

# Engaging government in deciding priority service areas: lessons from a vulnerable children's program in Nigeria



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In April 2013 the SMILE program began engaging with the government of Nigeria in the care of vulnerable children. Collaboration with government is one of the project's mandates, in addition to increasing direct services for vulnerable children. SMILE worked closely with the government in the project's planning stages. Together, SMILE staff and government officials assessed and selected the priority service areas for the project. They also selected the specific locations and communities, called local government areas (LGAs), that the program would serve.

The SMILE experience has provided insight into the process of engaging government from a project's earliest stages. This paper is intended to be a resource for those seeking to engage governments in program design and planning.

In this paper, you'll find:

- An introduction to systems-based social programs
- A step-by-step guide for conducting a government-led assessment
- The challenges faced during the SMILE experience
- Recommendations to replicate and improve the process SMILE Project

## SMILE Project

The Sustainable Mechanisms for Improving Livelihoods and Household Empowerment (SMILE) Program is a five year cooperative agreement between Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). SMILE is active in five Nigerian states: Benue, Kogi, Edo, Nasarawa, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). SMILE aims to improve the wellbeing of 500,000 vulnerable children (VC) and 125,000 caregivers from April 2013 to March 2018.

The program operates through an umbrella grants mechanism. The SMILE program provides funding and technical support to civil society organizations (CSOs) that serve vulnerable children and households. CSOs receive sub-grants for capacity strengthening and program implementation at the community level. They also receive technical support from the SMILE program. The participating CSOs provide services in household economic strengthening; food security and nutrition; and integrated care and support, which includes child protection, psychosocial support, health and education.

## USING A SYSTEMS APPROACH IN THE SMILE PROJECT

In addition to working closely with local CSOs, the SMILE program also targets the state level response to vulnerable children. SMILE is designed to strengthen the organizational systems and technical capacity of government offices in selected local government areas (LGAs). SMILE interacts with the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, and the Social Welfare Department, in each of the five states.

The SMILE program was designed with a systems strengthening approach in mind. As part of this, SMILE aims to develop the knowledge and skills of government and civil society to manage social programs for vulnerable children. SMILE emphasizes the development of both technical and organizational capacity. The program strengthens the capacities of state institutions, community organizations, social care workers, and households with the belief that this is the most sustainable way to improve the wellbeing of vulnerable children and families.

Government plays a critical role in coordinating and monitoring services for vulnerable children. SMILE was designed to engage government throughout the project's lifespan, with the expectation that this will be a vital part of the program's long term success. In particular, involving the government in deciding service priorities and program service locations can increase their ownership of the process. This ownership improves the long term impact of social programs and the national and local systems they support.

### WHAT IS SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING?

Systems strengthening is the process of identifying and implementing changes in a country's policy and practice in a social service area, like health or education. A systems strengthening approach involves designing initiatives and strategies to improve the functions of a social system. This approach aims to boost the quality, efficiency, coverage, and access of the system. Systems strengthening can help governments respond to social and economic challenges more effectively. Social programs are most sustainable when governments are involved directly in their design and implementation. Because of this, systems strengthening is an important long-term approach to serving vulnerable populations.

### HOW TO CONDUCT A GOVERNMENT-LED ASSESSMENT TO SELECT SERVICE PRIORITIES AND PROGRAM LOCATIONS

Rapid situation assessments were conducted in the five program states at the beginning of SMILE. The SMILE team used these assessments to determine which services were most needed in each state, and which local government areas should participate. SMILE worked closely with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development in each state during this process.

The assessments helped refine the program focus by identifying gaps in existing partnerships and new opportunities to maximize resources. The information collected in the assessments was later used in the request for application (RFA) documents provided to CSOs. This data helped CSOs develop strategies and propose focused projects.

The process below describes the steps in a government-led assessment, as experienced during the SMILE program.

