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Minutes of the 111th Session of the Evaluation Committee

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Minutes of the 111th Session of the Evaluation Committee

1. The deliberations of the Evaluation Committee at its 111th session held virtually on 22 October 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, Indonesia (Chair), Japan, Mexico, Nigeria and Switzerland. Silent observers were present from China, the Dominican Republic and the United Kingdom. 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; Regional Director, ad interim, West and Central Africa Division; Director, Research and Impact Assessment Division; Secretary of IFAD; and other IFAD staff.
4. His Excellency Abdelwahab Mohamed Elhijazi Mohamed Khair, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Sudan to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in Rome; Ms Saadia Elmubarak Ahmed Daak, Alternate Permanent Representative of Sudan; and Mr Adil Osman Idris, Senior Coordinator, Central Coordination Unit for IFAD-cofinanced projects of the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources of the Republic of Sudan, participated in the Committee's deliberations on the country strategy and programme evaluation for Sudan.

Agenda item 2: Adoption of the agenda (EC 2020/111/W.P.1)

5. The Committee adopted the agenda as contained in document EC 2020/111/W.P.1.

Agenda item 3: Results-based work programme and budget for 2021, and indicative plan for 2022-2023 of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (EC 2020/111/W.P.2)

Key messages:

- The Committee expressed support for the proposed work programme and budget of IOE for 2021, including the strategic objectives identified.
- On the carry-forward proposal, the Committee noted that it would be additional to the budget request and used to cover unforeseen, non-recurrent activities.
- The Committee welcomed the revised presentation of the budget, in response to the recommendation of the peer review that the document be simplified, but requested that information on budget utilization by type of expenditure and activity in the ongoing year be maintained to facilitate the Committee's oversight role.

6. The Committee appreciated the revised document, as contained in document EC 2020/111/W.P.2, which took into account comments made by members on the preview document reviewed at the 110th session.
7. In particular, the inclusion of accountability in IOE's first strategic objective was welcomed. IOE agreed to revisit the language used with respect to partnership, which should be seen as a means of achieving objectives rather than as an objective in itself.

8. Responding to queries as to the impact of COVID-19 on IOE's ongoing work, budget and forward planning, IOE clarified that most of the work during 2020 had had to be done based on desk reviews, using technology such as satellite and remote images, data collected by monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and/or surveys and field visits conducted by national consultants. While travel costs had decreased given the travel restrictions, consultancy expenditures had risen as a result of the increased usage of national consultants and experts to conduct evaluations remotely. IOE clarified that reduced travel costs did not necessarily mean an overall reduction in the cost of evaluations.
9. IOE explained that the activities to be undertaken in 2021 had been conceived taking into account possible risks of delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this was not the driving force behind the nominal decrease in the budget, which was due more to the strategic shift towards higher-plane evaluations and a reduction but continued engagement in project-level evaluations.
10. Additional information was provided on staff costs and, in response to a question regarding application of a percentage cap on travel and consultancies, IOE noted that such a cap would hinder the flexibility needed to ensure quality evaluation products and timely responsiveness to unforeseen circumstances – such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
11. Members' feedback would be incorporated into a revised IOE work programme and budget proposal to be submitted to the 131st Board session for consideration.

Agenda item 4: Country strategy and programme evaluation for the Republic of the Sudan (EC 2020/111/W.P.3 + Add.1)

Key message:

- The Committee welcomed the positive results achieved by IFAD in Sudan and noted that the design of the new country strategic opportunities programme (COSOP) for the period 2021-2027 would be developed taking into account the results of this evaluation.

12. The Evaluation Committee welcomed this second country strategy and programme evaluation for Sudan, as contained in document EC 2020/111/W.P.3, together with the agreement at completion point signed by IFAD Management and the Government of Sudan, as contained in its addendum.
13. Members welcomed the statement delivered on behalf of the Government of Sudan by His Excellency, Ambassador Abdelwahab Mohamed Elhijazi Mohamed Khair. Members also congratulated the Government of Sudan on the signing of the peace agreements in Juba and expressed their support for the democratic transition under way.
14. The Committee welcomed the significant achievements, in particular those related to the building of human and social capital, empowerment of communities, gender equality and women's empowerment, noting also the contribution made to reducing malnutrition and food insecurity. The evaluation highlighted the successful implementation of rural community-driven development through, inter alia, the provision of rural finance, capacity-building extension services and basic infrastructure.
15. Members noted with regret that sustainability had not been achieved with regard to large-scale infrastructure and recalled the central role played by national governments and institutions in ensuring sustainability of impacts and scaling up of projects. Concerns were also raised by members regarding the reduced number of IFAD staff present in the country. Management clarified that resources had only allowed for a total of four staff members in the Sudan country office.

