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Independent review of the Technical Cooperation Programme

Evolution of the TCP

FAO's Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) was launched in 1976 with resources from the Organization's regular core budget in order to respond to urgent, small-scale technical assistance requests from member countries. Between 1976 and the end of 2004, 8 674 TCP projects were approved for a total amount of US\$983 million. The criteria governing TCP remained largely unchanged except for the financial ceiling and maximum duration of projects, which were raised in 1991 from US\$250 000 to US\$400 000 and from 12 to 24 months, respectively. However, several major changes in the programme and the context in which it functions led to the need for a thorough review of the TCP mechanism.

As donor support to projects has diminished, TCP has become progressively more important within the overall FAO Field Programme. In many countries today, TCP is the most significant source of funding for FAO field projects. This has increased pressure to use TCP to carry out field activities that complement normative work, which can sometimes contrast with the Programme's demand-driven purpose. Support for TCP projects in the field has also changed as the number of international experts has fallen, and the burden of technical support has shifted to FAO headquarters and regional staff. In addition, requests for emergency TCP assistance have increased. Priorities in development cooperation have evolved, as many countries have built up their national skills and capacities, developed national strategies for poverty and hunger reduction and set up new working arrangements with international development partners.

FAO Council request for review

In November 2003, the FAO Council agreed that a process should be initiated to explore possibilities for strengthening the policy and operational framework of the TCP. In September 2004, the Programme Committee requested that, in the process of developing management proposals to strengthen the TCP, the internal consultation and review process should be complemented by an independent review by the Evaluation Service and the resulting report presented to the Programme Committee. This independent review was undertaken by seven external consultants.

Findings

Although there have been important changes in the international development context, the high added value of the TCP for FAO member countries has remained unchanged. All countries surveyed in the independent review found the timely, small-scale and focused assistance provided to be highly relevant and they also welcomed the TCP as a means of obtaining unbiased advice from FAO.

The distribution of TCP allocations among regions has reflected needs in terms of food security, poverty and dependence on agriculture (Africa receives over

40 percent). However, TCP allocations among individual countries did not reflect these considerations and the basis for decisions was not transparent. Governments and donors stressed that, to be more relevant, TCP projects needed to reflect national priorities more closely and be better linked to national frameworks for rural and agricultural development, including national poverty reduction and food security strategies. While some of the original TCP approval criteria from 1976 remain valid, others were no longer relevant; for example they did not adequately reflect FAO's comparative advantage in transferring knowledge internationally and bringing high-quality, unbiased advice to countries on request. Likewise, the process of selecting, designing, approving and implementing TCP projects was not optimal. Delays were caused by protracted dialogue about the initial project document. The overall relevance of TCP projects was reduced by FAO's difficulty in acting quickly. Project follow-up was not well considered at the start of projects and was not effective.

Overall, performance of TCP emergency projects had been good, but contributions to sustained productivity have been limited in the input supply projects. TCP funds were used for emergencies in the traditional project mode, which did not allow a sufficiently large or quick response to major emergencies.

Regional (multicountry) TCP projects generally did not have strong support from countries involved, as many of these projects were originally proposed from within FAO.

While FAO has taken measures to ensure the consideration of gender in field projects, accountability for delivery on gender issues in TCP was found to be weak.

Recommendations

In view of the strong support for TCP as a demand driven source of technical expertise, **the Programme should be maintained at the present share of FAO's budget** and, if at all possible, additional resources should be mobilized for it, as it meets a strong perceived need.

- **Target groups and allocation mechanisms.** The allocation of TCP resources should be proportional to needs and favour countries with large numbers of poor and hungry people dependent on agriculture. Funds should be made available in the form of **indicative country allocations** to all countries, except those allocated for meeting emergency requirements and an unprogrammed reserve for contingencies. FAO should introduce **flexible country-specific priority frameworks**, which should be a statement of intent for FAO cooperation with each member country with respect to all TCP (and other) resources.
- **TCP approval and design processes.** The FAO Representative (FAOR) should be assigned the **authority to approve individual TCP projects** for less than US\$100 000 that are in line with the approved country priority framework, unless they are of such complexity as to justify formalized technical clearance. For those projects that need technical clearance, a maximum turnaround time needs to

be introduced, beyond which the FAOR would be allowed to proceed. The FAOR should also have **full authority for operational management functions and monitoring**, including approval of minor project extensions and revisions.

Initial design documents for TCP projects within the country priority framework **should be approved in principle only**, with an indicative overall budget. The **more detailed design** should then be carried out as part of the first mission for the project or, alternatively, under an advance allocation for a design mission. In order for the TCP to catalyse follow up more fully, the FAOR should have a mandatory follow-up discussion with government and potential partners.

