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# PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

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**Independent Evaluation of FAO's Evaluation Function**

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This summary report presents the key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Independent Evaluation of the Evaluation Function (IEoEF) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).
- The evaluation aimed to assess the contribution of the evaluation function to the achievement of FAO's goals at the global, regional and national levels, with a forward-looking view to desirable and feasible improvements. The report therefore presents the overall performance of the FAO's evaluation function against its mandate, as defined by the Evaluation Charter, and its goals, and by its successive Evaluation Strategies.
- The evaluation covers the period of 2017–2022, while considering the recommendations of past evaluations and audits.
- The evaluation identified 18 findings and makes ten (10) recommendations to FAO that are covered in in the [full Report of the Evaluation](#) along with a Management Response, Document PC 139/2 Sup.1.

### GUIDANCE SOUGHT FROM THE PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

- The Programme Committee is invited to provide guidance on the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Independent Evaluation of FAO's Evaluation Function.

#### Draft Advice

##### **The Committee:**

- **noted the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Independent Evaluation of FAO's Evaluation Function;**
- **welcomed the positive findings concerning Office of Evaluation's (OED) integrity, impartiality, positive reputation and nurturing of partnerships, noting the finding that OED evaluations are overall of good quality;**
- **noted the findings concerning the need to *inter alia* increase independence, transparency, prioritization, capacity building and communication of FAO's Evaluation Function; and**
- **encouraged the Organization to prioritize the follow-up to evaluation's recommendations and their use in decision-making processes.**

## I. Introduction

1. This summary report presents the key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Independent Evaluation of the Evaluation Function (IEoEF) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The evaluation aimed to assess the contribution of the evaluation function to the achievement of FAO's goals at the global, regional and national levels, with a forward-looking view to desirable and feasible improvements. The report therefore presents the overall performance of the FAO's evaluation function against its mandate, as defined by the Evaluation Charter, and its goals, and by its successive Evaluation Strategies.

2. The evaluation covers the period of 2017-2022, while considering the recommendations of past evaluations and audits. The evaluation also looked at the activities and evaluations conducted in 2023, to take into account the early changes introduced since the endorsement of the Interim Evaluation Strategy by the FAO Conference in June 2023. It should be noted that these changes have continued during and beyond the time during which this evaluation was conducted: due to its time scope, this evaluation is not in a position to entirely capture this dynamic, ongoing evolution.

3. The evaluation questions were structured around the five primary principles underpinning evaluation in FAO: Independence, Impartiality, Credibility, Transparency and Usefulness. Consideration of the "leaving no-one behind" principle was an integral part in the design of the evaluation matrix under several evaluation questions. To answer evaluation questions, the evaluation took an outcome-oriented, theory-driven and evidence-based approach and conducted a desk review of key documents, portfolio analysis, 155 semi-structured interviews and an online survey of FAO personnel with 214 respondents (the survey had a confidence level of 95 percent and a margin of error of 5 percent)<sup>1</sup>. Overall, a total of 369 people were consulted for the evaluation, including 200 males and 161 females<sup>2</sup>. The evaluation took a broad sample of 30 evaluations which were meta-analysed and reviewed. It further narrowed down a sub-sample of 10 evaluations in five field operations for in-depth analysis from the global to regional, country, and local levels, including field interviews. The collected data was analysed by triangulating the sources and confronting the theory of change with the evidence of the actual results chain of the evaluation function. This information is presented under each evaluation question.

4. The intended primary users of this evaluation are FAO Governing Bodies and FAO personnel, particularly the Programme Committee, the Office of the Director-General and the Director-General of FAO, and the Office of Evaluation (OED) personnel. The headquarters' and Regional Offices' senior management, as well as other FAO evaluation personnel and FAO partners in Member States and at global level will also find this report of value. The evaluation identified 18 findings, which are summarized in the following points.

