

# **SIFSIA PROJECT (OSRO/SUD/620&621/MUL)**

## **FINAL EVALUATION**

### **LEARNING SYNTHESIS**

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#### **1. Introduction**

The SIFSIA programme (Sudan Institutional Capacity Programme: Food Security Information for Action), implemented in Sudan between 2006 and 2012, was both unique and ambitious. It was unique in attempting to build government capacity in two respects simultaneously: strengthening food security information and analysis *and* strengthening food security focussed policy-making, in other words in its objective of moving from information to action. It was also unique in attempting to do this in the challenging ‘post-conflict’ environment of Sudan after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. SIFSIA was originally designed as two sub-programmes, one focussed on capacity-building with the federal Government of National Unity (GNU) in Khartoum in the north – SIFSIA-North (SIFSIA-N) – and one focussed on capacity-building with the new Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) in Juba in the south – SIFSIA-South (SIFSIA-S). This division was reinforced with the secession of the Republic of South Sudan (ROSS) in July 2011. The SIFSIA programme was also highly ambitious in terms of what it was trying to achieve in this challenging context, for example establishing a new institutional architecture (from information collection to high-level policy-making) for food security within government, encouraging government ministries to work closely together in setting up an integrated multi-sectoral food security information system in a culture in which cross-ministry collaboration was weak, and attempting to influence and inform food security policy-making.

Five years’ experience of implementing the SIFSIA programme offer a rich source of learning. This note synthesises that learning, based on the findings and analysis of the mid-term and final evaluations of both SIFSIA-N and SIFSIA-S<sup>1</sup>. It has been written predominantly for FAO and for the European Commission (EC), implementor and funder respectively of the SIFSIA programme. The experience and learning from SIFSIA have immediate relevance for new food security programmes currently being designed and implemented in Sudan and South Sudan, and that may be introduced into other countries in Africa and beyond in the future.

This note starts with context-specific learning: Section 2 captures some of the key learning from SIFSIA-N, implemented in a political and policy context that was at best not conducive, and at worst hostile to food security planning and policy-making; Section 3 captures key learning from SIFSIA-S, about implementing a capacity-building programme in a context in which a new government was being built from scratch with very low basic capacity. Section 4 presents some of the generic learning about establishing a food security information system, while section 5 presents generic learning about building policy capacity. Section 6 summarises experience and learning about the capacity-building process itself.

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<sup>1</sup> See Buchanan-Smith et al (2012) and Nicholson et al (2012) for the final evaluation reports for SIFSIA-N and SIFSIA-S respectively, in which the analysis and specific learnings are presented in more detail.

## 2. Supporting food security planning and policy-making in a hostile political context, where food security is a low priority

This describes the context in which SIFSIA-N has been implemented over five-and-a-half years. During much of this period Sudan enjoyed rapid oil-fuelled economic growth, but food security was a low political priority. Government was more concerned with macro-economic stabilisation than addressing poverty and food insecurity experienced by almost half of the population<sup>2</sup>. It was also more concerned with short-term political events and developments (elections, the referendum in South Sudan, and subsequently secession) than with long-term policy initiatives. Only recently – since July 2011 – has the abrupt fall in oil revenues with the secession of South Sudan re-focused government attention on the agriculture and livestock sectors as potentially important sources of future economic growth, while deteriorating economic conditions and rising food prices have drawn attention to the potentially for unrest triggered by food insecurity. Despite Sudan's oil wealth, government ministries and the civil service have been chronically under-funded during the entire life of the SIFSIA programme. Meanwhile a number of centres of political and economic power have been established in Khartoum outside the conventional infrastructure of government.

In short, SIFSIA-N was introduced into a context in which there was little political support for strengthening food security planning and policy-making, yet the programme was welcomed by many government officers who saw it as a valuable source of technical support, resources, new approaches and technologies, enabling them to do their jobs better in an environment in which lack of resources was a serious constraint.

