Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Evaluation of the FAO Flexible Voluntary Contribution Mechanism

Programme Evaluation Series
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FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
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Abstract

The purpose of this evaluation was to provide an independent assessment of the performance and contributions of the FAO Flexible Voluntary Contribution (FVC) Mechanism, a pooled funding instrument, in achieving the FAO strategic objectives. The findings are intended to inform the design, implementation and monitoring of the FVC in its next phase. The evaluation was based on a mixed-methods approach, including a review of 509 documents, 114 interviews, an online survey, five country case studies, a cost analysis and a gender and inclusion analysis.

This evaluation found that the FVC is highly relevant in principle, providing valuable flexible funding in a landscape dominated by tightly earmarked resources. It is in high demand for its role in funding new and innovative work, scaling existing projects and filling critical funding gaps. In practice, however, its catalytic potential remains unfulfilled due to the modest volume of flexible funding and a lack of strategic prioritization. While FVC investments have contributed to the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031, the portfolio is fragmented, and the small award sizes limit their scale and impact.

The FVC's management costs are modest, and progress has been made in leveraging corporate platforms. However, there is still scope for improvement in communications, monitoring and documenting impact. The FVC operates in a "projectized" mode rather than a programmatic one, which challenges its intended theory of change (TOC) to reduce transaction costs and increase value for money.

The sustainability of the FVC is threatened by a loss of key resource partners and others reconsidering their commitments. The evaluation concludes that FAO and its partners must either reinvent the FVC to fully deliver on its value proposition or find alternative uses for the funds.

Based on these findings, the evaluation makes one overarching recommendation and four strategic recommendations for FAO to:

i. determine the future of the FVC through strategic dialogue with resource partners;

ii. improve the FVC's potential to be a catalytic instrument;

iii. enhance strategic prioritization in the FVC selection process;

iv. strengthen resource mobilization and visibility for the FVC; and

v. increase efficiency and continue to improve FVC processes.

The evaluation offers a number of potential actions that FAO could take to operationalize these recommendations.

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Acknowledgements

The FAO Office of Evaluation thanks all those who contributed to this evaluation. The Evaluation Team comprised Andy Featherstone (Senior Consultant), Charlotte Lattimer (Senior Team Member), Christine Harris Van-Keuren (Senior Cost Analyst), Clair Null (Responsible Officer), Ahmedou El Bah (Evaluation Manager), Berna Dinc (Evaluation Analyst), and Serdar Bayryyev (Quality Assurance Reviewer). Sarah Jaff (Office Assistant) provided operational support throughout the evaluation. Gianluca Bailey, Luigia Marro and Sohini Kumar supported the formatting and layout of the report.

Thanks are extended to the FVC Secretariat members for their engagement and assistance. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues at FAO headquarters, Regional Offices and Country Offices in Barbados, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mauritania, Uganda and Zambia for their participation.

The evaluation benefited from inputs from various other stakeholders, including resource partners, government officials and project beneficiaries. Their invaluable insights were instrumental in enriching this evaluation.

Abbreviations

FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations
FVC	Flexible Voluntary Contribution
FMM	Flexible Multi-Partner Mechanism
PPA	Programme Priority Area
RPAG	Resource Partners Advisory Group
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TOC	theory of change
TOR	terms of reference
UN	United Nations

Executive summary

Introduction and context

1. The evaluation of the Flexible Voluntary Contribution (FVC) Fund,[1] formerly known as the Flexible Multi-Partner Mechanism, is situated within the context of significant shifts in global funding patterns for the United Nations (UN) development system. There has been a notable decline in core (flexible) resources relative to overall funding, coupled with a corresponding increase in tightly earmarked funds for specific projects. This trend impedes the UN's capacity to strategically respond to national needs, adapt to evolving circumstances and efficiently implement development programmes. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' (FAO) own resource mobilization reflects these challenges: in the 2022–2023 biennium, 76 percent of its Programme of Work and Budget came from voluntary contributions, yet 99 percent of extrabudgetary contributions are fully earmarked, severely restricting FAO's flexibility (FAO, 2024c). By late 2024, only 2 percent of voluntary contributions were flexible or unearmarked, contributing to significant project fragmentation (FAO, 2025a). The volume of flexible funding available to FAO is reportedly at the lower end compared to other UN agencies, a challenge further compounded by a 7.1 percent fall in international aid in 2024.[2]

2. It is within this challenging financial landscape that the FVC emerges as a strategically important pooled funding instrument. Launched in 2010, the FVC directly supports the FAO Programme of Work and Budget by channelling pooled funds from multiple resource partners to selected subprogrammes, with decisions on their use made by the FVC Executive Committee and supported by the Resource Partners Advisory Group (RPAG) (FAO, 2022a). Its theory of change (TOC) posits that increased pooled flexible funds, applied programmatically, will reduce transaction costs and fragmentation, ultimately increasing value for money.

3. Over its operational history across four distinct phases (2010–2013, 2014–2017, 2018–2021, and 2022–2025), the FVC has demonstrated significant growth and reach. The total value of FVC funding consistently increased from USD 27.4 million (2010–2013) to USD 66.03 million (2018–2021) (FAO, 2023b), with USD 54.9 million committed for the current 2022–2025 phase by May 2025.[3] The FVC has also successfully broadened its support base, with the number of resource partners increasing from 4 (2014–2017) to 11 (2018–2021), marking a 36.4 percent increase. In the most recent 2018–2021 phase, FVC subprogrammes were implemented in 93 countries globally, with slightly over half the fund invested in Africa (FAO, 2023b). Three previous evaluations have consistently affirmed the FVC's strategic importance and potential as a flexible funding instrument supporting FAO's priorities. However, these evaluations also identified recurring challenges such as a lack of clarity in procedures, weaknesses in monitoring and reporting, limited engagement of Decentralized Offices, challenges in resource mobilization, and the inherent tension between earmarking and flexibility. This current evaluation aims to build upon these prior

[1] The FVC was previously referred to as a "mechanism." However, the term "fund" more accurately reflects its nature and purpose. Accordingly, this report consistently uses "fund."
[2] See, for example, (The New Humanitarian, 2025).
[3] Fund monitoring by the FVC Secretariat.

assessments to enhance the FVC's effectiveness and demonstrate its compelling value (FAO, 2021a, 2013, 2016).

Purpose of the evaluation

4. This evaluation provides FAO and its resource partners with an independent assessment of the performance and contributions of FVC investments in achieving the FAO Strategic Objectives. The findings are anticipated to inform the design, implementation, results management, reporting and monitoring of the FVC instrument in its next phase. The evaluation also examines how FVC-funded interventions have incorporated gender equality and cross-cutting issues, and how effectively they have reached and benefited marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities.

Methodology

5. The Evaluation Team employed a mixed-methods approach for data collection and analysis, ensuring methodological rigour through: i) the collection of both primary and secondary data across the evaluation period; ii) triangulation of evidence across multiple data sources; iii) a combination of evaluation tools and multiple analytical methods; and iv) rigorous comparative qualitative analysis. Details of the evidence that informed this evaluation are outlined in Executive summary table 1.

Executive summary table 1. Evidence informing this evaluation

Type of evidence	Description	Number
Document review	This included corporate and global documents, FVC-specific documents, evaluation reports and external literature.	509 documents
Interviews	Semistructured interviews were conducted with FVC resource partners, FAO personnel (headquarters, Regional and Country Offices), government partners, national organizations and community members.	114 interviewees
Online survey	An online survey was circulated to Lead Technical Officers of subprogrammes awarded between 2018 and 2021 and contributing resource partners to strengthen and triangulate evidence.	Responses received from 38 out of 53 subprogrammes Five resource partners
Country case studies	In-person case studies were conducted in Mauritania, Uganda and Zambia, alongside light-touch desk reviews of the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Barbados.	Three in-person Two desk-based
Cost analysis	A mixed-methods cost analysis was undertaken, which included an expenditure analysis to assess the cost of the resources used to manage the FVC.	
Gender and inclusion analysis	A systematic review was undertaken of corporate guidance and policies, FVC documents and reports, and the focus on gender and inclusion in a sample of FVC subprogrammes.	

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Findings of the evaluation

EQ 1: Relevance – What is the value added of the FVC in supporting the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031?

6. The FVC plays a valuable enabling role for FAO's work, particularly given the prevalence of tightly earmarked funding and fragmentation. There is high demand for flexible funding across FAO as it helps fund new and innovative work, scale existing projects and fill funding gaps despite its modest volume. The FVC itself is not entirely unearmarked; it includes softly earmarked funds, primarily allocated at the level of the four betters, averaging 30 percent of its funding, which is an increase from previous phases. Despite increasing in total funding between the 2014–2017 and 2018–2021 phases, preliminary evidence suggests this growth may not continue in the current phase. A dedicated resource mobilization plan for the FVC has not been prepared, and the FVC does not feature substantively in FAO's corporate plans or resource mobilization strategies.

7. The FVC is now fully aligned with the FAO Strategic Framework and the four betters (2022–2031), with an updated TOC and guidance documents offering reasonable clarity about its purpose. However, there is a lack of consensus on the strategic prioritization of flexible funds within the framework, moving beyond mere alignment. The subprogramme identification and selection process, while improved by the call for proposals, remains largely applicant-led, leading to a diffuse set of proposals rather than a focused selection aligned with corporately identified priorities or underfunded areas. Despite evidence that the process is followed, there is a lack of clarity and transparency from applicants regarding subprogramme selection. Additionally, concerns exist regarding small grant sizes and a perceived headquarters bias in the selection process, despite efforts during this phase to strengthen engagement with Decentralized Offices.

8. Key selection criteria, such as critical gaps, scalability and innovation are widely perceived as relatively easy to meet, contributing to a broad range of projects rather than highly targeted ones. There is also a lack of clarity and consistency in the definitions and use of the criteria across different FVC guidance documents and templates. While the FVC seeks to integrate inclusion, there is uneven attention to different marginalized groups**,** with a stronger focus on women and youth compared to Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities, although this was also perceived to be a corporate weakness.

EQ 2: Effectiveness – How effective has the FVC been in contributing to the implementation of the FAO Strategic Framework?

9. There is good evidence of results across the four betters from FVC investments, which cover the spectrum of FAO's work. FAO stakeholders at all levels can readily cite achievements, some of which were verified during country case study visits. Interviews with government partners and beneficiaries confirmed appreciation for FAO's work, which in many cases stimulated partnerships, investments and innovations. The FVC has served as seed funding to address critical gaps and underfunded areas, enabling FAO to pilot new approaches, gather evidence and establish foundations for future scale-up. It has also supported innovative initiatives with potential for transformative change, spanning technical methodologies, social and community engagement and capacity development.

10. The effectiveness of FVC-supported subprogrammes has been influenced by both enabling and hindering factors. Enabling factors include the strengthening of the FVC over time (e.g.

revised governance documents, flexible workplans), leveraging FAO's expertise and existing work, and strengthened partnerships. Hindering factors include challenges in project management, insufficient FVC resources and project durations, and external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and political processes.

11. While attempts have been made to reach marginalized groups, the evaluation found a stronger focus on women and youth in FVC investments compared to Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities, with the latter being particularly under-represented. There is a lack of clear tracking and monitoring of data pertaining to these groups, which is symptomatic of FAO-wide challenges with disaggregated data, making it difficult to definitively determine the extent to which these groups have been reached and benefited.

EQ 3: Efficiency – How efficiently is the FVC implemented?

12. Cost analysis indicates that FVC coordination expenditures accounted for just 1.4 percent of the total FVC allocations between January 2022 and March 2025 (USD 769 815 from USD 55.4 million). When estimated costs for FVC Leadership personnel (who are paid out of the FAO Regular Budget) are added, the total investment increases to approximately USD 2.65 million over the same period of time. However, the absence of a comparator means it is not possible to draw specific conclusions on the efficiency of the FVC relative to other FAO funds or processes. A comparative cost analysis fell outside the scope and time limitations of this evaluation.

13. The FVC has made efforts to standardize and formalize its procedures to align with the corporate FAO project cycle. However, there are still instances of deviations in processes and templates which, though often justified, were not always clearly communicated in advance. The FVC's ways of working continue to favour a projectized mode rather than fully supporting FAO's corporate shift towards a more programmatic approach. Integrating the FVC into FAO's wider programmatic efforts would require change to the corporate operational procedures, which is beyond the FVC's direct remit.

14. Communication efforts have primarily focused on external outreach to resource partners, with less emphasis on internal communications, though internal awareness among Decentralized Offices personnel has improved. While communication with resource partners has been challenging due to shifting preferences, there are consistent messages for FAO to emphasize the FVC's contribution to FAO's strategic results and provide visibility for resource partners' flexible funding. Priorities for internal communications include enhancing the transparency of FVC processes and decision-making and improving knowledge management.

