
Comments of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD on the country strategic opportunities programme for the Islamic Republic of Mauritania

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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 for the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.

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I. General comments

1. In 2023 and 2024, the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) conducted its second country strategy and programme evaluation (CSPE) in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. This evaluation covered the period from 2007 to 2023 and included the country strategic opportunities programme (COSOP) of 2007, the country strategy note of 2016 and the COSOP of 2018. It assessed eight loan-financed operations and a selection of national grants and non-lending activities.
2. In a context of political stability and relatively favourable economic conditions in Mauritania, the IFAD country programme provided significant support for the implementation of national agricultural policies. The programme strengthened community structures and organizations, encouraging them to become active participants in the development of their territories. It also contributed to the expansion of cultivated areas. However, the imbalance between land development efforts and support for agricultural production reduced the impact of interventions. The evaluation highlighted areas for improvement in the next programme, such as ineffective approaches to value chain development, lack of strategies to include young people and other vulnerable groups, and insufficient collaboration with other United Nations agencies and development partners. Furthermore, the interventions did not adequately consider the sustainable management of natural resources.
3. The CSPE made five recommendations, which were fully agreed upon by IFAD and the Government of Mauritania. These recommendations are as follows: (i) continue support for the development of agricultural and pastoral production systems, gradually deploying a value chain approach and systematically integrating and supporting the sustainable management of natural resources and adaptation to climate change; (ii) continue and strengthen the community-driven development approach in the programme as the foundation for local development, reintegrate rural finance and support institutional strengthening in the agriculture sector, including non-state entities; (iii) ensure that targeting continues to be guided by poverty rates, reintegrates oasis zones and is geared towards specific approaches centred on youth employment; (iv) continue support to women, adopting adequate gender strategies and mobilizing the necessary expertise; and (v) improve IFAD's monitoring of operations and its participation in capitalizing on lessons and in public policy dialogue.
4. The development objective of the new COSOP for Mauritania (2026–2033) is to contribute to inclusive rural economic growth that creates decent work and promotes social well-being. To that end, the new COSOP sets out two strategic objectives (SOs): SO1 – promote value chains that are innovative, resilient, inclusive and responsive to markets and to the needs of the rural poor; and SO2 – contribute to the improvement of the institutional framework for the transformation and resilience of food systems. The COSOP considers gender, young people, nutrition, the environment and natural resources management as cross-cutting themes.
5. The new COSOP for Mauritania explicitly references and integrates the CSPE recommendations into its strategic objectives. In particular, SO1 incorporates support for sustainable production systems and value chain development (recommendation 1), while explicitly mentioning the development of financial instruments (recommendation 2). SO2, meanwhile, focuses on strengthening institutions and non-state actors for rural development (recommendation 2). The community-driven development approach (recommendation 2), which has been

highly visible and successful in guiding investments in past projects, is less evident in the new COSOP. The new COSOP reintegrates oasis zones (recommendation 3) and indicates that women and young people will be prioritized (recommendations 3 and 4), but only briefly mentions how they will be reached. The focus in SO2 on contributing to an improved enabling environment indicates increased attention to policy dialogue (recommendation 5). The COSOP also proposes an advanced, integrated monitoring and evaluation system for the entire programme (recommendation 5).

