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PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

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Evaluation of FAO's effectiveness at country level: A synthesis of evaluations in middle-income countries: Armenia, Colombia, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In line with the recommendations of the 112th session of the Programme Committee (CL 145/6 para. 24.b) concerning modalities for saving costs, while ensuring adequate access to information contained in Evaluation reports, this document is presented as a comprehensive executive summary translated in FAO languages, while the Evaluation report in its entirety is published on the FAO Evaluation Web site in the original language.

Guidance sought by the Programme Committee

The Programme Committee may wish to provide its views and guidance on the key issues in the Evaluation report, and to the response to the recommendations and proposed follow-up actions by Management.

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Food and Agriculture
Organization of the United
Nations

Office of Evaluation

FAO's effectiveness at country level: a synthesis of the evaluations of FAO's cooperation with four Middle Income Countries: Armenia, Colombia, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam

Final report

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Office of Evaluation (OED)

This report is available in electronic format at: <http://www.fao.org/evaluation>

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Executive Summary

Background

ES1. Since 2005 country evaluations have been part of the evaluation programme of FAO and cover all FAO activities in the country, including national projects from all funding sources, national participation in regional projects, use made of normative products and the work carried out by the FAO Representation. Country evaluations allow in-depth analysis of the corporate performance in any single country, accountability thereof and lesson-learning, in particular for stakeholders at country level.

ES2. The FAO Programme Committee, which is the Governing Body that approves the work-plan of the FAO Office of Evaluation (OED) and receives its reports, has been indicating the category of country, e.g. Low Income and Food Deficit or Middle Income, to be selected for these evaluations. Synthesis reports, covering evaluations in similar types of countries, have been submitted to the Programme Committee with a view to drawing lessons from FAO's work in similar types of countries. Since 2005, four synthesis reports were prepared.

ES3. At its October 2011 session, the Programme Committee requested the Office of Evaluation (OED) to conduct evaluations in Middle Income Countries (MICs). In the period 2012-2014, four evaluations of MICs were completed, as follows:

- Sri Lanka, completed in October 2012;
- Viet Nam, completed in May 2013;
- Armenia, completed in February 2013; and
- Colombia, completed in June 2014.

ES4. This report synthesises these four country evaluations: it highlights the similarities of key aspects of FAO's work in the four countries, and draws conclusions and recommendations for the Organization's future approach to all those countries that have achieved significant results in improving the economic and social conditions of their populations, the capacity of their institutions and have thus different expectations in terms of collaboration and partnership with FAO.

Methodology

ES5. The synthesis is based on a detailed review of the four evaluation reports. Findings about FAO's work and functioning in the four countries were exclusively identified from the evaluation reports. In addition, an analysis was also carried out of the size and characteristics of FAO's field programme in those Member Countries that in two selected biennia, 2004/05 and 2012/13, were classified as MIC according to the World Bank database.

Overall conclusions and recommendation

ES6. FAO's work in the four evaluated MICs had a number of strengths according to the evaluations. First, projects and programmes were generally judged to be relevant, well aligned with government priorities, largely demand-driven, and appreciated by government partners. Projects were generally effective in terms of delivering on the outputs planned. Second, FAO was valued as a partner for the technical capacity it provided and for the technical quality of its normative products.

ES7. There were also notable achievements in individual countries. These included the significant contribution to food production and asset replacement following civil conflict and natural disasters in Sri Lanka; the effective fostering of collaboration and knowledge sharing between national institutions by the global and regional projects involving Armenia; and the very effective and relevant models for addressing the needs of vulnerable communities developed in Colombia.

ES8. Programme management and administrative strengths identified in the evaluations included the good relationships made and maintained with development partners, albeit too few, and the commitment and competence of FAO national staff.

ES9. There were also a number of recurrent weaknesses. In three of the countries, for some or all of the period evaluated, programme development and management suffered from the lack of high quality Representative, and/or sufficiently competent staff in-country, further compounded by uneven backstopping and support from regional offices and headquarters. Also, insufficient delegation to the country offices affected efficiency of operations: on this specific matter, evidence from Colombia and other countries showed that the introduction in 2013 of the Global Resource Management System (GRMS) represented a significant improvement on administrative matters.

ES10. At the programmatic level, policy influence, policy dialogue and advocacy were widely assessed as limited, as was capacity development at institutional and organisational level in three of the four country programmes evaluated. The integration of gender equality was universally poor. Sustainability and efficiency were mixed and not always adequate. All the CPF's were weak on analysis, strategy and prioritisation and to a large extent, in inclusiveness of other partners in the preparation process. The contribution to FAO's global goals of poverty and hunger reduction, or to environmental sustainability, was limited.

ES11. The analysis of overall FAO's presence in MICs showed that so far, the Organization did not modify the standard business model of country offices to the changed circumstances and expectations of the national governments. In the four countries, following FAO's business model at country level, financial resources made available through the Regular Programme only covered the core staff of the FAO Representation. Additional resources were made available, to different extent, by the host countries and the field programme portfolios did change only to some extent, mostly due to the potential for resource mobilization with resource partners and national governments in MICs.

