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Investing in rural people

Minutes of the 108th Session of the Evaluation Committee

Note to Evaluation Committee Members

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Minutes of the 108th Session of the Evaluation Committee

1. The deliberations of the Evaluation Committee at its 108th session, held virtually on 1 April 2020, are reflected in the present minutes.
2. Once approved by the Committee, the minutes will be shared with the Executive Board.

Agenda item 1: Opening of the session

3. The session was attended by Committee members for Cameroon, France, India, Indonesia (Chair), Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria and Switzerland. Silent observers were present from Bangladesh, China, the Dominican Republic, Finland and the United Kingdom. The session was also attended by the Deputy Director, Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE); Associate Vice-President, Programme Management Department; Associate Vice-President, Strategy and Knowledge Department; Director, a.i. and Policy and Results Specialist, Operational Policy and Results Division; Secretary of IFAD; and other IFAD staff.

Agenda item 2: Adoption of the agenda (EC 2020/108/W.P.1)

4. The provisional agenda comprised the following items: (i) opening of the session; (ii) adoption of the agenda; (iii) country strategy and programme evaluation for Sierra Leone; (iv) evaluation synthesis on community-driven development; (v) approach paper: Thematic evaluation on IFAD's contribution to smallholder adaptation to climate change; (vi) discussion on the revised Terms of Reference of the Evaluation Committee; (vii) revised draft action plan for the implementation of the main actions and recommendations of the peer review of IFAD's evaluation function; and (viii) other business.
5. The Committee adopted the agenda as contained in document EC 2020/108/W.P.1, with the inclusion of an oral update on the Leaf mobile application and an update on the revised agenda for 2020 of the Evaluation Committee under other business.

Agenda item 3: Country strategy and programme evaluation for Sierra Leone (EC 2020/108/W.P.2)

6. The Committee welcomed the first country strategy and programme evaluation (CSPE) for Sierra Leone, covering the period from 2003 to 2018, and thanked IOE for a well-written document. Members agreed with the findings and recommendations, noting that these would be addressed in the new country strategic opportunities programme (COSOP) being submitted to the 129th session of the Board. Members also appreciated Management's response to the CSPE and agreement with the recommendations.
7. Members congratulated IFAD on its performance in such a fragile context, noting the crucial role played by IFAD in restoring productive assets and infrastructure in the years following the long civil war and the subsequent Ebola outbreak. The Government of Sierra Leone thanked IFAD for the support provided in boosting food security and agricultural output and looked forward to working with IFAD to increase the production and marketing of agricultural products as envisaged in the new COSOP.
8. The Committee underlined the relevance of recommendation 2 on the importance of diversifying production and increasing the focus on nutrition for improving food security. In this context, one member highlighted that the experience and knowledge gained in cultivating staple crops should be maintained and cautioned that diversification towards livestock production would entail increased investments and greater risks.

9. While support was expressed for the recommendation for a country-specific youth strategy, members noted that the issue of gender and women's empowerment should also be addressed.
10. Members noted that most of the targets had been achieved, however clarification was sought in relation to the sustainability of benefits and the finding that small-scale farmers had benefited less from the rural finance activities than expected. In particular, members noted that Apex Bank had not been able to develop a convincing banking model for small-scale farmers and that IFAD in turn had not developed an effective strategy to cope with this challenge. Furthermore, one member enquired to what degree IFAD's strategy in Sierra Leone might be realigned towards increased community-driven development and small-scale farming.
11. Management explained that the rural finance initiatives had been expected to provide 30 per cent of their lending to agriculture, however only 20 per cent had been achieved. An agribusiness unit had therefore been set up under Apex Bank and an agricultural lending policy was developed. In addition, a specific financing facility had been created with earmarked funds for agriculture. Management hoped that these measures would generate improvements and enable the new projects to reach their objectives.
12. One member expressed appreciation for the increased engagement with other United Nations agencies in-country and welcomed Management's commitment to strengthening IFAD's country presence and involvement in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. Such partnerships should build on synergies and could also prove valuable in promoting capacity-building and knowledge management. Partnership between IFAD and the Government was also key in ensuring a robust monitoring and evaluation system to deal with risks and capture lessons learned.
13. One member submitted queries in writing and sought additional information on the involvement of youth in agriculture and a specific marketing strategy for agriproducts. Management advised that through the Agricultural Value Chains Development Project, youth are involved in agricultural activities both directly and indirectly: as contractors, as lead facilitators and trainers in farmer field schools, as labour for feeder road and farm track rehabilitation and construction and for work in agribusiness centres. Efforts were also under way with the Government and other development partners to develop a youth strategy in order to further target all young people. With regard to the marketing of agriproducts, value addition, establishment of agribusiness centres and market information support were among the activities being implemented.
14. Responding to the observation that quality inputs had not been available to farmers, Management acknowledged that this had been one of the main challenges faced by the country programme during the Ebola crisis, as delivery chains had been interrupted and therefore quality seeds, fertilizers and mechanized equipment could not be delivered in a timely manner to small-scale farmers. This challenge continued to be relevant given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Management would ensure that special arrangements were made to guarantee that inputs were delivered in advance of the planting season.
15. Management also explained that in designing the new COSOP steps had been taken to address the issue of sustainability by targeting beneficiaries from past projects to ensure continuity of benefits, and by setting up multi-stakeholder platforms aimed at facilitating linkages with the private sector and between value chains to enhance sustainability and long-term benefits. Management also confirmed that all interventions in Sierra Leone had been and would continue to be firmly rooted in and driven by the communities. It was noted, however, that the link between

