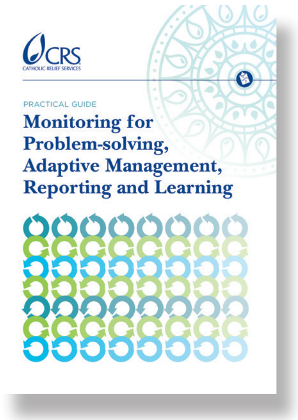
CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES

PRACTICAL GUIDE

Monitoring for Problem-solving, Adaptive Management, Reporting and Learning



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Based on the learning needs and insights of participants in the *Essentials of MEAL Design* training (EMECA, November 2018), and examples and lessons learned on light monitoring contributed by EMECA staff (April 2020).

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INTRODUCTION

Internal and external stakeholders have different information needs over a project's life, for purposes that include adaptive management, accountability, compliance, reporting and learning. A project's monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning, or MEAL, system should provide the information needed by these stakeholders at the level of statistical reliability, detail and timing appropriate to inform data use.

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At its most fundamental, a project MEAL system should enable us to:

- **Count** goods, activities, participants … for reporting and internal/donor accountability
- **Check** progress against indicators, assumptions, beneficiary satisfaction, possible changes in context … for adaptive management and learning purposes
- **Confirm** results on indicators and ToC assumptions at key points in time … for donor reporting and for project-based and broader learning
- **Change** activities and/or approaches as needed … to address challenges and improve results (this is what adaptive management is about)
- **Communicate** (proposed) changes to donors and other relevant stakeholders (consult or inform)[1]

In emergency contexts where the situation is still fluid, 'informal monitoring' has proved helpful to staff's ongoing assessment of the broader environment in order to identify changes in the situation, in other actors' responses, and in priority unmet needs that would require corresponding changes in the response.[2] The same distinction between **informal monitoring** of possible changes in the project's operating context—whether identified as project assumptions and risk factors or not—and **formal monitoring** of the activities included in the response and project indicators, is relevant for development contexts too.

- **Informal monitoring**: Ongoing assessment of changes in operating context
- **Formal monitoring**: Tracking progress against project activities and indicators

1. Depending on the scope of the change proposed, communication (e.g. to donors) often happens before the change is made.
2. See CRS' *Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning in Emergencies* for more information.

Within formal monitoring, it is useful to further differentiate between **light monitoring** and **rigorous monitoring**:

- **Light monitoring** aims to provide timely feedback on new activities (or new locations or target groups) or aspects of the project's theory of change (activity-to-output or output-to-IR change) logic that staff are less confident about, to check for early signs that progress is being made and that assumptions are holding true while there is still ample time to make adjustments if necessary.[3]
- **Rigorous monitoring** aims to collect representative data for evidence-based project management, reporting and learning, not just at midterm but throughout project implementation.[4]

Light monitoring is "light" in various ways:

- Limited scope of questions which aim to simply check if any problems exist, recognizing that signs of a possible issue may trigger more in-depth monitoring depending on the severity of the issue and the scope of the change required to address it
- Uses simple monitoring methods (not spending much time and effort on data collection)
- Uses small sample sizes or incomplete/partial data sets, that cannot be generalized but are 'good enough' to anticipate trends and identify potential issues for adaptive project management
- Integrates these light checks into project activities to the extent feasible, for cost- and time-efficiencies

In practice, effective project monitoring requires the use of different tools, sample sizes and/or frequency as appropriate over time. For instance, if light monitoring reveals a possible issue, we would want to confirm these initial findings and assess the scale and severity of the issue by using a larger, more representative sample size and possibly probing into the issue with a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. That is, there is a continuum from light to rigorous monitoring rather than a simple dichotomy.[5]

Light monitoring is "good enough" monitoring, resulting in timely and relevant data that enables staff to take action before it's too late.

The MEAL system should allow us not only to *prove* but also to *improve*.

