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Minutes of the Seventh Special Session of the Evaluation Committee

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Executive Board — 132nd Session
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For: Information

Minutes of the Seventh Special Session of the Evaluation Committee

1. The deliberations of the Evaluation Committee at its seventh special session held virtually on 21 January 2021 are reflected in the present minutes.

Agenda item 1: Opening of the session

2. The session was attended by Committee members for Cameroon, France, India, Indonesia (Chair), Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria and Switzerland. Silent observers were present from Canada and Dominican Republic. The session was also attended by the Interim Officer-in Charge, Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE); Associate Vice-President, Programme Management Department; Associate Vice-President, Strategy and Knowledge Department; Director, Operational Policy and Results Division; Director, Research and Impact Assessment Division; Secretary of IFAD; and other IFAD staff.

Agenda item 2: Adoption of the agenda (EC 2021/S7/W.P.1)

3. The Committee adopted the agenda as contained in document EC 2021/S7/W.P.1 with the inclusion, under other business, of a learning note prepared by IOE on the experience of conducting evaluations during COVID-19.

Agenda item 3: Draft revised IFAD Evaluation Policy (EC 2021/S7/W.P.2)

Key messages:

- The Committee welcomed the draft revised IFAD Evaluation Policy, which incorporated feedback received. Members provided additional feedback to be taken into consideration, in particular with respect to the theory of change. This feedback will be reflected in a revised version for submission to the 112th Evaluation Committee session.
- The Committee highlighted the importance of defining how the high-level principles set forth in the policy would be implemented.
- A benchmarking exercise with other international financial institutions and United Nations agencies was suggested to support a possible future revision of annex I on the selection process for the Director, IOE.

4. The Committee welcomed the revised IFAD Evaluation Policy, incorporating comments made by members at the 111th session and noted that the revision was the result of a joint undertaking by IOE and Management.
5. Given the importance of the revised policy's theory of change, which would guide development of the IOE strategy, the revised Development Effectiveness Framework and relevant evaluation products, some members noted that the policy might benefit from a more detailed elaboration of the theory of change to ensure that it properly corresponded to the accompanying graphic illustration. This would provide a clear description of the steps needed to strengthen the self- and independent evaluation functions and their role in enhancing the Fund's development effectiveness.
6. Moreover, members underlined the importance of impartiality and credibility when discussing the principles contained in the policy. Suggestions were made to better clarify the difference between independent evaluation and self-evaluation.
7. Considering the time required to conduct the policy review, it was suggested that a longer time frame be foreseen for the next review, namely in seven years' time.
8. In response to the observation that the practicalities of implementing the high-level principles set forth in the policy were not addressed, IOE and Management recalled

the recommendations of the peer review, which cautioned against dealing with specific implementation details in the policy, as this could render it too rigid and short-lived. Such details and the linkages and synergies between independent and self-evaluation would be addressed in the Evaluation Manual, due to be submitted to the Committee in September, and which would ideally benefit from the input of the new IOE Director. Furthermore, IFAD's knowledge management strategy, which would be shared with the Executive Board, would outline how knowledge would be generated and how evaluation findings interact with knowledge management.

9. Some members asked about how the relevance of self-evaluation products would be ensured. Management recalled the commitment for the Twelfth Replenishment of IFAD's Resources period to review the Development Effectiveness Framework, which would provide a good framework and set of priorities to discuss self-evaluation products. The input of Committee members would be welcome in this regard.
10. With respect to the annexes to the policy, a request was made to reinstate the annex presenting the key elements of the terms of reference of the Director, IOE. A member asked about the necessity of specific procedures for hiring IOE staff members (annex II). IOE underscored the importance of ensuring the independence of the entire staff of the office, hence the inclusion of the annex related to staff as an integral part of the policy.
11. Recalling experience in implementing the annex relative to the selection of the IOE Director, members agreed that more discussion was required, which could be facilitated by considering the procedures of other institutions. As such, a benchmarking exercise with international financial institutions and United Nations agencies to identify best practices and possibilities for streamlining the process could inform further discussion. The current practice of consulting the ClearCheck database should be explicitly mentioned in the related annex.

Agenda item 4: Draft revised Terms of Reference of the Evaluation Committee (EC 2021/S7/W.P.3)

Key message:

- The Committee welcomed the draft revised Terms of Reference and Rules of Procedure and provided additional feedback, including with respect to the rotation of the Chair.

12. Comments by members included a request to clarify: the role of the President in appointing the members of the Committee; the rules applicable to the identification of an interim Chair, in case of need; and the practice of rotating the Chair between Lists B and C. On the latter point, it was proposed that wording highlighting the desirability of rotation among the Lists on a regular basis be included in the document.
13. Members also asked Management to provide some details on the costs of self-evaluation vis-à-vis independent evaluation. Management clarified that costs were very much dependent on the type of product and that there was no standard cost.

Agenda item 5: Other business

Appointment of the Director, Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD

14. The Committee was provided with an update on developments with respect to the ongoing appointment process for the Director, IOE.

Learning note prepared by IOE on the experience of conducting evaluations during COVID-19

15. The Committee thanked IOE for preparing the lessons learned note from the experience of carrying out evaluations in times of crisis and noted the steps taken to ensure evaluation quality, including the advantages, opportunities and limitations thereof. Members expressed appreciation for IOE's aim to learn from this experience and capitalize on opportunities to reduce travel costs and, by extrapolation, the carbon footprint of evaluations.
16. Members took note of the wider social acceptance by many stakeholders of remote interviewing, including senior government officials, which offered an opportunity, also in the future, to rebalance the time spent during field missions and allow more time in the field as compared to the capital.
17. Moreover, the Committee noted the focus on using the growing number of IT tools available, such as machine learning and remote sensing to gather secondary evidence, and commented that these could be used in the future. IOE clarified that remote sensing was mostly based on satellite images and satellite-based metadata, and was used to complement data or information on projects or on evaluations conducted.
18. On the quality of interviews carried out by remote versus those carried out face-to-face, IOE explained that there were some nuances that could not be captured in a remote interview; however, by and large the amount of information gathered and the ability to collaborate of many stakeholders had exceeded expectations.
19. Members queried the impact on IOE's budget. IOE responded that while there were savings due to less travel, additional expenditures to hire national consultants to make up for the lack of information tended to offset these savings. Savings had also been made when workshops were not held or were held virtually. Overall, however, the cost of evaluations undertaken remotely was not necessarily lower than those evaluations done by traditional means.

Closure of the session

20. The Committee was reminded that the draft minutes would be circulated to members for their comments.
21. The Chairperson thanked the participants for their contributions to the discussions and for having facilitated the timely closure of the session.