The following learning can be drawn from this experience:

- In such a challenging context, an early *political economy analysis* is essential to understand the *realpolitik*, in particular a) where political power and decision-making lies, and b) to gain insight into the real political priorities beyond written documents and formal statements. Such a political economy analysis should be part of the programme formulation phase, and should be ongoing throughout programme implementation.
- **Programme formulation** should be a consultative and inclusive process that begins with a stakeholder analysis and ensures that all the stakeholders are involved throughout. This takes time and should not be rushed.
- In a potentially hostile yet politicised environment, **high level political support** must be cultivated within government to give the programme the best chance of succeeding. This may require high-level lobbying and relationship-building, at the beginning and throughout the programme. This requires well-informed and strong leadership at senior levels from both the funding and implementing bodies.
- In a capacity-building programme of this kind in a challenging context, **relationship-building** more generally, for example between the implementing agency and key technical departments and individuals in government, is essential for trust to be built and for the programme to be based on partnership. This takes time but is worth the investment early on if it facilitates the ultimate success of the programme.
- Where food security is a low political priority, it is tempting for the programme to focus on the 'easier' technical side of data collection and analysis. This can serve a useful function if the availability of reliable data and insightful analysis help to build demand for data and information amongst decision-makers in the future, and if they are used effectively to draw attention to issues of food (in)security. However, this should not happen at the expense of the more politically sensitive and challenging policy-making side of the programme. Both should *move forward together*.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Sudan Baseline Household Survey carried out by the Central Bureau of Statistics in Khartoum in 2009

- Where there is limited political support or even political resistance, the programme must be *flexible and constantly adapting* to the changing and evolving context in which it is operating to identify windows of opportunity and to seize those opportunities as they arise. This requires a pragmatic and responsive approach, well-informed by ongoing political analysis of the context.
- These challenges ultimately beg the question: *should such a programme be attempted in a hostile political environment in which there is little support for food security?* There are valid concerns that resources will be wasted and little achieved. The experience of SIFSIA-N warns against overly ambitious targets in such a context that are unlikely to be achievable, yet it also shows the benefit of strengthening food security capacity within government at such a time by providing data and analysis to inform decision-making, and by encouraging a more evidence-based approach to decision-making.

### 3. Supporting food security planning and policy-making in a 'post-peace agreement', post-war context

South Sudan is an extreme example of this type of context. The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 marked the end of more than two decades of civil war, yet unresolved conflict and grievances persist at local level. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) transformed itself from a rebel movement into the ruling party and had to form an entirely new government, at county, state and 'national' (ie Juba) levels. The infrastructure of South Sudan had, quite literally, been 'shot to pieces' and it had suffered from chronic under-investment for more than two decades. Many who remained in South Sudan during the war had limited or no education. There was a dearth of information, particularly food security baseline data although levels of poverty and food insecurity were known to be high. Despite the injection of substantial amounts of aid money financial resources were extremely limited, both to establish a new government and its associated infrastructure and civil service, and to implement the usual functions and services provided by government.

In short, the SIFSIA-S programme was attempting to build government capacity in food security planning and policy-making almost from scratch. It offers valuable learning of how to do this, with nascent government institutions and policy frameworks in an early state of evolution.

- First and foremost is the learning about *how long* it takes to build a food security information system and policy-making infrastructure and capacity from scratch. A good start can be made in five years but to build sustainable capacity and institutions requires much longer. A newly established government like GoSS is unlikely to have the resources to maintain a meaningful information system for some time, and it is therefore likely to be in the interests of both the international community and government for a food security information system to be supported by international funding for some years until government can carry the costs.
- Even though it may not be possible to secure *donor funding* for a long period at the outset, such a capacity-building programme could be designed according to phases, and should not be overly ambitious from the start. There are advantages to securing multi-donor funding. Not only does this reduce dependency upon any one donor it also raises the visibility and buy-in from the broader international community.
- Whatever government's stated commitment to food security, during the critical early phase of a new government establishing itself *political priorities* will evolve and food and agriculture must compete with other priorities, some of which are likely to take precedence, for example security and political survival. Thus, whatever institutional

arrangements government may sign up to in early project agreements, it may be unwilling or unable to sustain these agreements over time. Periodic review of the formulation and planning documents is advisable so that plans can be amended to reflect changing government priorities and to adapt to new opportunities that arise. This is more likely to result in effective programming than a prescriptive approach that discourages flexibility.

