
Comments of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD on the country strategic opportunities programme for the Kingdom of Cambodia

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Action: The Executive Board is invited to review the comments of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD on the country strategic opportunities programme 2022–2027 for the Kingdom of Cambodia.

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I. General comments

1. The Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) undertook the first country strategy and programme evaluation (CSPE) in the Kingdom of Cambodia in 2017. The CSPE reviewed the country strategy and programme since the Fund started operations in 1997, focusing on the period 2007–2016 in particular. The CSPE findings and recommendations were presented and discussed with IFAD, the Government, and other stakeholders and development partners at a national workshop organized in January 2018.
2. The CSPE found that IFAD-funded projects had made contributions in a number of important areas of rural transformation, in particular support to the decentralization and deconcentration processes of the Government, and gender equality and rural women's empowerment. The portfolio also contributed to improving the agricultural productivity of poor rural households, although greater results could have been achieved had some weaknesses (e.g. extension and training approach) been addressed and other constraints such as labour shortages taken into consideration.
3. In spite of the achievements, the evaluation found that the portfolio had remained static until around 2010 amid a fast-evolving rural context. The projects largely replicated older project designs and approaches – group formation, agricultural training and extension services combined with group revolving-fund support. In general, the portfolio did not reflect a full appreciation of the implications for rural households of increasing non-agricultural income opportunities and labour shortages.
4. The evaluation made the following recommendations:
 - (i) Recommendation 1: Develop and operationalize a two-pronged strategy for the portfolio with support to: (i) agricultural commercialization, with a focus on relatively advanced smallholders; and (ii) coping strategies of poor households;
 - (ii) Recommendation 2: Balance investment in human capital and rural organizations supported by strategic partners, with tangible items;
 - (iii) Recommendation 3: Pursue more strategic planning and use of grants and investment financing to deepen partnerships with farmer organizations/associations;
 - (iv) Recommendation 4: Explore options for supporting regulatory services in agriculture in future pipeline development; and
 - (v) Recommendation 5: IFAD to work with the Government to strategize and facilitate mobilization of other partners to invest in smallholder agriculture by using ongoing projects as a platform, in areas such as strengthening of agricultural extension services and pro-poor agricultural value chain development.
5. The agreement at completion point for the CSPE, signed by IFAD and the Government in March 2018, indicated their agreement with the evaluation's recommendations. The same document also indicated that IFAD and the Government had decided to extend the period of the 2013–2018 country strategic opportunities programme (COSOP) in order to align the new COSOP with the Government's then upcoming National Strategic Development Plan for the period

2019–2023. According to the COSOP results review carried out in December 2021, while the extended COSOP was scheduled to end in December 2021, IFAD and the Government agreed to extend it for another year for a number of reasons, including the COVID-19 pandemic. It should therefore be noted that there was a time gap of four years or so between the CSPE and the new COSOP preparation.

6. The new COSOP contains a great deal of data and information and a good analysis of the country context and relevant issues, especially in appendix III (agricultural and rural sector issues) and appendix V (Social, Environmental and Climate Assessment Procedures (SECAP) background study), although it is not always clear how the main texts and appendices are linked or how they inform the strategy (see specific comments below). In general, regardless of the time elapsed since the CSPE was conducted and several developments in the context, the CPSE recommendations are still valid overall and have been largely reflected in the new COSOP, while emerging issues are also taken into consideration. IOE also recognizes that some of the CSPE recommendations have already been incorporated in the country programme. For example, IFAD has developed a partnership with and mobilized cofinancing from the European Investment Bank for the Sustainable Assets for Agriculture Markets, Business and Trade Project (SAAMBAT), which was designed after the CSPE and approved in 2019, and includes financing for value chain infrastructure. This relates to the CSPE recommendations 2 and 5. The target group description in the same project (SAAMBAT) also reflects the CSPE recommendation 1. The issue of regulatory services (CSPE recommendation 4) has been taken up in the ongoing portfolio and in the new COSOP (e.g. highlighting strengthening certification and origin tracing systems).
7. Some specific comments are provided below for consideration in the COSOP's operationalization, as well as project design and implementation.

II. Specific comments

8. **Target group and targeting strategy.** There seem to be some inconsistencies between the target group description in the main text and appendix V of the new COSOP. The main text (para. 37) describes the target group as "poor and vulnerable rural Cambodians whose income is less than 150 per cent of the national poverty line". Under this, two groups are mentioned: "(i) smallholder farmers who are either poor or near-poor and vulnerable to falling into poverty due to climate, market or other shocks but who have productive potential and can take advantage of market opportunities; and (ii) landless or land-poor households ready to take advantage of employment opportunities". This resonates with the CSPE recommendation 1 which referred to a two-prong strategy, although for the landless or land-poor households, the evaluation also suggested the possibility of non-land-based productive activities that would be complementary to non-agricultural or off-farm activities, and not only wage labour opportunities. On the other hand, the new COSOP, in appendix V, indicates that "the core target group of the COSOP is the producer organizations [formal or informal] and their members", hence not clearly including landless or land-poor households. Depending on the opportunities available, it would be important, at the project design stage, to articulate potential pathways showing how and to what extent these poor households (who may not be members of producer organizations) could be reached and benefit, whether from non-land-based productive activities (agriculture or non-agriculture) or wage employment.
9. **Vulnerable groups.** Detailed information and analysis on gender issues, youth, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities are included in appendix V (SECAP background study). However, with regard to targeting, these subgroups tend to be lumped together with rather general descriptions. There are some exceptions, such as the consideration of value chains with a greater likelihood of involving specific groups (e.g. para. 39 in the main text) or an emphasis on information,

communication and technology in relation to youth. A better differentiated strategy, building on diagnostic analysis and experience, will be needed in project designs. The CSPE rated the gender equality and women's empowerment criterion satisfactory, but the experiences leading up to good achievement and lessons are not captured in the COSOP.

10. **Partnerships with farmer organizations and associations and indigenous peoples' organizations.** The CSPE provided a positive assessment on the partnership fostered with apex farmer organizations as well as indigenous peoples' organizations, mainly through non-country specific grants. Among others, the evaluation highlighted IFAD's contribution in terms of facilitating the participation of these organizations in the policy discussion through the Technical Working Group on Agriculture and Water. The evaluation recommended that such partnerships be continued and strengthened with more strategic planning and use of grants and investment financing. The new COSOP does mention the intention to continue partnerships with these organizations but rather in general ways. As noted in the CSPE, structured partnerships could contribute to different outcomes, and it will be important to clarify the main purpose of supporting and working with them, in addition to the modalities of engagement and resource requirements (human, technical or financial).

III. Final remarks

11. IOE appreciates that the Cambodia country programme in recent years has taken on board the CPSE recommendations and that the new COSOP for Cambodia continues to build on the CSPE findings and addresses some of its recommendations.