Provides timely feedback on new activities and checks for early signs that progress is being made and that assumptions are holding true while there is still ample time to make adjustments if necessary

Collects representative data for evidence-based project management, reporting and learning, not just at midterm but throughout project implementation

3. Feedback and response mechanisms, or FRM, provide another critical source of information on community satisfaction and potential issues for problem-solving and adaptive project management.

4. A project's midterm evaluation is the most reliable source of statistically significant, representative data on progress toward the project's intermediate results and strategic objectives, but project MEAL systems often also collect and report data on output and IR-level indicators on a quarterly or annual basis.

5. Similarly, if informal monitoring revealed a change in the operating environment that may represent a risk or an opportunity for the project, we would want to further investigate the issue and its potential effect on the project through additional data collection (often through a combination of key informant interviews and light data collection in target areas).

Plan for all types of monitoring

A project's MEAL system should include informal, light and rigorous monitoring, as they are complementary and reinforce one another. Plan for light monitoring at project start-up (DIP and SMILER+ workshops) and document these plans in the project's Detailed Implementation Plan and MEAL operating manual. The DIP workshop can serve to identify new activities or aspects of the project's theory of change (activity-to-output or output-to-IR change logic) that you may be less confident about and that should be checked early on; the DIP will also help you determine when light monitoring activities should be conducted and for how long.[6]

6. For more information, see CRS Compass Standard 7, Key Action 1, Key Action 3 and Key Action 4.

The table below provides further description of each type of monitoring.

	Informal monitoring	Formal monitoring	
		Light monitoring	**Rigorous monitoring**
Why?	**Adaptive management:** To **check** whether there have been any changes in the context that may affect the continued emergency response or development project.	**Adaptive management:** To **check** on the relevance and effectiveness of activities: to check beneficiary satisfaction with activities and for signs that progress toward outputs and IRs is being made, to identify possible problems while there is time to further investigate issues (if needed) and to make adjustments (**change**) as applicable. To **check** whether the project's critical assumptions seem to be holding true and are sufficient for supporting the project's theory of change	**Adaptive management, documentation and reporting:** To provide **reliable data** on the relevance and effectiveness of activities (**count** progress toward outputs and **confirm** light monitoring results against output and IR project indicators) for adaptive management (**change**), reporting and learning purposes (**communicate**).
When? **How often?**	**Ongoing**, throughout the life of the response or project, as part of all staff's daily work.	**Time-bound**: **Early and for a limited time**, based on the activities schedule and project management information needs to support adaptive management. Focus on the early stage of activity implementation, especially if the activity, target group or context is new. Keep monitoring to the minimum needed for problem-solving – adjust frequency based on perceived risk and initial results. Stop checking when activity is complete, adequate evidence is gathered that activity is achieving intended results, or data saturation is achieved.	**Ongoing** for activity- and some output-level monitoring (counting) until activity is completed. **At specific, predefined points** in project implementation for most output- and IR-level monitoring. Frequency as per MEAL plan and reporting requirements. Timing based on the activities schedule, usually after select activities are completed.
How much? (sample)	No specific requirements; this happens as part of normal community interactions (i.e. it is convenience sampling).	Use small sample sizes for initial checks of whether there are any issues. Adjust as needed, e.g. investigate further with larger samples if issues are identified. Purposeful sampling of villages where activities are first initiated. Very small, non-probability samples of project participants in those villages. The sampling approach should aim to reveal typical issues that may hinder progress (e.g. selecting communities that performed "worst" at baseline; selecting "critical" cases that are assumed to face most challenges to progress – if they do progress, there is a strong likelihood that the rest of the communities will also progress).	**Count**: The entire project population; there should be no sampling if the indicator calls for reporting a number. **Confirm:** Random sampling for quantitative methods (percentage indicators). Aim for a small but representative sample (i.e. higher margin of error than for evaluations).[7] Purposeful sampling for qualitative methods (probing why/why not or how questions).

