

Executive summary

Introduction

1. In 2018 the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) conducted a Project Performance Evaluation (PPE) of the Rural Development Project in the Eastern Middle Atlas Mountains (PDRMO) in the Kingdom of Morocco that was implemented from 2007 to 2015. The objectives of the evaluation were to (i) assess the results of the project; (ii) generate findings and recommendations for the design and implementation of ongoing and future operations in Morocco; and (iii) identify issues of corporate, operational or strategic interest that merit further evaluative work. The evaluation methodology was based on an in-depth review of available documentation and additional primary and secondary data collected during a field mission to Rabat and the project area. The collection methods used were primarily participatory and the data collected were qualitative.

2. The overall objective of PDRMO was to contribute to alleviating rural poverty by diversifying and sustainably increasing the incomes of rural people, through the restoration and sustainable management of natural resources. To this end the project was to: (i) build the local capacities of grass-roots organizations; (ii) ensure the sustainability of economic development by developing agro-silvo-pastoral resources and promoting microenterprises, and sustainably facilitating access to local financial services; and (iii) mitigate land degradation. To achieve its objectives, the project called for various interventions –socio-economic infrastructure, soil and water conservation works, plant and animal production, access to financial services and entrepreneurship development.

3. PDRMO was implemented in the Middle Atlas Mountains region in the province of Boulemane, in 10 rural communes and two municipalities, and covered a total area of 528,000 hectares. The project was to reach 60,000 direct beneficiaries and 15,000 indirect beneficiaries living in 150 *douars* [hamlets]. The target population comprised poor rural people with a special emphasis on the most marginalized groups: smallholder crop and livestock farmers, women, youth and landless people, particularly those living in the most remote areas.

Main evaluation findings

4. **Relevance.** The PDRMO objectives were fully aligned with the Government's strategies, above all the Green Morocco Plan adopted in 2008, as well as with IFAD's strategies. The project area, which is vast, is one of Morocco's poorest provinces and the project design prioritized the targeting of women and young people. The project was to take an integrated, participatory approach to meet the most immediate needs of the populations and contribute solutions to the multidimensional facets of local poverty. Implementation was based on an innovative participatory approach at the *douar* level, as the smallest socio-territorial unit, but it also called for the planning of structural activities such as roads and natural resource management. Nevertheless, the PDRMO's objectives and expected results were not in tune with the proposed execution period, human resources available and allocated financing. Within this context, the project did not effectively involve the government agencies concerned –such as the National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA) and the Ministry of Water and Forestry –in implementation from the design stage.

5. **Effectiveness.** PDRMO achieved most of its physical objectives in terms of socio-economic infrastructure. The project obtained good results on arboriculture development and diversification and improvements in sheep breeding and beekeeping. Rural roads helped to open up access to the targeted communes, and the positive effects of small- and medium-sized hydraulic development were visible in the field. The effectiveness of PDRMO was however limited by significant delays resulting from inadequate human resources available for implementation and the lack of solid partnerships. In addition,

the limited project resources, in relation to people's expressed needs, led to difficult trade-offs and activities being too thinly spread. Although this was an integrated project, there was very little synergy between the various PDRMO interventions. The work done to facilitate sustainable access to financial services was unsuccessful as the microcredit associations present in the project area showed no interest in collaborating with the project.

6. **Efficiency.** PDRMO was completed, as planned, in 2015, during the peak period of its activities. Because of delays in the preparation and validation of the *douar* development plans, the project execution phase did not actually start until 2012, just three years before project completion. The provincial agriculture department did not have the qualified staff needed to implement the project, and the use of technical assistance for management and monitoring –though essential in the project context –increased operating costs considerably. Upon project completion, the total amount completed was modest, with US\$15.86 million disbursed, or about half of the planned costs. The project's economic rate of return was 13.36 per cent, which was slightly below the design estimate of 14.5 per cent.

7. **Rural poverty impact.** The project's impact is difficult to measure given its weak monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system, the many activities and late start-up. Impact varied from one commune to the next based on degree of vulnerability to climate change and the presence of well-structured rural organizations. The impact on social and human capital was one of the project's strong points as it successfully reinvigorated and strengthened the fabric of local associations. The structuring of livestock breeders' groups was the best example of this. The project also enabled better access to basic social services such as education and healthcare by improving physical access to the rural communes targeted. Drinking water supply provided better quality water and reduced the distances traveled to fetch water. Higher and more diversified incomes as a result of microenterprise development and agro-silvo-pastoral resources development, however, remained limited by the poor performance of the rural finance component.

8. **Sustainability of benefits.** The sustainability of PDRMO was supported by its inclusion in sector policies on rural poverty reduction –the Green Morocco Plan and the National Initiative for Human Development Support Project (INDH) –and by the Government's efforts to complete and consolidate activities after the project ended. The creation of Water Users Associations –for both agricultural and drinking water –and the handover of track maintenance to rural communes has allowed for long-term management of socio-economic infrastructure, but doubts persisted as to their capacities and availability of resources to successfully carry out this mandate. The interventions on natural resource management adopted a highly local approach that was not integrated with a rational and integrated approach to watershed management and protection. Finally, the rural organizations that were supported, particularly to set up microenterprises, showed low levels of functionality and inclusiveness and the project was unable to promote sustainable access to financing.

9. **Innovation.** The participatory approach using *douars* was the major innovation by PDRMO in the project area. However, it was not sufficiently adapted to the specific context of the area, with its weak fabric of associations. Other innovations were promoted at the technical level –such as the practice of improving pastureland with deferred grazing –but PDRMO also missed multiple opportunities for innovations, such as support for local financial services, a weakness throughout the country portfolio.

