

COUNTRY PROGRAMME EVALUATION SERIES

Evaluation of FAO's contribution to Bangladesh

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive summary

Introduction

- 1 The Office of Evaluation (OED) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is conducting a series of Country Programme Evaluations (CPEs) to better orient FAO's programme to the specific needs of the country and to make the best use of the Organization's comparative advantages. Furthermore, the CPEs aim to enhance understanding and awareness of FAO's contributions within the context of the Country Programming Framework (CPF).
- 2 FAO's programme in Bangladesh is one of the largest among member countries in terms of number and volume of projects. In consultation with the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (RAP) and the FAO Country Office in Bangladesh, the Office of Evaluation (OED) conducted an evaluation of the Bangladesh country programme to provide input into the preparation of the next CPF.
- 3 This evaluation covers FAO's work between 2011 and 2015 in order to align with the start of Bangladesh's Sixth Five-Year Plan. It assesses FAO's contributions towards achieving the national development goals set out in the Sixth Five-Year Plan, and also considers the national priorities of the Seventh Five-Year Plan which targets Bangladesh to become a middle-income country by 2021.
- 4 This evaluation used the CPF 2014–2018 as the main evaluation framework, and was conducted within the overall framework of the Office of Evaluation's (OED's) Guidelines for the Conduct of Country Programme Evaluations (2016) and the United Nations Evaluation Group Norms and Standards for Evaluation (2016). The CPE also drew upon the findings of the cluster evaluation on food safety which covered *Improving Food Safety in Bangladesh* (GCP/BGD/047/NET) and *Institutionalization of Food Safety in Bangladesh* (GCP/BGD/054/USA).
- 5 The evaluation used a mixed-method approach to collect data and information from a range of sources and informants. The process started with a desk review followed by an inception mission in Dhaka in February 2016 to identify the scope of the evaluation and key questions. The evaluation team members, mostly Bangladeshi nationals, were recruited between May and June. Pre-main mission interviews were conducted with FAO staff at headquarters, and outcome harvesting questionnaires were sent to the Chief Technical Advisers of FAO projects in June and July. A two-phase main mission took place in July (investigation) and September (debriefing) 2016.

Country context

- 6 Bangladesh is located at the world's most densely populated delta, making it vulnerable to regular floods, cyclones, salinity intrusion and climate change. Significant progress has been made on food availability while challenges remain in access and utilization. Although the agriculture sector's contribution to overall growth has been relatively small, its contribution to poverty reduction has been significant. Reducing arable land, land degradation and limited non-farm job opportunities have resulted in rural poverty. Growth potential varies among agricultural subsectors. Investing in the subsector with high potential for job creation and income growth is a key to reduce rural poverty.

Findings

Strategic relevance

- 7 FAO's programmes consistently reflected a strong alignment with the country's development needs in the food and agriculture sector and supported the government's policies and strategies in this area, including resilience interventions that targeted local communities. The current CPF largely addresses the country's development issues in the areas of FAO's mandate and reflects consistency with the strategic objectives of the Organization. More attention should be paid to certain areas that are critical for the achievement of national development goals (e.g. income generation and job creation).

Comparative advantage

- 8 FAO's comparative advantage was recognized by the government and stakeholders, particularly with regard to FAO's ability to deliver quality development services based on its localized technical expertise and global knowledge. FAO's comparative advantage was shown by its contribution to long-term policy and institutional capacity development, as well as in sustainable productivity and quality enhancement at the farm and community level. Stakeholders appreciated FAO's unique role of feeding the downstream experience into the upstream policy process and vice versa. Moreover, FAO linked resilience interventions with sustainable/climate-smart agriculture development, contributing further to capacity development and enhancing the resilience of local communities.

Normative values

- 9 FAO's normative values were generally integrated into its activities. The interventions addressed aspects related to rural poverty, gender and vulnerable populations where appropriate. However, these aspects were not always adequately documented, and normative values could have been addressed more explicitly and systematically in project documents. Doing so would require putting more weight on these values at the design stage.

Priority area 1: Reduce poverty and enhance food security and nutrition (access and utilization)

- 10 FAO has made significant contributions to the improvement of food security and nutrition in Bangladesh, which was well-acknowledged within the country. Interventions were designed in line with key national policies and priorities, as articulated in the national plans. A high level of national ownership was demonstrated, although project sustainability is overly dependent on the skills and experience of the current staff.