## II. Findings

5. *Independence: OED has gradually progressed towards functional administrative, financial, and planning independence, although without sufficient guarantee yet, and not entirely reaching the level envisaged by the Evaluation Charter. This has reduced OED's ability to ensure adequate coverage.*

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was available through the FAO intranet for approximately 14 000 individuals, including all FAO personnel having access to intranet, and the members of the Programme Committee. Senior and middle managers in FAO headquarters were invited to inform their staff of the availability of the survey; the team does not have information on the extent of the trickle-down from senior to mid-level and line management, and to other staff. The evaluation team further invited 116 external evaluation experts via email to respond, based on its database of FAO experts. The survey had a confidence level of 95 percent and a margin of error of 5 percent. The response rate was 0.015 percent. However, this figure may be misleading, as the number of people to whom the survey was accessible is higher than the number of potential respondents due to significant limitations: language barriers for some FAO personnel in the field; low relevance of a survey on evaluation for many FAO personnel. Therefore, it is estimated that the rate of response among persons who effectively received an invitation to take the survey, and for whom evaluation is relevant, is much higher – but impossible to establish precisely, as the evaluation team did not receive precise information as to how many persons did receive the survey, and how many persons in FAO are (potential) users of the evaluation function. Nonetheless, the low response rate means that the survey results should be used with caution. Therefore, they have been used in this report only as an additional source for further confirmation and illustration of the extent of certain trends identified and triangulated through other data sources.

<sup>2</sup> Note that 8 people who responded to the FAO personnel survey preferred not to indicate their gender.

6. Until 2022, OED's functional independence had fallen short of the provisions of the Evaluation Charter: The Office had lacked autonomy in key administrative decisions. Since then, the Director-General granted increased autonomy, thus partly catching up with the requirements of an evaluation function as regards human resource management and daily work processes. However, this progress does not yet comprehensively cover all aspects of functional independence, and it is not yet guaranteed in the internal regulatory framework.

7. Financial independence is in principle strongly supported by the FAO Evaluation Trust Fund, which is a unique model and a positive precedent. Thanks to the Trust Fund and the Evaluation Charter, OED theoretically enjoys wide autonomy in determining what geographic areas, organizational issues, or thematic aspects of FAO work are covered by OED evaluations. However, this autonomy has not been used to its full potential: donor requirements, and their interpretation by FAO, have severely and unnecessarily constrained the autonomy of OED to make decisions on its work plans and on prioritisation of evaluations.

8. Most of the evaluations in OED's portfolio stress accountability rather than learning: the imbalance between these key objectives curtails the contribution of the evaluation function to decision-making. During most of the period under review, limitations to OED's independence in planning evaluations also resulted in uneven and inequitable coverage of geographic and thematic areas of activity. The evaluation function has mostly catered to the needs of specific donors, with priority given to the thematic or geographic areas supported by these donors. Other thematic areas, such as emergency resilience, a dominant theme in sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, received less attention until 2023.

9. The evaluation selection process is currently being amended, which could contribute to greater independence in evaluation selection and planning, and, in turn, to more balanced coverage. Recently introduced tracking and charging of OED personnel's time on the applicable budget source, in line with audit recommendations, will further improve the measurement of OED's level of effort in relation to specific programmatic areas, budget lines, and geographic areas. OED's internal structure has changed over time but does not yet enable its personnel to equitably cover the variety of FAO activities and regions.

10. OED's evaluation models are varied and have evolved over time. OED personnel, external experts, and stakeholders in the regional offices, experienced a "decentralisation" attempt around 2020, followed by re-centralisation into "One OED" under the current OED Strategy. The composition of evaluation teams, and the participation of OED personnel have also varied. This has led to uncertainties about the definition of an independent evaluation team, although OED's independence as a manager and often implementer of evaluations, is generally acknowledged as high, not least due to the professional attitude of OED personnel.

11. *Impartiality: OED is credited with a high level of integrity and impartiality. It champions strong ethics and continuous efforts to improve the strength and diversity of its teams and of the data it collects. However, this cannot fully correct for weaknesses in the data emanating from interventions.*

12. OED has established itself as an actor of high integrity within FAO, thanks to strong ethical standards and the quality of locally visible outposted personnel. Most stakeholders appreciate OED's impartiality and its resistance to pressure, as well as the complementary skills of evaluation team members.