II. Specific comments

6. The following specific comments are made based on the review of the COSOP.
7. **Strategic priorities.** It is positive that support for production and value chain development has been integrated into one SO, as this will enable the delivery of an integrated programme, the absence of which was highlighted by the CSPE as a main weakness. Including rural finance as part of the first SO is also in line with the CSPE recommendation. The fact that one of the two SOs focuses on institutional support highlights the importance that the country strategy places on improving the enabling environment for rural development. The CSPE emphasized the need to invest in capacity development of institutional actors and farmers' and interprofessional organizations, so that they can provide services to their members. However, the absence of a country office and the small size of the country team present significant challenges in terms of providing institutional support and contributing to policy dialogue, which may make achieving this outcome difficult. The COSOP should further detail how this support will be provided, considering these constraints.
8. **Theory of change (ToC) and intervention logic.** The ToC figure could be simplified, and the coherence between the narrative and the figure could be improved. The figure does not include elements related to gender, and the coverage of natural resources management, in particular water, and climate change adaptation is partial, despite these being highlighted as significant challenges in the country. These aspects are only briefly mentioned in the narrative. The ToC narrative introduces the term "fragility" but does not elaborate on it. The ToC hypotheses are formulated as outcomes, while they should be linked to the risks identified. The ToC aims to describe the programme's intervention logic; however, the following section (section III.B) presents the programme intervention model structured around four levels (inputs, outputs, outcomes and impact). This seems to be an additional ToC with different outcomes and expected impact. Having two intervention logics in the same document creates confusion, so it is recommended that the two be combined to ensure coherence. Finally, the table presenting the COSOP strategic objectives is not followed by a description of these objectives in the narrative. Providing a clear description of the objectives in the narrative would make the COSOP more effective in communicating what the country programme intends to do.
9. **Targeting.** The COSOP indicates that the new programme will target the Adrar and Tagant regions, following the recommendations of the CSPE to continue working in the oasis zones. In addition to mentioning the CSPE recommendation, it would be important to explain the rationale for this targeting, based on the country context. The extension to these regions is relevant, provided that poverty rates are maintained as the guiding principle. The CSPE specifically indicated the need to work on climate change adaptation and sustainable use of natural resources, including water, in the oasis zones, something that is not specified in the COSOP.
10. **Gender and youth.** While gender and youth are indicated as cross-cutting areas in the COSOP, these areas are not sufficiently developed. Although analyses of the challenges facing women and youth are provided in the appendices, the COSOP does not highlight these challenges and only briefly mentions the interventions the

programme will develop to support these groups. It indicates that the economic integration of young people will be achieved through vocational training, the development of entrepreneurial activities and their integration into value chains and that gender equality will be ensured through specific measures to facilitate access to resources, services and governance mechanisms. With regard to gender, there is no mention of transformative changes, and the descriptions of actions aimed at increasing women's voice and influence in decision-making processes are insufficiently developed. This was identified in the CSPE as an area where limited results had been achieved, and further investment in this area is particularly important in the Mauritanian context.

11. **Sustainable management of natural resources and climate change adaptation.** As Mauritania is severely affected by climate change, the sustainable management of natural resources is of particular importance. The CSPE highlighted the need for the country programme to promote better integration of climate change adaptation and sustainable natural resources management, in particular management of pastureland and water resources and the promotion of agroforestry, agroecology and smart farming practices. The COSOP would be more relevant if it provided more information on how the programme intends to address these challenges. This information could also be useful for the purposes of mobilizing further climate finance as cofinancing in the coming years.
12. **Instrument and funding.** The COSOP outlines the expansion of the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources, Communal Equipment and Organization of Rural Producers Project (PROGRES) in a second phase. It would be useful to mention whether the new phase of PROGRES will differ from the previous phase and how it will integrate CSPE recommendations in relation to production support and value chain development, such as extension services, access to inputs, processing, rural finance and marketing, which were insufficiently addressed in the previous phase.
13. **Non-lending activities.** The COSOP outlines how the programme intends to contribute to policy dialogue, the strengthening of rural institutions, knowledge management and partnerships. The explicit attention given to these aspects is positive, as is the programme's aim to include an expert who will work on knowledge management. While the COSOP indicates that the programme management unit (PMU) will also cover non-lending activities, it would be important to specify how the country team will support these efforts and what its role will be.
14. **Monitoring system.** The introduction of an integrated monitoring and evaluation system, led by the PMU and based on an integrated digital platform, is a positive step. According to the COSOP, this system will centralize data from the local to the national level and will include specific indicators, data flows and quality controls. The establishment of such a system will provide the PMU with up-to-date information essential for piloting interventions.

III. Final comments

15. The new COSOP for Mauritania shows strong alignment with all five CSPE recommendations. It combines support for production with value chain development and has a strong focus on institutional support and policy dialogue. While the new COSOP demonstrates commendable alignment with the key CSPE recommendations, some areas merit further consideration. These include: (i) a more explicit strategy to target women and youth, based on the specific challenges they are facing; (ii) a clearer reference to the gender-transformative approach, in line with the IFAD Gender Action Plan 2026–2031; and (iii) a clarification of the intervention logic and more concrete indications of how climate change adaptation and sustainable use of natural resources, including water, are going to be tackled. While there is a strong focus on non-lending activities – including institutional support, policy influence and partnerships – in the absence of a country office in Mauritania, the COSOP would benefit from clarification of the roles of the PMU and

the country team to ensure the delivery of SO2. Further clarification of these aspects would enhance the overall relevance and effectiveness of the COSOP and its usefulness as a tool for developing future partnerships and engagements with national and international actors operating in the rural sector in Mauritania.