16. Finally, members noted that the design of the new COSOP would take into account the findings of the evaluation – a good example of creating a learning cycle that should be replicated for evaluation products across the board. The COSOP would therefore focus on improved performance in knowledge management and M&E, with a view to ensuring optimal policy engagement. Furthermore, emphasis would be placed on building stronger partnerships, strengthening institutional capacity and fostering greater engagement with the Government so as to facilitate scaling up and sustainability of benefits. Opportunities for collaboration with the Rome-based agencies, including in the area of water harvesting to address both water shortages and the impact of flooding, were also highlighted.

**Agenda item 5: Draft revised IFAD Evaluation Policy
(EC 2020/111/W.P.4 + Add.1 + Add.2)**

Key messages:

- The Committee welcomed the draft revised IFAD Evaluation Policy as contained in document EC 2020/111/W.P.4 and the senior independent advisers' opinions, as reflected in the addenda.
- IOE and Management would work together to reflect the feedback received from the Committee with a view to submitting a revised draft for the Committee's consideration at a special session in January 2021, prior to its submission to the Board for approval in April 2021.

17. Members welcomed the revised policy and noted the three main elements contained in the peer review's recommendation that led to the revision, namely that the policy should: (i) cover the whole evaluation function, self- and independent; (ii) reaffirm the independence of IOE; and (iii) enhance the learning from evaluation. Explicit reference and a direct link to the external peer review should be made in the revised policy.
18. Members appreciated the collaborative efforts by IOE and Management and suggested that this joint effort be better reflected in the document. Members expressed support for the policy's core objectives and noted the usefulness of the theory of change. While the respective roles and responsibilities had been clearly outlined in the document, the Committee noted a certain imbalance in the descriptions of the self- and independent evaluation functions. It was agreed that this section would be revisited to reflect inherent differences and complementarities and to achieve a more balanced approach between self- and independent evaluations and accountability and learning. The structures underpinning the revised policy – the multi-year IOE evaluation strategy and the evaluation manual – should also be cited.
19. Some members suggested strengthening the section on IOE's role in validating the self-evaluation function to emphasize the importance of tracking as part of the independent evaluation function and providing a definition for "impact assessment", given its relevance and its repeated use throughout this high-level document. The importance of learning was underscored and further information was requested on changes foreseen in internal knowledge management to ensure that lessons learned were captured and applied to future operations.
20. In answer to concerns raised by some members regarding IOE's independence and "immunity" from outside influence, IOE referred to the section on independence and operational safeguards for IOE and committed to further strengthening this section if deemed necessary. Furthermore, as suggested by one of the external reviewers, two separate sections could be considered to better differentiate between IOE-Management collaboration and partnerships with external stakeholders. The Committee also agreed that IOE should have access to all information available to Management, so as to be able to carry out its work.

21. The timeline for the revision of the policy, which had been set at five or six years, was questioned given previous discussions that had suggested a longer timeline.
22. IOE and Management agreed to revise the policy to reflect the comments provided by the Committee and to submit it for further consideration at a special session of the Committee in January 2021, prior to submission to the Executive Board.

Agenda item 6: Draft revised Terms of Reference of the Evaluation Committee (EC 2020/111/W.P.9)

Key messages:

- The Committee noted that the draft revised Terms of Reference of the Evaluation Committee should be considered after approval of the Evaluation Policy.
- In response to observations by some members, it was agreed that the mandate of the Evaluation Committee would be reviewed with a view to ensuring clarity as to the “products” to be reviewed by the Committee while avoiding being overly prescriptive.
- It was agreed that this document would also be considered at the Committee’s special session in January 2021.

Agenda item 7+8: Note by the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD on revised products and oral update on the simplification of its internal processes (EC 2020/111/W.P.5 + Add.1) + Management note on self-evaluation products (EC 2020/111/W.P.6 + Add.1)

Key messages:

- The Committee noted the IOE note on revised products and the oral update on the simplification of IOE internal processes, which was considered together with Management’s note on self-evaluation products and their respective addenda.
- The Committee welcomed both notes and their respective addenda and agreed that further discussions on both were required.