- For these reasons it is important that programme *planning documents are not overly ambitious*. It may be unwise to expect government to deliver on more than the establishment of core staff functions during the first phase of programming.
- Where capacity is low yet the needs are great, the *programme should prioritise its focus and activities* according to a) where leverage is likely to be highest, and b) where possible building upon existing capacities. Examples of each in South Sudan include: (i) input to the Food & Nutrition Security Assessment and the South Sudan Development Plan – exercises in which government has a vested interest, for maximum leverage, and (ii) support to the Livelihoods Analysis Forum (LAF) and to market information data collection through CLiMIS (the Crop and Livestock Market Information System) – both of which built upon existing initiatives.
- Where it is impossible for a single programme like SIFSIA-S to meet government's overall capacity-building needs, it should look to *extend its impact* in two ways:
  - first, by playing a strong advocacy role with government and with international agencies to generate additional resources
  - second, by collaborating with other food security and capacity-building projects so that different initiatives complement each other and the sum of the combined efforts are greater than the component parts. To some extent such collaboration should be allowed to evolve organically, and may not be entirely predictable or prescribed from the outset.
- Where government is starting from a weak base and capacity-building will take time, the programme should also pay attention to *capacities outside government* that can be harnessed and that can complement government services, for example in NGOs and other civil society organisations. Some of these may be better placed to deliver field information than nascent local level government, and may substantially increase coverage.
- Although there is a tendency to equate 'post-peace agreement' with 'post-conflict', this is rarely the case in practice and conflict usually persists, at least in some areas where it continues to be a threat to food security. Despite the inevitable interest, even pressure, to focus on longer-term food security and development objectives 'post-peace agreement', it is essential that the food security information system is able to address both *long-term, chronic as well as acute, emergency food security needs* in order to be relevant and effective. In the case of Sudan and South Sudan, the two SIFSIA sub-programmes missed an opportunity to collaborate in monitoring and analysing the impact of secession on food security in the transitional and border areas that have been particularly affected.

#### 4. Establishing a functioning food security information system

A number of more generic learnings about how best to build government's capacity to establish and run a functioning food security information system emerge from the SIFSIA experience. These include:

- Having *a clear conceptual framework of food security* from the outset indicates how the different elements of food security relate to each other. This should be complemented by a model of the process from food security data collection through