7. If participant/beneficiary numbers are small, sampling may not be appropriate or necessary. In this case, COUNT actual numbers. This should be determined at design or SMILER stage and documented in the MEAL plan.

	Informal monitoring	Formal monitoring	
		Light monitoring	Rigorous monitoring
How? (methods and tools)	Mix of direct observation and informal conversations with a range of stakeholders and community members (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries), based on opportunities. Informal monitoring is not structured (no tool used); it happens as part of routine community interactions.	Most likely, qualitative methods such as semi-structured observations and conversations / semi-structured interviews with project participants and others. May include quantitative methods on a very small, statistically unrepresentative sample of project participants. Often guided by tools from the MEAL system, complemented by qualitative probing questions. Integrate into project activities whenever possible (e.g. check retention of previous session's key messages at start of next session).	Activity monitoring (typically **counting**) is often based on activity records. Standalone monitoring activities use quantitative methods—such as structured observation, pre- and post-training tests, post-distribution surveys, individual/ household interviews, etc. —using tools developed as part of SMILER.[8] Qualitative methods (e.g. focus group discussions) to explain findings from quantitative data collection as needed or to measure qualitative indicators as per project MEAL plan.
What to ask **What to look for**	This is an unstructured process that requires staff to have the right mindset—a healthy curiosity—to look for unanticipated changes in the context. Look for signs, such as displaced people starting to return home to their villages; people talking about new services that the government or another actor is promising; tension between some families or groups within some villages, even if unrelated to the project; misperceptions about project purpose and benefits, etc. Also look for signs of whether project assumptions and risks external to the project appear to be holding true.	Ask and look for evidence of satisfaction with the activities and progress—or lack thereof—against output- and IR-level indicators: e.g. are participants satisfied with the activities or inputs provided? With information provided? With delivery modalities? What is the level of participation of different people and groups in project activities? Have participants gained the knowledge, skills or attitudes promoted? Do participants seem to be using the inputs distributed and applying promoted practices? In all cases, probe: If not, why not? Look for potential unintended impact of project interventions and "do no harm" considerations. Also investigate whether project assumptions appear to be holding true.	Measure results (number or percentage) achieved against project indicators as specified in MEAL plan: How much of what we planned to do has been accomplished? How many people are participating and benefitting? How many people are adopting promoted practices (and which ones)? How much of what type of change is being seen or reported in target households or communities? As relevant, use qualitative methods to probe into why/ why not or how? Also investigate whether project assumptions appear to be holding true.

8. SMILER = Simple Measurement of Indicators for Learning and Evidence-Based Reporting (Currently being revised).

	Informal monitoring	Formal monitoring	
		Light monitoring	**Rigorous monitoring**
Who to ask	Everyone (beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, local leaders, key informants, partners and other NGOs, government officials, etc.) as opportunities for interaction arise: this is an unstructured, spontaneous process. Record the source of information (i.e. men/women and other relevant demographics/ characteristics)	Participants (and other community members, as applicable). Women and men separately. If known, focus on groups/individuals most likely to give a sense of success or reveal issues (e.g. critical cases).	Data sources identified as per MEAL plan (likely includes men and women; may focus on some subgroups only or disaggregate further for comparative analysis).
Who does it?	All staff (CRS and partner, MEAL and non-MEAL) should be engaged in informal monitoring.	Specific CRS and/or partner program or MEAL staff: Most field staff are responsible for conducting some level of light monitoring on their project component. MEAL staff may also be assigned light monitoring responsibilities.	Specific CRS and/or partner program or MEAL staff, as per MEAL plan and roles and responsibilities defined at SMILER+ workshop (data flow map).
Where and how to record findings	Staff document information learned in the field in their field trip reports and/or share verbally during team meetings (see below). Discussion (preliminary interpretation) and decisions are documented in (internal) meeting notes or reports.	Monitoring data are documented in monitoring tools when conducted as standalone light monitoring activities; or in activity records/field notes when integrated with project activities. Preliminary findings, interpretation and decisions are documented in (internal) meeting notes or reports.	Quantitative activity/output data are tracked in a simple Excel database. Output and IR data are recorded in the project Indicator Performance Tracking Table (IPTT) or Partner Indicator Reporting Table (PIRT) completed by partners. Qualitative data are documented in monitoring tools and analysis matrices, and findings documented in reports.

