

Thematic Evaluation Series

Real-time evaluation of FAO's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme

Annex 1. Terms of reference

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Abbreviations and acronyms

CLG	Core learning group
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
OED	FAO Office of the Evaluation
TOR	Terms of reference

1. Introduction

1. The COVID-19 pandemic is jeopardizing human health and disrupting the food systems that are the foundations of health. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has designed a COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme with the goal of proactively and sustainably addressing the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. It aims at enabling donors to leverage the Organization's convening power, real-time data, early warning systems and technical expertise to direct support where and when it is most needed. In line with the United Nations (UN) approach to "build back better," and in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the programme's objectives are, in the short-term, to mitigate the immediate impacts of the pandemic while, in the long-term, strengthening the resilience of food systems and livelihoods.
2. At its 129th session, the FAO Programme Committee requested that the Office of Evaluation (OED) conduct a real-time evaluation (RTE) of FAO's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme. The evaluation will take stock and assess the progress made and provide timely feedback/early assessments to foster learning and accountability. The terms of reference (TOR) have been developed after a desk review and initial consultations with key relevant headquarters and decentralized office personnel, and were refined based on the findings of a stocktaking study, which was in itself an early product of the RTE as originally conceived. The TOR presents the scope, purpose, approach and methodology in addition to management arrangements and timelines.

2. FAO's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme

2.1 Background

3. FAO's response to the COVID-19 crisis has taken place in two main phases: i) immediate response (March-June 2021), which took place in areas within the general mandate of the Organization and in response to an unfolding humanitarian crisis; and ii) transition and recovery phase (July 2021 onwards), which serves as transition from the emergency response towards a medium- to long-term horizon recovery. Throughout these phases, FAO has strived to ensure "business continuity" and "external coordination", by establishing flexible mechanisms and measures to facilitate programme and project implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
4. The emergent and evolving nature of events required FAO to address them in a fluid and agile fashion. Unlike traditional programme development, response times were limited, and operational conditions posed an additional challenge. It was within that context that the original concept note for the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme was produced. The programme governance includes co-chairs, a technical review team and a secretariat (hosted by the Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division [PSR]). It was officially launched on 14 July 2020 with an appeal for USD 1.32 billion. A timeline with key events is included in Appendix 1.

2.2 Programme design

5. The programme encapsulates an evolving and dynamic set of actions that FAO has taken as circumstances change and new information becomes known. As the pandemic unfolded, consultations with internal and external stakeholders brought FAO to structure the programme as an 'umbrella' initiative centred around seven key priority areas (PA):
 - i. **Global Humanitarian Response Plan:** Addressing the impacts of COVID-19 and safeguarding livelihoods in food-crisis contexts.
 - ii. **Data for Decision-making:** Ensuring quality data and analysis for effective policy support to food-systems and Zero Hunger.
 - iii. **Economic Inclusion and Social Protection to Reduce Poverty:** Pro-poor COVID-19 responses for an inclusive post-pandemic economic recovery.
 - iv. **Trade and Food Safety Standards:** Facilitating and accelerating food and agricultural trade during COVID-19 and beyond.
 - v. **Boosting Smallholder Resilience for Recovery:** Protecting the most vulnerable, promoting economic recovery and enhancing risk management capacities.
 - vi. **Preventing the Next Zoonotic Pandemic:** Strengthening and extending the One Health approach to avert animal-origin pandemics.
 - vii. **Food Systems Transformation:** "Building to transform" during response and recovery.
6. The programme was initially created for resource mobilization, coordination and harmonization of support countries. No explicit theory of change (TOC) was formulated, nor a programme results framework and related monitoring plan developed although some priority area-specific results were enunciated. Nonetheless, following the programme's expansion, the need for a result chain and a country-level monitoring system has been acknowledged.

7. The programme is characterized by its ability to adapt/calibrate existing interventions and quickly tackle emergent issues as well as unforeseen scenarios while seeking to reach both its short- and long-term objectives. This characteristic is one of the principal reasons why an RTE centred on learning has been requested.