increased income and improved food security needed to be strengthened to ultimately enable impactful rural transformation.

Agenda item 4: Evaluation synthesis on community-driven development (EC 2020/108/W.P.3)

16. The Committee congratulated IOE for a well-structured and comprehensive evaluation synthesis, and welcomed Management's response thereto. Members agreed with the key recommendations, namely the need for IFAD to (i) take corporate ownership of community-driven development (CDD); (ii) match design with appropriate levels of resources for CDD to deliver strong results; and (iii) adopt CDD-friendly funding instruments that would support the demand-oriented approach.
17. Members noted the considerable scope of the evaluation synthesis, beginning with the first CDD project implemented in 1982, continuing with the peak period of CDD-related investments from 1990 to 2007 and concluding with operations in the recent past when value chain approaches became more prominent in IFAD, resulting in a slight reduction of CDD-related approaches.
18. The Committee welcomed the findings of the synthesis, particularly that CDD-related projects are effective, address an institutional void especially in remote and fragile situations, and help to build capacity and sustainability at the community level.
19. Members requested clarification on the differences in CDD application in the different regions and on possible trade-offs to implement more CDD projects without jeopardizing efficiencies. IOE clarified that CDD approaches require more time and investment at the outset and that this needed to be factored in when designing a project. Perseverance and stamina were also required, qualities present in IFAD, as recognized by many governments and international financial institutions (IFIs). IFAD had also taken steps to address delays in project approvals by pre-financing start-up activities so as to ensure continued momentum from design to implementation.
20. Members requested more details on lessons learned with respect to partnerships with other multilateral and bilateral cooperation agencies that could prove beneficial for future activities in this field. IOE explained that CDD approaches required a phased approach. Partnerships were in place – for instance with the World Bank – but since IFAD had moved towards direct supervision these partnerships had become weaker.
21. Members also asked how CDD would fit into IFAD's strategic direction of having fewer and larger operations, as this tactic could impede a bottom-up, demand-based approach. Management explained that the programmatic approach in operations incorporated many aspects, among them CDD. The larger-scale operations envisaged by IFAD would not negatively impact the CDD approach; indeed, they might allow for more time to engage meaningfully with communities.
22. In addressing the findings that there had been a greater focus on value chains than CDD in the recent past, IOE and Management clarified that value chain approaches and CDD approaches should not be seen as antithetic and that there were examples of CDD approaches in value chain projects and vice versa. In several cases a sequential approach had been taken. This entailed first creating an enabling environment within a community which subsequently developed into a value chain approach.
23. Members noted the importance of local governments for successful CDD projects and the need to reinforce women's empowerment, develop corporate ownership of CDD and increase its visibility. Members appreciated Management's uptake of the recommendations and were pleased to see that work had already begun on their follow-up.

