Comments of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD on the country strategic opportunities programme for the People's Republic of China

Note to Executive Board representatives

**Focal points:**

**Technical questions:**

- **Oscar A. Garcia**
  Director
  Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD
  Tel.: +39 06 5459 2274
  e-mail: o.garcia@ifad.org

- **Fumiko Nakai**
  Senior Evaluation Officer
  Tel.: +39 06 5459 2283
  e-mail: f.nakai@ifad.org

**Dispatch of documentation:**

- **William Skinner**
  Chief
  Governing Bodies Office
  Tel.: +39 06 5459 2974
  e-mail: gb_office@ifad.org

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General comments

1. The Independent Office of Evaluation (IOE) undertook a country programme evaluation (CPE) for China covering the period 1999-2013. The agreement at completion point (ACP) for the CPE was signed in October 2014. In accordance with established practice, the ACP was attached as an appendix to the new country strategic opportunities programme (COSOP) for 2016-2020.

2. The CPE made six recommendations: (i) reassess targeting in a changed rural context (geographical targeting, socio-economic targeting and support to ethnic minorities); (ii) strengthen knowledge cooperation; (iii) sharpen the focus on scaling up impact; (iv) promote South-South and triangular cooperation; (v) strengthen partnership with the Government and other in-country stakeholders; and (vi) enhance IFAD presence and capacity in the country, including outposting of the country programme manager (CPM) for China.

3. The new COSOP provides a context for the evolving partnership between IFAD and the Government. The document presents two main strategic objectives: (i) smallholder access to markets; and (ii) environmental sustainability and climate resilience. Under each strategic objective, three thematic areas of focus are indicated. "Innovation", "scaling up" and "knowledge management to inform policy and support South-South cooperation" have been identified as strategic thrusts.

4. IOE acknowledges and appreciates that the new COSOP directs attention to innovation, knowledge management, lesson learning, policy engagement and scaling up, thus largely reflecting CPE recommendations. Moreover, IOE notes IFAD's intention to outpost the CPM. This is also in line with the CPE recommendation to enhance country presence and the capacity to strengthen support to the lending portfolio, as well as to non-lending activities.

5. At the same time, some issues could have been better clarified/reflected or received more attention, as noted below.

Specific comments

6. **Targeting.** One of the CPE recommendations was on targeting. It highlighted the need for particular attention to poor villages with production potential that are not necessarily all very remote, but that have natural resource and environmental challenges. It recommended a flexible approach and differentiated strategies for diverse groups (e.g. younger business-oriented farmers, returning migrants, poor households and retired farmers), and the continuation of support to ethnic minorities in remote mountain and forest areas.

7. The new COSOP suggests a targeting strategy in broad terms that combines the selection of geographical areas with other considerations. For geographical areas selection is guided, first by nationally designated poor counties, and within these counties, poor villages with production and market potential. "Other considerations" involve households with production and market potential, women, rural youth and ethnic minorities. It is not clear how “production and market potential” will be assessed, or how remote mountain and forest areas inhabited mainly by ethnic minorities will be considered, where diverse production systems are practised and not integrated into mainstream agricultural commercialization processes. When translating the targeting strategy presented in the COSOP into the design of specific investment projects, it will be important to develop a shared understanding of how to select counties, villages and/or beneficiary households to ensure that the projects would be as inclusive as possible, and with a differentiated
and flexible approach to different groups as suggested by the CPE. At the same
time, IOE acknowledges that the concept note for one of the proposed projects
(appendix VI.A of the COSOP document) provides more specific information on the
selection of geographical areas and target groups, and indeed indicates attention to the
poverty level and ethnic minorities.

8. **Non-lending activities.** IOE acknowledges and appreciates attention to non-
lending activities in general. However, an indicative list of possible non-lending
activities is long (appendix VI.B of the COSOP: 20 activities listed, of which two
are indicated as ongoing) and seems rather ambitious. Moreover, the document
does not make clear what human and financial resources would be required or may
be realistically mobilized to undertake and support these activities. It might have
been useful to prioritize more carefully, with clear indications of possible linkages
and synergies with the proposed strategic objectives and strategic thrusts.

9. The CPE recommended strengthening partnership with the Government and other
in-country stakeholders. The narrative presented as partnership strategy is very
general, except for the point on outposting the CPM. While the limitation on
document length is recognized, the COSOP could have presented strategic direction
and focus more carefully – and specifically reflecting the context of the IFAD/China
collaboration.

10. The new COSOP refers to South-South cooperation as part of the strategic thrusts,
rather than as a strategic objective in itself, given that it is a means and not an
end. The document discusses this cooperation mainly in terms of China being "a
potential source of knowledge that can be shared with other countries". In addition,
the proposal to upgrade "the IFAD country office as a knowledge hub for rural
development and a South-South cooperation centre" is mentioned.

11. The country’s willingness to share its wealth of development experience with other
countries and IFAD’s interest in supporting this process – and the other way
around, i.e. China learning from other countries’ experiences and knowledge – is
welcome, even though this goes beyond IFAD’s strategy for rural poverty reduction
in China. It would be important to ensure that initiatives and activities supported
under the heading of South-South cooperation are responsive to demands and
needs, with clear orientation to results and development effectiveness beyond
activities and outputs.

12. COSOP results management framework and logical framework (logframe) for
pipeline projects. There could have been more reflection on and elaboration of
indicators. The suggested indicators do not necessarily seem to reflect the
proposed objectives, outcomes or project components. For example, there is no
provision under "key indicators" for strategic objective 2. Key indicators for
"strategic thrusts" (i.e. scaling up, innovation and knowledge management) are
mainly at the output level and based on activities/events. Moreover, in the logframe
for pipeline projects, there is no outcome or indicator related to the proposed
project component on ecological conservation/rehabilitation and adaptation to
climate change.

**Final remarks**

13. IOE acknowledges the efforts made in the COSOP preparation process as shown in
appendix III, including the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders,
preparatory studies and background papers, and IFAD/Government collaboration.
In general, IOE appreciates the attention by both Management and the
Government to the CPE recommendations.