15. Demonstrating impact and sustainability remains challenging for the FVC, consistent with FAO-wide limitations in this area. This is hindered by factors such as short project time frames, modest funding levels, project design factors and a lack of strategic focus. While piloting impact evaluations shows promise, scaling this up would require additional resources and prioritization.

16. The progress that has been made against each of the 2021 evaluation report recommendations is addressed in relevant sections of this report. The update has been included in the annexes, with a summary provided in Executive summary box 1.

Executive summary box 1. Summary of progress made against 2021 evaluation report recommendations

The status of recommendations from the 2021 evaluation of the FVC presents a mixed picture, with some notable successes alongside persistent challenges. Several recommendations have been formally implemented, including significantly enhancing funding flexibility (with roughly 70 percent of contributions now unearmarked), the establishment of a new governance framework that allowed subprogramme durations to extend beyond a single biennium, and increasing the engagement of Decentralized Offices through a call for proposals mechanism, with 24 percent of the 2022–2025 subprogrammes managed by Decentralized Offices. However, within these recommendations, problematic issues persist, including portfolio fragmentation, short project time frames continuing to hinder impact, and a persisting perception among Decentralized Offices that there is a bias towards headquarters. Many of the recommendations are only partially implemented. Further work on the theory of change (TOC) is needed. Similarly, while resource allocation processes have improved, clearer definitions of criteria and greater transparency represent unfinished work. Quality assurance was put in place for the terminal reports but not the annual reports, and while impact evaluations have begun, a comprehensive strategy for broader thematic evaluations focusing on FVC-specific aspects like innovation or catalytic effects have not been implemented. Critically, a dedicated resource mobilization plan for the FVC has not been prepared, limiting its visibility within broader FAO efforts and hindering the exploration of emerging financing modalities and non-traditional partners as recommended.[4]

Conclusions and their implications for the contribution of the FVC to the FAO Strategic Framework

17. Relevance: The FVC is highly relevant in principle, as it plays a valuable role amid a landscape dominated by tightly earmarked and fragmented funding. It is in high demand across the Organization because it helps fund emerging or underfunded priorities, supports the testing and scaling of innovative approaches, and fills critical financing gaps in ongoing or new initiatives. In practice, though, the volume of flexible funding remains modest, and its catalytic potential is unfulfilled.

18. Effectiveness: The FVC contributed to aspects of the FAO Strategic Framework, particularly by enabling pilot initiatives and supporting normative work that would have been difficult to fund through core or earmarked resources. However, the fragmented nature of the portfolio and the comparatively small size of the awards means that the critical gaps that are addressed and the effects of the fund are diffuse and remain at a fairly modest scale.

19. Efficiency: FVC management costs are modest, and there has been notable progress made in leveraging corporate platforms for project management and other functions. At the same time, there continues to be scope for the FVC to improve on its communications, monitoring and documentation of impact.

[4] The evaluation notes the corporate restriction on the FVC having its own dedicated resource mobilization "strategy", in line with the Director-General's directive that FAO should maintain a single overarching strategy for resource mobilization. In this context, referring to an FVC-specific resource mobilization "plan" is considered more appropriate. Regardless of the terminology, the evaluation found that a dedicated and clearly articulated resource mobilization roadmap for the FVC does not currently exist, and that the FVC is not playing a central role in the broader FAO resource mobilization strategy currently in place.

20. The conclusions of this evaluation are material to the four key assumptions outlined in the FVC TOC, which present the conditions necessary for the Fund to contribute to the FAO Strategic Framework. These are examined in the following paragraphs.

21. The first assumption is that increased pooled flexible funds will strengthen FAO's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) delivery, which is partially supported in principle but significantly challenged by the modest volume of FVC funding, constituting a maximum of 2 percent of total voluntary contributions, and a lack of strategic prioritization. Second, the assumption that applying flexible funds programmatically will reduce transaction costs and increase value for money is significantly challenged because the FVC primarily operates in a "projectized" mode rather than a programmatic one, preventing the full realization of assumed benefits. Third, the assumption that effective governance and strategic prioritization enhance FAO's contribution to SDG achievement is partially supported in principle regarding governance – with demonstrable strengthening of the FVC process, diligent management and revised guidance cited as enabling factors – but challenged regarding strategic prioritization, as the FVC is often perceived as peripheral to FAO's core operations, making impact demonstration difficult due to short project time frames, modest funding and lack of strategic focus. Finally, the fourth assumption, that both FAO and its Members fulfilling their shared responsibilities for UN Reform within the UN Funding Compact will accelerate SDG achievement, is conceptually sound but challenged by the extent to which necessary conditions are being met; while the FVC contributes to SDG-aligned results, its modest 2 percent flexible funding volume indicates Members' responsibilities are not fully realized, and internal FAO challenges further hinder complete fulfilment.

22. The FVC is currently at an inflection point, operating similarly to a microcosm of FAO, with resources thinly spread across many issues and geographies, and its subprogrammes not significantly distinct from other funding mechanisms. The need for change is urgent because the FVC has lost a key resource partner, and others are reconsidering their commitment, posing a threat to its sustainability. To address this, FAO and its resource partners must either reinvent the FVC to fully deliver its value proposition or determine other uses for the funds. This reinvention process will require compromise from all involved, with FAO needing to demonstrate how flexible funds enable unique activities, and resource partners needing to embrace flexible funding, aligning with the UN Funding Compact and empowering FAO in its management of the FVC.

Recommendations

23. Based on the findings and conclusions of this evaluation, one overarching recommendation and four strategic recommendations are proposed to navigate the challenging multilateral aid environment and strengthen the FVC.

Executive summary table 2. List of recommendations

Main recommendation	Description and subrecommendations
Overarching recommendation	
Determine the future of the FVC through strategic dialogue *This could be accomplished through the following actions:*	Use the findings of this evaluation to engage in an open and strategic dialogue with FVC resource partners to determine their ongoing commitments to the FVC, accompanied by a high-level discussion within FAO regarding the value of flexible funding, how to ensure it is used in a catalytic way to advance corporate priorities and how to incentivize resource partners to contribute. Use these discussions as a basis to determine the future viability of the Fund and ways of maximizing the investments from resource partners.
Action by:	FVC Executive Committee, FVC Secretariat, FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division, FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget
Strategic recommendations	
1. Improve FVC's potential to be a catalytic instrument *This could be accomplished through the following actions:*	1.1 Refocus the FVC on forward-looking initiatives that could be transformational for FAO. Utilize FVC funds to pursue opportunities that have the potential to yield higher rewards for FAO, even if that means that they also entail higher risks.
	1.2 Be more selective. Shift away from funding a high share of proposals and asking each of them to reduce their proposed scope and budget to instead make it possible for funded teams to pursue their full ambition.
	1.3 Scale back the selection criteria to enable projects to work intensively in one country rather than driving them to spread support thinly across multiple countries in order to be funded. Similarly, allow proposals to focus on being either innovative or focused on scaling rather than requiring that each funded proposal attempt both simultaneously.
	1.4 Set aside resources to continue to track the longer-term outcomes of FVC subprogrammes even after their implementation periods end, to substantiate the catalytic returns on FVC investments. In particular, set up processes to carefully monitor the extent to which FVC investments enable FAO to access other sources of funding, build new partnerships and establish FAO's expertise in new areas.
Action by:	Executive Committee, FVC Secretariat, FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships, FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget
2. Enhance strategic prioritization in the FVC selection process *This could be accomplished through the following actions:*	2.1 Develop and implement a clear, transparent and criteria-based process for strategically prioritizing FVC investments within the Strategic Framework 2022–2031, distinguishing this from simple alignment with the four betters. This should move beyond the current largely applicant-led approach and be driven by a systematic analysis of corporate strategic priorities, including identified underfunded or high-impact areas, and communicated transparently to applicants through calls for proposals.
	2.2 Strengthen accountability and align with the FAO principle of subsidiarity, perhaps by reformulating the Executive Committee to include two Deputy Director-Generals and one Assistant Director-General serving on a rotational basis.
	2.3 Standardize and clearly define key selection criteria – such as critical gaps, scalability and innovation – across all guidance documents, assessment templates and decision-making processes. To enhance clarity, consider consolidating all FVC operational and guidance documents into a single, comprehensive document (e.g. manual) that articulates explicit definitions, benchmarks and application procedures.
	2.4 Improve attention to marginalized groups. Continue to provide explicit and targeted attention to women and youth within FVC investments and consider how to target other marginalized groups, such as Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities, moving beyond broad alignment to concrete actions in project design and implementation.

Main recommendation	Description and subrecommendations
Action by:	Executive Committee, FVC Secretariat and FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships
3. Strengthen resource mobilization and visibility for the FVC *This could be accomplished through the following actions:*	3.1 Develop a comprehensive resource mobilization plan and related action steps for the FVC that clearly articulate its value proposition, targets and objectives. It should include specific incentives for donors to provide unearmarked or softly earmarked funds – such as recognition, preferential partnership opportunities or alignment with strategic priorities – and outline commitments from FAO to maximize the use of flexible funds, including recognition of resource partners' contributions.
	3.2 Increase the visibility of the FVC within FAO's corporate Resource Mobilization Strategy and Medium-Term Plan, in line with aspirations for it to be at the centre of delivering results for FAO.
Action by:	FVC Coordination Unit in coordination with the FAO Project Support Division and the FAO Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division
4. Increase efficiency and continue to improve FVC processes *This could be accomplished through the following actions:*	4.1 Review and adjust FVC ways of working to better support FAO's shift towards a more programmatic approach, including better integration of the FVC in corporate planning and reporting.
	4.2 Continue to strengthen efforts to monitor outcomes of FVC investments and generate evidence of impact. Address the FAO-wide challenge of insufficient disaggregated data by establishing clearer requirements and systems within the FVC to track and monitor the extent to which marginalized and vulnerable groups are reached and benefit from FVC initiatives.
	4.3 Build on the progress that has been made in strengthening internal communication, focusing on increasing transparency of FVC processes, decision-making, and enhancing knowledge management regarding funded subprogrammes and results.
	4.4 Consider lessons learned from the cost analysis exercise for future evaluations, including the need for comparative analysis to determine the cost-efficiency of the FVC in relation to other similar funding mechanisms.
Action by:	FVC Coordination Unit in coordination with the FAO Project Support Division and FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget

1. Introduction and approach

1. This section summarizes the purpose, objectives and scope of the review. It provides an overview of the users and outlines the methodology that was used and the limitations that had a bearing on the exercise.

1.1 Introduction and context

2. The subject of this evaluation is the Flexible Voluntary Contribution (FVC) Fund, previously known as the Flexible Multi-Partner Mechanism (FMM),[5] which is a pooled funding tool established to support the implementation of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) strategic goals.

3. The evaluation is situated within the broader context of recent shifts in global funding patterns for the United Nations (UN) development system, which has included a notable decline in core (flexible) resources relative to overall funding, alongside a corresponding increase in tightly earmarked funds for specific projects (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2024). This trend impedes the UN's capacity to strategically respond to national needs, adapt to evolving circumstances and efficiently and coherently implement development programmes.

4. FAO's own resource mobilization trends reflect these global challenges, underscoring the strategic importance of flexible instruments like the FVC. In the 2022–2023 biennium, 76 percent of FAO's Programme of Work and Budget was derived from voluntary contributions, indicating a substantial dependency on resource partners (FAO, 2024c). A critical issue is the degree of earmarking: 99 percent of extrabudgetary contributions were reported as fully earmarked, severely restricting FAO's organizational flexibility and adaptability in addressing complex, long-term developmental challenges (FAO, 2023a). By late 2024, FAO reported that 2 percent of voluntary contributions were provided as flexible or unearmarked funding (FAO, 2025a). This has contributed to significant project fragmentation. Indications from the literature review suggest that the volume of flexible funding available to FAO is towards the lower end when compared to other UN agencies.[6] This challenge is further compounded by an estimated 7.1 percent fall in international aid from official donors in 2024 compared to 2023, marking the first drop after five years of growth.[7]

5. It is within this challenging funding landscape that the FVC emerges as a strategically important pooled funding instrument. Launched in 2010, the FVC provides flexible, voluntary and multiyear contributions to FAO and its partners, supporting global, regional

[5] For purposes of clarity, the Fund will be referred to as the FVC in this report, irrespective of the funding phase.

[6] The United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the budgetary and financial situation of the organizations of the United Nations system Financial Statistics database is a comprehensive source for detailed breakdowns by agency, though navigating it to get the latest comparable figures across all agencies requires careful data extraction. While it is possible to make agency estimates, the lack of official figures means that it is not feasible to share these. See (UN General Assembly, 2024).

