
Comments of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD on the country strategic opportunities programme for the Republic of Colombia

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Action: The Executive Board is invited to review the comments of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD on the country strategic opportunities programme for the Republic of Colombia.

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I. General comments

1. In 2022, the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) conducted its first country strategy and programme evaluation (CSPE) in the Republic of Colombia, covering the period 2008–2022, two country strategic opportunities programme (COSOPs), two loans and a selection of 14 grants.
2. While the country had made substantial progress in reducing poverty, the most remote rural areas continued to experience higher levels of poverty and inequality in the distribution of income and access to assets, such as land. The country sought to end the historic armed conflict through a peace process that addressed inequalities. Within this framework, IFAD focused on the most excluded rural groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant communities, women and young people. The most significant results included the rebuilding of social cohesion, an increase in household income and strengthened local capacity for resilience and management of grassroots organizations.
3. The agreement at completion point, signed by IFAD and the Government in June 2023 (appendix VII of the new COSOP), indicated agreement or partial agreement to the CSPE recommendations: (i) channel a larger portfolio of resources to expand and dynamize IFAD's country strategy and programme (partially agreed); (ii) define a new agenda for cooperation with the Government (partially agreed); (iii) increase IFAD's involvement in the design and implementation of the new country programme and strategy in coordination with the Government and multiple partners (agreed); (iv) capacity-building (agreed); and (v) design a communication strategy aimed at sharing and using results as public goods (agreed).
4. The new COSOP for Colombia 2024–2027 proposes two strategic objectives (SOs): (i) to contribute to strengthening the productive capacity of the most vulnerable populations with limited access to productive assets and financial and non-financial services; (ii) to contribute to strengthening enabling regulatory and policy environments conducive to the transformation of rural economies and food systems by making them more inclusive, productive, resilient and sustainable.
5. The new COSOP generally takes into account the CSPE findings with regard to: (i) analysis of the gaps and inequalities that still persist in the most fragile territories and most vulnerable populations in rural Colombia; (ii) the country's challenges with respect to food systems, family farming and the effects of climate change; and (iii) the Government of Colombia's strategy with regard to the peace process, the comprehensive rural reform and the National Development Plan. The COSOP reflects, also in general terms, some of the recommendations of the CSPE by envisaging a portfolio funded through Borrowed Resource Access Mechanism (BRAM) resources and non-reimbursable funding, financing from the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and other international partners and South-South and Triangular Cooperation.
6. Since IFAD has concluded previous operations in Colombia, there is a significant opportunity to redefine its added value in the current Colombian context, the innovations that can be introduced and the main partnerships to be developed.

II. Specific comments

7. **Value chains.** The theory of change (section III.A and appendix I) and the COSOP's SO1 (III.B) refer to resilience, sustainability and inclusion to address socioeconomic, institutional, environmental and climate vulnerabilities. They do so from the perspective of value chains and access to assets, under a logic of productivity and competitiveness. However, the COSOP's approach is presented in conventional terms. It could have clarified IFAD's value added in Colombia's current rural context by explaining how its value chain approach: (i) is tailored to targeting populations with high levels of poverty in a fragile conflict-affected context; (ii) is connected with security and food systems and the different complementary activities of family farming; (iii) contributes to the conservation and enhancement of the significant local biodiversity and cultural heritage.
8. **Targeting and differentiated strategies.** The COSOP prioritizes households of Afro-descendant communities, Indigenous Peoples, victims of conflict and female and young heads of household (section III.C). This is consistent with the CSPE's recommendations in terms of focusing on the groups with the greatest poverty and inequality.
9. Although the COSOP states that differentiated approaches will be applied in the selection of the target population, no indications are given about the mechanisms that will be employed to interact with this population (in the past, IFAD promoted participatory processes for the identification of beneficiary demands and the direct transfer of resources to beneficiaries). The target group commitment (section VI) does not reflect IFAD's previous experience in which comprehensive attention to beneficiary households and organizations was not only linked to business plans or value chains but aimed at strengthening human and social capital. The COSOP could also have envisaged partnerships with government agencies in Colombia that have made great progress in the application of differential approaches through social protection and inclusion programmes. Within this framework, work is needed to better define strategies not only for women and youth (section III.B) but also for displaced persons, Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendant communities.
10. **Territorial approaches.** Compared to the previous period, this COSOP makes a reasonable choice in attempting to avoid geographic dispersal and concentrating on three regions. It will be important in the design of operations to consider that the Pacific Region, the Caribbean Region and the Orinoco Region are profoundly different in socioeconomic, cultural, political and environmental terms and require different strategies. Three elements are important for designing territorial strategies: (i) the presence of public programmes, national and international agencies and intersectoral synergies at the local level; (ii) the territorial planning and management framework and opportunities to collaborate with subnational governments; and (iii) the importance of generating lessons learned to inform policy dialogue. The COSOP (section III.B) could have explained what approaches will be taken and what partnerships are envisaged.
11. **Innovations and implementation mechanisms.** The COSOP mentions that the portfolio will catalyse innovative interventions that lead to greater social and economic inclusion. There are some details about digital technological innovation, but the rest of the innovations, as well as the strategic partnerships, are presented in general terms (section IV.D). Knowledge management (section IV.E), which is also inherent to innovations, is limited to the recording and analysis of operations data to feed institutional information systems. The CSPE found that IFAD had introduced innovative approaches, including some that enabled communities to formulate local development initiatives in a participatory manner. The new COSOP could have specified what innovations (themes, mechanisms, partners) will be worked on in the period 2024–2027 and how they will contribute to the definition of a new agenda and differential value of IFAD in Colombia.

12. **Strengthening capacities.** SO1 of the new COSOP refers to strengthening productive capacities. The outcome of SO2 refers to increasing the capacities of local actors to create enabling environments (section III.B). These require very different knowledge and skills. Furthermore, with respect to SO2, the range of necessary capacities is even broader and more varied (rural poverty reduction, food security, environmental governance and peace consolidation). The CSPE recommended avoiding dispersed and uncertified training and contributing to a coordinated capacity-building system benefiting from: (i) IFAD experience; (ii) relevant training offered by universities, higher-level technical institutes and the National Training Service; and (iii) other public and private institutions with a territorial presence and experience. The COSOP could have been more specific about the type of partnerships needed to address capacity challenges.

III. Final comments

13. IOE appreciates the preparation of the new COSOP, noting that it could have further elaborated upon specific CSPE recommendations aimed at consolidating an innovative IFAD proposal within the framework of the current Colombian challenges. It will be key to consider these factors in the design of new operations. IOE remains available for any clarification and support required.