



Evaluation of the third project cycle of the Benefit-sharing Fund of the International Treaty on the Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

Executive summary

Programme Evaluation Series

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Introduction

1. This report outlines the main findings, conclusions and recommendations of the independent evaluation of the third project cycle of the Benefit-sharing Fund (BSF 3) of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA). The purpose of this evaluation was “to provide an independent assessment of the extent to which planned collective objectives set out in the third project cycle of the Benefit-sharing Fund (BSF 3) have been met. It also aimed at drawing lessons learned and recommendations that could inform the further development of the BSF programme and its future project cycles”. The evaluation assessed the third project cycle as a whole; it covered the entire 20 operational projects implemented from 2014 to 2020. Given the large geographical scope of the BSF 3, the evaluation focused on a selected number of projects for the in-depth assessments. The evaluation focused on all the key activities undertaken within the BSF 3 framework covering both Window 2 (Immediate action) and Window 3 (Co-development and technology transfer) projects.
2. The specific objectives of this evaluation are to: i) assess the relevance and scope of the projects as well as the quality of their design in responding to identified needs and priorities; ii) assess whether the planned project results have been realized, and whether the gaps, challenges and risks in achieving BSF 3 intended results have been overcome; and iii) identify good practices and lessons learned from the programme level and project level implementation that could feed into and enhance the further development of the BSF programme.
3. The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the following evaluation questions:
 - i. EQ 1. Relevance. To what extent is the BSF third project cycle relevant, filling a gap and adding value in the management and conservation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture at national and regional level?
 - ii. EQ 2. Effectiveness and Contribution to Results. To what extent have BSF 3 programme and project objectives been achieved and were there any unintended results? To what extent can the attainment of results be attributed to the BSF 3 projects? How have the results demonstrated the catalytic role of the BSF in international cooperation in the conservation and use of PGRFA?
 - iii. EQ 3. Partnership. To what extent have the BSF governance and partnership arrangements been appropriate and effective in fostering the conservation and sustainable use of PGRFA at different levels (global, regional, national)? How are these partnerships influencing (positively or negatively) the achievements and sustainability of the projects’ expected results?
 - iv. EQ 4. Efficiency. How efficient was the institutional and implementation set up? How efficient was the implementation set up at the national and regional level?
 - v. EQ 5. Knowledge management. To what extent has the BSF 3 been able to contribute to knowledge management and sharing of experiences to inform PGRFA consultations worldwide?
 - vi. EQ 6. Sustainability. What are the prospects for sustaining the results beyond projects’ closure? In particular, the systems in place after projects’ closure to sustain key activities. What are the prospects for scaling-up the activities? To what degree is the national policy context favorable to a sustainable use of the rich diversity of PGRFA?
 - vii. EQ 7. Cross-cutting issues. To what extent have cross-cutting issues such as gender, fairness and equity¹ considerations been taken into account in the BSF projects?

¹ The ‘fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources’ is one of three objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

4. The Benefit-sharing Fund was established in 2009 by the Treaty's Contracting Parties of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture in the spirit of multilateralism, to fund projects in developing countries to increase crop diversity and enable a dynamic exchange of plant genetic material for increased adaptation, agricultural diversification and food security.
5. The 20 projects of BSF 3 covered 45 developing countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, Group of Latin America and Caribbean Countries (GRULAC), Near East and North Africa, and South-West Pacific. The BSF 3 projects contribute to seven priority results areas:
 - i. **Result area 1.** Locally adapted varieties or other genetic material successfully conserved and used.
 - ii. **Result area 2.** Technologies for the conservation and sustainable use of PGRFA co-developed by and/or transferred to selected developing country PGRFA institutions.
 - iii. **Result area 3.** Information created, disseminated and accessed by lead institutions on scientific, technical and environmental matters related to PGRFA, including genotypic and phenotypic data.
 - iv. **Result area 4.** Increased capacity of resource-poor farmers to conserve and manage PGRFA in specific areas vulnerable to climate change.
 - v. **Result area 5.** Increased capacity of PGRFA institutions and researchers to conserve and manage PGRFA.
 - vi. **Result area 6.** Evidence-based plans and priorities to help resource-poor farmers adapt to climate change, developed by consortia of PGRFA institutions as building blocks for future policy development and investment
 - vii. **Result area 7.** Awareness on the ITPGRFA and value of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture (PGRFA) to meet future challenges is raised at the national, regional and international level.

