

EVALUATION SERVICE

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FAO's crop production programme

Evaluation of FAO's activities in crop production

Ensuring food security and raising farm income levels have been fundamental corporate objectives since the founding of FAO. Activities aimed at increasing and diversifying crop production are therefore of major interest, and numerous requests for assistance in this area are received from FAO's member countries.

FAO's work in crop production includes: plant nutrition, water availability, research and extension (including germplasm improvement under the Joint FAO/IAEA Division), agro-meteorology, farming systems, mechanization, post-harvest processing and loss reduction, and crop and livestock systems. Although these are cross-cutting fields of work, the main responsibility for crop production activities lies with the Plant Production and Protection Division (AGP). The evaluation was thus restricted to the work of the Crop and Grassland Service (AGPC), directly related activities of the Plant Protection Service and the Seeds and Plant Genetic Resources Service and crop-related work of the Joint FAO/IAEA Division.

Findings

When crop production was reviewed by the Evaluation Service in 1990, FAO's Field Programme had reached an average of 220 crop production projects per year. These projects were mainly supported by the United Nations Development Programme and bilateral donors. The number started to decline in the early 1990s and, by the time of the present evaluation (2003), had fallen to 61, of which two-thirds were small projects funded by FAO through its Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP).

This development has had a profound impact on the way FAO works in this area. Up until the mid-1990s, the main role of AGPC was to support field projects, many of which had large budgets and required a considerable amount of technical backstopping. The decline of the Field Programme, together with decentralization, led to a new emphasis on normative work under the core-funded Regular Programme. To a large extent, this was a challenge faced by FAO as a whole in converting to the new programme model within the 15-year Strategic Framework. However, the considerable change in the nature of FAO's crop production activities meant that it was particularly important to re-examine priorities and methods of work in line with the reshaping of the Organization. It is in this context that the evaluation was conducted.

Crop production services provided by FAO now include:

- Technology transfer and training, mainly through projects and dissemination of information through networks.
- Provision of international fora for discussion on scientific matters (e.g. the International Rice Commission, the Tropical Asian Maize Network).
- Information dissemination through a range of print and electronic products.

- Promotion of strategic crop research and development initiatives through cooperation with International Agriculture Research Centres and national programmes.

AGPC has traditionally adopted a disciplinary approach. However, in line with the greater emphasis placed on interdisciplinarity within FAO, progress has been made towards closer interaction with other organizational units and the identification of cross-discipline thematic areas to address in crop production. The thematic areas defined were:

- Alternative crops
- Urban and peri-urban agriculture
- Good agricultural practices and organic agriculture
- Conservation agriculture (conservation tillage systems)
- Production and biodiversity in crop and grassland systems
- Sustainable use of genetic resources: plant breeding and biotechnology.

The crop-related Field Programme is now largely composed of small TCP projects. The majority of those assessed were found to have led to identifiable improvements in crop production. Country projects were particularly effective when focused on particular themes (e.g. the Farmers' Field School extension methodology and the Special Programme for Food Security).

Recommendations

■ **Strategy and focus.** FAO's role in crop production needs to be made more specific, particularly its normative Regular Programme work, extending beyond general promotion of alternative crops and cultivars, for example, and crop production work should be organized in a manner which is both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary so that production systems can be better understood and FAO can act more as an adviser on policy and strategic development.

■ **Interdisciplinary approach.** The Crop and Grassland Service should be reorganized on the basis of project and programme teams responsible for major tropical production systems and agro-ecologies. A pilot thematic activity on **crop/livestock production systems** in a selected agro-ecological setting should be developed. Additional components should then be introduced in Regular Programme activities in two areas of particular interest to member countries:

- a) plant breeding: raising strategic awareness and promoting appropriate policy and technical initiatives;
- b) horticulture: focusing on horticulture within alternative crops work. This should include critical elements in production and commercialization (e.g. marketing, post-harvest value addition) and be based on the specific requirements of different regions and countries.

■ **Good agricultural practices.** FAO should continue to develop the necessary protocols and related practices for the practical and effective implementation of good agricultural practices.

■ **Biotechnology.** Expertise in plant biotechnology (including biosafety) should be brought within AGP, with the Joint FAO/IAEA Division providing continued support to research, technical training and capacity building.

■ **Linkages with international agricultural research institutes.** Closer ties should be established with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) institutes, especially in view of changes in their activities, which have taken on a stronger development dimension. Joint working groups should be formed on subjects of common interest where there is mutual benefit to be derived from such cooperation (as opposed to seeking additional funding).

■ **Networks.** Crop production networks should be examined with a view to making some more self-supporting through other funding sources and re-examining the benefits from support to those that are unlikely to be viable without indefinite FAO support. There should be a more critical approach to production of publications, focusing on those with practical field application.

■ **Field projects.** TCP projects should be examined in the light of: their contribution to normative work and with regard to their two-year time limit; the target beneficiaries (not always the most disadvantaged) and the promotion of technologies (that do not directly benefit the poorest farmers); selectivity in identifying inputs to projects; and the amount of international consultancy used (as this may not have been adequate in certain specialized activities).

Field projects in general, including TCP, should demonstrate that **economic and marketing perspectives have been considered** and included if appropriate and that **provision has been made for monitoring of training** (including the performance of modified Farmers' Field School approaches).

Peer review

A panel of external international experts with relevant expertise reviewed the evaluation conclusions. It endorsed both the quality of the evaluation process and, broadly, the findings and recommendations of the report. It stressed the importance of reorienting the programme from a commodity approach to a sustainable production system and agro-ecology approach as well as the strengthening of normative functions. The panel also underlined the importance of increasing the focus of FAO's involvement in biotechnology, as well as counterbalancing this with support to government plant breeding work. Panel members underlined the issues raised with regard to TCP activities and suggested that FAO undertake a thorough review of that financing mechanism. (This has since been completed, including an independent external review.)

Management response to the evaluation

FAO management also endorsed the recommendations, in particular the reorientation of the crops programme towards more normative work, although they stressed the importance of field project activities and the degree to which these are appreciated by beneficiary countries. They suggested the accent should be on a balance between field and normative work.

The Programme Committee appreciated the evaluation as insightful, thorough and frank, and welcomed the strategic orientation of the analysis. It endorsed the recommendations in general and highlighted those concerning the need to:

- focus more actively on policy and strategic development matters in addition to traditional technical advisory functions;
- take a more integrated approach to agricultural development activities, including economic and marketing issues;
- adopt a work programme that focuses on major tropical production systems, stressing in particular the importance of crop/livestock systems;
- reinforce plant breeding activities;
- undertake a review of crop production-related networks and information products;
- bring all FAO's crop biotechnology expertise under AGP.

The Committee also stressed the importance of field activities, including those funded under TCP, and endorsed the recommendation that the statutory two-year duration of TCP projects should be reviewed. The Committee noted that some recommendations, especially those concerning an integrated approach to agricultural development, would have applicability to the Agriculture Department as a whole.

FAO Governing Bodies' conclusions (Programme Committee)

References

Evaluation of FAO activities in crop production.

Available at: <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/MEETING/006/Y9908e.htm>

Report of the Ninetieth Session of the Programme Committee.

Available at: <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/MEETING/007/J0522e.HTM>