

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH COUNTRY PROGRAMME EVALUATION

Policy engagement and strategic partnership for greater impact

In 2014/2015, the Independent Office of Evaluation of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) undertook a country programme evaluation (CPE) in Bangladesh, assessing the cooperation and partnership between the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and IFAD between 2004 and 2014. The CPE confirmed that the period was marked by a responsive and productive partnership between the Government and IFAD, continuing a long-standing and fruitful relationship that started more than 30 years ago. Since 1979, IFAD has financed 31 projects in Bangladesh for a total project cost of more than US\$1.9 billion (US\$717.2 million from IFAD), which places Bangladesh among the top three recipients of IFAD funding in the Asia-Pacific region and also globally. The organization's significant contribution, consistent engagement and important catalytic role in promoting rural poverty reduction have positioned the Fund as a trusted development partner in the country.

The strategies and priorities of the country strategic opportunities programmes (COSOPs) of 1999, 2006 and 2011 were well nested within the country's overall strategy, as reflected in the country's five-year plans and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. Over this period IFAD has focused its efforts and developed expertise in the areas of rural infrastructure, inland fisheries, agriculture, markets, microfinance and gender. IFAD's strategic focus and development priorities have been flexible, forward-looking and generally well prioritized, responding to the emerging country needs and economic realities. By and large, the Government has demonstrated a good level of ownership of and commitment to the IFAD-supported portfolio.



Sunamganj Community Based Resource Management Project. Woman moving to collect fresh drinking water in another village, as clean water is scarce in her village during monsoon in Sunamganj village.

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Substantial project-level successes

The CPE considers that the IFAD-supported programme during the last three COSOP periods (covering from 1997 to 2015) produced significant results in reducing rural poverty, in particular with respect to increases in rural household income and assets in project areas, as well as improvements in productivity. The projects have substantially contributed to expanding the microfinance sector across Bangladesh, where credit support has reached approximately 600,000 poor farmers. Projects have also been effective in the areas of infrastructure development, community-based natural resource management and access of rural poor to markets.¹ The programme contributed substantially to building/strengthening social capital and empowering the beneficiaries, and in particular to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

¹ Concrete data of achievements in these areas are available in the CPE report (http://www.ifad.org/evaluation/public_html/eksyst/doc/country/index.htm).

Policy engagement and strategic partnership deficit

Notwithstanding the significant achievements at the micro-level noted above, the CPE observed that IFAD's policy engagement and strategic broad-based partnerships in the country have been weak and constrained. This critically limited its ability to mainstream or scale up the successful project innovations and lessons in the macro-level national public policy domain. Experience suggests that policy engagement at the country level can help to create an enabling environment that creates the conditions for large numbers of rural people to move out of poverty, at a scale that no single project can address. The three COSOPs identified a range of relevant policy issues to work on with the government and development partners. However, IFAD's influence in initiating and moving forward the policy agenda have been minimal, limited mostly to the project level with implementing agencies. More could have been done by engaging the policy-level authorities in some of the broader systemic issues.



Microfinance for Marginal and Small Farmers Project. Beneficiaries working in their vegetable field in kalika doba, Gobindoganj, Gaibanda

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Stronger policy engagement and broad-based partnership can bridge micro-successes with macro-level impact

IFAD's remarkable project (micro) level successes did not reap the full potential of benefits at macro-level due to weak policy engagement. The organization's current in-country policy level reach, advocacy and influence deserve a stronger strategic positioning and actions to successfully confront this "micro-macro" dilemma.

The COSOP aspirations in policy dialogue, partnership building and knowledge management would require serious attention and follow-up work, due diligence, accountability and resources to be results-oriented and to unlock the full potential of the programme. In this regard, a number of constraints need to be addressed, including lack of broad-based institutional partnership within the government, poor knowledge and visibility of IFAD in the country, and limited country presence.

Observations and suggestions

The CPE distilled two related critical observations with forward-looking suggestions:

- **Sustaining programme achievements needs policy interventions.** Rural social institutions and practices generated through IFAD-funded projects have been successfully tested, and far-reaching results have been achieved (e.g. Bill User Groups, Water Management groups). In some projects, the experiences and achievements in providing access to land and water rights have been exceptional. The valuable experiences and models generated through years of investment require conscious policies and a legal basis for sustainability, accompanied by relevant support until a sustainable institutional framework is established. There is a danger that the gains achieved could be eroded if the future pathways to institutionalization are not supported. A push for more lasting reform in policies and legislation through policy dialogue is required to sustain and extend programme benefits; for example, the rights of fisherfolk in beels of Sunamganj district and of charland settlers in Noakhali district.
- **Broadening institutional partnerships within the Government is critical for scaling up successes.** In order to inform, internalize and scale up policy discussions in Bangladesh, IFAD requires a strong constituency that would champion innovations arising through the programme and help mainstream them in policy circles and processes. IFAD has positive engagements with various departments at the operational level through rural development projects. However, it would benefit from a stronger institutional partnership within the Government at the central ministry level. The current relationships with counterpart departments are excellent, but the capability for higher-level policy interaction when required needs strengthening. IFAD could do more to develop and sustain strategic relationships across a wider range of stakeholders.

Further information:

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