Methodology

6. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the evaluation was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 involved extensive desk review, portfolio analysis and (virtual) semi-structure interviews focusing on 11 BSF 3 projects. Phase 2 involved two country case studies in Kenya and Zimbabwe with field visits to farmers. Lastly, a survey was conducted covering all 20 project and their co-implementers.

Findings

Relevance

Finding 1. The BSF 3 was, to a great extent, relevant in filling gaps and adding value in the management and conservation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture. Both the Immediate Action projects (Window 2) and the Co-development and transfer of technology Projects (Window 3) were well aligned to relevant international agreements and goals of the United Nations, primarily the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The BSF 3 was also highly aligned and strategically linked with the Second Global Plan of Action for Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (GPA), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the various articles of the International Treaty, including its updated Funding Strategy.

Finding 2. The projects of both Windows were targeted to meet the needs of men and women farmers who live in poverty and are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Window 2 created added value to the climate adaptation strategies of men and women farmers, while Window 3 created added value information for the development of climate-ready traits and plant varieties potentially for the benefit of farmers.

Finding 3. At global level, the geographical distribution of the projects in the six regions was proportional to the regional allocation of eligible Contracting Parties and the regional distribution of eligible pre-proposals. However, there were marked imbalances in the number of approved projects within both the African and Asian regions. Indonesia led three out of the five projects in Asia, whilst Francophone sub-Saharan Africa was absent in BSF 3 since none of the submitted full project proposals (six) were selected for funding.

Effectiveness

Finding 4. To a large extent, the evidence collected shows that the BSF 3 has contributed to strengthening capacities at national and regional levels for improved conservation and management of PGRFA. The capacity development and the co-development of technologies under Window 3 facilitated the cooperation of national PGRFA institutions within and between countries. This enabled projects in the South [developing countries] to access technologies from the North [developed countries] or from international research organizations and adapt such technologies to their own context and priorities.

Finding 5. To a large extent, the BSF 3 enabled the co-development and adaptation of technologies amongst developing countries. The outputs in terms of identified and developed PGRFA materials and software were significant. In addition, software and knowledge platforms were developed to ease access to and sharing of databases. However, planning for project uptake after the funding period had not been done or made explicit for most of the proposals and reporting of Window 3.

Finding 6. The BSF reached a significant number of farmers. A major focus of the BSF 3 projects was on capacity building, with good indicators of farmers' empowerment enabling them to conserve and use PGRFA tailored to their highly diverse agroecologies and socio-cultural needs. On the policy level, the Seed Fairs and Farmer Field Days enabled farmers to substantially dialogue with policymakers and stakeholders.

Finding 7. The BSF 3 facilitated a likely unprecedented number of PGRFA materials to be accessed, tested and developed with farmers in multiple locations of highly diverse agroecologies and cultures. These resulted in the participatory development and adoption of climate-resilient strategies that included both farmers' landraces and improved cultivars, contributing to the food security and improved livelihoods of men and women farmers. However, the likely strategic contribution to the broadening of the genetic base or diversity of crops has yet to be studied.

Finding 8. The multi-stakeholder engagement provided a good basis for numerous policy dialogues. Many Window 2 projects contributed to policy engagement at national level, while the Window 3 projects did not have an explicit policy agenda. However, regional level policy linkages and awareness raising were not part of the objectives of the multi-country projects. The multi-country projects could have provided inputs and linkages at regional level. Another missed opportunity is with multi-country projects whereby the oversight of the National Focal Points is limited to their respective country and is not informed of the project activities in other participating countries.

Finding 9. Two countries within one project aimed for and succeeded in concretely contributing to national level plans to help farmers adapt to climate change. This achievement is an important step in institutionalizing the contribution of the BSF project in PGRFA conservation and sustainable use.