	Informal monitoring	Formal monitoring	
		Light monitoring	**Rigorous monitoring**
Analysis and interpretation	Create time for debriefing and encourage field staff to share what they hear and see in the community during regular team meetings.* Ensure informal observations are also reported, discussed and interpreted during project review meetings** with staff and partners. Cross-reference and compare what different team members heard or saw. Consider specific characteristics of information source: location(s) and/or person(s). Compare past field reports to see if some observations are recurring.	Light monitoring data are analyzed and interpreted during regular* team meetings. Light monitoring findings are also discussed during project review meetings** with staff and partners. Light monitoring data are interpreted together with existing accountability and quantitative activity and output tracking (counting) data. Disaggregate data between men and women (and other relevant demographics/characteristics, e.g. purposeful sampling decisions) Interpret findings within limitations of sample size.	Data analyzed by MEAL staff and PM in preparation for project review meetings** with staff and partners. Comparison groups and data disaggregation as per MEAL and/or analysis plans[9] (gender disaggregation at minimum). Probe for correlations between indicators. Quantitative and qualitative monitoring and accountability data are interpreted jointly. Data are interpreted within their level of representation.
Use **Change and commu-nicate**	Appropriate action is taken immediately to further investigate and/or to adjust/change the response as needed. Preliminary findings may be communicated with key stakeholders and may be documented in project reports as appropriate	Use for problem-solving: appropriate action is taken immediately to adjust activities or approaches as needed. Key findings and decisions may be communicated verbally with donors and are usually documented in project reports. Report findings within limitation of approach (do not generalize findings to all participants or report numbers or percentages); focus communication on action taken to solve problem.	Use data, trends and comparisons for project adaptive management and learning. Use for reporting to donors and other stakeholders. Report percentage within limitation of sampling strategy (margin or error).

* Team meetings can be daily in the early phase of an emergency response, but only weekly or even monthly for more established development programs. The key principle is to share monitoring information at the first available opportunity. In case of monthly meetings, monitoring data that may suggest a significant issue might require escalation to the project manager without waiting for the regular team meeting. Even if done verbally, reporting of informal monitoring during team meetings is critical to compare individual staff members' observations and learning with those of other team members.

See Compass Standard 11, Key Action 3 for more information on (light) project monitoring; and the MEAL in emergency online course's Monitoring method building block, for discussion of monitoring and adaptive management in emergencies.

** Project review meetings are typically held on a quarterly and annual basis in development contexts, and monthly or quarterly in emergency contexts. See Compass Standard 11, Key Action 4 for additional guidance on data analysis and interpretation in project review meetings.

9. See *Guidance for Planning for Data Analysis, Visualization, Interpretation and Learning* (upcoming)

Annex: Light Monitoring in practice: Tips and lessons learned from the field

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who is responsible for light monitoring?

Light monitoring requires collaboration between programming and MEAL staff. Program staff should take the lead in identifying the need for light monitoring. Program staff are best placed to identify what requires light monitoring (what activities are new or what project assumptions we need to make sure are holding); when light monitoring activities should take place, based on the DIP; or what profile of communities or participants (who) might be least likely to succeed (critical cases). MEAL staff can support on tool development and implementation (how).

When do we do light monitoring?

Start early and end early: Light monitoring is most useful **soon after you start** a new activity, start working with a new target population or in a new context, to check whether it's going OK before it's too late to change. Once you have made adjustments (if needed, based on light monitoring results) and confirmed things are progressing in the right direction – **stop**! You've met your information needs!

As light monitoring samples are so small, how can we be sure there is really no problem?

