

# Strengthening Couples

**“As a result of this project, we learned a lot about the things that have contributed to improving the quality of life in our home.”**

*- Abou and his wife, participants in Maramou, Niger*

**“It is a first project that affects all the social strata of the village, a project that teaches us and reminds us of what we will have to do or avoid in our relationships and our society.”**

*- Imam Saadou of Mayahi, Niger*

## A SMART APPROACH TO COUPLES STRENGTHENING

Despite decades of investments in health, agriculture and other development programs, chronic problems such as malnutrition, preventable childhood diseases and infant mortality remain high in many regions of the world. Household economic strengthening activities such as internal savings and loans can improve child health outcomes, however economic benefits do not automatically translate into improved health (Brunie, 2014). Research shows that income controlled by women is more frequently spent on food, education and health care for the whole family, particularly children (UNICEF 2011; Smith et al. 2003) (Pena, et al., 1994; Quisumbing, et al., 1995). In most cases, however, men control the household income and expenditures. This dynamic created the need for a program that promotes better communication, a commitment to shared goals and empowers women to have a stronger voice in how family resources are used.

In 2008, CRS implemented the SMART Couples project (**S**trengthening **M**arriages **A**nd **R**elationships **T**hrough Communication and Planning.) The program coaches cohabitating couples on better ways to communicate and adopt joint-decision making behaviors around such areas as agriculture, WASH, nutrition, maternal and child health, natural family planning and household economics. The intervention uses the social-ecological model of behavior change. Results show that SMART Couples who successfully adopt the new behaviors and communication techniques are better able to plan effectively and advance the well-being of the family (Effects of faithfulness-focused curriculum on couples from three countries in Africa. CRS, 2012). The approach has been implemented in 14 African countries and reaching over 157,400 beneficiaries. It is already proven effective in strengthening household governance and intra-household decision making while challenging detrimental cultural and gender norms.



Couples report having better communication after participating in the program.  
*Dorothy Brewster-Lee/CRS*



The SMART approach teaches women and men valuable joint-decision making skills, which increases the chance that the outcomes of other health and development interventions will be achieved. *Dorothy Brewster-Lee/CRS.*

The program includes two innovative CRS training curriculums—the Faithful House for Christian participants and Islamic Family Life for Muslim participants. Program elements include two-hour daily sessions over two weeks to groups of 7 to 15 couples. Participants record what they learn so they can transfer new knowledge back to their community; the hope is that lessons learned will influence social norms. After the training, facilitators follow up with home visits and encourage participation in SMART couple support groups to help couples sustain new positive behaviors. Results show that couples who complete the program are better able to communicate, plan and improve the health and well-being of their entire family.

The innovative SMART Couple program is grounded in CRS' Integral Human Development framework. It is a process that promotes full human potential, especially in the following areas: 1. Human (values, knowledge, skills and spiritual wellbeing) 2. social (extended family, community networks) 3. political (government, access to power) 4. financial 5. natural and 6. physical. This CRS program is designed to respond to the growing need for new approaches that promote greater integration into multisector programs with a focused effort on reaching young couples.

## CROSS-CUTTING APPROACH

There is a growing recognition that a multi-sectoral, integrated approach is needed to solve complicated development problems. We know that integrated projects are less likely to leave gaps and inefficiencies that undermine positive change. (REF – Food Security Desk Review for Karamoja, Uganda, 2017). For example, to successfully reduce the rate of malnutrition in low income countries, there must be both sufficient quality of food for women and

children under two, and proper health and environmental conditions (USAID-KUSINTHA 2016).

Creating long-term, positive change in the household starts with a willingness to work together. With greater couple cooperation, communication, joint decision making and new skills, couples can better manage household income, food preparation, agricultural production, livestock, water, sanitation, and food consumption. Applying couple strengthening activities as part of a gender crosscutting objective is one way that newly adopted behaviors and skills such as improved communication, better joint decision-making, cooperation and planning is systematically applied across a program that has several interventions (MCH, nutrition, agriculture, WASH, SILC etc.) (REF – Food Security Desk Review for Karamoja, Uganda, 2017). The CRS couple strengthening approach is contributing to the cross-cutting gender objective in multi-sector programs in Burundi, Ethiopia and Democratic Republic of Congo.