Finding 10. The results of the three to four-year project cycle of the BSF 3 can be broken down into immediate and medium-term results, which need to be linked to long-term outcomes. The various interventions of the BSF 3 projects, when collectively analysed, constituted the various elements of a PGRFA community-based adaptation and disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategy that contributes towards long-term resilience of farming communities.

Partnerships

Finding 11. The multi-stakeholder and multi-country partnership arrangements in the BSF 3 significantly contributed to the achievements of the projects. The BSF 3 played a catalytic role linking in situ and ex situ PGRFA management, concretely manifested in: i) the iterative flow of PGRFA materials; ii) an active exchange of scientific and local knowledge; iii) as an intergovernmental undertaking, the active engagement and ownership of national institutions of the Contracting Parties was highly decisive in facilitating the wide access and use of PGRFA as well as dealing with transboundary pest and diseases.

Finding 12. The BSF 3 demonstrated a viable model of the Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing (MLS) through the access and use of existing plant genetic materials, which in turn generated new materials for the farmers and the MLS. The collaboration generated significant goodwill, which was consistently expressed, not only among the projects but also among the Treaty stakeholders who were not part of the projects. However, these stakeholders and project partners also expressed the need to reconsider the roles of key stakeholders in relation to the focus of the BSF.

Efficiency

Finding 13. The BSF has been dynamically evolving for greater efficiency. The third project cycle of the BSF was efficiently designed and executed. The checks and balances of project selection and approval were rigorous. The evaluation found that the Secretariat provided highly competent support to the process and was responsive in applying lessons learned from previous project cycles. However, the management of rejected proposals and the selected proposals with no funding allocations need to be reconsidered.

Finding 14. Overall, the contract management was complicated due to its institutional set up. Despite complications, directly contracting the implementing partners was a good practice. With regard to project planning and monitoring, a good system for monitoring was used. However, there were some weaknesses in project planning and risk management due to the lack of systematic updates, which affected the overall efficiency of project management. This included the lack of the technical expertise to support the Secretariat in project management.

Finding 15. The size and length of the projects were sufficient to deliver significant results. The three-to-four-year length of the projects was consistent with the project cycles of most donors. The most successful projects had realistic planning, with linkages to programmes that can potentially phase the BSF project's immediate and medium-term milestones, linking these to long-term goals (see Figure 3, Finding 10).

Knowledge management

Finding 16. The effective knowledge management at project level resulted in actionable climate adaptation strategies, with potentially promising outcomes as described in EQ 2 (Effectiveness). However, the lack of a strategic knowledge management strategy at the BSF programme level limited the benefits mainly to BSF-funded projects. BSF benefits in the form of knowledge products, PGRFA materials and lessons have not yet been further shared, improved and adapted by the wider stakeholders, and particularly by the Contracting Parties of the Treaty. In this regard, the leveraging of the knowledge generated by the BSF has so far been limited.

Finding 17. At project level, there have been numerous initiatives for awareness raising, which have helped to generate awareness and goodwill. However, at global level, awareness on the collective achievements of the BSF 3 has not been translated into a compelling narrative to relate the significance of PGRFA's conservation and sustainable use for food security in the context of climate change. The major gaps in communications in terms of quality, accessibility and frequency, were consistently expressed by all stakeholders interviewed.

Sustainability

Finding 18. For the immediate and medium-term, the BSF remains dependent on voluntary contributions. The prospects of securing funding are dependent on a more strategic, innovative and competitive programme. At project level, it is still too early to assess its sustainability, though there are promising indications. There were also risks as most Window 3 projects had no provisions for project uptake. In addition, the operations and sustainability of some community seed banks are at risk.