10. **Scaling up.** The lessons learned under PDRMO, and other similar development projects in the mountain regions, contributed to strengthening government action to promote these zones, with the preparation of an updated mountain zone development strategy and creation of a technical division specializing in mountain zone development within the Ministry of Agriculture.

11. **Gender equality and women's empowerment.** Women were one of the project's priority target groups. Pro-women activities focused mainly on functional literacy and

microenterprise financing in areas such as crafts and livestock farming. This support was however limited in relation to local needs and the project's initial objectives. Given the poor performance of the rural finance component, it was not possible to create sustainable opportunities for women's empowerment and the income-generating activities funded were fragile and focused mainly on areas with low value added. In addition, women's participation and influence in rural organizations remained marginal.

12. Environmental and natural resource management. PDRMO's interventions in natural resource management resulted in an improvement in the availability of soil and water resources. Improved water availability came about, inter alia, as a result of lining traditional earthen *seguias* [canals], which previously caused considerable losses. In terms of soil resources, PDRMO undertook a land improvement initiative by de-stoning and developing reclaimed land for arboriculture in olive and almond trees. The results, however, were localized and limited compared to the expressed needs, which were well above the project means, as well as problems with land tenure and above all the lack of an integrated development approach by watershed.

13. Adaptation to climate change. The mountain zones are characterized by fragile ecosystems under the double threat of erosion and desertification. PDRMO carried out actions to reduce the effects of climate change, such as protecting wadi banks and consolidating or building diversion structures at the head of irrigated areas. But in the absence of good linkages with national and sector programmes –the Ministry of Water and Forestry and environmental agencies –the project efforts were insufficient to address the challenges of climate change, which have become increasingly acute in recent years.

14. Conclusion. PDRMO was designed to replicate the rural development project in the Rural Development Project in the Mountain Zones of Al Haouz, approved in 2000. However, it was implemented in a more challenging context that was highly inaccessible, with a very weak fabric of associations and inadequate human resources. These constraints were not fully taken into account at design, leading to considerable delays in the implementation of activities and operating costs three times higher than projected owing to the recruitment of permanent technical assistance. In spite of this, the project managed to achieve most of its objectives in terms of physical targets and generated localized impact in terms of soil and water restoration, agricultural diversification and livestock farming development. The participatory approach adopted by the project contributed to reinvigorating grass-roots organizations, although they remained fragile and insufficiently inclusive. The project's sustainability was supported by an institutional and strategic framework that places mountain zone development at the top of the Government's priorities. However, greater involvement of the services concerned – agricultural research and advice agencies, and the Ministry of Water and Forestry – remains essential to ensure the sustainability of the PDRMO gains.

Recommendations

15. The evaluation recognizes the efforts undertaken, following project completion, by IFAD and the Government to improve its results. The following recommendations were developed with this in mind and are intended to be taken into account in current and future projects.

16. Recommendation 1: Pursue capacity-building efforts for grass-roots organizations to enable them to become inclusive actors in local development. At the institutional level, agricultural associations and cooperatives should be organized into unions and apex organizations to improve their collective effectiveness, positioning them at various links in the value chain and so strengthen their bargaining power with national and provincial authorities. This should be prepared in advance by strengthening advisory assistance combined with agronomic research and public and private agricultural advice. In addition, the agricultural and drinking Water Users Associations organized into provincial unions and eventually into regional federations could, through appropriate capacity-building, take action to rehabilitate small-and medium-size

hydraulic works and consolidate water supply according to the principle of local project management, in addition to sustainable management of infrastructure.

17. At the operational level, the participatory approach should be included at the project formulation stage to avoid affecting implementation, and should be adapted to the specific mountain zone context where the most appropriate level for diagnostics, planning and implementation of local development is one higher than the *douar* –at the commune or watershed level.

18. Recommendation 2: Strengthen the protection and restoration of natural resources through innovative integrated watershed management approaches and sustainable natural resource management. These approaches will allow for better anticipation of the effects of climate change and better linkages with policies and land use plans. Hydraulic improvements should be based on a long-term development scheme covering both surface water and ground water resources and seek maximum efficiency in water use. It would also be advisable to make use of all potential water savings offered by comprehensive rehabilitation of irrigation systems –primary and secondary *seguias* at least –and more efficient on-plot irrigation through better irrigation management. Finally, agricultural land protection should be done in the framework of an overall procedure that includes protection upstream and downstream of the watershed and close targeted protection that is highly adapted to the risks.

19. Recommendation 3: Improve the geographical and social targeting of interventions. The geographic targeting strategy should include interventions that are less spread out and focus on agro-ecological mountain zones with high rates of poverty and vulnerability. In addition, social targeting should ensure that the most vulnerable people participate in local development. For this reason the M&E system should monitor the number and type of beneficiaries to detect cases of exclusion. It is also necessary to establish specific targeting strategies to increase the presence of women and young people, particularly in decision-making bodies of grass-roots organizations. These must be targeted according to their level of representation and prior capacity to include women and youth.

20. Recommendation 4: Improve project implementation by mobilizing appropriate competencies and strengthening M&E and operational partnerships. The executing agency (DPA) should have the human and material resources needed to implement a project. External technical assistance should not substitute capacity in the executing agency and other key actors, and should not be bought in at the expense of capacity-building in these agencies. It should provide support, at a cost that is justified by the responsibilities and value added of such support. Equally, the M&E system should be strengthened and its operationalization included as a condition in financing agreements, to enable lessons learned to be drawn from past experiences, improve resource planning and allocation, and be in a position to measure impact. In addition, partnerships should be reinforced, particularly with the Ministry of Water and Forestry and watershed agencies and especially at the formulation stage, with results-based framework agreements and programmes and genuine responsibility-sharing rather than service provision.