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Evaluation of FAO's effectiveness at country level: A synthesis of evaluations in middle-income countries: Armenia, Colombia, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

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1. The synthesis evaluation report draws together common findings and recommendations from four recent evaluations on FAO's programmes and set-up in Middle Income Countries (MICs): Armenia (2013); Colombia (2014); Sri Lanka (2012); and Viet Nam (2013).
2. The report identifies a series of issues and themes for Senior Management consideration and makes a single recommendation calling for the development of an overarching strategy for cooperation with MICs. Senior Management welcomes the report's analysis and is confident that the findings will contribute to several ongoing and closely-related efforts to strengthen FAO's performance at the country level, both in MICs and more generally.
3. The MIC classification includes a broad and varied segment of FAO's membership, a diversity reflected in the four countries covered in the synthesis evaluation. The populations of the four countries, for example, range from 3 million to 90 million and per capita GNI figures range from USD 5 000 to almost USD 12 000. Whilst agriculture contributes less than 7 percent of Colombia's GDP, it represents more than 20 percent of Armenia's GDP. Latest FAO estimates suggest that less than 6 percent of Armenia's population is food insecure, whereas almost a quarter of Sri Lanka's total population is malnourished. More generally, some MICs, including some of these included in synthesis evaluation report, are recovering from recent conflicts and others are subject to recurrent large-scale sudden-onset natural disasters. Management notes too, that many MIC characteristics are also shared by non-MIC countries.
4. A broad spectrum of measures, actions and approaches have been implemented in recent years to heighten the Organization's effectiveness at country levels. Many address issues, problems and challenges highlighted in the synthesis evaluation report. For example, the synthesis report points to the critical importance of effective country leadership. Since 2012, Management has implemented a series of deliberate measures to strengthen country leadership, including revised recruitment, assessment and mobility procedures. More than 40 FAORs have been appointed since the start of 2012. They have been subject to new assessment and selection processes and the large majority of newly appointed FAORs have worked for the Organization already, representing a significant break with the past.
5. In addition, the five recently-completed evaluations of FAO's regional and subregional offices have facilitated a comprehensive review and examination of what needs to be done to strengthen FAO's decentralized office network, including country offices. Proposed actions have been discussed in detail and endorsed by the Programme Committee.¹
6. Management agrees with the synthesis evaluation report's finding on the importance of sharpening the strategic content and prioritization of CPFs, and is introducing measures to improve CPF formulation.² Similarly, Members have endorsed a series of Management proposals to strengthen FAO's capacity to provide effective policy support at the country level, another issue highlighted clearly in the synthesis evaluation report.³ The report highlights efforts to mainstream gender perspectives at the country level as a particular area of weakness. In November 2013, Management presented Members with an update on actions taken to strengthen gender mainstreaming and a series of proposals to take this critical challenge forward.⁴ Management believes that progress has been made, but recognizes that this is still a work-in-progress. The Deputy Director-General (Operations) has been appointed FAO's "gender champion" in order to ensure continuing progress across the whole Organization in coming months and years in line with FAO's system-wide commitments on this critical matter.

¹ Evaluation of FAO's Regional and Subregional Offices for Asia and the Pacific (January 2014, PC 115/3), Latin America and the Caribbean (March 2014, PC 115/4), Africa (September 2013, PC 114/2), Europe and Central Asia (January 2013, PC 133/3), and the Near East (January 2011, PC 106/5)

² CPFs have been discussed on multiple occasions. For example: JM 2013.2/3 "Report on structure and functioning of decentralized offices network". The recent regional evaluations have all highlighted this issue.

³ PC 115/7: "Follow-up on the evaluation of FAO's role and work in food and agriculture policy", 115th Session of the Programme Committee, Rome, 26-30 May 2014

⁴ PC 114/15 refers

7. The synthesis evaluation report calls for a business model for country offices that is “better tailored” to the needs of MICs, and includes this proposal as an element in the recommendation that is made. Management fully supports the logic and rationale underpinning this proposal and is committed to working towards a model that enables the set-up of all country offices to respond to the needs and character of host countries (and regardless of the income classification of a particular country).

8. In addition, it is expected that the comprehensive financial framework for cost recovery now under development will lead to transparency and simplicity of cost recovery and distribution in the evolving FAO operating environment, especially in country offices. Furthermore, Management believes that further consideration of the question of country coverage may generate opportunities to further revise the business model for country offices, and in this regard, welcomes the stress given by Council on the need for “*further analysis and action in the future, in particular a review of the country coverage and modalities of FAO’s decentralized offices network*”.⁵

9. Moreover, FAO Management is committed to implementing a coherent Organization-wide accountability and internal control framework, combined with a deliberate plan to address the internal control weaknesses in FAO’s decentralized offices highlighted by both the Office of Inspector General and the External Auditor. Management believes that these measures will go a long way to improving the performance and effectiveness of FAO’s country offices, and in so doing, address many of the findings identified in this synthesis evaluation report.⁶

10. The report makes one recommendation, namely to develop an overarching strategy for cooperation with MICs. The proposed recommendation includes two elements, firstly regarding the focus, scope and modalities of corporate support to FAORs in MICs, and secondly, on the need to define a new business models for FAO’s offices in these countries. FAO’s country programmes are country-driven: the bottom-up/top-down character of FAO’s strategic planning process is an integral feature of FAO’s reviewed Strategic Framework. For this reason, whilst Management does not believe that there is a specific need to develop an exclusive strategy for Middle Income Countries, it is committed to continuous improvements to sharpen the Organization’s ability to respond to country needs and to maximize results, particularly at the country level. These changes and improvements will continue to be delivered in the current biennium and will be reinforced in the Programme of Work and Budget 2016-17, in all FAO country offices rather than just those in MICs.

⁵ CL 149/REP refers

⁶ FC 156/15 refers