Priority area 2: Enhance agricultural productivity through diversification/intensification, sustainable management of natural resources, use of quality inputs and mechanization

- 11 FAO's interventions in agricultural production and productivity enhancement, food and nutrition security, and natural resource management were highly relevant to the national priorities. FAO's approach of working with central research institutions and national and subnational level government agencies (with well-defined needs and priorities) was appropriate, effective and results-oriented. Interventions were built into project designs as core elements, and stakeholders utilized FAO's international knowledge system and globally-tested methodologies.

Priority Area 3: Improve market linkages, value addition and quality and safety of the food system

- 12 FAO's interventions under Priority Area 3 addressed both upstream and downstream areas: statistics and information systems; food safety systems, legislation and institutional capacities; and livelihood support/augmentation. In these areas, FAO relied on its long

track record and unique institutional expertise and global knowledge, both upstream (in evolving best practice guidelines) and downstream (assisting in their implementation). The technical assistance contributed to the development of technical, functional and institutional capacities, as well as livelihood enhancement skills, in many subsectors and geographical and beneficiary groups. However, in some areas, specific value addition or distinctive institutional expertise was not evident. This has made it difficult for quality commodities to enter into a new market and fetch higher prices. On food safety, the government considers the need for introducing the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point system to the stakeholders throughout the commodity chain (shrimp). The small-scale of some interventions and the lack of well-formulated exit plans impeded the sustainability of results.

Priority Area 4: Further improve technology generation and adaption through better producer-extension-research linkages

- 13 FAO has contributed to adapting technologies and sharing knowledge by training extension personnel and beneficiaries. Some new technologies, however, could not be pursued due to inadequate funding. Although the overall impact could not be quantified due to the short duration of implementation, beneficiaries' perceptions were positive. The interventions laid the foundation for sustainability, with improved capacities and willingness of beneficiaries to continue their application. Overall, Priority Area 4 successfully linked extension personnel with producers. However, linkages between research and extension, and research and producer were not strong.

Priority Area 5: Increase the resilience of communities to withstand 'shocks' such as natural disasters, health threats and other risks to livelihoods

- 14 FAO supported Bangladesh to increase the resilience of livelihoods to natural disasters and health threats. The Organization's main contribution was the provision of technical support, training and research at the field level. FAO is viewed as having strong, technical and field level expertise. This has made the Organization an important and relevant partner in resilience work.

Gender

- 15 Although the CPF acknowledged the importance of gender mainstreaming, it was not always integrated at the operational level due partly to the absence of systematic gender reviews. Gender mainstreaming was prominent in the field projects, as they actively involved female stakeholders. The lack of gender-disaggregated baseline data at project level made monitoring of gender differentiated activities and outcomes difficult.

Partnerships

- 16 Stakeholders acknowledged FAO as a useful development partner, based on its concrete contributions and good working relationships with partners. FAO was acknowledged for its role in facilitating and coordinating multi-sectoral initiatives, its inputs and technical contributions to policy processes, and the demonstrated expertise in project formulation, management and implementation. FAO's partners included government agencies, development partners, donors, United Nations agencies, research and academic institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector. The partnerships covered strategy and policy, knowledge and advocacy, technical assistance, capacity development and field-level implementation of interventions.

Capacity development

- 17 Capacity development was at the core of FAO's Bangladesh programme. Capacity development support was provided upstream (policy and institution level) and downstream (behavioural changes in the field), and was most effective when field experiences were used as evidence for policy formulation. Systematic or formal knowledge flow within FAO

was more top-down than bottom-up. More efforts should be made in the application of global norms to the local context, and in sharing country experiences with regional and global stakeholders.

Coherence and synergies

- 18 While each intervention was coherent with the government's priorities and FAO's corporate Strategic Objectives, there was scope for improving synergies among and within priority areas. The forthcoming CPF should develop an overall strategy and priority area approaches that will help ensure synergy among interventions. Formulating a limited number of flagship projects that act as an umbrella of multiple interventions may help. FAO should maintain close working relationships with the Economic Relations Division of the Ministry of Finance for more coherent and strategic programming.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

- 19 During the period covered by this evaluation (2011–2016), FAO continued a responsive and fruitful partnership with the government that started four decades ago. The relationship became particularly productive over the past three generations of FAO Representatives. The Organization's effective catalytic role in promoting rural poverty reduction through its support to agriculture and food and nutrition security has positioned it as a trusted development partner in the country. The evaluation offers the following conclusions, which draw substantively from the findings in Chapter 4.