## ENGAGING YOUTH

In many low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, more than 50% of girls are married. “Many women are married and bear children during their adolescent years, at a time when they have the least access to resources and decision-making power in the household, which affects food utilization and nutrition outcomes.” [REF – Burundi DFAP RFA]. By teaching women and men valuable joint-decision making skills, we are also increasing the chances that the benefits of other programs will be much better realized. (REF – Burundi DFAP RFA/Couple lit rev).

Operational research shows that SMART young couples are demonstrating the highest improvements in gender relations and dynamics, male involvement in child health, birth-spacing and joint health decision-making.



## EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT COUPLE INTERVENTIONS

Research in resource-limited countries is confirming a link between the quality of marriages and HIV risk, testing and counseling [5] [6] [7], contraception [8] decreased intimate partner violence (IPV) [11] (ref:25,26,28) and the health and well-being of children in the household [15], [16], [17], [18] [19].

## SMART COUPLE RESULTS

Randomized control trials of the SMART Couples' base curriculum (The Faithful House) were completed by CRS in 4 Sub-Saharan countries. Results from a 10-month follow-up study in Ethiopia show that a significantly higher proportion of participants shared responsibility in child care and decision-making. Couples were also more likely to report shared authority in making major decisions on household issues ( $p < 0.01$ ) and when to have sex ( $p < 0.01$ ). Similar results were found in studies in Uganda, Cameroun and Zambia.

## ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

Couples say they expect their training and new skills will result in better overall relationships with improved joint decision making and better asset management. Couples reported a commitment to successfully completing couple-initiated household contracts aimed at improving the well-being of all family members and to sharing their lessons learned with their communities in order to break down unproductive social norms and promote new ones.

## REFERENCES

5. Catholic Relief Services. Short-term effect of values-based curriculum on couples from Northwest Cameroon : a pilot evaluation.; 2011.
6. Catholic Relief Services. Effects of faithfulness-focused curriculum on couples from three countries in Africa.; 2012.
7. Catholic Relief Services. Short-term impact of faithfulness-focused curriculum on couples from three regions in Ethiopia.; 2011.14. Richter LM, Sherr L, Adato M, et al. Strengthening families to support children affected by HIV and AIDS. AIDS Care. 2009
11. Richter LM, Sherr L, Desmond C. Synthesis Report JLICA Learning Group 1 Strengthening Families - An obvious truth: Children affected by HIV and AIDS are best cared for in functional families with basic income security, access to health care and education, and support from kin and commun.; 2008. Available at: <http://www.ccaba.org/wp-content/uploads/JLICA-Learning-Group-1-Synthesis-Paper.pdf>.
16. Richter LM, Naicker S. A Review of Published Literature on Supporting and Strengthening Child-Caregiver Relationships (Parenting). Arlington, VA; 2013.
17. Betancourt TS, Abrams EJ, McBain R, Fawzi MCS. Family-centred approaches to the prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV. J. Int. AIDS Soc. 2010;13 Suppl 2(Suppl 2):S2. Available at: <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=2890971&tool=pmcentrez&rendertype=abstract>.
18. Hosegood V. The demographic impact of HIV and AIDS across the family and household life-cycle: implications for efforts to strengthen families in sub-Saharan Africa. AIDS Care. 2009;21 Suppl 1(August):13-21. Available at: <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=2758218&tool=pmcentrez&rendertype=abstract>. Accessed August 22, 2013.
19. Center for Global Health and Development - Boston University. Documentation of three programs providing family-centered support to most-at-risk populations (MARPs) and their children: Ukraine, Vietnam, Zambia.; 2011:1-43. Available at: [http://www.bu.edu/cghd/files/2011/12/Children-of-MARP-Program-Documentation\\_Sept-1-Final.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/cghd/files/2011/12/Children-of-MARP-Program-Documentation_Sept-1-Final.pdf).
25. Child Protection in Crisis - Livelihoods and Economic Strengthening Task Force. The Impacts of Economic Strengthening Programs on Children: A review of the evidence.; 2011. Available at: <http://www.cpcnetwork.org/task-forces-details.php?ID=2>.
26. Woller G, Wolfe J, Brand M, et al. Livelihood & Food Security Conceptual Framework. Available at: [http://microlinks.kdid.org/sites/microlinks/files/resource/files/LIFT ES Framework\\_8 17 2011.pdf](http://microlinks.kdid.org/sites/microlinks/files/resource/files/LIFT%20ES%20Framework_8%2017%202011.pdf).
28. Vyas S, Watts C. How does economic empowerment affect women's risk of intimate partner violence in low and middle income countries? A systematic review of published evidence. J. Int. Dev. 2009;21:577-602.30. Clulow C, Donaghy M. Family therapy. J. Fam. Ther. 2010;32:142-168.