3. Overview of the portfolio and resource mobilization

8. The COVID-19 programme called for USD 1.32 billion. As of early March 2021, almost USD 238 million have been mobilized specifically under the umbrella programme (18 percent of the appeal):
 - i. Voluntary contributions – which are channelled to both development and emergency-oriented projects – amount to USD 207 million, of which USD 102 million in confirmed contributions and USD 105 million in pipeline contributions.
 - ii. FAO's resources currently invested in the programme amount to USD 31 million, with additional USD 1.85 million from FAO's Multidisciplinary Fund specifically allocated to the elaboration of COVID-19 data and statistics.
9. Distribution of (earmarked) financial contributions indicate less donor interest in Priority Areas 2 (Data for decision-making), 4 (Trade and food safety standards), 6 (Preventing the next zoonotic pandemic) and 7 (Food systems transformation) despite their perceived relevance in the COVID-19 response and in strengthening long-term resilience.
10. As of February 2021, a total of 97 TCP projects for a value of USD 21 million have been approved in response to requests from Member Countries. There are an additional 22 projects for USD 4.2 million being prepared for approval. As of March 2021, extrabudgetary resources allocated to COVID-19 projects were above USD 94 million. So far, resource mobilization under the programme has been more effective for the Africa region, which has received USD 75 million (32 percent of all the funding), followed by Asia with USD 43 million (16 percent). Several subregions (Caribbean, Central Asia, Near East, Pacific) did not attract significant resources, and reported to have limited capacities to formulate subregional COVID-19 resource mobilization strategies, and to develop project proposals. Other reported constraints include the confrontation with multiple crises (Southern Africa), or investments on food systems not positioned as a high priority (Central Asia).

4. Evaluation scope, purpose, approach and audience

11. RTEs, although formative in nature, are primarily conducted during the early stages of an intervention, and focus on identifying issues, promising practices and initial lessons learned in order to provide timely feedback to stakeholders and thus inform operational decision-making. To do so, a useful RTE must be participatory and adaptive both in methods and in the lines of enquiry it pursues, so as to meet the information needs of the intended primary users.

4.1 Scope

12. The RTE covers FAO's COVID-19 responses that have been grouped under the programme, from the onset of the pandemic to date, irrespective of budget source or geographic location. In order to contextualize the work of the programme, other COVID-19-related FAO responses may be addressed tangentially.

4.2 Purpose

13. The main purpose of the RTE is to identify emerging lessons learned and good practices for organization-wide learning and planning as the programme is being implemented; although providing an account of early results and findings related to programme design and implementation for possible "course-correction" would also be relayed, this would be secondary. The emphasis is on single and double loop learning. If the need for a more traditional formative evaluation were to arise, a different exercise would be developed by OED.

4.3 Approach

14. The RTE will adopt a consultative approach in order to adjust to the needs of primary intended users as they arise, programme evolution and new data. In this regard, the RTE is developmental in that it will accompany programme implementation while stressing: i) high level of engagement of primary intended users; ii) adaptability of the evaluation process as required; iii) ownership of the process by stakeholders; and iv) a collaborative effort with frequent and open communication. The RTE will be guided by utilization-focused evaluation principles to ensure that the necessary information is available to primary intended users to inform their decision-making in a timely manner.
15. The RTE will use a rolling work plan consisting of distinct, stand-alone evaluative exercises (processes and products) with their own mini-TOR (i.e. a concept note) focusing on specific issues or theme. On the other hand, reporting will still be programme-centred to the extent findings corroborate that focus. The stocktaking study already identified a number of key issues, and as new information emerges, additional relevant topics of interest will be considered for inclusion.

4.4 Audience

16. The audience of the RTE are FAO Member States, the Programme Committee and FAO in general. The primary intended user of the RTE is programme management, related technical and resource mobilization units and decentralized offices. Findings will also feed into global evaluative processes, such as the Inter-Agency Evaluation of the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP)¹ and syntheses prepared by the COVID-19 Evaluation Coalition.²

¹ FAO is a member of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which has called for an evaluation of the GHRP in 2021 <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/>

² FAO is a member of the COVID-19 evaluation coalition: <https://www.covid19-evaluation-coalition.org/>

5. Key issues and evaluation questions

5.1 Key issues

17. After analysing the emerging issues identified in the stocktaking study, and in consultation with programme management, four topics will be included in the RTE's rolling work plan:

