Project Performance Evaluation of the Coastal Climate-Resilient Infrastructure Project in Bangladesh

LESSONS LEARNED FROM CONDUCTING A REMOTE EVALUATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Independent Office of Evaluation

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Investing in rural people

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a number of challenges for IFAD's Independent Office of Evaluation (IOE). Primary among them were travel restrictions and social distancing requirements, which meant that in-person meetings and field visits were often not possible. IOE had to rapidly innovate and adapt its approach to meet these challenges, particularly for evaluations that were already under way. One such evaluation was the Project Performance Evaluation of the Coastal Climate-Resilient Infrastructure Project (CCRIP) in Bangladesh. CCRIP was implemented by the Local Government Engineering Department of the Government of Bangladesh, and was cofinanced by IFAD, the Asian Development Bank and the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW). The project aimed to improve the livelihoods of poor rural households by building or rehabilitating climate-resilient roads and markets in rural areas that are economically disadvantaged and highly vulnerable to natural disasters and climate change. It was implemented in 12 coastal districts in southwest Bangladesh between 2013 and 2019.

The Project Performance Evaluation started in February 2020, just before the pandemic took hold.

ADAPTING THE EVALUATION APPROACH TO THE EVOLVING CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Between March and mid-June 2020, the planned approach for the CCRIP evaluation went through several changes, initially with the hope of conducting a country mission at a later date, but eventually switching to a fully remote evaluation when it was realized that the pandemic situation and the restrictions to mobility adopted by the public authority would make field visits impracticable. The final approach involved various adaptations to address the methodological and practical concerns associated with COVID-19:

- The in-person field visit was substituted by a remote field mission conducted by an enlarged team of four national consultants, coordinated and supervised by the international consultants;
- Data collection and validations were carried out remotely, using a complex arrangement of internet-based and mobile communications. Thanks to the network of national consultants, it was possible to obtain photos, short videos and other factual information on project sites and infrastructure from local persons and beneficiaries;
- Extensive use was made of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data and satellite and digital imagery to evaluate the quality, performance and sustainability of CCRIP-built infrastructure;
- An independent external reviewer who had conducted a country-level evaluation in Bangladesh for IFAD in 2014 and knew the country and project implementation context provided an additional "reality check" to the validity of the evaluation process and findings.

The use of GIS data and visual imagery was a significant innovation adopted to compensate for the absence of field visits and was given added value when a major cyclone and heavy flooding took place in May and June 2020, affecting some of the project districts. Although far from welcome, the cyclone provided an opportunity to use a "natural experiment" to evaluate how well the CCRIP could withstand it. GIS data and satellite images, as well as photographs and videos of CCRIP infrastructure taken by local contacts of the national consultants, were used for a before and after the project and before and after the cyclone visual assessment and technical review of infrastructure quality by the consultant engineer (see Figure 1).

LESSONS LEARNED

Reflecting on the experience of the evaluation, a number of important lessons emerge.

- While the team was able to conduct a large number of remote interviews, there was a tendency to reach relatively more informants at the government level and fewer diverse categories of informants at community level. The use of snowball sampling (i.e. selecting an informant who would provide information and contacts of other potential informants, who would then point to other possible informants, and so on) to select informants at community level was a simple and effective method for making contact with project beneficiaries remotely, although it inevitably introduced the possibility of selection bias.
- Not being able to interact face-to-face with beneficiaries or to use observation techniques made it more difficult to assess gender dynamics and the power relationships between stakeholder groups. This constraint was partially offset by involving a national consultant who had worked in the project area and had expertise in gender and social inclusion.
- Given the limitations of remote interviews at community level, the availability of household-level data from an impact study carried out by IFAD's Results and Impact Assessment division in 2018 was critical to the evaluation.
- It was sometimes difficult to locate GIS maps and satellite images that could be used for comparison purposes, and the quality of the maps and images was sometimes poor. Asking local engineers or other contacts in communities to take and send

photographs and videos of project infrastructure using their mobile phones proved to be an effective complementary approach for collecting visual data.

- GIS data were useful to explore evaluation questions regarding infrastructure quality and performance. Other types of data were needed to elucidate institutional, empowerment and social relations issues.

- An evaluation framework based on an extensive desk review of project documentation and secondary data greatly strengthened the coherence and completeness of primary data collection.

- Some counterparts and informants were extremely busy and a few of them tested positive for COVID-19. This demanded increased tact, flexibility, patience and time from all sides. It was helpful to have a local resource person responsible for arranging the remote interviews, as this relieved the IFAD country office and government counterpart of this task during a stressful period.

OVERALL REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS FOR OTHER EVALUATIONS

The CCRIP evaluation provides lessons regarding conducting evaluations entirely remotely, whether during the COVID-19 pandemic or under other circumstances. For rural development projects aimed at household and community welfare, traditional evaluation approaches with an in-person field mission remain the desired option, in terms of methodological rigour and timeliness to complete analysis. Depending on the secondary evidence available, traditional approaches may not be more costly than remote modalities. Nevertheless, a remote approach was the only way for the CCRIP evaluation to be conducted, and the team was able to arrive at a comprehensive and relatively nuanced set of findings by taking the measures described above. However, had less project M&E data and other secondary information been available (including from an impact assessment), or had the project been mostly comprised of socio-economic interventions rather than construction and rehabilitation of infrastructure, a remote approach may have been more problematic.

FIGURE 1.
Using satellite imagery to assess infrastructure quality and performance before/after CCRIP (Tarali Bazar, Kaliganj, Satkhira)

Image 1: Before CCRIP

Image 2: After CCRIP

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Cover photo: Bangladesh - Coastal Climate Resilient Infrastructure Project Women buying vegetables at Rahamatpur hat market, Babuganj, Barisal.

Interior: Bangladesh - Coastal Climate Resilient Infrastructure Project A newly built road that connects Nil Dumur hat, Sham nagar, Sathkhira, Bangladesh.

December 2020