13. OED is often in the position of having to rely on weak internal data from interventions, although there are notable exceptions, such as data-intensive projects that facilitate monitoring and evaluation by national counterparts and by FAO. OED offsets the impact of data weaknesses both by generating qualitative primary data and by cooperating with technical divisions at headquarters and with some Regional Offices to define monitoring and results frameworks.

14. OED has deployed major efforts to increase the inclusiveness and diversity of evaluation teams in order to obtain varied perspectives that would contribute to impartiality. Collaboration in some instances with proactive local partners has bolstered inclusive data collection. However, overall progress on inclusiveness remains slow. Many of the interventions that OED evaluates have themselves

exhibited a lack of focus on diversity, which tends to produce inherently biased data for which evaluation teams cannot fully compensate.

15. *Credibility: OED evaluations are overall of good quality, and their design is as strong as possible given the constraints of financial and human resources, and intervention-generated data.*

16. The evaluation function is generally well-served by a strong workforce and a network of external experts built over the years. The key weakness is that OED, mirroring a general situation in FAO linked to the organization's funding structure, consistently resorts to "consultants" to carry out core staff functions: this provisional status, by decreasing job security and continuity, affects their ability to perform optimally.

17. The FAO evaluation guidelines have been gradually updated but have not caught up with changing needs, environment, and industry standards. Until very recently, ex-ante quality assurance consisted of internal review of draft reports being delegated to various levels of OED, culminating in clearance by the Director, which may be delegated to other OED personnel. OED has started to revisit this approach through internal memos, a rating tool, and a pilot ex-post quality review. However, OED technical clearance is maintained under the new quality assurance process, a time-consuming practice which creates bottlenecks.

18. The various evaluations are inconsistent in the extent to which they address context, or analyse local dynamics that condition the success of interventions. There are a number of examples of good practice in this area, such as incorporating the perspectives of youth into evaluation design, or working with programme managers to increase the ownership of partners and country offices, while ensuring that evaluations are targeted to the most meaningful issues. However, the level of ambition for OED evaluations remains limited, in particular for the evaluation of impact. In this regard, OED evaluations mirror the limitations of the interventions' results frameworks at the impact level. The demand for better evaluation of contributions to impact-level changes is only sporadically met by evaluation and research in FAO.

19. *Transparency: Externally, OED evaluations are available, but neither sufficiently accessible nor accessed. Internally, OED has not capitalised on the effort made to increase the transparency of internal decisions and processes.*

20. The FAO evaluation function publishes all evaluation reports that match quality standards. However, the fact that a report is available does not mean that knowledge and accountability products are easily accessible to all. A lack of knowledge about where to find these reports, the length of the reports, language barriers, and delayed publication all serve as deterrents to potential readers. Access was observed to be lowest at both ends of the range of users: disadvantaged groups (e.g. persons with lower literacy, or facing language barriers, or a digital gap) and high-level users (who lack time, and whose need for real-time information evolves faster than the length of clearance before publication).

21. Learning the lessons of the past when its personnel had limited awareness of internal processes such as impending evaluations, availability of evaluation managers, documents and products of evaluations other than its own, OED recently invested in powerful internal transparency tools. The new OED strategy also fills a gap by offering a clear vision. However, at the time when this evaluation was conducted, the Office had not reaped the full benefit of these tools, since it has not yet ensured consistent, pro-active internal communication, feedback loops, change management, and has not sufficiently supported its personnel in appropriating these tools.

22. *Usefulness: The usefulness of OED evaluations varies depending on their type: most contribute to accountability, but there is a gap in knowledge products and learning. This is partly because OED fills a gap in generating data on results, which would normally fall under a monitoring function.*

23. Despite recent initiatives under the current FAO Strategic Framework and PROMYS, FAO has lacked a full-fledged monitoring system during most of the evaluated period. This has created a gap, and there has been a demand for OED to fill it for accountability purposes, pushing the evaluation function to create evidence on results which goes beyond its mandate, especially under project evaluations – at the expense of other evaluation products.