Topic	Focus	Period
1. Programme design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development and validation of the TOC 	May-July 2021
2. Programme results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contributions of FAO's response, as per the TOC 	August 2021-March 2022
3. Data for action (PA2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uptake of COVID-19-related knowledge products and services 	May-September 2021
4. Humanitarian response (PA1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connectivity, coherence, inclusiveness and timeliness of humanitarian response 	May-September 2021

18. The first component will focus on revisiting the results chain of the programme with the view of updating and further detailing the expected impact pathways. The programme theory of change that emerges will be used as an input for conducting the other three assessments. The second component will make use of the revised results framework to assess early outcomes of FAO's response at country level. Such a framework will also be useful for the programme to strengthen monitoring of country-level implementation and reporting on results.
19. The third and fourth component will focus on themes (such as FAO's work on data and humanitarian response) for which the stocktaking identified enough evidence for a more in-depth assessment, as well as clear uses and users of the evaluative information both within and outside FAO. Further details on these components can be found in the concept notes annexed to this TOR.

5.2 Key evaluation questions

20. Each of the RTE components, with the exception of the first one, will address the following overarching questions:
- i. What are the promising/good practices and lessons learned to ensure relevance and timeliness of the response?
 - ii. How coherent was the coordination and synergies within FAO and with external partners?
 - iii. To what extent was FAO prepared and able to maintain business continuity?
 - iv. To what extent FAO followed the leave no one behind principle, through advocating for the rights and inclusive targeting of women, minorities and marginalized groups?
21. More specific questions will be included in the different components, as per the focus of their assessment (i.e. the assessment of COVID-19-related data for action may also ask questions on the efficiency of the production and dissemination process; the assessment of the humanitarian response may have more detailed questions regarding the targeting and inclusiveness of beneficiaries). The list of corresponding sub-questions as well as the respective data collection tools will be developed at the start of each evaluative exercise.

6. Methodology

22. The evaluation will adhere to the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards³ and ethical guidelines.⁴ The evaluation will use definitions adopted in FAO's corporate strategies, policies and frameworks.
23. A mixed-method approach will be used to collect data to allow for triangulation and validation of data collected from different sources using different methods,⁵ and enhance the credibility of findings, conclusions and recommendations. Both qualitative and quantitative data will be gathered from primary and secondary sources in line with FAO's *Guidance note for conducting evaluations under the pandemic (COVID-19)*.⁶
24. As stated earlier, each RTE component will be based on a 'concept note' detailing the purpose, scope and methodology for that particular exercise; the concept notes will serve as 'mini' TORs and ensure that they are aligned with the overall purpose of the RTE. For the exercises requiring increased stakeholder participation, workshops and small group work will be the primary mechanism used.
25. The concept notes, when appropriate, will be supplemented with an evaluation matrix presenting sources of information, evaluative criteria and data collection methods to address each evaluation question and sub-question accordingly. The evaluation matrix and the various data collection tools will be finalized before the respective data collection phase.
26. In order to increase the utility of the process and products derived from the RTE, a core learning group (CLG) will be established (see Appendix 1) for each of the component exercises. The CLG will consist of key stakeholders and intended primary users such as the Office of the Chief Economist, the Chief Scientist, and the different streams at FAO led by Deputy Director-General (DDG)-Bechdol, DDG-Semedo and DDG-Thomas. Organized and coordinated by OED, the CLG will hold dedicated workshops as the RTE progresses.
27. Each CLG will serve as a source of information, a forum for discussion, provider of feedback on findings and possible recommendations; and just as important, advocate for adopting lessons learned, good practices and suggestions for improvement identified. This approach will foster the ownership of the RTE results by key stakeholders and promote the use of relevant information at headquarters, regional and national levels.
28. The Evaluation Committee, consisting among others of the Chief Economist, the Chief Scientist, DDG-Bechdol, DDG-Semedo and DDG-Thomas, will act as reference group.
29. Given that timely delivery of information is critical for a successful RTE, reporting will be tailored to meet needs and circumstances and can include debriefings, abridged report formats and key findings briefs.

³ United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), 2016. (<http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/1914>).