After participating in The Faithful House, households report that fathers are more engaged in their children's lives. Dorothy Brewster-Lee/CRS.

## AVAILABLE RESOURCES

No.	Resource	Focus of the manual/resource	Language	Available
1	The Faithful House CORE Manual	Basic couple strengthening text and HIV & AIDS prevention	English French Spanish	online
2	The Faithful House Couples Handbook	Pictorial summary of TFH and IFH manuals used by couple beneficiaries for informal message sharing in the community	English French	online
3	The Faithful House	Revised TFH Core Manual with stronger emphasis on couple strengthening and less on HIV prevention	English French	upon request/ SharePoint
4	Love and Life	TFH specifically developed for HIV+ populations (RCT studies in Ethiopia)	English	upon request/ SharePoint
5	PMCT	HIV+ mothers	English	online
6	The Faithful House & FAM	Developed for the Natural Planning Project (NPP) with Georgetown (Uganda). Provides detailed instructions on how to organize a couple-focused natural family planning project in health facilities and communities. Includes FAM and Couple Strengthening implementation job aids and MEAL tools.	English French (on Sharepoint)	online
7	The Faithful House Facilitators' Training Manual	A training manual for TFH facilitators	English French (on Sharepoint)	online
8	The Faithful House Household Economic Strengthening – Burundi & Benin	Based on the revised version of the TFH CORE manual. Contains additional text focused on household livelihoods and economic strengthening.	French only	upon request/ SharePoint
9	The Faithful House & Nutrition	Nutrition. This resource is being developed by WARO RTA Nutrition	English (French to come)	upon request/ SharePoint
10	The Faithful House & Integration into Multi-sectoral projects (family planning and nutrition – eg. Burkina Faso, Ghana & Niger)	Description of TFH and Fertility Awareness Methods with practical tips on how to integrate couple strengthening activities into multi-sectoral projects. Scheduled for release June 2017.	English (French to come)	upon request/ SharePoint
11	Islamic Family House (IFH)	Islamic version of the original TFH manual	English French	upon request/ SharePoint
12	“Couples Schools” version of The Faithful House and Islamic Family House	This version takes the 3-day workshop and divides it into 10 sessions over a 2-week period. This makes it easier to get both members of the couple together and is cheaper than organizing a full-day workshop.	English French	upon request/ SharePoint

For additional information, see Addenda:

- A. Curricula (TFH and IFH) in English, French and Spanish with supplemental text for NFP, nutrition, HIV, and HES).
- B. Workshop Facilitation Job Aids
- C. Couple Functionality Assessment Toolkit (CFAT) and other MEAL Tools (sample Results Framework , MEAL Plan and indicators)
- D. Cascade (Burundi /Mali)
- E. Human Resource consideration
- F. Guidance for country specific adaption, start-up and RFA
- G. Costs (3 top items and budget template)
- H. Listing of Couple Strengthening Literature References