24. One member suggested that IFAD develop guidelines and give CDD a more central role in IFAD's programme structure, fostering links to climate change interventions targeted at smallholders and grass-roots operations. Management confirmed that CDD approaches were incorporated in strategies in many areas including targeting, indigenous peoples and special programmes for fragile situations. They had also been included in the recently approved stakeholder feedback framework.
25. IFAD aimed to create an enabling environment for further integration of CDD approaches in-country programmes. To this end, Management was also working on the implementation arrangements for the new IFAD financing mechanism: the Adaptation for Smallholder Agriculture Programme + (ASAP+). These arrangements would involve NGOs, farmers' organizations and municipalities. The Community Development Fund (CDF) mechanism could also be used for public goods related to climate adaptation, such as community land restoration, village irrigation schemes, rainwater harvesting or watershed management. The link between CDFs and local government structures could also promote sustainability within ASAP+.

Agenda item 5: Approach paper: Thematic evaluation on IFAD's contribution to smallholder adaptation to climate change (EC 2020/108/W.P.4)

26. Members welcomed the approach paper and highlighted the relevance and timeliness of the theme as it addressed a very critical issue for smallholder farmers. Moreover, members expressed their appreciation for the objective, scope and methodology proposed and indicated that IFAD and Member States could greatly benefit from the findings of the evaluation.
27. Members turned to the first overarching evaluation issue: the impact of IFAD interventions on beneficiaries' ability to adapt to climate change. It was suggested that an assessment be undertaken of IFAD's ability to identify, test, replicate and scale up adaptation solutions, in particular nature-based and agroecological solutions that had proven to be successful. In addition, the evaluation should assess to what extent the use of the grants policy was effective in supporting smallholders' adaptation to climate change. IOE confirmed that scaling up and adapting successful practices would be an essential aspect of the evaluation and would be reflected in the evaluation questions. Furthermore, a sample of grants relevant to climate adaptation would be selected and analysed.
28. Regarding the third overarching issue of IFAD's ability to address existing and projected challenges, members noted that the evaluation should assess IFAD's in-house expertise, particularly in view of ongoing discussions on the Targeted Capacity Investment. Management suggested looking at not only in-house expertise per se, but also where the expertise was located given the regional variations in climate-related activities.
29. One member questioned the appropriateness of including a theory of change in the approach paper at this stage. The proposal for a theory of change should instead stem from the evaluation itself, once the conclusions were available. IOE clarified that this first attempt to develop a theory of change would serve as an initial reference and would be elaborated upon and refined during the evaluation process.
30. Members raised concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the timeline given that 10 case studies based on field visits were foreseen for the evaluation. IOE noted that the timeline had been developed prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. IOE recognized the related challenges and would revert to the Committee should amendments to the timeline or planned field visits be required.
31. Members sought clarification on the difference between thematic and corporate-level evaluations (CLEs). While the methodology and the evaluation metrics were the same, IOE explained that CLEs should in future focus on the analysis of

corporate processes or policies while thematic evaluations would deal with a specific theme, sector or development practice. Thus, thematic evaluations would look at both operational, project and field level results and corporate strategies but would not focus on the latter. This approach was being explored in the context of the revision of the IOE product mix, as recommended by the external peer review of the evaluation function at IFAD.

32. Members requested that the evaluation include findings of previous evaluations such as the evaluation synthesis on CDD. IOE confirmed that the thematic evaluation would build on findings and conclusions of other evaluations, including project performance evaluations, CSPEs and CLEs. In addition the evaluation would explore past and current climate risks and, to the extent possible, the anticipated risks or increasing threats facing certain countries.
33. Members underlined the importance of adhering to the internationally recognized concepts and definitions with respect to climate change adaptation and mitigation. IOE clarified that all definitions related to climate adaptation were sourced from United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and referenced in footnotes. It also affirmed that national adaptation plans would play an important part in assessing IFAD's contribution to climate adaptation efforts at the national level.
34. One member suggested looking at best practices at the international level. IOE responded that best practices of all agencies and not only IFIs would be taken into consideration. The use of methodological tools would be further elaborated upon in a design report.
35. One member requested clarification on the self-assessment by Management that would inform this evaluation. IOE replied that as for some previous CLEs Management would undertake a self-assessment of its performance in relation to the evaluation topic and then share the findings at the design workshop. The self-assessment would address questions that had been agreed with IOE and any additional items that Management wished to discuss.