1. **Identify objectives for the rapid assessment** The objectives of the SMILE assessments were to:
  - identify LGAs for program implementation based on agreed criteria
  - confirm priority service areas for vulnerable children and use these in the RFA document
  - identify key actors and coordinating platforms at the state level for program implementation.
2. **Gain entry into states and local government areas through community gate keepers and government officials from relevant ministries**
3. **Conduct interviews with state officials, local government and community members, and expected beneficiaries** SMILE used a questionnaire and interview guides for conducting rapid assessments at state, local government, community and child level. The assessment team conducted interviews with state officials from various sectors, local government and community-based care workers, care givers and children. Data was collected this way to ensure that the different actors involved in children services all gave their input. The assessment was qualitative and collected the following information:
  - service areas of greatest importance for children
  - key actors at state, LGA and community levels
  - existing networks and coordinating platforms that the SMILE program could use during implementation
4. **Analyze data and prepare an initial summary of findings** After the assessment, the team clustered responses into priority areas based on the question themes. This included analyzing all responses, and then organizing a comprehensive list findings. The team prepared an initial summary of findings to discuss with state officials at debriefing meetings.
5. **Host assessment debriefing meetings in each state with representatives from multiple sectors** These meetings were a platform to present and discuss the initial findings from the field.
6. **Reach a consensus on selection criteria for program participation** During the debriefing meetings, SMILE facilitated dialogue among assessment actors, including representatives from government and civil society. This dialogue led to consensus on parameters for selecting LGAs for program targeting. This process was led by the State Ministries of Women's Affairs and Social Development in all the five program states.
7. **Rank priority service areas and agree on a list of participating locations** During the debriefing meetings, government and program representatives ranked the priority service areas through consensus. Each meeting also produced a short list of the local government areas to be included in the program. The SMILE technical team later finalized these lists through review of targeting criteria, data from the rapid assessment, and obtaining state consensus.

## SMILE SELECTION CRITERIA

The SMILE project used these resources to inform LGA selection criteria:

1. state rapid assessments
2. state and national VC Situation Assessment Reports
3. national and state census data
4. state ministry reports
5. experience from state actors across sectors

With the government, SMILE agreed on the following criteria:

1. overall population per LGA
2. specific VC population per LGA
3. forms of vulnerabilities faced by children in specific LGAs
4. most difficult or hard to reach areas
5. state of children's services or facilities in the LGAs
6. consideration of rural and urban mix

## CHALLENGES

The challenges faced during government engagement in SMILE related mostly to the decision making process. The most significant challenges were:

- the absence of clear parameters to guide LGA selection at the state level
- a lack of prior data to inform objective decision making
- the different geopolitical interests among state actors presented some conflict in prioritizing project areas

These challenges were managed by creating and sharing clear parameters for LGA selection. The discussions were also guided by the SMILE team to ensure that the regions and communities with greatest need were prioritized.

## RECOMMENDATIONS ON CONDUCTING RAPID STATE ASSESSMENTS WITH GOVERNMENT

1. **Plan, design, and test your assessment tools with the government.** Working with them to ensure that these tools will capture issues most relevant to the program context. Seek information from state officials that will help your team develop clear assessment objectives. These objectives will help you collect relevant and focused data.
2. **Train the state assessment teams thoroughly on the assessment process and the intended outcomes.** This will increase the consistency of results across multiple teams. Include staff from the different technical areas of the program in each team. This helps ensure that relevant information for each of the program's objectives will be collected and analyzed.
3. **Communicate clearly with government at the state, LGA, and community levels.** This communication and subsequent support is necessary to gain entry before, during, and after the field assessment. Continue to involve and update the various levels of government on the assessment progress. This contributes to their ownership of and investment in the program.

4. **Create clear parameters for assessment debriefing sessions at the state level.** Use these technical guidelines to keep the discussion of assessment results, and proposed recommendations, in line with program focus. Use these sessions to share results with the wider audience of stakeholders, receive diverse ideas and recommendations, and gain consensus across the state actors.
5. **Create clear, thorough recommendations to share with state actors.** Use information from other sources to contextualize the assessment results. Provide direct recommendations. Being clear about the path forward can increase government involvement in the process. These recommendations will also give CSOs a specific, technical focus to use in designing their interventions and responding to the RFA.

## RECOMMENDATIONS ON SELECTING PROGRAM SERVICE LOCATIONS WITH GOVERNMENT

1. **Include guidance for the selection of program locations in the technical proposal documents.** Having clear selection criteria will allow the process to move along quickly. Use the assessment results and state resources to evaluate locations according to the criteria. Having precise selection guidelines can also moderate the role of political interests in determining the communities served.
2. **Create selection criteria that include a variety of social, political, and economic factors.** Include an area's population, forms of vulnerability, geographical location, and political representation. State officials should guide this process. When gathered, include this information in the RFA. This will allow partners to indicate specific project locations and beneficiaries in their proposals.
3. **Review existing data as part of the program startup phase.** Ask state actors to share resources that can inform beneficiary targeting and community selection.
4. **Involve relevant state actors in the selection of program locations.** Government and civil society parties often know which areas in the state are most affected by socioeconomic challenges and need the greatest service. Selecting service locations with government members can also facilitate their ownership of the program overall.
5. **Work closely with government ministries to host selection meetings in each state.** Request that a state ministry coordinate the meeting and invite participants. The ministry should facilitate the selection process according to the established criteria. At times, state actors may present certain locations and communities as more or less vulnerable. This presentation is not always based on evidence. Political considerations are important to take into account when selecting service locations, but manage the meeting with care to ensure that the communities with most need will receive services.



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