Cross-cutting

Finding 19. Most of the projects, especially Window 2, considered fairness and equity primarily by choosing to work in areas with high levels of poverty, including indigenous communities that were vulnerable to climate change. However, gender and social inclusion varied amongst projects. In addition, the project design did not specifically target the youth. With regard to the balance between rights and obligations of the Contracting Parties, much of the discussions are understandably around access and benefit-sharing. However, a number of respondents also pointed to the corresponding obligations of Contracting Parties to promote fair and equitable benefit-sharing. The obligations seem to receive less attention.

Conclusions

7. **Overall conclusion.** The evaluation concludes that the niche and added value of the BSF (past and present cycles) are due to a combination of traits: i) unique and unequivocal mandate in which 148 signatory countries and the European Union committed to the Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing; ii) works with the entire array of PGRFA needed to address the immense challenges brought about by climate change; iii) representation of all stakeholders in the entire spectrum of *in situ* and *ex situ* PGRFA; iv) synergistic and mutually reinforcing Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing; and v) integrated research for development with marginalized and vulnerable communities through participatory selection, development, conservation and sustainable use of PGRFA as an integral part of climate-resilient strategies.
8. **Conclusion 1. Relevance.** The BSF 3 was highly relevant in leveraging PGRFA as an indispensable element of farmers' food security and adaptation strategy for climate change. The BSF 3 was relevant and aligned at various levels linking PGRFA interventions from local, national to major international agreements, primarily with the SDGs, the Paris Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Second Global Plan of Action.
9. **Conclusion 2. Effectiveness.** For a relatively small amount of money, the BSF 3 significantly contributed to the overall objectives of the Benefit-sharing Fund. For USD 9.7 million, the BSF 3 enabled the formation of 270 partnerships to implement 20 projects in 43 participating countries. The multi-stakeholders and multi-country collaboration and capacity building delivered a likely unprecedented number of PGRFA materials to be accessed by farmers. 20,706 varieties were characterized and/or tested for the development and adaptation in multiple locations around the world, 298 new varieties were selected and developed and 5 933 accessions were planned for inclusion into the MLS.
10. **Conclusion 3. Partnerships.** The intergovernmental mechanism of the Treaty and the partnerships within the multi-stakeholder and multi-country arrangements in the BSF 3 significantly contributed to the achievements of the projects. The partnerships generated and/or reinforced PGRFA innovations and capacity building, which otherwise were highly unlikely to be achieved by a single institution on its own. Through partnerships, the BSF 3 played a catalytic role in linking *in situ* and *ex situ* PGRFA management.

11. **Conclusion 4. Efficiency.** As the operational arm of the Treaty's Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing, and by constantly evolving, the BSF 3 provided an effective and reasonably efficient funding modality. In effect, the BSF 3 enabled the funding and implementation of a number of relatively small and diverse but critical PGRFA interventions, which otherwise would not have been possible to be funded individually by major donors.
12. **Conclusion 5. Efficiency.** The third project cycle of the BSF was efficiently designed and well executed from the call for proposals, selection and approval processes. The checks and balances in project selection and approval process were rigorous. The Secretariat provided highly competent support to the selection and approval processes, and the help desk function. A good system for project cycle management is operational and the reporting and monitoring is more systematically addressed in the newly-approved Operations Manual of the BSF. However, the planning, monitoring and reporting for the BSF 3 was not consistently efficient. Lessons learned from the previous cycles have not yet been reflected on the mechanisms to help ensure greater outcomes such as linkages with other projects and partnerships, and the need for planning from the outset for the dissemination of results has yet to be included.
13. **Conclusion 6. Knowledge management.** The BSF generated rich and tangible data and knowledge on the still-developing field of PGRFA management for food security in the context of climate change. The effective knowledge management at the project level resulted in actionable climate adaptation strategies, with potentially promising outcomes. However, at the programme level, the leveraging of the knowledge generated by the BSF has so far been limited.
14. **Conclusion 7. Sustainability.** It is too early to assess the sustainability of the individual projects' activities and outcomes. Nevertheless, there were promising indications: i) many of the BSF 3 projects were linked to other programmes and plans, which could help in the uptake of the activities and results; ii) a number of projects made provisions to help ensure project continuity; iii) the results in capacity building could help sustain key project activities; iv) changes in policy and practice with a number of projects indicating intentions to pursue the collaboration with partner institutions and continue to engage farmers. However, there were also risks, given that a number of projects, particularly Window 3 projects, had not made provisions for project uptake. In addition, the operations and sustainability of some community seed banks were at risk.
15. **Conclusion 8. Cross-cutting.** Most of the projects, especially for Window 2, considered gender, fairness and equity through working with communities with high levels of poverty and vulnerability to climate change. However, the projects generally targeted individual farmers, rather than household members. This may not reflect the nature of family farming, the diversification of crops and varietal preferences between men, women and youth.