Conclusion 1. Strategic relevance

- 20 The strategies and priorities of the CPF (2014–2018) and its supporting interventions were highly relevant and addressed well-identified national needs and priorities. FAO's strategic focus and development priorities followed a flexible, consultative approach with the government. The CPF was pragmatic and forward-looking, and was generally well-prioritized to respond to emerging needs. The Organization's strategic framework and the government's core policy documents (e.g. the Five-Year Plan, National Agriculture Policy, National Food Policy, Country Investment Plan), along with the established consultative mechanism, facilitated the formulation and implementation of the CPF. Government appreciated FAO's assistance in its formulation (environment, forest and climate change) and implementation monitoring (agriculture, food security and nutrition).

Conclusion 2. Coherence

- 21 The programme portfolio represented a judicious mix of upstream and downstream support, and the programme made noteworthy contributions at both levels. FAO's contribution was particularly significant in policy development, institutional strengthening and capacity development. Linkages between the two levels helped the CPF strategy and interventions evolve into holistic multi-dimensional support packages in some areas, such as food and nutrition security and food safety, and sustainable agriculture and climate change/resilience.

Conclusion 3. Upstream support

- 22 Upstream support culminated in the sequential formulation and implementation of key policies, in particular on food and nutrition security and food safety. FAO interventions succeeded where there was strong government commitment, competent technical oversight, sustained resource availability and support to institutional capacity development. FAO made a distinctive contribution to food and nutrition security and food safety, in which sequenced projects provided holistic and long-term support. FAO's successful experience working with the Ministry of Food to improve food and nutrition security is being replicated in other sectors, such as forestry and environment.

Conclusion 4. Downstream support

- 23 Complementing the upstream policy support, the programme demonstrated a desirable balance with downstream interventions in productivity enhancement in agriculture (including fisheries and livestock) and promoting sustainable production and resilience through conservation and management of natural resources. This balance helped ensure that FAO's programme was relevant to the realities faced by producers and consumers, as well as to the disaster-prone poorer households in ecologically distressed areas. The projects had a positive impact on household and farm level productivity through the infusion of modern farming methods and technologies, as well as strengthening the extension and public delivery system at meso and primary levels. There was clear evidence of productivity gains for beneficiaries. FAO's programme was perceived as technically solid and contributed to capacity development and behavioural changes while being thinly spread, and the benefits at the field level were often location-specific and limited in scale.

Conclusion 5. Knowledge

- 24 FAO capitalized on its track record of institutional expertise and contributed global knowledge to both the upstream (in evolving best practice guidelines) and downstream (in strengthening household level livelihood support, interfacing with technology adaptation and dissemination, and assisting efficient delivery systems). In supporting productivity enhancement, projects drew on FAO's strong institutional expertise and knowledge, and time-tested FAO models (e.g. farmer field schools, Food Control Model Guidelines). The potential for strengthening upstream policy linkages based on lessons and experiences from downstream/grassroots projects was not always leveraged adequately. FAO also utilized the knowledge with local institutions, in particular those under National Agricultural Research System, by working with them. Knowledge flow within FAO (between headquarters and the Bangladesh Country Office) was more top-down than bottom-up. Knowledge from Bangladesh was not adequately fed into the global knowledge pool at headquarters.

Conclusion 6. Comparative advantage

- 25 FAO acted as a pioneer in the field and utilized its experience in policy and institutional capacity development. FAO's comparative advantage was in being a technical agency, and that reputation was well-acknowledged by the government and partner agencies. Another important role of FAO was in conveying important information and advocacy. The Organization established its reputation as an honest broker in some critical areas, including nutrition, food safety and climate-smart agriculture. FAO's role as a resource provider was less significant in Bangladesh, where various partners with larger financial envelopes operate. While FAO provided quality service in implementing projects, its approach was not always efficient due to its institutional requirements. The perception of FAO's role in project management was mixed for this reason.