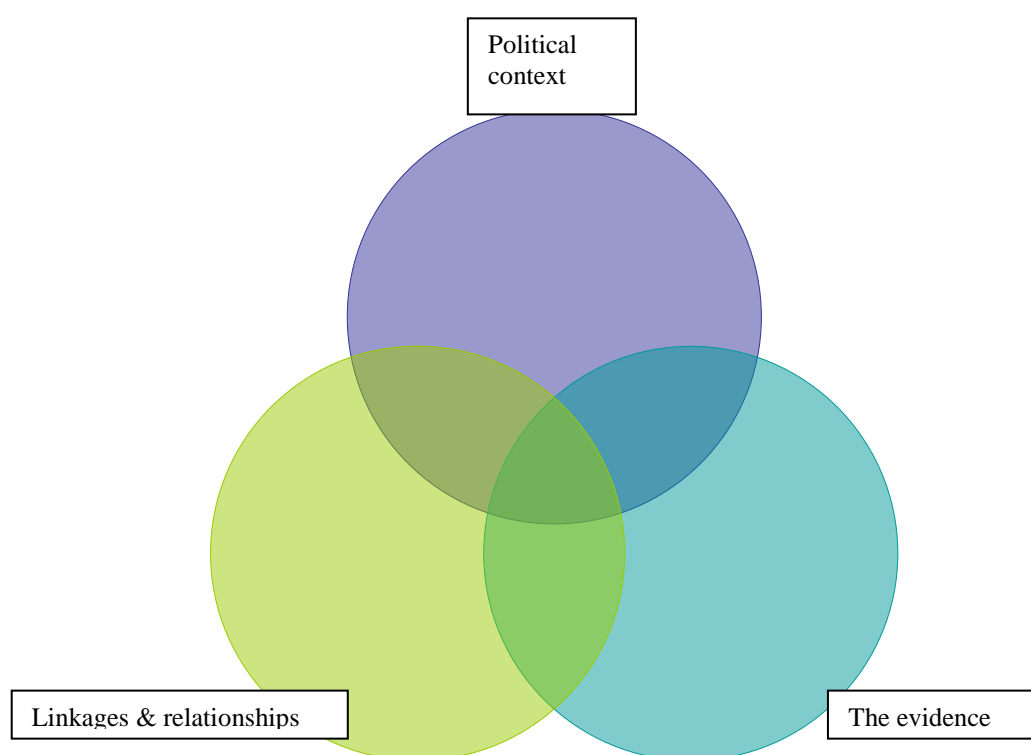
analysis to decision-making. Both of these should be actively promoted amongst key stake-holders to build a common understanding and common language, especially in government cultures where there is little tradition of multi-sectoral and cross-ministerial working.

- The programme should be adequately ***focussed at the level at which the food security data needs to be collected***, as well as at higher levels where analysis and decision-making take place. Ultimately the food security information system will only be as good as the data on which it is based. This implies that even a national-level programme must pay attention to field-based data collection and how that can best be supported.
- ***Nutrition*** must be a central part of the food security information system, addressed not just from a health perspective but also from an agricultural perspective. For example, how can agriculture contribute to improved nutritional status through dietary diversity?
- While a food security information system should ***build upon existing capacity*** and initiatives for maximum impact, care should be taken to avoid reinforcing existing government biases, for example in terms of sectoral or geographic coverage, in favour of a more holistic approach
- A ***livelihoods approach*** to designing a food security information system, whereby data is collected by livelihood groups and/ or by livelihood zone, can greatly enhance the accuracy of the system and of its recommendations. However, if there is no existing baseline on livelihood zones, this can take time and considerable investment to establish.
- From the outset, the food security information system should be designed to be ***gender-sensitive***. This means ensuring that data collection is disaggregated by sex, and that analysis is gendered.
- A successful food security information system must be supported by ***a clear communications strategy*** that addresses dissemination and promotes utilisation. Identifying and designing an appropriate information portal should be part of this.
- In a three to five year project it should be possible ***to trial different data collection methods***, adapting them to the context and abandoning them if they do not work. As far as possible these should be selected according to the needs and capacity of the country/ government concerned, rather than driven by the technology on offer. Opportunities to learn from food security information systems in neighbouring countries should be sought and built upon to ensure that mistakes are not repeated.

## 5. Informing & influencing food security policy-making

This is probably the most challenging part of establishing a food security information system that extends to ‘action’, and this is where there is least experience to draw upon. A useful conceptual model of how to influence policy and decision-making with research-based evidence is the ODI/ RAPID model, adapted in Figure 1 below. This shows that quality evidence alone is not sufficient to influence decision-making. There is an important relational element between information providers and information users, and the political and organisational context may determine if and how information and analysis are taken up.