Recommendations

16. **Recommendation 1. To the Governing Body - Relevance.** To capitalize on the BSF's achievements in highlighting PGRFA as an indispensable element of farmers' food and nutrition security and climate adaptation strategy; and in line with the call of ITPGRFA's Funding Strategy, to support the nexus between biodiversity and climate change; the Governing Body should further advance the BSF's alignments with SDG 2 (end hunger), SDG 13 (climate action) and the Paris Agreement on enhancing adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to climate change² by further sharpening, illustrating and concretizing the strategic importance of PGRFA for a resilient food and nutrition security in the context of climate change.

² Article 7, Paris Climate Agreement.

17. **Recommendation 2. To the Funding Committee - Effectiveness.** In line with the ITPGRFA Funding Strategy for the programmatic implementation of the BSF in a long-term, coordinated, synergistic and effective manner, and to further leverage the significant achievements of the BSF 3, the evaluation recommends that the Funding Committee commissions the development of the BSF multi-year programme framework, that is both strategic and operational, as well as technical and political, visionary and results oriented.
18. **Recommendation 3. To the Secretariat - Partnership.** In line with the Funding Strategy's objective to strengthen partnerships and to leverage the significant contribution of the multi-stakeholder partnerships to the BSF 3, the evaluation recommends that the Secretariat map out institutions and programmes to define synergies and further define the programmatic approach of the BSF.
19. **Recommendation 4. To the Funding Committee - Efficiency.** To improve the technical efficiency of the complex, multi-country and interdisciplinary PGRFA programme, consistent technical support for the BSF Secretariat is needed. The Funding Committee should consider extending the support of a broad range of experts not only in the selection process but also in the planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning process.
20. **Recommendation 5. To the Secretariat - Efficiency.** To ensure a more efficient project management, the BFS Secretariat needs to improve its planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) by: i) ensuring the integration of a responsive and periodically updated plan, budget and risk management; ii) get expert support to establish the technical feasibility of the project; and iii) establish coherence in reporting.
21. **Recommendation 6. To the Secretariat - Efficiency.** To improve efficiency and transparency in contract management and reporting, the Secretariat should regularly submit and distribute the BSF's annual progress and financial reports to all the donors, the Funding Committee, the Contracting Parties and the project holders. This should be also posted on the ITPGRFA's website. This report should serve as a common template used for all donor requirements as much as possible, and it should be adjusted to specific donor requirements as needed.
22. **Recommendation 7. To the Funding Committee - Knowledge management and communications.** In line with the statement of the funding strategy on knowledge management and investing in communications, the strategic programme framework referred to in Recommendation 2 should include the development and budget allocation of a corresponding knowledge management and communication strategy. The Secretariat can formulate the design so that the BSF's contribution to the conservation and sustainable use of PGRFA is leveraged for greater reach, impact and visibility.
23. **Recommendation 8. To the Funding Committee and the Secretariat - Sustainability.** For greater reach and sustainability of the BSF projects, put emphasis on the efficiency in capacity building methods, impact pathways with clear entry and exit strategies, and extend investments to further optimize results of very well performing projects from previous project cycles.
24. **Recommendation 9. To the Secretariat - Cross-cutting.** To improve the reach to more farmers and to improve gender and social inclusion, the Secretariat should guide projects for more coherent ways of calculating the numbers of farmers reached, formalizing women's role and leadership as a project selection criterion. In the context of family farming, consider working with household as a unit rather than individual farmers.

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