[7] See, for example, (The New Humanitarian, 2025).

and country-level programmes. It is designed to align with FAO's four betters (better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life), which seek to enhance the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The FVC operates through two funding arrangements: non-earmarked and softly earmarked contributions, offering more flexibility than tightly project-specific earmarking. It directly supports the FAO Programme of Work and Budget, channelling pooled funds from multiple resource partners to selected subprogrammes. Decisions on the use of these contributions are made by the FVC Executive Committee, with guidance from the Resource Partners Advisory Group (RPAG) (FAO, 2022a). The FVC's theory of change (TOC) posits that the availability of increased pooled flexible funds, when applied programmatically, will reduce transaction costs and fragmentation, ultimately increasing value for money (FAO, 2023c).

6. Created in 2010, the FVC has had four distinctive phases: 2010–2013, 2014–2017, 2018–2021[8] and 2022–2025. Over its operational history, the FVC has demonstrated significant growth and reach. The total value of FVC funding has consistently increased across phases: USD 27.4 million for 2010–2013, USD 47.7 million for 2014–2017 and USD 66.03 million for 2018–2021 (FAO, 2023b). For the current 2022–2025 phase, partners committed USD 54.90 million by May 2025.[9] The FVC has also successfully broadened its support base, with the number of resource partners increasing from 4 (2014–2017 funding cycle) to 11 (2018–2021 funding cycle), marking a 36 percent increase. In the most recent 2018–2021 phase, 53 FVC subprogrammes were implemented in 93 countries globally, with slightly over half the fund invested in Africa (FAO, 2023b). A complete list of FVC subprogrammes funded through the 2018–2021 cycle is provided in the supplementary material, including the amount awarded, implementing countries, lead technical unit, period of performance and mapping to FAO's Strategic Objectives.

7. Three previous evaluations of the FVC have been undertaken, covering its earlier phases (2010–2013, 2014–2017 and 2018–2021). These evaluations consistently affirmed the strategic importance and potential of the FVC as a flexible funding instrument supporting FAO's priorities. However, they also identified recurring challenges, which include a lack of clarity and formalization of procedures, weaknesses in monitoring and reporting, limited engagement of Decentralized Offices, challenges in resource mobilization, and the inherent tension between earmarking and flexibility (FAO, 2021a). This current evaluation is designed to build upon these prior assessments, examining how the FVC has evolved and responded to previous recommendations, thereby aiming to further enhance its effectiveness and demonstrate its compelling value.

1.2 Purpose of the evaluation

8. This evaluation provides FAO and its resource partners with an independent assessment of the performance and contributions of FVC investments in achieving the FAO Strategic Objectives. It is anticipated that these will inform the design, implementation, results management, reporting and monitoring of the FVC in its next phase.[10]

[8] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions, the deadline for implementing interventions funded during this phase was extended to end of 2023.
[9] Fund monitoring by the FVC Secretariat.
[10] The terms of reference (TORs) for the evaluation are reproduced in Annex 1.

9. The evaluation examines how FVC-funded interventions have incorporated gender equality and cross-cutting issues and how effectively these have reached and benefited marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities.

1.3 Intended users

10. The main users of the evaluation are the FVC Resource Partners, FAO senior management, the FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division and the FVC Coordination Unit within such Division.

11. The results of the evaluation are also of interest to the divisions at FAO headquarters responsible for the design and implementation of programmes, particularly the FAO technical units and Programme Priority Area (PPA) leads, and Decentralized Offices (Regional Offices and Country Offices) involved in the implementation of FVC-funded programmes.

1.4 Scope of the evaluation

12. Details of the scope of the evaluation are outlined in Table 1.

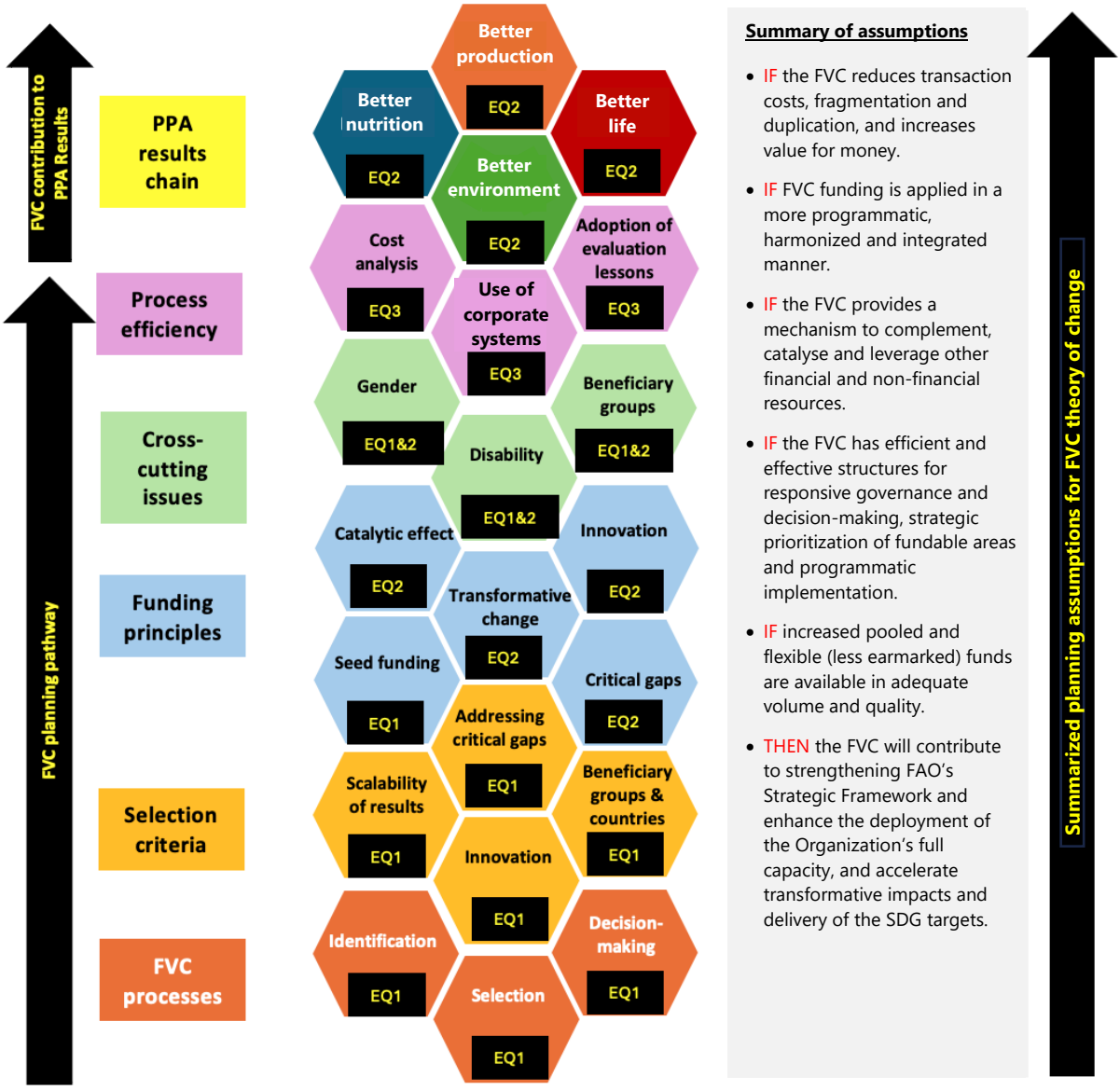
Table 1. Scope of the evaluation

Scope	Description
Substantive scope	The evaluation focused on the FVC funding process and the 53 subprogrammes that received funding from it during the 2018–2021 funding cycle.
Geographic scope	The geographic scope of the evaluation is global, consistent with the mandate of the FVC.
Temporal scope	The focus of the temporal scope is on the 2018–2021 phase, as all the subprogrammes have now been completed. It also includes the 2022–2025 phase in order to assess the process changes implemented in response to the previous evaluation.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

1.5 Evaluation questions, analytical framework and evaluation matrix

Figure 1. Analytical framework



Note: "EQ" refers to "evaluation question".

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

13. The evaluation addresses three key areas of enquiry:

    i. Evaluation question (EQ) 1: Relevance – What is the value added of the FVC in supporting the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031?

    ii. EQ 2: Effectiveness – How effective has the FVC been in contributing to the implementation of the FAO Strategic Framework?

    iii. EQ 3: Efficiency – How efficiently is the FVC implemented?

14. An analytical framework was developed to guide the evaluation (Figure 1). It drew on the evaluation questions outlined in the terms of reference (TOR) as its primary framework. It

then places these in the context of the FVC's TOC.[11] Consistent with the TORs, the framework focuses on specific aspects of the FVC's processes and performance. The analytical framework includes a summary of the assumptions outlined in the TOC, which describe the conditions required for the fund to be effective.

15. The evaluation questions and analytical framework were used as the basis for the development of an evaluation matrix which provided a foundation for the evaluation and outlines indicators for each evaluation question, method and data source. The evaluation matrix is reproduced in Appendix 4.

1.6 Methodology

16. A mixed-methods approach was adopted for data collection and analysis. The evaluation ensured methodological rigour through i) the collection of both primary and secondary data across the evaluation period and triangulation of evidence across multiple data sources; ii) the combination of evaluation tools and multiple analytical methods; and iii) rigorous comparative qualitative analysis through the use of an evidence summary approach. The main methods for data collection and analysis are outlined below.

1.6.1 Document review

17. The Evaluation Team conducted a review of global and country documentation. The document review included: i) key corporate and global documents, including the FAO Strategic Framework; ii) FVC-specific documents, including the governance documents, terminal reports, annual progress reports, past evaluations, relevant FVC publications, expenditure and budgets; and iii) external reviews and evaluation reports. Reports and other documents that were utilized for the evaluation are listed in the References section.

1.6.2 Key informant interviews

18. The Evaluation Team conducted semistructured interviews with 114 people. These comprised representatives of FVC resource partners, staff of the FVC Coordination Unit and the FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division, personnel at FAO headquarters involved in the implementation of past and/or current phases of FVC, Regional Office personnel as well as personnel in selected Country Offices, government partners, beneficiary organizations and community members. A full list of interviewees is provided in Appendix 1.

1.6.3 Online survey

19. An online survey was prepared and disseminated to solicit the views of FAO personnel and resource partners. It comprised two parts: the purpose of module one was to strengthen and triangulate evidence; the purpose of module two was to gather additional evidence on the status of past subprogrammes. A total of 48 respondents (Lead Technical Officers [LTOs]) from FAO provided information on 38 of the 2018–2021 subprogrammes, and five resource partners also participated in the survey.

[11] The FVC TOC is reproduced in Appendix 2.

1.6.4 Cost-effectiveness analysis

20. The methodology used to undertake the FVC cost analysis involved a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data. For the cost data, the analysis employed "cost economy", which is defined as a systematic examination of a programme to assess the cost of resources used. This approach is specifically an "expenditure analysis", grounded in actual financial outflows, drawing data from accounting or financial systems.[12] Non-cost quantitative data, such as time and personnel counts, were analysed using descriptive methods, while qualitative data served to complement and contextualize the quantitative findings, providing illustrative examples.

21. The data collection and analysis followed a step-by-step process, beginning with a desk review of relevant documents to establish a foundation and identify data gaps. The analysis then separated the FVC funding process into three distinct phases. For each phase, specific tasks were listed, and the stakeholders involved in those tasks were identified together with their respective sources of financing.[13]

22. Data collection approaches varied by stakeholder group: FVC Coordination Account expenditures (November 2018 to April 2025) were extracted directly from accounting reports; estimates of time spent on FVC tasks for Executive Committee members and one FVC Secretariat member, financed by the FAO General Account, were collected via interviews and multiplied by base salary for cost estimation; technical units, Decentralized Offices and Management were interviewed for personnel counts, time estimates and process information related to proposal submission, but their costs were not monetized. Cost estimates for support tasks financed by the FAO General Account were ultimately dropped from the analysis due to difficulties interviewees had in providing reliable time estimates.

23. The cost analysis methodology acknowledged significant limitations, which are summarized in section 1.7 of this report.

1.6.5 Gender and inclusion

24. The evaluation sought to analyse the extent to which FVC interventions have been gender-responsive and how effectively these have reached and benefited marginalized and vulnerable groups such as women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities through a systematic review that included i) engagement with FAO focal points and corporate policies/strategies to determine corporate guidance and benchmarks; ii) a review of FVC guidance documents and reports; and iii) a focus on the effect of selected FVC subprogrammes on gender and inclusion in the case study countries.

[12] An expenditure analysis differs from an economic evaluation as it does not include opportunity costs, the value of non-monetary inputs, amortization or depreciation. It also precedes more advanced analyses like cost-efficiency, cost-effectiveness or benefit-cost analysis.

[13] This revealed that while the FVC Coordination Account documented expenditures paid directly by resource partners, the FAO General Account also financially and operationally supported FVC activities.

1.6.6 Country case studies

25. In-person country case studies were conducted in Mauritania, Uganda and Zambia, and light-touch desk reviews were undertaken of the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Barbados. The case studies included interviews of headquarters-based Lead Technical Officers and Country Office-based FAO personnel, government partners and other stakeholders, which included beneficiaries.