ES12. In this model, the large majority of employees was recruited through extra-budgetary resources directly as project personnel, or indirectly through the Administrative and Operational Support (AOS) share of the Project Support Costs. The need for extra-budgetary resources and AOS to 'be visible' has led to FAO's engagement in too many projects funded by the governments, other partners or FAO itself, where the field-level operational components prevailed over the technical and policy assistance, and in which the added value and comparative advantage of the Organization was not strong.

ES13. If the approach appears justified, in particular in MICs, in practice this is leading to a project-focused type of support to 'earn visibility' which may not enable the Organization to express its full potential and best comparative advantage in countries that have their own implementation capacity and would mostly benefit from high level policy and technical knowledge. At the same time, in countries where the field programme portfolio is smaller or

national staff costs are high, financial resources available are not sufficient to enhance staff capacity.

ES14. The common thread to the recommendations of the four evaluations indicates what the issues at stake and the obstacles are. There are reasons and incentives that explain why the country offices and programmes are structured as they are. Responding to government requests or donor priorities ensures relevance and visibility, but not necessarily strategic impact, while entering into policy dialogue and providing high-level advice on strategic priorities is more demanding. Advocating for different policies is less neutral and can be more controversial. Consultants of international renown are more expensive.

ES15. Nevertheless, a final important finding of the four evaluations was that the national institutional and cooperation context in all the four countries was changing, and that FAO needed to adapt to meet that change. Moreover, the four countries belong to a group of peers that in 2013, according to the World Bank classification based on per-capita income, included 101 among FAO Members and recipients of the Organization's support: 53 of them were in the category of UMICs and 48 in the category of LMICs. In total, this represented almost three times the number of the LIC Members, which were 36 in the same year.

ES16. In line with their middle-income status, these countries are likely to need more normative, policy, organisational and capacity development support from FAO in future than the Organization is offering now. At the same time, the field-level projects are still necessary as they are a key part in the knowledge generation process and they also contribute to institutional visibility and credibility, if well designed and implemented and their results are properly documented and diffused. The two types of support should be considered complementary and used to develop synergies, meet requests and needs while proposing innovations and capacity development.

ES17. The trends in expectations indicate the need for a presence in the country at the level of authority, competence and clout that allows rapid response to queries and requests for assistance, either directly or by calling upon – and obtaining - inputs from elsewhere in the Organization. The point is not having additional long-term international staff posted in all 73 middle-income countries; rather, it is about maintaining - or re-building - capacity at sub-regional, regional and headquarters level of technical staff who can support countries from a distance and can be mobilized at relatively short notice, virtually or in person, directly or through networks of consultants.

ES18. These changes are happening at a time when the combination of declining donor aid flows to MICs and evolving country demands does present a challenge to FAO, as much as to many other organisations. MICs are increasingly skilled, discerning, and demanding. FAO needs to be equipped in country to provide what these countries need, and financed to be able to meet the costs of doing so. A starting point has to be the recognition that the financial resources, from either the FAO Regular budget or extra-budgetary, will not be sufficient to cover the cost of the type of in-country presence that MICs increasingly require. Other organisations, UN and others, face a similar dilemma. One solution could be a single country office and a common country strategy for all the UN food agencies, agreed with the governments, focused on their priorities and building on respective agencies' comparative advantage. Another alternative could be, on the model of FAO's coverage in Eastern Europe and the Pacific, to appoint non-resident Representatives for MICs where a fully-fledged

Representation may no longer be necessary, while ensuring regular interaction with and support from the responsible Sub-regional or Regional Office.

ES19. All these issues point to the need for a specific business model that includes profile of FAO Representative, delegation of authority, capacity to call upon rapid support from other parts of the Organization and national Resource Mobilization strategies that evolve with the rapidly changing financial resource environment, among others. The numbers of FAO Members that would benefit of a better tailored business model are such that a specific FAO strategy in Middle Income Countries appears fully justified. Not having it, and maintaining Business As Usual, means that it will not be feasible for the Organization to become more upstream, more strategic, more proactive, and more policy and advocacy orientated. In other words, becoming irrelevant and not useful.

ES20. In the light of the above, this synthesis contains only one recommendation addressed to Senior Management, for the development of a strategic approach to the work of the Organization in MICs.

Recommendation 1. To FAO Senior Management, on a strategy for the Organization in Middle Income Countries

FAO should develop an overarching strategy for its cooperation with Middle Income Countries, aimed at improving the delivery of the Organization's core functions and the fulfilment of its mandate. The strategy should:

- i) provide guidance and reference on the main focus, scope and modalities of corporate support, and
- ii) define a new business model for its country offices and the corporate network that supports them.

ES21. This report provides some initial information and analysis on the issues to be included in the strategy. FAO Representatives and staff in middle-income Member countries would be able to provide richer inputs, based on their knowledge and experience, for a detailed strategy development.