24. In many (chiefly project-related) evaluations, donor accountability tends to prevail over organizational learning. The situation has therefore disproportionately affected OED's learning function. In contrast, strategic organization-wide evaluations such as big thematic, or Sustainable Development Goals' evaluations, are appreciated as learning products, but they are pitched at too high a level for some key users to act based on this knowledge. OED has produced useful, but still too few, knowledge products and in-person facilitation of learning.

25. Most users place the highest value on mid-term evaluations and Country Programme evaluations: the former, because their timeliness makes them directly usable by budget holders, and the latter because they are pitched at an optimal level (strategic, but directly related to daily decision-making for a wide range of users). Country Programme evaluations belong in an intermediate level category, between the project and the organizational level, where there is great demand for learning. The emerging practice of cluster evaluations, and narrower thematic evaluations start addressing this vast untapped potential for usefulness.

26. In the absence of proper follow up mechanisms, the usefulness of OED recommendations is difficult to assess. Recommendations are usually considered sound, and users appreciate them. However, their usefulness is often curtailed by several factors, including late timing, and the number of recommendations, which is at times unreasonable. Simple practices, such as validation workshops or evaluation debriefs, increase the ownership of recommendations.

### III. Conclusions

27. The internal reputation of OED is good, and the demand for evaluations is high. Since the previous IEOEF, an evaluation culture has clearly risen throughout the organization during the period under review, not least thanks to the role of outposted OED personnel, and to the repeated (and in most cases positive) experiences of FAO personnel as evaluatees. OED has proactively and productively nurtured strong partnerships with most of its users. This creates a basis for enhancing communication with users and counterparts beyond simple communication of results and reports, through outreach and nurturing constructive, collaborative partnerships.

28. Despite constraints in time, resources and data availability, OED has contributed significantly to accountability, although its outputs have been more often useful for donors rather than for the FAO. Project-level or top strategic-level evaluation products dominate OED's production, with a "missing middle" at the programme and sub-thematic levels (except highly valuable CPEs). OED has often provided project-level monitoring functions, deflecting it from its evaluation purpose, which requires attention. Furthermore, the programme-level learning products have not been sufficiently used for cross-fertilisation of knowledge among country offices, programmes and similar projects.

29. OED evaluations have a vast untapped potential to contribute to decision-making processes, but many mid- and high-level FAO managers are not yet accustomed to using evaluations in this way. A drift towards programme-level evaluations through clustering of the project evaluations may help them reach higher levels of organizational management.

30. During the period considered, the FAO evaluation function underwent several profound and, at times, contradictory changes. The office has only recently been granted greater autonomy, although this is not yet tantamount to full functional independence. While the Evaluation Trust Fund is a unique, promising, and adequate model for financial independence, its promise is being undermined by multiple exceptions, donor requirements and inherited OED commitments. The attempt at a decentralized OED was not implemented along the lines of the initially envisaged decentralisation strategy. Instead, OED changed its approach to a "one OED" vision, while retaining outposted personnel in the field.

31. Most of 2023 was dedicated to catching up with past recommendations and rolling out new evaluation and appointment patterns, but the competency portfolio, internal reporting lines and relationships with regional and country offices are still being shaped. Since 2022, OED's internal planning for evaluations has progressed greatly and moved from mostly on-demand servicing of evaluation needs to a more comprehensive oversight of FAO's rapidly increasing portfolio of extra-budgetary activities. The results of this transition are now being stabilized, as the evaluation standards are brought into conformity with new internal guidelines. Yet, the regulatory, policy and

quality assurance framework of FAO remains unfinished, and some guidance materials are partly outdated.

32. The OED has accumulated an internal reform fatigue, whereby high hopes coexist with eroded levels of trust. Yet, it is underpinned by a professional and dedicated workforce which delivers high quality outputs in most cases. This situation presents classical change management challenges and highlights the need for active, two-way communication and contribution between management and personnel, in order to successfully institutionalise the positive post-2022 changes, while capitalising on the benefits of a growing portfolio since 2017.