26. The country case studies were selected on the basis of the number of FVC subprogrammes implemented, the diversity of the four betters addressed by the FVC interventions and geographic distribution. A range of additional selection criteria were then used to determine a reasonable level of geographic, programmatic and income level coverage of FVC investments (Table 2).

Table 2. Country and subprogramme sample

Country	Region	Income level	FVC contribution	No. of subprogrammes	Four betters
In-person case studies					
Uganda	FAO Subregional Office for Eastern Africa	Low-income country (LIC)	USD 4.5 million	14	better production, better nutrition, better environment, better life
Zambia	FAO Subregional Office for Southern Africa	Low- to middle-income country (LMIC)	USD 2.1 million	8	better production, better nutrition, better environment, better life
Mauritania	FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa	LMIC	USD 1.4 million	4	better production, better nutrition, better life
Desk reviews					
The Lao People's Democratic Republic	FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific	LMIC	USD 1.5 million	4	better production, better environment, better life
Barbados	FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean	Small Island Developing State (SIDS), middle-income country (MIC)	USD 0.3 million	1	better production, better nutrition, better environment, better life

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

1.6.7 Use of generative artificial intelligence for analysis

27. An artificial intelligence (AI) large language model (NotebookLM) was used to support some aspects of data analysis and synthesis for the evaluation. A structured process was adopted for its use in the evaluation, which is consistent with the FAO guidance (FAO, 2025b) and is summarized in Box 1.

Box 1. Process for the use of AI in the evaluation

- Selection and gathering of organizational documents for AI assessment and analysis.
- Identification and agreement on prompt techniques and optimal use of the software (NotebookLM).
- Design of standard prompts for specific questions and indicators, ensuring systematic assessment and alignment with evaluation objectives.
- Iterative testing and optimization of designed prompts to ensure output quality and usefulness.
- An approach to quality check AI analysis and input into the evaluation.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

28. The aspects of the evaluation which drew on AI analysis included:

    i. *Analysis of the terminal report and annexes*: this was used to complement team members' own analysis. The rationale for the use of AI for this task was that the report and annexes were lengthy (1 137 pages in total) and went beyond the resources for a manual analysis. AI was used to complete specific tasks, such as to identify trends, synthesize the evidence and extract relevant examples for inclusion in the evaluation report.

    ii. *Comparative analysis of evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations*: the three previous evaluation reports (undertaken in 2013, 2016 and 2021) were reviewed with assistance from AI in order to summarize the key findings and identify trends that were included in the context section of this report. Once identified, the trends were manually quality checked for accuracy.

    iii. *Targeted searches linked to specific evaluation questions*: for this task, AI was used as a research partner to complement the work of the Evaluation Team. This involved the use of AI to examine the document repository in order to identify evidence relevant to evaluation questions and indicators. This was used for the purposes of triangulation and to strengthen the evidence base for the evaluation findings presented in this report.

29. As recommended in FAO guidance, a focus was placed on using AI to "*enhance*" the evaluation, particularly in instances when the volume of data went beyond the team's own analysis capacity (FAO, 2025b). In this respect, AI enabled the Evaluation Team to undertake analysis that otherwise would not have been possible given the resources available.

1.6.8 Consultation, validation and reporting

30. The Evaluation Team drew on findings from the data collection phase to produce a draft evaluation report. This document and a presentation of the main findings were shared, discussed and validated with key stakeholders. The feedback gathered was collated and incorporated into a final version of the report.

1.7 Limitations

31. The evaluation encountered a range of limitations that influenced its process and outputs. These are listed in Table 3 alongside the accompanying mitigation measures that were adopted.

Table 3. Limitations and mitigation measures

Risk	Mitigation	Residual risk
Risks associated with clarity of the scope and scale of the evaluation		
A lack of clarity in key terms and criteria associated with the FVC	As highlighted in the previous FVC evaluation, there are key terms and criteria associated with the FVC that are either undefined or ill-defined or poorly understood (despite prior evaluations recommending the need for clarification). The Evaluation Team used a discrete number of terms for which a consistent interpretation was adopted.	Low
Risks associated with the quality and availability of data		
Limitations in the data to support rigorous cost analysis	i) Expenditures documented in the FVC Coordination Account represent only a portion of the total FVC management and support costs, and the analysis was unable to estimate costs not captured in this account. Aside from the Executive Committee and one FVC Secretariat member, other personnel or shared FVC managerial and support costs (such as overhead, facilities, supplies, equipment, etc.) paid through the FAO General Account were not included, which results in underestimated costs. ii) The costs used for the Executive Committee and one FVC Secretariat/Coordination Unit member are prospective estimates based only on base salary, which may also result in underestimation. iii) The expenditure data from the FVC Coordination Account covers a different time period than the estimates for the Executive Committee and one Secretariat member, making the data non-comparable. iv) FVC managerial and support costs paid through the FAO Regular Budget are derived from FAO Member assessed contributions, preventing a statement on the total amount paid by FVC resource partners both directly (via the FVC Coordination Account) and indirectly (through the FAO General Account or project budgets). v) Cost estimates for support tasks financed by the FAO General Account were ultimately dropped from the analysis due to difficulties interviewees had in providing reliable time estimates.	High
Limited scope to evidence the contribution of the FVC to outcomes and impact in FAO's PPA results chain	As outlined in the FVC theory of change (TOC) and results framework, outcomes are medium- to long-term changes, which are not explicitly captured by FAO or FVC monitoring and reporting mechanisms. Where relevant evidence existed for case study countries, this was reviewed by the Evaluation Team to the extent possible given time and resources. The online survey also sought to harvest additional data on this issue.	Medium
Risks associated with stakeholder accessibility and reliability		
The risk of poor data quality due to staff turnover	Staff turnover at both headquarters level and in Decentralized Offices meant that there were some gaps in subprogramme review. The impact of this was mitigated to an extent by interviewing a wide range of personnel and consultants; the comprehensive annual and terminal reports also played a key role in addressing knowledge gaps.	Low

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

1.8 Structure of the report

32. Following this introduction, section 2 of this report provides an overview of the FVC as a funding instrument, including its evolution from its commencement in 2010 to the current phase, the structure of the FVC and the TOC underpinning its operations. Sections 3, 4 and 5 discuss the key findings of the evaluation, which are organized around the key evaluation questions. Section 6 presents the conclusions and recommendations.

2. Background and context

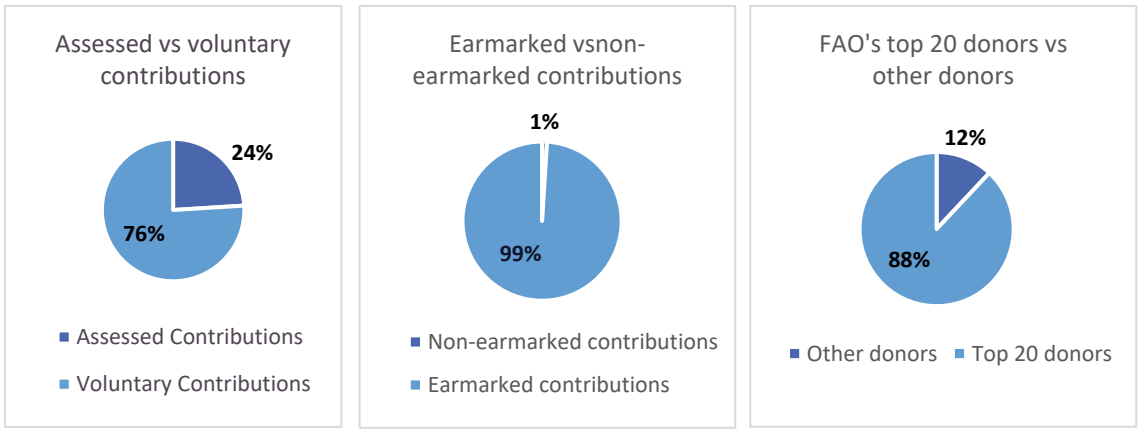
33. This section presents an overview of recent shifts in FAO's global funding, which provides important context for the evaluation. A history of the FAO FVC is then outlined, including its approach and past results and an explanation of how it seeks to deliver impact. Other funding instruments are referred to, including how they may contribute to this evaluation.

2.1 Context of voluntary contributions and flexible funding

34. Published in May 2024, the Funding Compact for the United Nations Support for the Sustainable Development Goals acknowledges that UN funding patterns have been characterized by a decline in core (flexible) resources relative to overall funding (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2024). It suggests that a rise in tightly earmarked funds for specific projects can limit the UN's ability to respond strategically to national needs and priorities, adapt to changing circumstances, and implement development programmes efficiently and coherently. The Funding Compact is a response to the growth in scale and complexity of global development challenges linked to the persistent underfunding of the UN development system to address them effectively, and represents a non-binding instrument for voluntary action by individual Member States, other cooperation partners and entities of the UN development system (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2024).

35. While advocating for more core resources, the Funding Compact also recognizes that not all earmarked funding is the same. It encourages a shift towards more softly earmarked contributions. Softly earmarked funding includes contributions to single-agency thematic funds, funding earmarked to a region or country programme without further restrictions, or contributions to multipartner trust funds that are flexible within the fund's TORs. This provides more flexibility than tightly project-specific earmarking (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2024).

Figure 2. FAO resource mobilization



Source: FAO. 2023a. Resource Mobilization Action Plan 2023. Rome. and FAO. 2024c. *Programme Implementation Report*. Rome.

36. FAO provides an overview of resource mobilization figures that are material to this evaluation (Figure 2). These include:

i. An increase in voluntary contributions: 76 percent of FAO's 2022–2023 Programme of Work and Budget stem from voluntary contributions, indicating a high dependency on resource partners rather than FAO's Members more generally.

ii. Project fragmentation: a total of 3 677 active projects in the Field Programme Management Information System (FPMIS), valued at USD 8.5 billion, demonstrates extensive fragmentation.

iii. Highly earmarked resources: 99 percent of the extrabudgetary contributions are fully earmarked, limiting organizational flexibility and adaptability in addressing complex, long-term developmental challenges.[14]

37. Linked to this, the recent Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) assessment raised concern about the detrimental effects of the increase in earmarked funding. The report notes that FAO faces a significant challenge due to the "rapid rise of earmarked contributions against the constraint of a regular budget that had remained flat for 12 years" (MOPAN, 2025). This imbalance is described as "hampering FAO's flexibility to allocate resources against its strategic objectives" (MOPAN, 2025), suggesting that a heavy reliance on resource partner-driven earmarked funds can pull the organization in multiple directions, making it harder to channel resources to core strategic priorities defined by FAO and its membership. The assessment suggests that the increase in extrabudgetary (earmarked) funding may lead to the "fragmentation of resources across too many operational areas, leaving some priorities underfunded" (MOPAN, 2025).

38. While a comparative analysis of research on the flexible funding of other UN agencies is outside the scope of the exercise, indications from the literature review are that the volume of flexible funding that FAO has available to it is toward the lower end when compared to other UN agencies.[15]

39. This challenge is further exacerbated by the recent changes in the development aid funding landscape; in April 2024, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that international aid from official resource partners fell in 2024 by 7.1 percent in real terms compared to 2023, the first drop after five years of consecutive growth (OECD, 2025). While estimates vary, the widely reported reductions in development assistance by many resource partners in 2025 have already resulted in termination of work and considerable disruption, and there is growing acceptance of the significant challenges that lie ahead.[16]

[14] It is noteworthy that a 2025 FAO publication reported that "*just 2 percent of voluntary contributions [are] provided as flexible or unearmarked funding",* which differs from the 1 percent figure cited in the Resource Mobilization report. See (FAO, 2025a).

[15] The United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the budgetary and financial situation of the organizations of the United Nations system Financial Statistics database is a comprehensive source for detailed breakdowns by agency, though navigating it to get the latest comparable figures across all agencies requires careful data extraction. While it is possible to make agency estimates, the lack of official figures means that it is not feasible to share these. See (UN General Assembly, 2024).

[16] See, for example, (The New Humanitarian, 2025).

2.2 Introduction to the FAO Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund

40. The FVC is a pooled funding instrument that provides flexible, voluntary and multiyear contributions to FAO and its partners to respond to development challenges. Since its launch in 2010, FVC has supported global, regional and country-level programmes. Aligned with FAO's four betters (better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life), FVC supports flexible funding approaches that enhance the achievement of the SDGs. The pooled funds from multiple resource partners are flexibly channelled to subprogrammes that contribute to the FAO Medium-Term Plan (MTP). The FVC is not a pass-through funding instrument, but one that ensures that funds contributed are used to achieve tangible results by directly supporting the FAO Programme of Work and Budget (FAO, 2022a). Salient aspects of the evolution of the FVC since its establishment in 2010 are outlined in Figure 3. In particular, during the 2018–2021 phase, funding was initially allocated under five programmes which corresponded to FAO's Strategic Objectives at the time; hence, each award was referred to as a subprogramme. During that phase, the Executive Committee solicited proposals directly from technical units, whereas during the 2022–2025 phase, the FVC shifted to using a call for proposals modality[17] through which all technical units and Regional Offices have been invited to submit their ideas for funding; although the selection process is no longer structured according to programmes, the terminology of each award being referred to as a subprogramme has been retained.