⁴ UNEG, 2008. (<http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/102>).

⁵ Evidence may be obtained through a combination of the following methods to address the key evaluation questions and sub-questions: i) desk review; ii) synthesis and stocktaking from other ongoing evaluations; iii) semi-structured interviews; iv) online surveys; v) Cybermetric analysis; and vi) country case studies.

⁶ <http://www.fao.org/evaluation/highlights/highlights-detail/en/c/1268896/>.

7. Process

7.1 Exploratory phase

30. As part of the exploratory phase, stocktaking was conducted to understand the overview of FAO's responses to COVID-19 to date and background of FAO's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Programme. The findings of the study have not only informed the refinement of these TOR, but also represents the first product of the RTE.

7.2 Real-time evaluation phase

31. Starting with the four exercises identified above, and as per their respective concept notes, the RTE will have concurrent activities taking place. As information emerges and the Reference Group processes it, decisions will be made as to whether additional exercises will be initiated or new lines of enquiry pursued. OED, in consultation with the Reference Group, will determine when the RTE will end.
32. Each stand-alone exercise carried out as part of the RTE will result in a written product to evidence the work conducted although reporting (particularly briefings) will be programme-centred. It is envisaged that the RTE will take place between May 2021 and March 2022, with each stand-alone exercise having different time frames within the above period. Synthesis of the stand-alone products will be produced for presentation to the relevant Programme Committee session (autumn 2021 session and spring 2022 session).

8. Management arrangements

33. OED has overall responsibility for managing the evaluation process and ensuring the quality of the reports presented to Management and to the Programme Committee. A designated Evaluation Manager from OED will manage the evaluation including preparation of the TOR and selection of external consultants.
34. **Evaluation team.** In addition to the Evaluation Manager from OED, the evaluation team will include an external consultant as a Team Leader. Additionally, evaluation consultants may be hired, as required, to conduct and/or support the different topics and themes assessed by the RTE.
35. **FAO.** Personnel at headquarters and decentralized offices will be consulted throughout the process. Senior management will be responsible for identifying members to the CLG, while personnel at headquarters and decentralized offices will be responsible for identifying relevant information including projects/activities for closer examination in a systematic manner. Decentralized offices will also provide administrative and logistical support in undertaking case studies as needed.

9. Time frame

36. The tentative evaluation time frame is presented below:

- i. **Stocktaking phase** (end-January – March 2021): Desk review, preliminary data collection and preparation of stocktaking report.
- ii. **Exploratory phase** (April – early May 2021): Drafting of TOR, recruitment of evaluation team, launching of the evaluation.
- iii. **Real-time evaluation phase** (mid May 2021 – March 2022): The concept note of each stand-alone product will provide detailed information on the time frame.

Appendix 1. Reference group and core learning group descriptions

Reference group

- i. The purpose of the reference group is to serve as a forum for discussion and learning, providing feedback to the RTE as it progresses. In particular, the group will be asked to i) provide comments on the RTE TORs and component concept notes; ii) provide comments on the draft reports and/or other RTE products; and iii) ensure the promotion and use of lessons learned, good practices and evaluation results through dissemination and advocacy with stakeholders.
- ii. The Evaluation Committee, made of the Chief Economist, the Chief Scientist, DDG-Bechdol, DDG-Semedo and DDG-Thomas, among others, will act as Reference Group for the RTE.

Core learning group

- i. Each component exercise of the RTE will have a dedicated CLG.
- ii. The purpose of the CLG is to increase the utility of the process and products of the RTE by:
 - serving as a forum for discussion and technical input as each exercise progresses;
 - providing feedback on findings and possible recommendations;
 - providing comments on draft reports and/or other RTE products;
 - advocating for adopting lessons learned, good practices and suggestions for improvement identified.
- iii. Depending on the topic/nature of the component, membership of each CLG will vary though their roles will be the same. CLG participants will be drawn from the RTE intended primary users' groups such as the priority area teams, and offices involved in the management of the programme (the Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division [PSR], Chief Economist, DDG Bechdol and DDG Thomas Offices).
- iv. The CLGs will meet, at a minimum, at the start and conclusion of each RTE component. Additional meetings may be convened as necessary.

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