C-SAFE's final End of Project Survey. For each tool, the CSI is adapted to the individual context, with coping strategies defined and ranked by the respective communities themselves.

The CSI measures the *frequency* and *severity* of strategies used by households to survive short-term food security emergencies. It basically asks the question, "What do households do when they do not have enough food to eat?" Tracked over time, the CSI has provided C-SAFE with information on the direction of improvement (or deterioration) in food security. The higher the index, the higher the severity of food stress in a community. C-SAFE has used the CSI to generate the following types of information:

- Types, severity, and frequency of coping mechanisms
- Changes/trends in coping strategies within communities
- Compare coping strategies of different vulnerable groups
- Levels food stress in a community

The CSI is used by many organizations as a stand-alone tool; however, C-SAFE usually combines it with other approaches to measuring vulnerability to further refine the food security picture. Two approaches most often used in combination with the CSI are Asset Ranking techniques and the Food Consumption Index.

Information generated by the CSI has proved useful in many ways. It is used as a baseline indicator for new projects (i.e. the MAP); helps to geographically prioritize programming efforts; fine-tunes targeting criteria; informs adjustments to ration size; and finally, the CSI recently revealed that food distribution 'frequency' has a significant effect on coping strategies. CSI data unequivocally suggests that Food-for-Assets beneficiaries who received *monthly* distributions had increased their food consumption and employed far less severe coping strategies compared with those who were provided with rations lasting *two months*.

10. Reinventing Evaluation

In its original design, the C-SAFE program planned for a final evaluation at the end of FY 2005. The regional program evolved, however, with Malawi transitioning to a Development Assistance Program (DAP) in Year 2, and Lesotho joining the consortium in Year 3. Ultimately, C-SAFE was extended an additional year due to continued and escalating food insecurity in the region. In keeping with its learning agenda, the C-SAFE program adapted the final evaluation to the evolving context, and seized the opportunity to influence programming in Year 4 and beyond.

The final evaluation was recast from a retrospective appraisal to a forward-looking *programmatic review*, with an emphasis on linking lessons drawn from experience, to improving practices and future planning. The design of the evaluation was participatory, with the evaluation questions developed by multiple stakeholders, including program managers, M&E staff, field staff, USAID representatives and beneficiaries in Zimbabwe and Zambia. Three significant processes informed the review:

1. An End of Project (EOP) survey -- a field based qualitative and quantitative survey -- was conducted in Zimbabwe and Zambia in May 2005, with information on the characteristics, perceptions, program effects and food security status of beneficiaries. For Lesotho, a separate Food-for-Assets assessment was conducted.
2. A regional 'Lessons Learned from Working as a Consortium' exercise was conducted in four key areas: commodities, finance, programming and organizational structure.
3. Key informant interviews and literature review conducted by the external evaluator.

The Review took the form of two-day workshops held in Zimbabwe and Zambia, where country-specific findings of the EOP surveys were shared/discussed. The workshop approach engaged staff in debate around the findings, but also focused upon action planning for Year 4. The process culminated in a presentation at the annual C-SAFE regional workshop and a final document capturing critical findings and recommendations for the future of C-SAFE.

C-SAFE found that managers and technical staff are often so seeped in the daily challenges of project implementation that there is limited opportunity for critical reflection. The risk of a traditional evaluation, especially in the context of a significant scaling up of humanitarian operations, had the potential for the traditional result -- an evaluation submitted to the donor, with limited readership and relegated to the shelf. The 'Review' enabled the country teams to debate and distil the critical issues emerging from the available data through a structured and facilitated process, with an emphasis on linking learning to action planning for Year 4 and beyond.

ACRONYMS

C-SAFE	Consortium for Southern Africa Food Security Emergency
CHS	Community & Household Surveillance system
CFSM	Community Food Security Monitoring
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
CSB	Corn Soya Blend
CSI	Coping Strategy Index
CSPro	Census and Survey Processing System (software)
DAP	Development Assistance Program
EOP	End of Project survey
EUM	End Use Monitoring
FANTA	Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance
FFA	Food-for-Assets
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus / Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MAP	Market Assistance Program
NGO	Non-Governmental Ogranization
PDM	Post Distribution Monitoring
RPU	(C-SAFE's) Regional Program Unit
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TFA	Targeted Food Assistance
UN	United Nations
VAC	Vulnerability Assessment Committee
WFP	World Food Program
WV	World Vision
USAID-FFP	U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Food for Peace