#### **IV. Recommendations**

33. Recommendation 1: The FAO Programme Committee, supported by the Director-General and Governing Bodies should statutorily increase the independence of OED in decision-making, particularly as regards internal functioning such as hiring, contracting, procurement, and travel. The independence of OED should be secured in the regulatory framework, and tantamount to that of an independent internal oversight body. Consultation with UNEG and comparison with other UN family organizations would be useful. (This recommendation mirrors a similar one made during the previous IEoEF.)

34. Recommendation 2: OED should apply stringent selection of evaluations for its own operations. Among them, OED should prioritize strategic evaluations as well as intermediate level evaluations of strategic importance with high learning potential, such as CPEs, sub-thematic evaluations, regional evaluations, and cluster project evaluations of strategic interest. Project evaluations without strategic relevance should be devolved to budget holders as per Recommendation 5.

35. Recommendation 3: OED should update and consolidate FAO evaluation guidelines, frameworks, and internal guideline memos. OED personnel, budget holders undertaking their own evaluations, and external consultants, would benefit from updated guidelines within an overall evaluation framework, summarized in a fully updated and consolidated OED handbook, in line with up-to-date UNEG standards.

36. Recommendation 4: OED should establish a registry of its recommendations, with a system for following up. This would require an IT-based, searchable registry of recommendations and management responses from 2025 onwards designed for data analysis, with an annual follow-up and update. This supposes that recommendations in OED evaluations be more standardised in terms of format, prioritised, targeted at individual entities, and timebound. The data from this mechanism would be valuable to the Programme Committee and other key users within FAO.

37. Recommendation 5: OED should strengthen the capacity of budget holders to undertake non-strategic evaluations (such as most project evaluations). To this end, OED could design training modules to strengthen the capacity of budget holders such as the GCF, GEF, and other units: budget holders would then be able to gradually take over most project evaluations. OED also needs to step up coaching and advice to budget holders requiring support on ongoing and future evaluations.

38. Recommendation 6: OED should establish a standardised, ideally externalised, ex-ante quality assurance system applicable to all FAO evaluations. This system would be underpinned by quality assurance checklists for all types of deliverables. A framework contract with a quality assurance service provider should be considered.

39. Recommendation 7: OED should finetune, stabilise, and actively communicate, including directly among all OED personnel, its internal structure, tools and procedures. Priority would be given to the INTAKE process, evaluation planning, allocation of evaluations to members of OED, and correcting for unequal access to evaluation managers and team leaders by the various types of evaluation (e.g., emergency/resilience). Change management techniques would be useful in this endeavour.

40. Recommendation 8: FAO Senior Management, in cooperation with OED, should actively engage OED in the design and deployment of PROMYS. OED would add value and pave the way for mutually reinforcing monitoring, evaluation, and learning at organizational level, by contributing to the design of the system, including indicators, types of data sources and definition of meta-data. This joint

endeavour could further support the design of ongoing monitoring initiatives in REU and RLC as testing grounds for the future system, in a mutually beneficial fashion.

41. Recommendation 9: OED should generalise the production of standardised, concise, user-friendly, and accessible knowledge products, building among others on the existing practice of evaluation syntheses. OED could consider the use of social media, intranet, “nuggets” videos. The role of Evaluation Focal Persons and outposted OED personnel could be expanded to include, for example, presenting common findings/issues in regional country evaluations from which FAO Representatives (FAORs) could learn.

42. Recommendation 10: OED should strengthen the dissemination of evaluation products and digests and facilitate users’ access. It could generalise evaluation briefs in a much more concise and visual format. OED may consider translation of evaluation briefs in relevant languages (including, where applicable, national languages), increase the user-friendliness of evaluation reports and standardise the format of the executive summaries and recommendations. OED could also proactively disseminate evaluation products with identified evaluation users or key learning partners.