23. Members noted that the revision of IOE products was a key deliverable for IOE under the action plan to implement the recommendations of last year’s peer review. They also noted IOE’s extensive consultations with IFAD Management at different levels and with Evaluation Committee members. Members were reminded that feedback from the Executive Board informal seminar in May 2020 had been incorporated in the document, which would undergo further revision.
24. Concerns were raised regarding the apparent increase in the number of evaluation products and some members noted that the products should not add to the complexity but rather keep things as simple as possible, thus facilitating knowledge sharing and incentivizing the learning element/output. IOE clarified that it was not aiming to increase the number of evaluations carried out in a given year. While members noted that the aim of this apparent increase in evaluation products was to offer a wider range of options from which to select the products that best fit the diverse needs of the institution, they looked forward to further details being provided in the revised evaluation manual and in IOE’s multi-year evaluation strategy. With respect to the latter, IOE informed members that this would not be a joint strategy; rather it would relate only to IOE, in line with the recommendation of the external peer review.
25. There was a rich exchange of views among members, Management and IOE. Among the issues raised were:

- (i) The usefulness of impact evaluations – hence the proposed flexibility of frequency was welcome.
- (ii) The methodology used in impact assessments – including validating the approach and the results – and the validity of extrapolating the impact across operations could be reviewed by IOE. Furthermore, consideration was given to the importance and benefits of continued collaboration between Management and IOE with a view to considering how best to face the constraints that the COVID-19 pandemic posed to the IFAD11 impact assessment. On a related note, members appreciated Management’s efforts to build capacity in this area, strengthen M&E, and to finalize a data privacy policy in order to make the assessments publicly available.
- (iii) Clarifications were required with respect to the difference between evaluation synthesis reports and project cluster evaluations; the vehicle for reporting on recommendations arising from country strategy and programme evaluations (CSPEs); plans for streamlining products; and the use of the Operational Results Management System to provide real-time data.
- (iv) The gradual approach to be adopted for the review of non-sovereign operations until such time as private sector operations might be considered ready for evaluation.
- (v) The usefulness of subregional evaluations and project cluster evaluations and whether they responded to an actual gap in knowledge. One member specifically welcomed the choice of themes for these new products.
- (vi) The need to better align the timing of CSPEs and the development of COSOPs.
- (vii) The value of Management and IOE jointly conducting post-completion sustainability reviews.
- (viii) The cost implications related to the product mix.
- (ix) The importance of knowledge and learning and the need to ensure that the feedback loop was timely.
- (x) The importance of revising the evaluation manual through strong collaboration between IOE and Management.
- (xi) The need to strengthen complementarities and to consider the content and periodicity of both the Annual Report on Results and Impact of IFAD’s Operations (ARRI) and the Report on IFAD’s Development Effectiveness.
- (xii) The importance of transforming the President’s Report on the Implementation Status of Evaluation Recommendations and Management Actions from a tool focusing primarily on accountability into a more strategic instrument.

Agenda item 9: Level 1 project restructuring in the Republic of the Niger (EC 2020/111/W.P.7/Rev.1 + Add.1)

Key message:

- The Committee reviewed the Level 1 project restructuring in Niger, and requested that the document be revised to clarify the difference between the definition of category A under the Social, Environmental and Climate Assessment Procedures (SECAP) and definition provided under the level 1 restructuring to facilitate understanding and decision-making by the Executive Board.

26. This was the first time that the Committee had been invited to review the reclassification of a project under SECAP, which in this case would be from

category B to category A. The proposed Level 1 restructuring of the Niger portfolio consisted of three projects and was submitted for review by the Evaluation Committee in accordance with the IFAD Policy on Project Restructuring approved by the Executive Board in 2018. Once reviewed, the Level 1 project restructuring would be submitted to the Board for approval.

27. Responding to queries from members, Management noted that no changes to the outcomes of the project were foreseen, nor were any negative environmental impacts as a result of the restructuring and alignment to national legislation. The primary objective was that of enhancing risk management and ensuring that all screening procedures were in place. Management also clarified the difference between Level 1 restructuring and SECAP category A, explaining that Level 1 restructuring could entail reclassification to SECAP category A or changes to development objectives. It was agreed that the document would be revised to further clarify these matters prior to submission to the Executive Board for approval.

Agenda item 10: Provisional Agenda of the Evaluation Committee for 2021 (EC 2020/111/W.P.8 + Add.1)

28. The Committee noted the provisional agenda for 2021, as contained in document EC 2020/111/W.P.8 and its addendum, and the four sessions that had been scheduled and agreed already in June 2020. The Committee noted that the revised draft Evaluation Policy and the revised draft Terms of Reference would be discussed at a special session in January. Based on the outcomes of that session, the agenda for the year could be revised as needed.
29. Finally, in response to a request for advance notice when two items were to be considered together, the Secretariat agreed to share a schedule of work ahead of the sessions.

Agenda item 11: Other business

30. No items were discussed under other business.

Closure of the session

31. The Committee was reminded that the draft minutes would be circulated to members for their comments and then submitted to the 131st session of the Executive Board.
32. The Chairperson thanked participants for their contributions to the discussions and for the timely closure of the session.