Figure 3. Evolution of Flexible Voluntary Contributions

	2010–2013	2010–2013	2018–2021	2022–2025
Name	FAO's Multi-Partner Programme Support Mechanism (FMM)		Flexible Multi-Partner Mechanism (FMM)	Flexible Voluntary Contributions (FVC)
Strategic reference	FAO's Strategic Objectives (SO) from 2010–2019 Framework; Each SO was an FMM Programme		Transition phase from SOs to four betters	Four betters and Priority Programme Areas
Funding modality	Funds allocated to specific SOs according to resource partner priorities		Initially as in previous phases with first call for proposals in 2021	Calls for proposals
Funding topics	SO1: Help eliminate hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition SO3: Reduce rural poverty SO4: Enable inclusive and efficient agricultural and food systems	Same as 2010–2013 plus SO2: Make agriculture, forestry and fisheries more productive and sustainable (SO5: Increase the resilience of livelihoods to threats and crises was not funded)	Funding awarded based on SOs; retroactively aligned with four betters	Alignment with the four betters, but all proposals reviewed together rather than by better as in previous phases
Number of Resource partners	3	4	11	8
Value of fund (USD)	27 371 303	47 739 518	66 034 552	54 424 433
Number of Sub-programmes	7	24	52	50

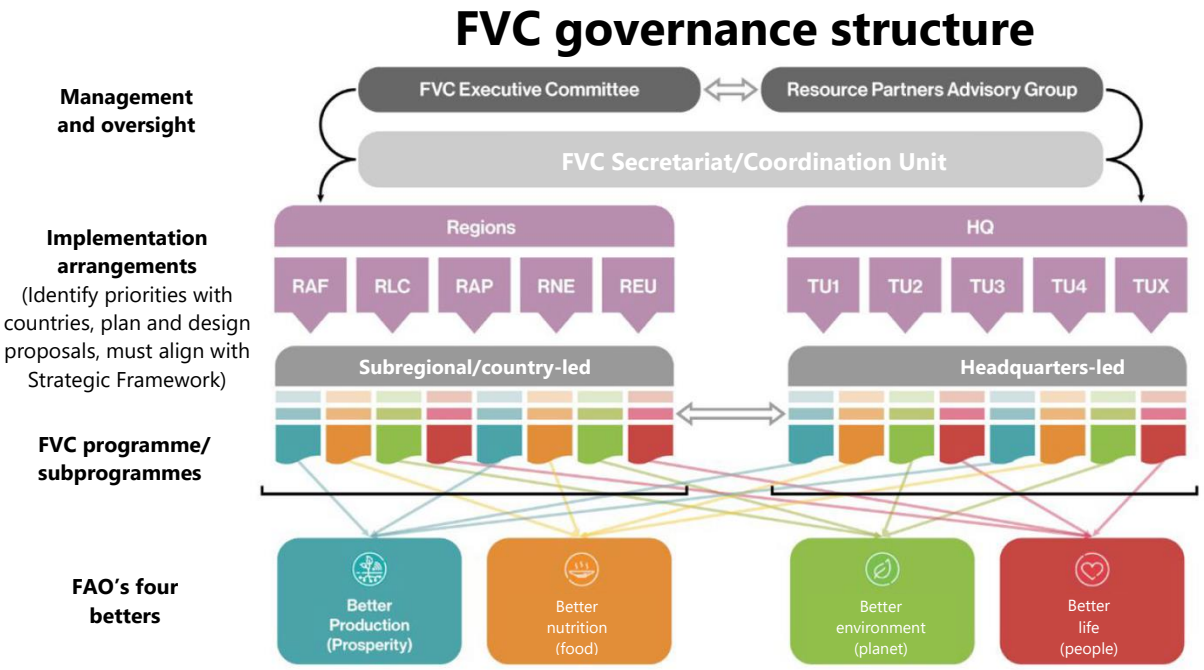
Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data provided by the FVC Secretariat.

41. The FVC has two funding arrangements: non-earmarked and softly earmarked contributions. Non-earmarked funds can fund interventions under any of the FVC programmes. Softly earmarked funds can be allocated to support work under one or more FVC subprogrammes at the level of the four betters, as per the resource partner's

[17] The call for proposals approach was piloted on a smaller scale in 2021 as a means of allocating remaining funds in the FVC account, following recommendations from the 2021 evaluation to enhance the inclusivity of the funding process.

agreement. The governance arrangements for the FVC are outlined in Figure 4, and its key elements are described below.

Figure 4. Governance structure of the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund



Note: RAF = FAO Regional Office for Africa; RLC = FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean; RAP = FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific; RNE = FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa; REU = FAO Regional Office for Europe and Centra Asia; TU = technical unit.

Source: FAO. 2023b. *FVC Governance Document, 2022–2025*. Rome.

42. Decisions on the use of the voluntary contributions – whether earmarked or softly earmarked – are made by the Executive Committee, with guidance from the RPAG. A Coordination Unit based in the FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division is responsible for overall fund management. The roles of these governance units are summarized below:

    i. The Executive Committee consists of FAO Deputy Director General(s), with the FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division as Secretariat. This Committee is the decision-making body and sets priorities in line with FAO's Strategic Framework.

    ii. The RPAG includes all resource partners contributing to the prevailing FVC phase. Non-contributing potential resource partners may be invited on ad hoc basis as guests/observers in FVC events. The group provides strategic advice, feedback and perspectives to shape the overall direction of the FVC, including its governance arrangements and management.

    iii. The FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division serves as the FVC Secretariat under the leadership of the Division's Director, and the day-to-day management is led by the FVC Coordination Unit.

    iv. The FVC Secretariat manages the overall FVC financial portfolio to address FAO's priorities. This includes coordinating financial contributions, fund allocations,

disbursements and programming; facilitating resource mobilization and partnerships; monitoring, reporting and raising awareness and visibility; organizing consultations, strategic dialogues and field trips with resource partners; supporting evaluation; and developing relevant programme documents. It also ensures the use of appropriate guidelines, templates and procedures to support quality assurance, compliance and accountability (FAO, 2022a).

2.3 Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund theory of change and implementation

43. The TOC for the FVC is presented in Appendix 2. It is aligned with the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031, underpinning the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems for better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life, leaving no-one behind. As articulated in the FAO Medium-Term Plan, these four betters reflect the interconnected economic, social and environmental dimensions of the agrifood systems. The 20 Programme Priority Areas are designed to contribute to the realization of the four betters and ultimately the SDG targets.

44. The TOC states that the performance of the fund is contingent on a series of assumptions. For the purposes of the evaluation, these have been summarized in the analytical framework and are outlined in Box 2.

Box 2. Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund theory of change assumptions

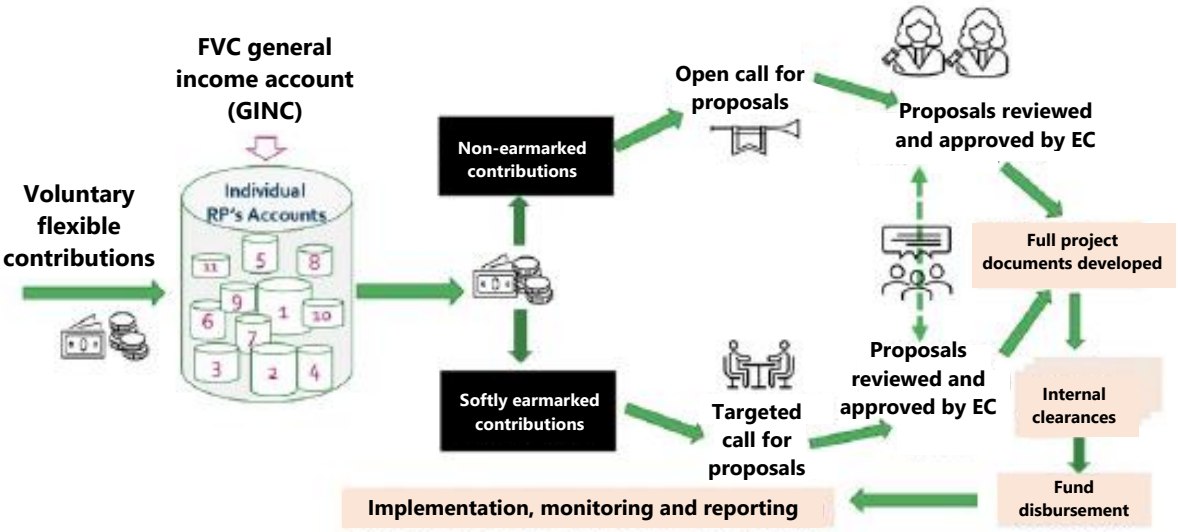
The FVC's TOC statement is based on the assumptions that:

- if increased pooled flexible funds are available in adequate volume and quality, it will help strengthen FAO's Strategic Framework and the delivery of SDG targets;
- if increased pooled flexible funds are applied in a more programmatic integrated manner, it will reduce transaction costs, fragmentation and duplication, thus increasing value for money;
- if effective and responsive governance and strategic prioritization of flexible funds are placed at the centre of delivering results, it will enhance FAO's contribution to the achievement of the SDGs; and
- if both FAO and its Members fulfil their shared responsibilities for the UN Reform in the context of the UN Funding Compact, it will accelerate the achievement of the SDGs.

Source: FAO. 2023c. FVC theory of change and results framework. Rome.

45. The FVC benefits from a suite of guidance documentation that includes the TOC and results framework, governance and operational guidance. These provide a foundation for the operations of the instrument. The schematic FVC process flow diagram provides a chapeau and assists in understanding the FVC selection, allocation and programming processes (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Schematic representation of the process of contributing, allocating and programming Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund resources to priority subprogrammes (projects)



Note: EC = Executive Committee; RP = resource partner.

Source: FAO. 2023g. *Flexible Voluntary Contribution (FVC) (2022–2025) Programme Operational Guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures.* Rome.

2.3.1 Subprogramme selection and funding criteria

46. To maximize the pooling of resources, decentralization and transparency of allocations, in the 2022–2025 phase, FVC subprogrammes are created based on calls for proposals, where the most successful initiatives are identified and selected by the FVC Executive Committee. Headquarters units and Decentralized Offices can submit fundable ideas based on the priorities outlined. The FVC allocates its resources according to a set of funding criteria, which are applied to subprogramme proposals to ensure alignment.

2.4 Overview of previous evaluation findings

47. Three previous evaluations of the FVC have been undertaken across all three FVC funding phases; 2010–2013, 2014–2017 and 2018–2021. A review of the objectives and scope of the evaluations, an assessment of the size of the fund, and a summary of the findings, conclusions and recommendations provide important background for this evaluation and are provided in Annex 2.[18] Several recurring themes emerge regarding the performance and operational aspects of the FVC which are material to this evaluation and are summarized below. It is important to note that the FVC Secretariat engaged constructively with each evaluation and took steps to formally respond to and address the recommendations made.

[18] The contents for this section are derived from the three evaluation reports (FAO, 2013, 2016, 2021a).

2.4.1 Strategic importance and potential of the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund for FAO

48. All three evaluations consistently highlight the strategic importance and potential of the FVC as a flexible funding instrument that supports FAO's priorities and channels voluntary contributions through FAO's corporate systems. It is seen as a valuable instrument for providing unearmarked or lightly earmarked funds.

2.4.2 Lack of clarity and formalization of procedures

49. A significant and persistent issue raised in all evaluations has been the lack of clarity, formalization and transparency surrounding FVC procedures, particularly concerning the prioritization and allocation of resources. This lack of formal documentation, unlike other FAO funding instruments, created uncertainty among stakeholders, including resource partners and FAO implementation units, and left room for diverse interpretations and application of criteria. Recommendations across the evaluations call for clarifying and reviewing these procedures, providing more precise definitions for allocation criteria, and adopting standard documentation formats.

2.4.3 Monitoring, reporting and documentation weaknesses

50. Monitoring and reporting systems and processes are identified as areas of weakness in all three evaluations, suggesting a need for better systems and documentation, and the need for better integration of reporting with FAO's corporate systems.

2.4.4 Engagement of Decentralized Offices

51. The limited involvement and awareness of FAO's Decentralized Offices (Regional and Country offices) and national stakeholders in the design and planning processes is a recurring concern, particularly in the more recent evaluations (2016/2021). Recommendations consistently call for increasing the participation and ownership of Decentralized Offices in concept note design and implementation planning.