Conclusion 7. Market linkages

- 26 Although FAO's overall performance was impressive, income growth was suboptimal due to weak market linkages in the project design. This was observed in the projects with value chain development elements. Although most projects under this evaluation succeeded in improving productivity growth and quality, they did not result in higher market prices due to weak market linkages. Insufficient attention to market aspects was partly due to the composition and dynamics of the project task force. These projects were led by technical officers with an agronomic background and no or insufficient technical inputs from those with economic backgrounds.

Conclusion 8. Upscaling and sustainability

- 27 FAO's limited financial resources and the nature of the programme did not permit the Organization to play a direct role in upscaling its successful initiatives. As a result, the full potential of FAO's project level successes was not always realized. Small-scale projects are most useful when used as a pilot activity or seed money for larger initiatives. This requires a clear exit or upscaling strategy at the design stage. However, the exit or upscaling strategy was often detailed only during project implementation.

Conclusion 9. Resource mobilization

- 28 Resource mobilization has been key to maintaining the large project portfolio in Bangladesh, and FAO has maintained good relationships with resource partners. Large donors continued providing resources for new projects, as FAO had lived up to its reputation as a technical agency in delivering quality programmes. Proactively initiating dialogue on issues within FAO's technical domain, instead of responding to demand-driven requests, is critical to continuing a fruitful relationship with resource partners. In some areas (e.g. nutrition, food safety, climate-smart agriculture), FAO paved the way for policy dialogue within the government and later played a lead role in generating partnerships, mobilizing donor resources and providing technical leadership in conceptualizing and implementing the interventions. The government expects the FAO assistance is building the capacity to formulate the projects to mobilize climate-related funds to implement the recently approved Country Investment Plan for Environment, Forestry and Climate Change.

Conclusion 10. Human resources

- 29 FAO's ability to effectively respond to country priorities and manage large programme delivery is a result of three generations of proactive leadership at the country office, excellent collaboration with the government and persistent engagement with partners. The programme also benefited from competent and dedicated country office staff, project professionals and operations specialists who were instrumental in managing and overcoming institutional and procedural bottlenecks. Increasing human resources could improve delivery in some areas; for instance, hiring a full-time gender specialist could help in stocktaking and documenting good gender practices.

Conclusion 11. Critical factors for the upcoming CPF formulation

- 30 Rethinking the role of agriculture. In addition to its endemic physical and structural challenges, the agriculture sector will face dynamic challenges in the coming decade due to changes in the demographics, labour market, poverty profile and rural-urban dynamics, as well as the shrinking land area under agriculture and the impact of slow onset climate change. Public policy responses to these challenges are already considering rethinking the role of agriculture. The agricultural sector will continue to be critical in poverty reduction through the provision of livelihoods and rural employment creation, and alleviating disaster risks and climate change vulnerabilities through sustainable management of natural resources including the development of forest biodiversity. Addressing the future challenges of enhancing domestic food grain productivity, achieving food security and decreasing nutrition deficiency will continue to be important for future FAO programmes. Looking ahead, FAO should consider the dimensions that have important implications for the country's national development agenda through new programme design and partnership modalities with the government and resource partners.
- 31 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and middle income country status. The SDGs set new development milestones for 2030, which will require additional investments in developing countries. At the same time, the attainment of middle-income country status will affect the level of overseas development assistance to future programmes (which are balanced by a compensatory adjustment of domestic resources or concessional borrowings to fund nationally owned mainstream programmes). This will alter the modality of technical cooperation. Considering these points, FAO needs to rethink its niche and explore new partnership modalities in the new environment.
- 32 National execution. With the government increasingly moving to national execution modalities and a larger proportion of self-financing for development priorities, the profile of technical assistance and capacity development needs will change. Capacity development demands on specialized agencies such as FAO will likely become more nuanced and may require new approaches and modalities for technical assistance design and management.

Recommendations

33 Drawing from the above conclusions, the evaluation offers the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1. Consider the longer term strategic relevance of FAO's country programming

34 In order to establish clearer linkages between the upcoming CPF and the national development agenda, the next CPF should be contextualized within the evolving environment (see Conclusion 11). FAO's current priority areas remain relevant for the medium-term. The next CPF should address higher national development priorities (noting the country's graduation from lower-middle income country status and its efforts to attain the SDGs, particularly SDG1) while consolidating gains from the current CPF. This would require the redefinition of the role of agriculture in the evolving broader development context and linking FAO's agricultural productivity and quality improvement projects to the national objectives of economic growth, poverty reduction and employment creation. Future projects should clearly target income growth at the household level and employment creation at the community level, by integrating market and production aspects into the project design.

