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## **Comments of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD on the Country Strategic Opportunities Programme for the Republic of Sierra Leone**

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**For: Review**

# Comments of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD on the Country Strategic Opportunities Programme for the Republic of Sierra Leone

## A. Background

1. The Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) conducted the first country strategy and programme evaluation (CSPE) for the Republic of Sierra Leone in 2019, covering the period from 2003 to 2018. The agreement at completion point for the CSPE has been attached as an appendix to the new country strategic opportunities programme (COSOP) for 2020-2025.
2. For a country emerging from a protracted civil war, the period from 2003 onwards was dynamic, characterized by reconstruction of the economic and productive sectors and a shift to fostering sustainable growth. The evaluation found that the IFAD portfolio was well aligned with the national priorities and government strategies. Its shift from providing basic agricultural inputs and infrastructure, making rural finance accessible and affordable, to commercialization of agriculture was appropriate. The design of the projects was kept simple and the implementation less demanding by, inter alia, focusing solely on two themes: agricultural production and rural finance.
3. The outreach of the portfolio was impressive, with targets at or close to 100 per cent achieved. Vast areas of land hitherto unused are now rice fields. Financial services successfully reached rural areas, making them accessible to over 200,000 households. About 88 per cent of the community banks and 83 per cent of the financial services associations supported by the portfolio are operationally sustainable. There have been positive economic changes such as increased productivity of rice and cocoa, and higher incomes for beneficiaries.
4. Despite the significant achievements, there were some shortcomings. First, true financial inclusion was missed: smallholder farmers constituted only a small proportion of the clientele of rural financial institutions. Second, while there was surplus production of rice, it was not effectively channelled to markets because marketing interventions did not work as intended. Third, while youth has benefited from project activities, IFAD did not have a specific strategy based on a needs assessment to involve young people in agriculture through its projects.
5. Finally, the evaluation notes that the resources of the IFAD Country Office were overstretched by the large scale of operations, the number of projects and their geographic spread. IFAD was not able to fully leverage its potential in contributing to rural development through its policy engagement and strategic partnership-building efforts at the national level.
6. The CSPE recommendations were to: (i) deepen the development impact of agricultural growth by focusing more on strengthening linkages along the value chain; (ii) pursue diversification more vigorously as a strategy for improving nutrition and building economic resilience; (iii) elevate the level of engagement in rural finance by building on existing structures and increased awareness about rural finance in the country; (iv) strike a balance between the existing almost exclusive focus on the development and oversight of individual projects and a focus on the management of the country programme; and (v) strengthen the targeting focus of the country portfolio by mainstreaming youth into a country-specific youth strategy.

## B. IOE comments

7. The three country strategic objectives are very relevant to the priorities of the Government for the agricultural sector and IFAD's own strategic objectives and areas of engagement, and take account of the priorities identified in the CSPE. In particular, objective 2 reflects clearly IFAD's priorities in the area of rural finance.
8. **Targeting.** The new COSOP makes explicit reference to persons with disabilities as part of the target group and in this regard proposes partnering with non-governmental and other organizations. This is highly welcome. At the same time, it is important that the scope of such partnerships also include an assessment of the needs of persons with disabilities. This will help in the design of appropriate interventions on their behalf. Additionally, future projects should elaborate on how the interventions for this group will be mainstreamed in practice in the projects.
9. The COSOP also describes how better geographic targeting of interventions will be achieved. Future interventions will be selected based on suitable agroecological and market development factors, favouring locations with high poverty rates. While this will help focus on maximizing impact, IOE cautions against too rapid an expansion of project areas. Furthermore, as producers' organizations will remain the projects' main entry point, it will be important to incorporate mechanisms that guard against elite capture in future project design.
10. **Key strategic partnerships.** The new COSOP aims to engage a number of government ministries – for instance, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs for activities related to the Gender Active Learning System, and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation for nutrition mainstreaming in projects. This broadening of partnerships is crucial not only to utilize the expertise of the relevant ministries, but also to increase their own capacities. This in line with the CSPE's findings.
11. **Innovation and scaling up.** The new COSOP proposes a number of innovations to be promoted by the country programme such as youth as service providers and road contractors, and a focus by farmer field schools on tree crops. Most of these have been tried out in IFAD-supported projects and have been found to be successful. Further, given IFAD's influential role in the agricultural sector in Sierra Leone and its long-standing experience, scaling-up is an important dimension of its engagement in the country. However, the scaling-up strategy should not be limited to IFAD-funded projects, but should embrace other instruments such as policy engagement through which proven approaches could be mainstreamed into national strategies and programmes.
12. **Other remarks.** Sustainability of benefits after project completion remains one of the most serious issues, especially in light of the fragile context of Sierra Leone and the limited resources available to the Government to continue donor-funded activities. This aspect is briefly reviewed by the COSOP, but it will be important for individual projects to lay out exit strategies in a clear and comprehensive manner.

## C. Final remarks

13. IOE appreciates that the new COSOP for the Republic of Sierra Leone addresses the main recommendations of the CSPE to improve portfolio management. Some aspects will require deeper analysis during future project design, such as how to ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups in producers' organizations and value chains in practical terms, as well as the inclusion of exit strategies for sustainability.