**Figure 1: Factors affecting utilisation of information in decision-making – the ‘context, evidence and links framework’**



Source: ODI/ RAPID (See Court and Young, 2003)

With reference to this model, the key learnings from the SIFSIA experience include:

- ***Very different skill-sets*** are required for the policy-making part of the programme from the technical information skills needed to establish a food security information system. Skills required to build policy-making capacity and to influence policy-making include:
  - Strong skills of political economy analysis, from the outset and throughout implementation of the programme, to understand the political economy of policy-making and to identify how and where to engage in policy-making
  - Strategic skills to identify opportunities and policy-windows as they arise
  - Strong research skills, and an ability to coach and mentor others in developing those skills, to carry out sound analysis and to make the transition from analysis to policy recommendations
  - Excellent communication skills, both writing skills and inter-personal skills to build relationships with key policy-makers and decision-makers

- In order to understand and continuously monitor the political economy of policy-making, consideration should be given to appointing a small ***group of independent national advisers*** who are well-placed to understand the process of policy-making in-country and who can identify and advise on opportunities for influence that the programme might otherwise miss.
- A ***pragmatic and flexible approach*** is required to strengthen and inform policy-making. An output/ activity-based logframe model is of questionable relevance to this part of the programme as it tends to promote rigidity and discourage opportunism. A more adaptive and responsive approach is usually required for policy-related work, identifying and seizing opportunities as they arise. This includes seizing opportunities to collaborate with other policy initiatives rather than working in isolation because those initiatives had not been foreseen nor included in early plans. This implies that the log-frame must be written in such a way that it encourages qualities of flexibility and adaptability to the changing policy and political context.
- The policy side of the programme must be supported by a strong and creative ***communications strategy***. Written reports alone rarely influence decision-making, and neither should electronic dissemination be the main or sole means of communication. Instead, the policy influencing part of the programme should aim to foster discussion and debate, ensuring that as many of the target audience as possible hear and discuss the findings of the information system and of commissioned policy-relevant research.
- There may also be opportunities for using ***policy-related tools and frameworks*** developed by FAO and others to support policy-makers, for example in translating outputs from the food security information system into scenarios and options appraisal tools.

## 6. Capacity-building

SIFSIA-N and SIFSIA-S adopted two different models to building government capacity, in each case adapted to the context. SIFSIA-N adopted a more intensive approach, targeting a small number of interested and committed individuals in key government ministries. SIFSIA-S adopted a more extensive approach, targeting and training large numbers of government officers, partly to create a critical mass of trained staff and partly to deal with the issue of high-turnover of staff and the risk of trained staff moving onto other positions. The principle of adapting the capacity-building approach to the context is a good one although it is too soon to be able to evaluate the longer-term impact of either approach. However, the contrast provides a valuable opportunity for learning if there was follow-up monitoring at a later stage.

The generic learning that does emerge from the SIFSIA experience of capacity-building is as follows:

- Before a capacity-building programme begins, time and resources must be invested in planning. It should start with a ***comprehensive assessment of existing capacity*** and of how this falls short of achieving the programme's activities and outputs within the respective institution. Training should then be tailored and targeted to strengthen the skills set of individuals to achieve those activities and outputs.
- ***Ongoing mentoring and on-the-job training*** should be central to the capacity-building programme, and is usually more effective for sustained capacity-building than one-off participation in a training course. Cyclical training in-country or in the region is likely to be more effective than pursuing academic qualifications overseas. eLearning materials and video can be an effective way of enhancing and reinforcing learning following participation in a training course.

- When trainees participate in a training or capacity-building programme, it should be made clear what outputs are expected from them on completion of the programme and the institutional support that will be required to make it happen. Where possible and feasible, ensuring those individuals share their training and knowledge with other colleagues should be a part of the *training contract*. Building a local ‘community of practice’ and ensuring that local support is available is likely to be more effective than isolated training missions.
- Where there is a risk that a capacity-building programme will be perceived as an opportunity for staff to train themselves and then move on to other better-remunerated work, a more targeted approach may be appropriate whereby participating staff must give *a time-defined commitment* to the post or assignment for which they are trained – a kind of ‘training bond’.
- Where training relates to, or is dependent upon the introduction of new software or infrastructure, *the timing of the training* is key and should only happen upon or after installation of the technology; it should not happen before.
- The planning and implementation of a capacity-building programme with government should pay attention to *gender equity*, ensuring the programme is accessible to women and that women are encouraged to participate to ensure balanced numbers.



## **References**

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