The existing **TCP facility for FAORs** should be increased to enable them to respond better to consultancy and other requests (in line with the country priority framework), including those for national strategy development and cooperation with the UN system and other members of the multilateral community. The **principles of partnership** should be integrated into the planning and management of the TCP.

- **Project approval criteria.** TCP approval criteria should further the flexible and rapid response to the demands of member countries for international

Management response to the evaluation

Management presented fully developed proposals for strengthening the policy and operational framework of the TCP, which drew extensively on both the independent review and on an internal consultation, and many of the recommendations of the independent review were largely accepted. The principal areas of divergence were: i) on the value of introducing country indicative figures as proposed by the review; and ii) the fact that the independent review proposed a greater degree of decentralization of responsibility than that deemed by management to be immediately possible, including responsibility for TCP project approval. Management also proposed a revised set of TCP project approval criteria, which were accepted by the Programme Committee and which focus on: 1) country eligibility; 2) aims and purposes; 3) country or regional priorities; 4) critical gaps or problems; 5) sustainable impact; 6) scale (up to US\$500 000) and duration (up to 24 months); 7) government commitment; 8) capacity building; 9) gender sensitivity; and 10) partnership and participation.

knowledge transfer, emphasizing: i) conformity to FAO's strategic priorities; ii) those areas in which FAO has comparative strengths; and iii) realistic assessment of the potential for sustainable impacts through national follow-up. TCP projects should be regularly monitored for **gender equity**. Furthermore, with the introduction of the country priority frameworks, the current functional categories for TCP support are no longer relevant and should be abolished.

- **Project size and duration.** The **US\$400 000 ceiling** for individual TCP projects was found to be appropriate and should be maintained, except for emergency TCP projects. The maximum duration of projects should be extended to **36 months** (from the present 24 months).
- **Emergency support.** A percentage (20 to 25 percent) of overall available TCP resources should be set aside for guaranteeing donor-pledged **emergency support**, especially for planning and coordinating emergency rehabilitation, and also for **seed assistance**. TCP emergency support should be **focused on major emergencies**, including pests and diseases, while support for recurring as well as small, stand-alone emergencies at the national level should be decreased.

- **Regional projects:** The use of TCP resources for **regional projects**, with the exception of emergencies, must be **contingent on the decision of participating member countries** to utilize part of their respective indicative country allocations for the regional activity. No TCP allocations should be channelled to any regional activity without the express request of the participating countries.
- A **comprehensive in-depth evaluation** of the TCP should be undertaken every six years.

FAO Governing Bodies' conclusions (Programme Committee)

At its May 2005 session, the Programme Committee expressed its appreciation for the consultative process from which the management recommendations had been drawn, noting the importance of the

TCP to member countries as a means for gaining access to FAO's normative and technical expertise. It also emphasized the need for reforms to the programme as it is currently conceived and implemented, in order to enhance its effectiveness, and it requested management to prepare definitive recommendations.

In September 2005, the Committee expressed general support for the recommendations made by management. The focus of TCP should be on the World Food Summit targets and the Millennium Development Goals. TCP projects should be developed in the context of the National Priority Frameworks being established for the totality of FAO's action at the country level and these should have low transaction costs. Regarding country eligibility, the Committee agreed that universality remained a basic principle of the Programme, with special attention to the neediest countries. Access by high-income developing and developed countries should be on a full cost-recovery basis. The Committee also agreed that:

- FAO should continue to decentralize TCP responsibilities further as part of the ongoing process of decentralization;
- the TCP facility for consultancy support, managed by the country representatives, should be increased to a maximum of US\$200 000 per biennium in each country;
- the emphasis of emergency TCP projects should progressively shift towards technical assistance and away from the provision of material inputs. Setting aside an indicative amount of 15 percent of the Programme's resources for emergency TCP projects accessible to all countries was also supported. Opportunities for selective reimbursement of emergency TCP resources and cofinancing should be identified;
- requests for regional projects should be submitted either by established regional bodies (including FAO regional statutory bodies) or by groups of governments;
- the modified TCP criteria proposed by management were welcome, and FAO needs to communicate to Members how the criteria are being applied;
- there should be an emphasis on impact and sustainability in project design, implementation and eventual evaluation;
- the increased ceiling of US\$500 000 for all TCP projects was justified; and
- while under normal circumstances the maximum project duration of 24 months should remain, this could be extended to 36 months on a case-by-case basis.

References

Independent review of the Technical Cooperation Programme.

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