By focusing on locations or participants least likely to succeed, **critical case sampling** is an effective way to ensure we're not missing a potential issue in spite of small sample sizes. Identify critical cases—individuals, groups or communities we believe will have the most difficulty in achieving project results due to specific characteristics—based on project assumptions or assessment findings, or the field team's impressions. If sampled respondents are achieving the intended results, the team can be reasonably confident that other project participants are also doing OK. If some participants or groups had significantly lower baseline responses, or when field teams report that some locations or groups are not engaging well in project activities (e.g. low attendance), these can also be specifically targeted for light monitoring (**worst-case sampling**). *(The Afghanistan example annexed uses critical case sampling, while the Iraq example uses random sampling but with a very small, non-statistically representative, sample size.)*

How do we know if we can take action or need to confirm light monitoring results before doing so?

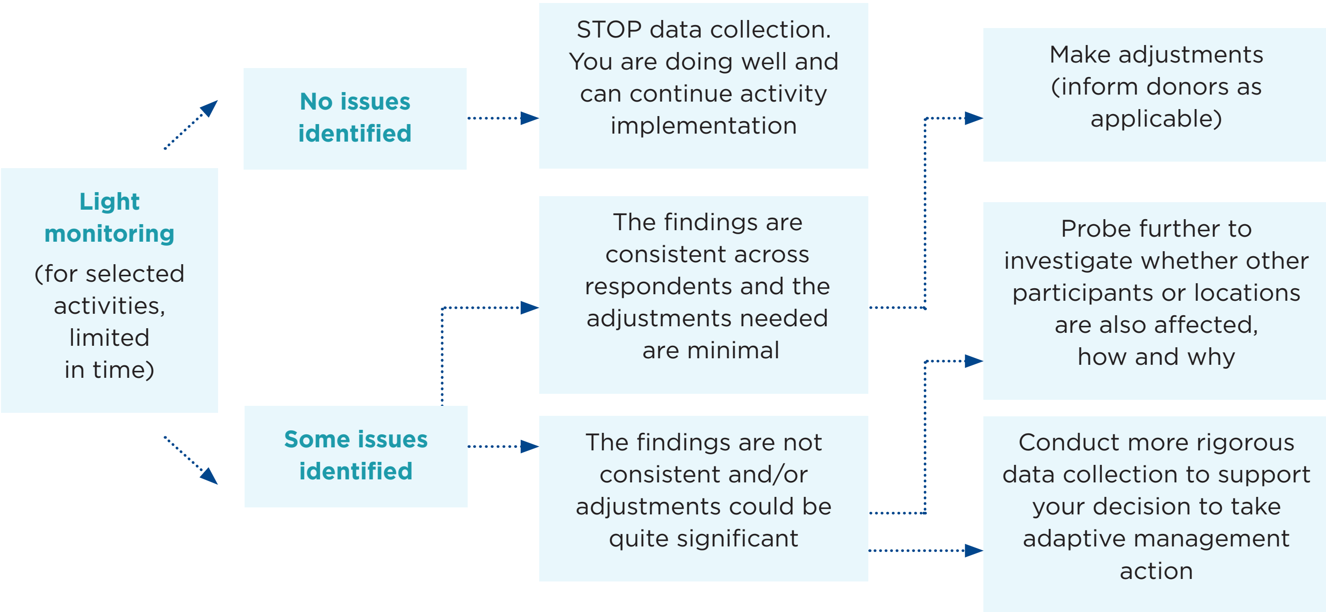
You may need to probe further into light monitoring findings if:

- light monitoring has uncovered some potential issues (i.e. activities are not delivering outputs or IR-level change is not happening as the ToC would suggest it should) AND
- findings are not consistent across respondents and/or possible actions to address the issue uncovered would entail significant changes to the design (especially if those changes may require donor approval).

In this case, you might want to probe further to better understand the scale of the issue: How prevalent is the issue? Is everyone equally affected or are some groups or individuals more affected than others and why?

This information would allow you to decide whether to take targeted action to improve the results of the specific groups or individuals that are failing, or if you need to adjust activities for everyone.