2.4.5 Resource mobilization, marketing and resource partner base

52. The challenge of attracting and retaining a broader base of resource partners and securing sufficient funding has been a consistent theme. Successive evaluations recommended outreach to potential partners and vigorous marketing (2013/2016) and the need for continued visibility of the FVC to retain existing support and attract new partners and investments (2021).

2.4.6 Earmarking vs flexibility

53. The inherent tension between the FVC's design principle of providing unearmarked or lightly earmarked flexible funding and the reality of varying degrees of earmarking preferred by resource partners is noted in all three evaluations. Differing degrees of earmarking were noted as constraining resource allocation according to Strategic Objectives and preventing the FVC from operating as a single programmatic fund (2013/2016); and allowing for partner preferences to continue to fragment the fund (2021).

2.4.7 Reducing transaction costs and increasing efficiency

54. The potential for FVC to contribute to reduced transaction costs for both FAO and resource partners is mentioned as a potential benefit in all three evaluations. The 2013 and 2016 reports highlight the difficulty in collecting solid data on efficiency gains from the FVC in order to evidence this; and the 2013 evaluation made a case for charging lower project servicing costs for the FVC in order to incentivize resource partners' engagement with the FVC.

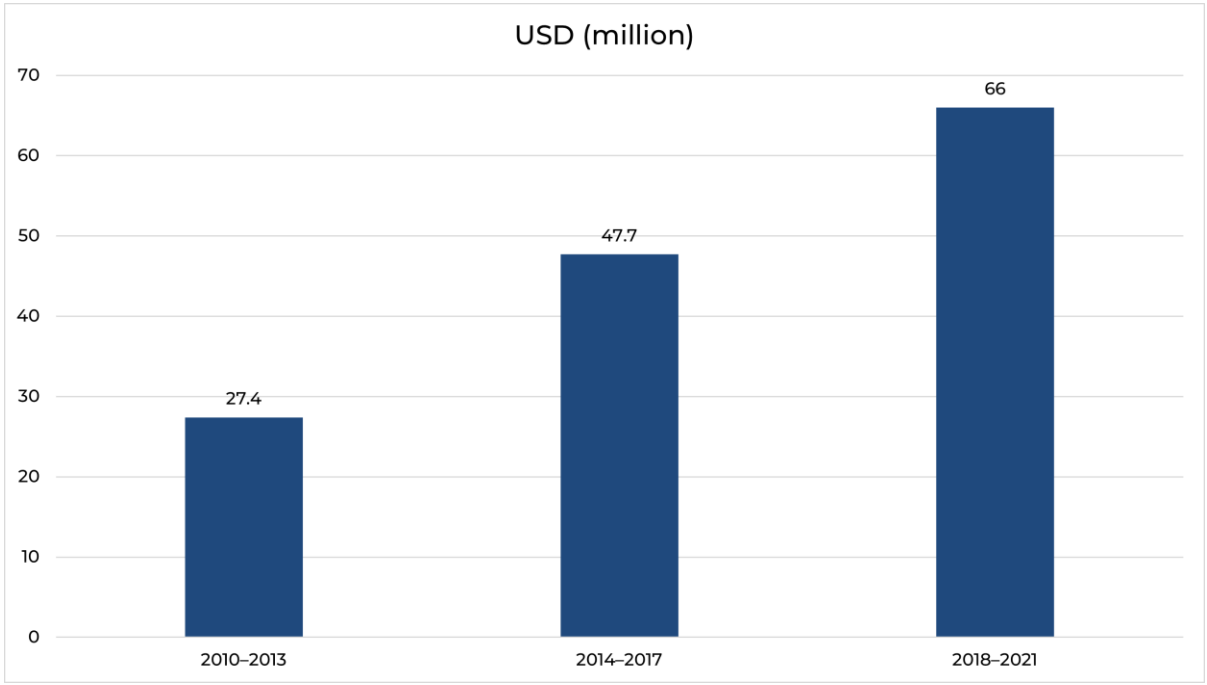
2.4.8 Summary of key issues and an agenda for the 2025 evaluation

55. In aggregate, the evaluations collectively paint a picture of the FVC as an instrument with significant strategic potential that has undergone incremental improvements over time, particularly in governance and management. However, persistent challenges remain, notably around clarifying and formalizing operational procedures, strengthening monitoring and reporting systems, ensuring greater involvement of Decentralized Offices and external stakeholders, expanding the resource partner base, navigating differing expectations on earmarking, and demonstrating efficiency benefits like reduced transaction costs. Many of these issues are evident in the TORs for this evaluation and have been addressed in this report.

2.5 Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund portfolio analysis for the 2018–2021 phase

56. During the 2018–2021 phase of the FVC, the funding cycle and implementation period were decoupled for the first time to facilitate the full implementation of initiatives. As a consequence, funds received from resource partners during the 2018–2021 phase (totalling USD 66.03 million) supported the implementation of 53 FVC subprogrammes until the end of 2023 (see Appendix 3) (FAO, 2023b).

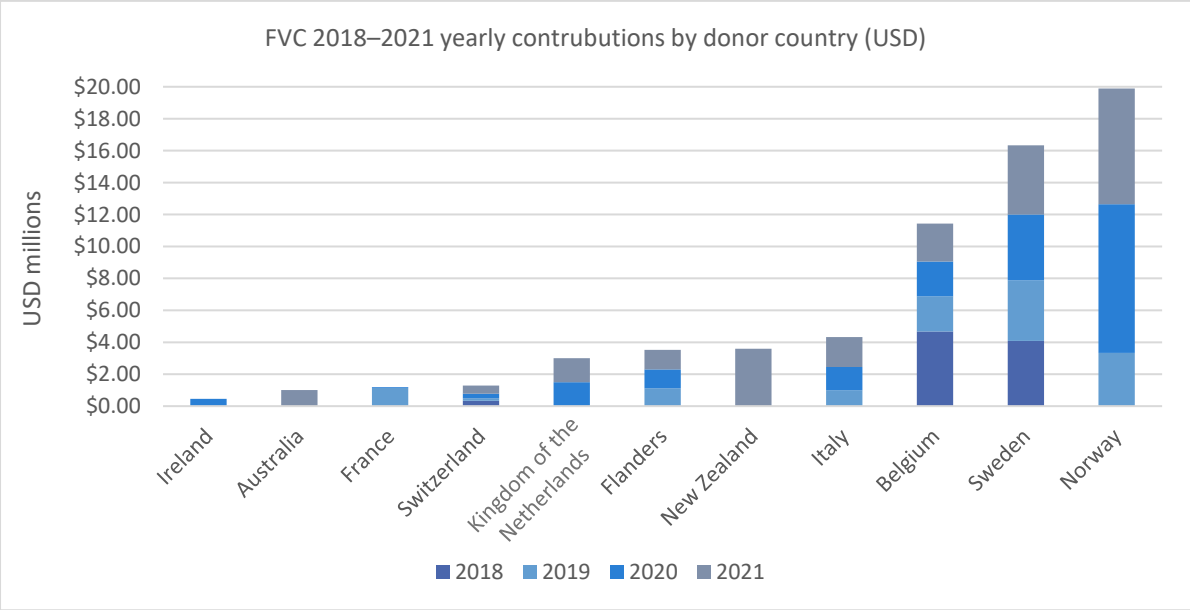
Figure 6. Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund resource partner contribution, 2010–2021



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

57. The total funding contributed by FVC resource partners increased from USD 47.7 million in the previous phase (2014–2017) to USD 66.03 million in the 2018–2021 funding phase, marking a 38.4 percent increase (Figure 6). The number of partners contributing to the FVC increased from 4 (2014–2017 funding cycle) to 11 (2018–2021 funding cycle) – a 36.4 percent increase. Norway, Sweden and Belgium were the top three contributors by grant size (Figure 7).[19]

Figure 7. Total contributions by donor country, 2018–2021 (USD million)



Source: FAO. 2023. *FVC Annual Report, 2023*. Rome.

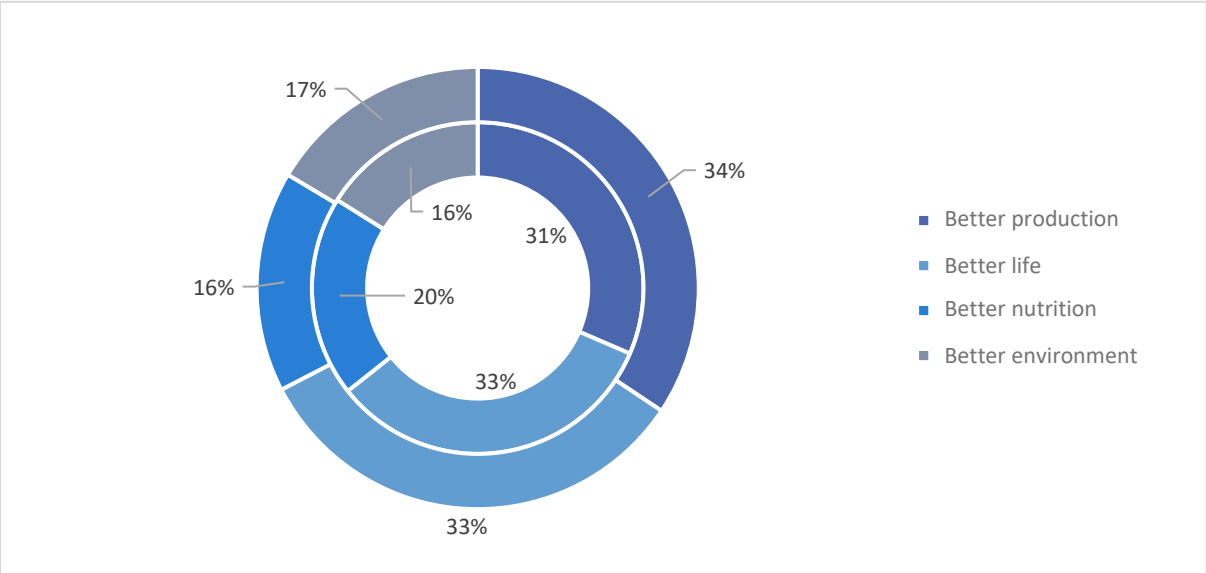
2.5.1 Thematic coverage of the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund (2018–2021)

58. Figure 8 illustrates the percentage of subprogrammes (outer ring) and the percentage of financial allocations (inner ring) across the four betters for the 2018–2021 phase.[20] The largest financial allocation was directed towards better production, accounting for 35 percent of the total, with 31 percent or 45 dedicated subprogrammes. The next largest allocation was for better life, which received 33 percent of the financial allocations and constituted 33 percent or 47 subprogrammes. Better environment and better nutrition both represented 16 percent of the financial distributions, with 23 (16 percent) and 28 (20 percent) subprogrammes, respectively (FAO, 2023b).

[19] In the current 2022–2025 phase, partners have committed USD 54.90 million (to date), which includes USD 13.6 million received in both 2022 and 2023.

[20] The subprogrammes in the 2018–2021 phase were retroactively aligned to the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031, which is based on the four betters and the 20 PPAs. Since FVC subprogrammes generally contribute to multiple PPAs, these allocations should only be considered as indicative.

Figure 8. Number of subprogrammes and percentage of financial allocations by four betters for the 2018–2021 phase



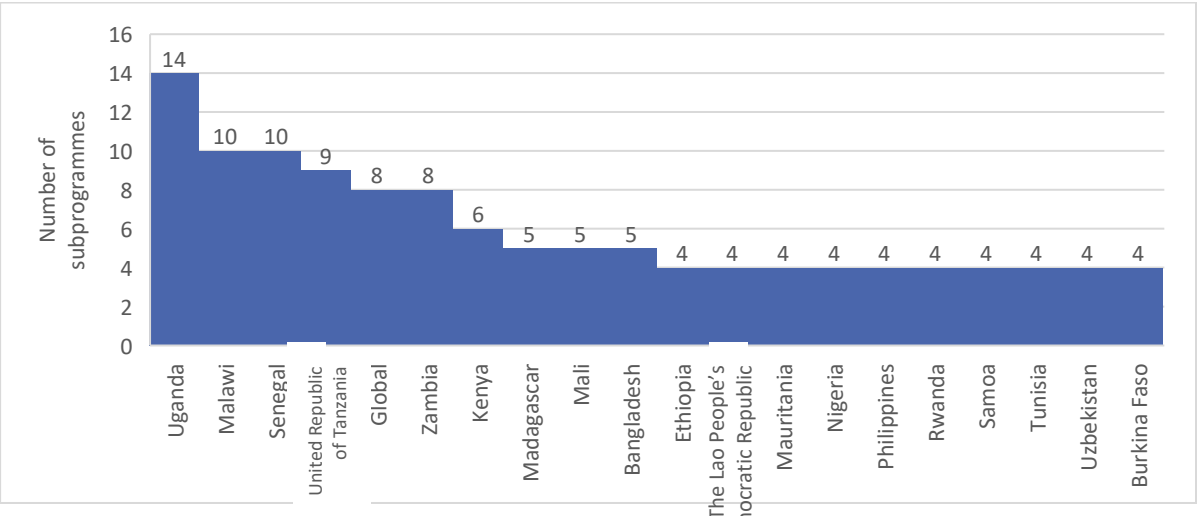
Source: FVC. 2023b. *FVC Terminal Report, 2018-2021, November 2023*. Rome.