Recommendation 2. The next CPF should shift to a holistic and integrated programme approach, and focus on fewer and better targeted thematic areas

35 The next programme should focus on fewer yet highly relevant thematic areas driven by the evolving development context while addressing emerging challenges. This can be done by consolidating and better packaging good practices from the current CPF cycle, adding a limited number of new activities of longer term development significance, and dropping activities with little comparative advantage. FAO has been establishing a strategic vision and framework through programmes with a holistic nature. Meeting the Undernutrition Challenge (MUCH) is instrumental in integrating food security and nutrition. Similar efforts may be made in other subsectors (e.g. linking sustainable agriculture and climate change/resilience work in Priority Area 5 and integrating food safety and value-addition in Priority Area 3) as a means for achieving longer term development. Also, efforts can be made to anchor FAO's technical expertise in the government's large flagship projects (e.g. National Agricultural Technology Program II). Integrating climate change, resilience, and/or gender elements into project design and implementation, where appropriate, would help approach sector-specific issues holistically and to collaborate with resource partners in different sectors.

Recommendation 3. Projects should be designed with a clear exit and/or scaling-up strategy

36 To ensure sustainability and continuity of results, FAO should incorporate well-defined exit strategies into its programmes and projects, and promote explicit learning and scaling-up strategies for successful projects. Moreover, to ensure that FAO's field-tested results are implemented in a timely manner, field projects should have a clear exit and upscale strategy as part of their design (while allowing for the possibility of fine-tuning during implementation). Considering the declining trend in delivery and resource mobilization since 2013 and likely reduction in future overseas development assistance flow, FAO should explore different possibilities for upscaling. This includes national execution (in particular on policy and technology) and working with NGOs on raising awareness. Working with the private sector (on market linkages) would require building market mechanisms into the project design. Tapping the synergy with the resource partners' ongoing activities is another way to ensure sustainability and continuity of results.

Recommendation 4. Continue providing quality normative work

37 FAO has made significant contributions beyond the project activities. These contributions include awareness raising of critical policy issues and capacity development at different levels. In addition to providing technical assistance, more emphasis should be placed on delivering quality normative work where FAO can make a catalytic difference. FAO should continue to act as an honest broker in the areas with technical competence.

Recommendation 5. Improve knowledge dissemination and strengthen bottom-up knowledge flow

- 38 Bangladesh's field-tested knowledge should be shared with headquarters more systematically. This would enable stakeholders to better leverage both the good practices at FAO Bangladesh and the global knowledge at headquarters. Knowledge sharing among countries can also be improved through interactive knowledge exchange and networks. Small-scale and one-off study tours had limited effects. FAO's technically sound and field-tested knowledge was well-recognized in the country. Effective dissemination of this knowledge would improve FAO's visibility. Linkages between research and extension and growers should be strengthened, particularly in the major researchable areas identified by the National Agricultural Research System institutes (e.g. demand-led agricultural technologies on varieties, farm machineries and management practices) and in the areas that the government considers important (e.g. development of climate-smart crop and fish varieties, management of soil health).

Recommendation 6. Consider initiating a new programme endorsement modality with the government and aligning the CPF with the Five-Year Plan and United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) cycles

- 39 FAO could consider the endorsement of the whole country programme by the Economic Relations Division, which consolidates views from relevant technical ministries instead of seeking approval of each project by the different technical ministries. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have already used a similar approach in Bangladesh which could help to make FAO's activities more coherent, clarify resource mobilization needs and reduce project start-up time. The current CPF (2014–2018) cycle could be aligned with the Sixth Five-Year Plan cycle (2016–2020) and UNDAF (2017–2020) for clearer strategic alignment and easier monitoring. Also, the next CPF should emphasize more on monitoring and evaluation (result-based management) in programme implementation.

Recommendation 7. Gender should be mainstreamed into the project design and implementation

- 40 Work on gender could be more systematically and explicitly positioned in the country programme design. FAO should prioritize the integration of gender considerations in its country programme and projects, based on sound gender analysis and the application of systematic approaches. The first step would be to gather and analyse already existing but undocumented good practices in the country. This would warrant a dedicated full-time gender specialist in the country office.



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