Agenda item 6: Discussion on the revised Terms of Reference of the Evaluation Committee

36. Members appreciated the revisions made to the Terms of Reference of the Evaluation Committee, noting that they reflected the discussions that had taken place at the Committee's informal meeting in January 2020.
37. It was noted that the revisions had been made in response to the recommendations of the external peer review. The peer review had also recommended the revision of the Evaluation Policy and review of the product mix of independent and self-evaluation. The interlinkages between these documents was highlighted and the need to consider the entire package as an intertwined whole was underscored.
38. With respect to the Secretariat of the Evaluation Committee, IOE noted that its understanding was that the Office of the Secretary of IFAD acted as the Committee's Secretariat. IOE's relationship with the Evaluation Committee stems from its independence and its direct reporting line to the Executive Board through the Committee.
39. Recalling the findings of the external peer review with respect to governance, Management referred to the need to ensure that the Evaluation Committee would focus on both independent and self-evaluations and that the role of the Secretariat should guarantee a certain impartiality in this respect.
40. There was broad consensus on the need for greater uptake by the Executive Board of recommendations arising from the Committee's deliberations. Suggestions from members on how to address this issue were welcome.

Agenda item 7: Revised draft action plan for the implementation of the main actions and recommendations of the peer review of IFAD's evaluation function (EC 2020/108/W.P.5)

41. The Committee welcomed the revised draft action plan. It was well designed and comprehensive, and the timing and sequencing of the various elements were reasonable.
42. In particular, members appreciated the inclusiveness of the approach, which foresaw the organization of an informal seminar in May where the Committee could discuss the Evaluation Policy, the revised Terms of Reference and the new IOE products mix. A similar approach was welcomed for the self-evaluation product mix, for which a note was envisaged for discussion at the October session.
43. Members requested a road map to capture all actions presented in the plan and asked for clarification on the approval process of the Evaluation Policy and on the scope and format of the multi-year strategy, as compared to the two-year indicative plan reviewed each year by the Committee. IOE confirmed that the Board would approve the Evaluation Policy. In line with best practice, the policy would be reviewed by a panel of international evaluation experts prior to Board approval. With respect to the multi-year strategy, IOE advised that it would cover a longer time horizon, be more detailed and benefit from wider consultation with both the Committee and Management. The budget of IOE would continue to be approved on an annual basis.

Agenda item 8: Other business

(a) Leaf mobile application

44. The Committee welcomed the new Leaf mobile application designed for smartphones and tablets. The application would enhance the transparency of IFAD's operations, providing easier access to IOE reports. Members appreciated the multilingual feature of the application and looked forward to using the application and providing feedback to IOE.

(b) Revised agenda of the Evaluation Committee in 2020

45. The Evaluation Committee's agenda for 2020 required alignment as a result of the most recent revisions to the draft action plan for the implementation of the main actions and recommendations of the peer review report. The main changes to the agenda were:
 - Deferral of four items from the 109th to the 111th session of the Evaluation Committee: the Evaluation Policy; the Terms of Reference of the Evaluation Committee; the overall update and simplification of IOE internal processes and procedures; and the IOE note on product mix. Both the revised policy and terms of reference would also be submitted to the Executive Board in December 2020.
 - Inclusion of a note on the review of self-evaluation products on the agenda of the 111th session of the Evaluation Committee.
 - The proposed multi-year strategy to implement the Evaluation Policy would be presented to the Evaluation Committee in October 2021 and to the Board in December 2021. In line with this change, the Evaluation Manual would be submitted to the Committee for its review in March 2022 and for the review of the Board in April 2022. The harmonization agreement would be presented to the Evaluation Committee and the Board in September 2022.
46. Members requested the Secretariat to organize an informal session to discuss how to improve the delivery of the Committee's recommendations to the Executive Board. The Secretariat, under the guidance of the Chair, would make the necessary arrangements and inform the Committee accordingly.

Closure of the session

47. The Committee agreed to draft a letter of appreciation to Mr Oscar Garcia, former IOE Director, for his leadership over the past six years and to demonstrate their gratitude for his professionalism and his important contributions to the work of the Evaluation Committee.
48. The Committee was reminded that the draft minutes would be circulated to members for their comments.
49. The Chairperson thanked participants for their contributions to the discussions and for the timely closure of the session.