2.5.2 Recipient countries of the FVC

60. The focus of the FVC is on low-income countries, which is reflected in the distribution of subprogrammes and is illustrated in Figure 9. Uganda had the greatest number of subprogrammes during the 2018–2021 phase, followed by Malawi and Senegal. Samoa is an example of the secondary focus of the FVC on Small Island Developing States (SIDS). As shown in the supplementary material, most subprogrammes were implemented across multiple countries; there is only one case in which an FVC subprogramme was implemented in a single country (FMM/GLO/148/MUL in Malawi).

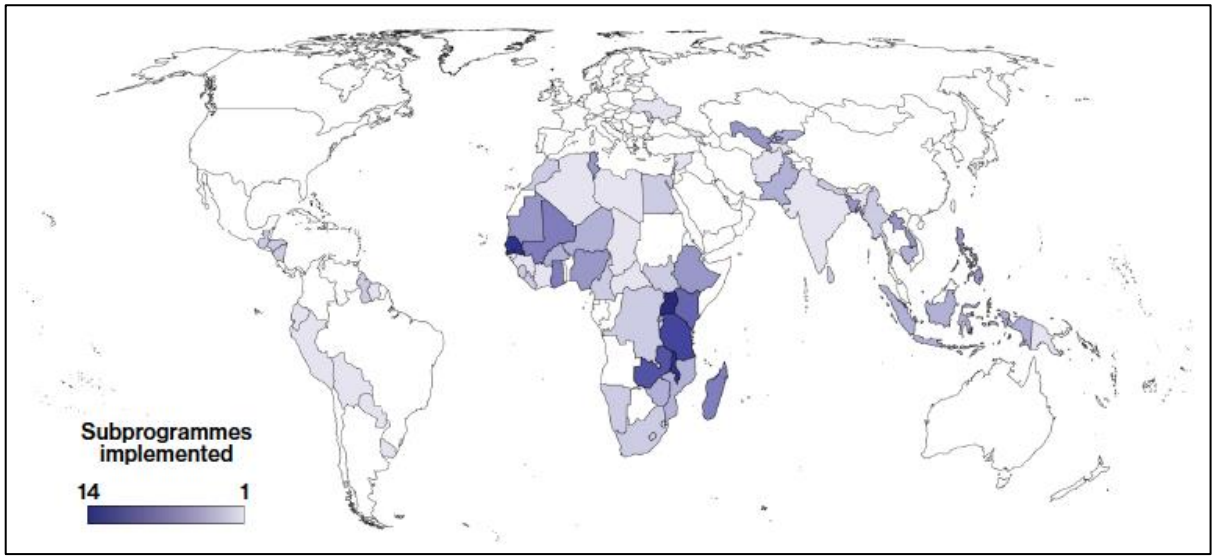
61. Figure 10 shows the geographic distribution of FVC-funded subprogrammes in each of the 93 countries of implementation.

Figure 9. Countries with four or more Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund subprogrammes, 2018–2021



Source: FAO. n.d. Field Programme Management Information System.

Figure 10. Geographical distribution of flexible voluntary contribution-funded subprogrammes (2018–2021 phase)

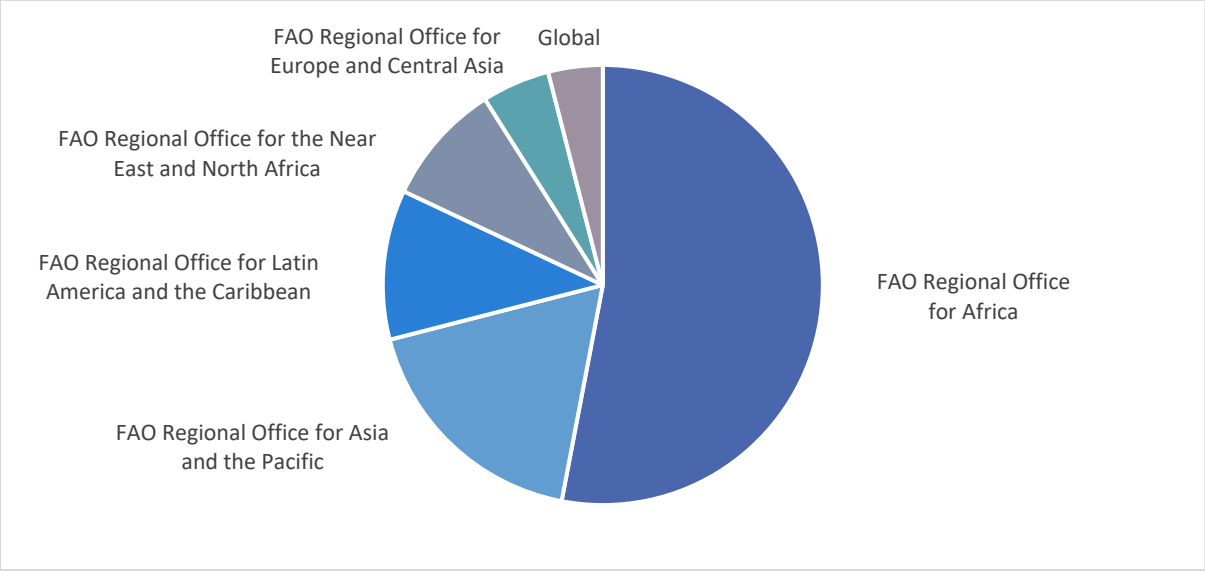


Note: Refer to the disclaimer on the copyright page regarding the names and boundaries used in this map. Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas). Final status of the Abyei area is not yet determined.

Source: UN Geospatial. 2020. Map of the World. In: *United Nations*. New York, USA, UN. https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/map-world-1. Data Source: Elaboration by FVC Secretariat in FAO. 2023. *FVC Terminal Report, 2018–2021*. November 2023. Rome.

62. Spending by region for the 2018–2021 phase is indicated in Figure 11. As shown, a significant proportion of the fund was invested in Africa (53 percent), followed by Asia and the Pacific (18 percent); Latin America and the Caribbean (11 percent); the Near East and North Africa (9 percent); and Europe and Central Asia (4 percent). Around 5 percent (USD 3.5 million) of resources was awarded to support work at the global level, while 10 percent of the FVC was awarded to Small Island Developing States in the 2018–2021 phase.

Figure 11. Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund 2018–2021 budget allocation by FAO region



Source: FAO. 2023. *FVC 2022 Annual report*. Rome.

2.6 Other FAO funding instruments

63. There are three other funding instruments that share some similarities with the FVC (either because they are flexible, or because they include similar selection processes).

64. There are two other flexible funds; the first of which is the Special Fund for Emergency and Rehabilitation Activities (SFERA), which was established in 2004 for support to high impact emergency assistance to the most vulnerable populations affected by crisis and disaster (FAO, n.d.a.). SFERA operates in a very different way from the FVC and so is of limited relevance to this evaluation. The second is the Africa Solidarity Trust Fund (ASTF), launched in 2012 to provide flexible and catalytic funding to African initiatives, but currently dormant (FAO, 2014).

65. The third fund is ELEVATE, which is an innovation fund established by FAO to foster an environment of continuous improvement and learning while minimizing and managing the risk associated with innovation projects. It is an instrument for FAO to pilot and experiment innovative approaches and new ideas. The four-phase process cycle of ELEVATE is of primary interest to this evaluation as it includes a structured and competitive internal process with similarities to the FVC's call for proposals.

3. Relevance

What is the value added of the FVC in supporting the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031?

66. This section addresses the relevance criterion. It has been organized according to the FVC process of subprogramme selection to permit a methodical approach to be taken to examine the relevance of the FVC to the FAO Strategic Framework. It draws on the evidence gathered from the document review, key informant interviews (KIIs) and the online survey. It also draws on the previous evaluation reports to determine the extent to which recommended changes have been made.[21]

3.1 The strategic relevance of flexible funding to FAO

Summary of findings: While flexible funding provides a valuable contribution to FAO's work, particularly in the context of highly earmarked funding and fragmentation, its volume is modest, representing a maximum 2 percent of FAO's total voluntary contributions. The FVC itself is not entirely unearmarked; it includes softly earmarked funds, primarily allocated at the level of the four betters, constituting an average of 30 percent of its funding, an improvement from previous phases. Although the total amount of FVC funding increased between the 2014–2017 and 2018–2021 phases, preliminary evidence suggests that this will not be the case in the current phase. Moreover, the proportion of flexible funding relative to FAO's total voluntary contributions appears to have decreased over time. While it was a recommendation of the previous evaluation, a resource mobilization plan was not prepared,[22] and the FVC does not feature substantively in FAO's corporate plans or resource mobilization strategies.

3.1.1 Flexibility and earmarking

67. As outlined in the context section of this report (section 2.1), and validated in interviews, flexible funding provides a valuable contribution to FAO's work, the majority of which is highly earmarked, resulting in a "fragmented" and projectized approach (FAO, 2025a). However, while flexible funding is valued, it is modest – both in terms of its dollar value and as a percentage of FAO's overall voluntary contributions, representing a maximum of just 2 percent of the total amount (FAO, 2025a).

68. The FVC is not a fully unearmarked fund but contains some softly earmarked funding. FAO has had some success in managing this in its favour over time and in line with the commitments of the UN Funding Compact. At the time of the previous evaluation in 2021, soft earmarking was permitted by subprogramme and by geographic area (FAO, 2021a); but when this evaluation was being undertaken, interviews suggest that soft earmarking was at the level of the four betters and accounted for an average of 30 percent of the FVC's

[21] The evaluation question concerning the geographic distribution of FVC investments that was included in the TOR has been addressed in the context section of this report.

[22] The evaluation notes the corporate restriction on the FVC having its own dedicated resource mobilization "strategy", in line with the Director-General's directive that FAO should maintain a single overarching strategy for resource mobilization. In this context, referring to an FVC-specific resource mobilization "plan" is considered more appropriate. Regardless of the terminology, the evaluation found that a dedicated and clearly articulated resource mobilization roadmap for the FVC does not currently exist, and that the FVC is not playing a central role in the broader FAO resource mobilization strategy currently in place.

funding. As documented in the 2021 evaluation report, there is a lack of consensus among resource partners on this key issue, with some committed to providing full flexibility, while others remain keen to earmark a proportion. Internal perceptions within FAO about the level of earmarking in the FVC also seem to vary significantly, with a view in some parts of the organization that the Fund is far more earmarked than is actually the case. As noted in the 2016 and 2021 evaluations, the result of soft earmarking by resource partners is that allocations may be skewed in a way that militates against the four betters and Programme Priority Areas that attract least funding (this issue is addressed in greater detail in section 3.4.2).

69. While this evaluation provides evidence of how flexible funds are used to support the FAO Strategic Framework, what it cannot do is provide a commentary on how successful FAO has been in raising flexible funds, as no explicit targets have been set for the FVC. The Portfolio Analysis in section 2.6 shows that in dollar value terms, the FVC has increased the total amount of flexible funding over time (from USD 47.7 million in the 2014–2017 funding cycle to USD 66.03 million in the 2018–2021 cycle).

70. The challenge with focusing on dollar values of flexible funding is that FAO's total volume of voluntary contributions has also increased significantly, suggesting that the percentage of the total voluntary contributions which are flexible may actually have decreased over this time,[23] though the figures lack consistency. The 2016 evaluation reported that in the 2014–2017 funding cycle, the FMM allocation of USD 28 million represented 2.4 percent of FAO's voluntary contributions (FAO, 2016); the 2023 corporate Resource Mobilization Strategy indicated that only 1 percent of voluntary contributions were unearmarked (FAO, 2023a); and in 2025, FAO's Finance Committee reported a figure of 2 percent (FAO, 2025a).

3.1.2 The demand for flexible funding from within FAO and the role of the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund

71. The evaluation found a strong demand for FVC funding across FAO, as was the case for each of the three previous evaluations;[24] there was consensus from personnel at headquarters and Decentralized Offices about the high value placed on FVC funding, which was consistently matched with disappointment that FAO did not have access to greater volumes of flexible funding. The benefits of flexible funding were considered to be numerous and were frequently linked to the growing proportion of earmarked funding, which made it challenging to fund new and potentially innovative work or to fill funding gaps.

72. Given the high demand for flexible funding from within FAO, strengthening the resource partner base of the FVC has been a consistent feature of previous FVC evaluations, as outlined in section 2.4. The 2013 evaluation recommended vigorous marketing; the 2016 evaluation explicitly found that, despite marketing efforts, no new partners had joined during that phase, and the FVC remained "underfunded and underdeveloped"; although

[23] As outlined in section 2.1 of this report, during the period of 2013 to 2023, FAO voluntary contributions rose from USD 882 million to USD 2.019 billion, an increase of 228 percent, and in the four years between 2017 and 2020, funding jumped an average of USD 1.24 billion per year. See (FAO, 2025a).

