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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

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For: Review

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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 outpostting 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 outpostting 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.