You would aim to confirm light monitoring findings by using a more representative sampling strategy (especially if critical case sampling was used for the initial data collection) and/or expanding your sample size as needed to increase confidence in the results. More rigorous quantitative data collection should still be complemented by qualitative data collection, which may help you identify other solutions to solve the problem.



Do we need to create new tools or can we use the tools from the MEAL system?

You can **adapt tools** from the project's MEAL system for light monitoring purposes. If you chose to use tools that collect quantitative data (i.e. measure your indicators), it is recommended that you: (1) simplify and shorten the tools to focus only on key questions or issues you need to find out now; (2) include probing "how" and "why or why not" open-ended questions in the tool, so that you have all the data that you need to take action as needed. Teams have found that the **qualitative data** in response to these open-ended questions are **the most useful for action planning** purposes.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FIELD

The following two examples show how light monitoring was conducted in a youth livelihood project in Iraq and in an emergency water restoration project in Afghanistan:

- In **Iraq**, phone interviews with a small randomly selected sample of female participants in each of the livelihood tracks offered by the project (self-employment and formal employment) sought to check their retention of knowledge gained during training, to find out whether they had faced any challenges, and to flag any potential safeguarding issues. The example shows how findings from the interviews were presented for team interpretation and decision-making (as well as reporting to the donor).
- In **Afghanistan**, focus group discussions (FGD) with members of water management committees aimed to find out whether the committees were functional, effective and likely to continue operating satisfactorily after project close-out. The example is an adaptation of the FGD guide used by the teams.

These examples were adapted for dissemination and learning purposes; the data presented is not real data.

CRS IRAQ

Livelihoods Training Light Monitoring Interviews

OBJECTIVES

- To lightly check knowledge retention through topic recall
- To check on challenges faced by participants
- To check for potential safeguarding issues

The CRS Iraq MEAL team conducted phone interviews with 20 female livelihoods participants in March 2020. They called at least 10 women from each of two training tracks.

MOST IMPORTANT TOPICS

Self-employment track	Formal employment track
Pricing; marketing and promotion; choosing good products; customer/client relations; budgeting; communication; flexibility; branding; leadership; feasibility studies; market analysis; business management; business planning; MS Word and Excel	Customer/client relations; accounting; coordination; marketing; MS Word and Excel; capacity building; leadership; market analysis; time management; business management; marketing and promotion; budgeting; teamwork

Female participants from both training tracks demonstrated good topic recall. Here (left) are the topics they said they found MOST important:

LEAST IMPORTANT TOPICS

Most respondents said all topics were important and did not single out specific topics they found least important. However, two self-employment track participants said that the topics in the previous week were repetitive. One formal employment track participant said she found MS Word least important because she already had information about it.

REGISTRATION INFORMATION USEFULNESS, AND TRACK-SELECTION SATISFACTION

Nice work! All of the female respondents reported that the information they received during the registration was useful. Consequently, all of them reported that they were satisfied with the tracks they had selected.

MS OFFICE TRAINING FOR SELF-EMPLOYMENT TRACK

	Are the topics in the training enough to help you with your business?	*Is one week enough for the training?*
✔	9	2
✘	2	9

Self-employment track participants said that one week was too short a time in which to learn Word and Excel. They said that they would need about two weeks.

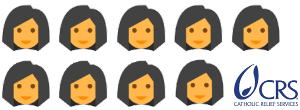
BUSINESS PLAN AND CAREER PLAN CHALLENGES

Formal employment track participants appeared to have experienced more challenges in completing their career plans than self-employment track participants.

What can we do about it?

Business plan	Career plan
❑ Difficulty in preparing tables: *Setting up the tables and filling in the price tables*	❑ Going to markets and dealing with (male) owners ❑ Finding a host employer ❑ Limited information from hosts ❑ Uncertainty of securing job after the internship

MEANS OF FINDING HOST EMPLOYER



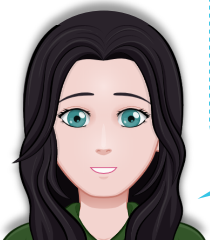
9 out of 10 women were able to secure their host employer through their own efforts; 1 woman said CRS helped her find a host.

SAFETY AND FREE AID

All 20 of us feel safe and comfortable inside the training centers, and no one has ever asked us to give cash or services in exchange for our participation. No one has ever collected fees from us.

TRAINERS' BEHAVIOR	SE	FE
The trainers are organized and well-prepared during the workshops.	9	8
The trainers have a good understanding of the topics they are discussing with us.	8	9
The trainers are able to answer our questions.	8	9
The trainers speak and act appropriately. They treat us with respect.	9	8
The trainers treat us equally. They do not favor some participants over others.	9	10

SE = Self-Employment | FE = Formal Employment



Overall, we are satisfied with the trainers; however, one of us said that the formal employment trainers needed more experience. We also have some feedback that we would like to share with you.

"The program is very useful. I enjoy it a lot, and it helps the youth in a big way"

"We suggest that you reduce the weeks and hours of workshops because we face transportation difficulties."

"When will the training resume?"

CRS AFGHANISTAN

WASH PROJECT: CHECKING ACTIVENESS OF WATER MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

Purpose: This tool will be used to check whether the water management committees (WMCs) established under the project are functional and effective in managing water-related issues in their communities.

Information collected using this form will assist program staff to decide whether additional support is needed to ensure that the committees are functional and active, and likely to continue functioning effectively after project close-out. More specifically, the information will help with early measurement of the following water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) indicator:

> *Number and percentage of water user committees created and/or trained by the WASH program that are active at least three (3) months after training*

While in most communities, WMCs have been established and trained on their roles, it is critical to assess the level of their **activeness** in managing water activities in their respective communities so that they remain active after the project ends.

Sampling: This light monitoring will be conducted in two of the project's four districts (targeting two districts that are most different) in communities where (i) the administrative and technical trainings of WMCs have already been completed and (ii) staff believe WMCs are not active (critical case sampling). In each district, two such communities will be selected for monitoring.

Data collection method: Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews (focus group discussions) with WMC members. Each focus group discussion is estimated to last 30 minutes, and a total of four FGDs will be conducted.

Tool: Semi-structured interview with WMC members

Invite four to seven members of the WMC to participate in a short meeting. Introduce yourself and explain that the purpose of the data collection is to understand their experience, and roles and responsibilities related to the committee so we can better tailor project activities to the local context and needs. Emphasize that their participation is purely voluntary and that they can stop the discussion at any point and/or decline to answer any question without any consequences. Also explain that the participation in this interview will not entitle them to any additional benefits. Explain that their names will not be recorded and that the information they share will be confidential, used only for the internal purposes of project management and not disclosed to anyone outside of CRS.

Confirm that participants are willing to participate and have their consent recorded, then proceed with the focus group discussion:

1. Can you please explain the purpose of the WMC in your community? What does the community expect you to do? How do you organize yourselves internally to deliver that?

2. Of the roles you mentioned the WMC is expected to do, which one(s) have you done in the past one month? *Probing question:* if any of the role was not done, why was this the case?

3. In the past month, did you hold any meetings? If not, why not? If yes, how many meetings? *Probing questions:* What did you discuss? What were some key results of the meeting?
Did you decide to take any action? What have you done to achieve those actions?

4. In the past month, have community members approached you about an issue related to water management? If yes, what was the issue? What have you done to resolve that issue?

5. One of the roles of the WMC is to maintain and repair the water system in your community. Do you believe you have the right knowledge and skills to repair or resolve a technical fault in the water supply system? Why or why not?

6. Do you expect the WMC to continue to exist and remain active after CRS leaves your community in a few months' time? If yes, why do think so? If no, why not?

7. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions on the WMC? If so, please explain.

Thank everyone for sharing their thoughts.

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