[24] As outlined in section 2.4 of this report, all three evaluations consistently highlight the strategic importance and potential of the FVC as a flexible funding mechanism that supports FAO's priorities and channels voluntary contributions through FAO's corporate systems.

the 2021 evaluation noted renewed partner confidence and an increase in the number of partners and resources compared to 2016 (see Box 3), it still emphasized the need for visibility to attract new partners.

Box 3. Progress made during the 2018–2021 phase in expanding Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund resources and resource partners

The 2021 evaluation report documents the efforts that FAO has made in increasing its flexible funding, noting that the previous results framework set a target of doubling the resource partnerships from three core resource partners in the 2014–2017 phase. This target was overachieved, and by December 2021, the number of resource partners had been increased to 11.

The 2021 evaluation report also highlights that USD 66.03 million raised for the 2018–2021 phase more than exceeded its resource mobilization target of USD 50 million. It also reported an improvement in the predictability of funding, with five out of eight resource partners making multiyear commitments.

Source: FAO. 2021a. Evaluation of the Flexible Multi-Partner Mechanism (FMM). Programme Evaluation Series, 11/2021. Rome.

73. In the 2022–2025 FVC phase, achievements have been mixed. The 2021 evaluation reported expectations of growing the FVC to at least USD 150 million (FAO, 2021a), although this target would appear to be extremely ambitious and at the time the evaluation was being undertaken, USD 54.4 million had been raised.[25] In terms of the number of resource partners, there have been some changes; at the time this evaluation was conducted, eight resource partners had contributed to the FVC in the current funding phase, six of which had made multiyear commitments (Table 4).[26]

[25] This sum was reported by the FVC in May 2025.

[26] Multiyear funding commitments to the FVC have been made by Norway (every four years), Belgium (every four years), Flanders (every three years), the Netherlands (every three years), Sweden (every 4 years), and Qatar (Every two years). Switzerland and Monaco have made annual contributions.

Table 4. Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund resource partners by year and phase

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	'206	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total number of resource partners (by year)	2	3	2	2	3	3	3	4	3	7	9	9	6	7	7	3
Total number of resource partners (by phase)	3 resource partners contributed to the FVC				4 resource partners contributed to the FVC				11 resource partners contributed to the FVC				8 resource partners contributed to the FVC (01/011/22– 31/05/25)			
Total contributions (by year, USD million)	6.5	7.8	6.5	6.5	11.9	11.9	11.9	12.1	9.1	12.8	20.5	23.6	13.4	15.4	15.4	10.0
Total contributions by phase	USD 27.37 million				USD 47.74 million				USD 66.03 million				USD 54.4 million			

Note: Figures for 2025 are for the first five months only. Financial data was provided by the FVC Coordination Unit. Resource partner contracts were shared with the Evaluation Team.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

74. The development of a dedicated resource mobilization strategy for the FVC was a recommendation of the 2021 evaluation. The management response refers to the inclusion of the FVC in FAO's Corporate Resource Mobilization Action Plan (FAO, 2023a), which was prepared in 2023; however, the FVC is not explicitly referenced in the document aside from in the glossary. It is noteworthy that the SFERA is mentioned in the section on "Countries in Crisis", alongside an action point on emergency-related flexible funding, but no specific role or vision is outlined in the document for how the FVC can contribute to supporting the FAO Strategic Framework. To this end, the management response to the 2021 evaluation, which made a commitment to embed and highlight the Flexible Multi-Partner Mechanism's specific requirements, does not appear to have been actioned (FAO, 2021a). Beyond a single reference, the FAO Medium-Term Plan does not refer to the contribution or potential role of the FVC in delivering the Strategic Framework (FAO, 2025c).

3.2 Strategic Framework 2022–2031

To what extent is the FVC aligned with the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031?

Summary of findings: The FVC is now fully aligned with the FAO Strategic Framework. The TOC and guidance documents have been updated and offer reasonable clarity about the FVC's purpose relative to other funding. Where there continues to be a lack of consensus is in the use of flexible funding to address strategic priorities, prompting an important differentiation between strategic alignment (i.e. FVC funding contributing to the four betters) and the strategic prioritization of the funds (i.e. FVC funding contributing to identified priorities from within the four betters). This issue was identified in the 2021 evaluation and still remains relevant, particularly among resource partners. This dissonance – strategic alignment versus strategic prioritization – is evident across the FVC TOC and its suite of guidance documents.

3.2.1 Alignment of the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund with the FAO Strategic Objectives

75. In 2022, the FVC strengthened its linkages to the FAO Strategic Objectives as the Fund and its TOC were aligned with the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031 and the four betters.[27] Internal interviews were broadly positive about this shift; however, there was also some scepticism, in particular among resource partners, and some senior FAO personnel, about the extent to which the Fund has been used strategically. In trying to understand this, it is important to distinguish between strategic "alignment" (i.e. FVC funding contributing to the four betters) and strategic "prioritization" of the funds (i.e. FVC funding contributing to identified priorities from within the four betters).

3.2.2 The influence of the theory of change on the strategic prioritization of the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund

76. The purpose of a TOC is to "explain how a given intervention, or set of interventions, is expected to lead to specific development change, drawing on a causal analysis based on available evidence" (UNDG, 2017). The rationale for the FVC TOC is to provide a "strategic overview of how its chosen priority programmes will bring about the desired change. It maps out the planning, action and impact pathways that lead to the change and how these are connected" (FAO, 2023c).

[27] The full TOC and explanatory notes have been reproduced in Appendix 2.

77. The 2021 evaluation considered the TOC to be a "very good beginning", and the FVC has subsequently made further changes based on the recommendations. Interviews and analysis undertaken for this evaluation suggest there are three challenges that limit the utility of the TOC in going beyond a focus on "alignment" to prompt the use of the FVC towards strategic "prioritization".

Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund planning pathway (funding): complexity rather than clarity

78. The planning pathway describes an aspirational approach for the FVC to mobilize flexible funds, set priorities and select subprogrammes that align with the FAO Strategic Framework. There are numerous steps that are outlined in the pathway, a number of which either lack clarity or the delivery of which are not monitored and measured. Fund mobilization, which is the cornerstone of the FVC, appears at the end of the chain rather than at the beginning. The FVC annual reports do not refer to the different steps in the Planning Pathway in a way that permits an examination of the effectiveness of the FVC by the Coordination Unit, FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division or those tasked with governing the fund in fulfilling these important functions.

Action pathway (results chain): a focus on alignment rather than prioritization

79. The four Fund Outputs at the base of the Action Pathway are linked to aspirational fund results of "Sufficient, less earmarked resources available to strengthen FAO's Strategic Framework". The outputs are the most important element in the pathway and a commentary is provided in the annual reports on the performance of FVC against each of these. A generic pathway from the Fund Results to the four betters is then reproduced from the FAO Strategic Framework. As previously outlined, the pathway focuses on the alignment between the FVC and the FAO Strategic Framework, but it misses an opportunity to show the specific contribution that flexible funding can make to the delivery of prioritized aspects of the Strategic Framework. This gap was identified in the 2021 evaluation, the finding from which continues to have relevance as it is a missing component within the TOC (Box 4).

Box 4. Proposed adaptation to the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund theory of change from the 2021 evaluation

"It would be very helpful to have a TOC for the Action Pathway itself, which is presently missing. Such a TOC would help crystallize the most appropriate and prospectively effective types of subprogrammes for financing from the limited Flexible Multi-Partner Mechanism corpus. This distinction is important because the FMM is primarily a financing modality and not a vertical delivery mechanism – it rightly does not have its independent results chain isolated from the corporate Results Framework. Thus, the TOC for FMM's Action Pathway should be able to clarify how the chosen subprogrammes are enabling corporate-wide results of the six programme areas; and, more specifically, how the FVC interventions achieve greater level of contribution to corporate outputs and outcomes than other/traditional financing modalities. Thus, the Action Pathway should be able to outline clearly why these subprogrammes are funded under FMM and not any other modalities, and what are the specific catalytic effects intended, which can then be included in the monitoring framework."

Source: FAO. 2021a. *Evaluation of the Flexible Multi-Partner Mechanism (FMM)*. Programme Evaluation Series, 11/2021. Rome.

80. Rather than propose a TOC specific to the Action Pathway as the previous evaluation did, it is suggested that the Action Pathway in the TOC is adapted so that it moves away from a generic approach of alignment with the four betters to outlining a process through which selected strategic priorities will be addressed from within the four betters.

Change pathway (impact): an unfulfilled promise of impact

81. The Change Pathway is an unnecessary addition to the FVC TOC both because it is generic and because the accompanying narrative includes a caveat that measurement of the contribution that FAO makes at the outcome and impact level is impossible to isolate and hence difficult to measure (FAO, 2023c). Thus, it is difficult to identify the value that this adds.

3.2.3 FVC guidance

82. The FVC benefits from a suite of guidance that has expanded over time, and which now includes i) a governance document; ii) operational guidance; iii) an Appendix on the FAO project cycle; and iv) a TOC and results framework (addressed in section 3.2.1). These reinforce the linkages between the FVC and the FAO Strategic Framework from a programmatic perspective. The next part of the report focuses on the contents of the documents, while strategic issues are addressed in sections 3.3, 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6.

83. The governance document was updated from the 2018–2021 phase at the beginning of the 2022–2025 phase in order to align it with the FAO Strategic Framework in addition to incorporating new FAO procedures. A comparison of the 2018 and 2022 governance documents shows that the revised version benefits from considerable improvements over the older version and provides more coherent and rigorous guidance for users of the fund.

84. The revised operational guidance builds on the previous document, which was introduced in the 2018–2021 phase. As the operational guidance document was only revised two years after the previous version, the contents are largely consistent with its predecessor, albeit with minor changes to reflect adaptations in the FVC process and to accommodate recommendations from the 2021 evaluation.

85. The revised project cycle Annex to the operational guidance is much improved from the 2020 version. The key difference is the addition of a series of templates for key steps of the cycle. While in theory this addresses the lack of clarity that has existed, in practice it appears that there have continued to be periodic changes in the process and the templates that were used. This issue is addressed in more detail in section 5.2.

3.3 Subprogramme

How has the FVC applied its subprogramme identification and selection process?

Summary of findings: The FVC Coordination Unit has been diligent in adapting FVC processes; the introduction of the call for proposals process for the 2022–2025 phase is an improvement for guiding applications and enhancing relevance and efficiency. However, concerns were raised about the circulation of the call for proposals, consistency of communications and the adequacy of time provided for proposal preparation. A significant finding is the persistent lack of clarity and transparency surrounding the subprogramme selection process, which echoes findings from previous evaluations. Furthermore, there continues to be a perceived missing step in strategic prioritization, whereby the process is largely applicant-led by technical units and Regional Offices, resulting in a diffuse set of proposals across the FAO Strategic Framework rather than a focused selection aligned with corporate strategic priorities or underfunded areas.

3.3.1 FVC governance

86. The FVC governance structure is described in section 2.2. The following section examines its role in subprogramme identification and selection.

The Executive Committee

87. The Executive Committee is responsible for determining FVC priorities in line with the FAO Strategic Framework and the governance document. As such, it leads the process of identification and selection of subprogrammes. The Committee comprises two Deputy Director-Generals (DDG), although at the time the evaluation was undertaken, this had been reduced to a single DDG as a consequence of staff turnover. The FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division provides a Secretariat function.

88. Interviews among FAO personnel and resource partners revealed a broad knowledge of governance arrangements for the FVC, but far less clarity about decision-making processes. The headquarters-centric composition of the Executive Committee was frequently mentioned, with the lack of Decentralized Offices representation considered an omission. While there has been increasing emphasis placed by the FVC on Decentralized Offices participation during the 2022–2025 phase, the lack of a Decentralized Offices representative in the Executive Committee is out of step with the subsidiarity principle outlined in the governance document.[28]

89. The role of the Executive Committee that garnered most attention within FAO and resource partners was the selection of subprogrammes. This issue is dealt with in detail in section 3.3.2.

Resource Partners Advisory Group

90. The role of the Resource Partners Advisory Group includes oversight and advisory support across all aspects of the leadership, management and operations of the FVC. The formal engagement between the RPAG and the Executive Committee takes place at least twice a year to discuss strategic issues relating to the FVC, its overall performance, and future directions and strategies. Minutes from the strategic consultations, supplemented by interviews conducted during the evaluation, shed light on the relationship that the FVC has with its resource partners and highlight a number of enduring issues that have been raised. Table 5 summarizes key issues raised during the 2022–2025 phase for purposes of comparative analysis.

[28] The Annex of the Governance Document states that "*the subsidiarity principle in FAO aims to further empower its decentralized offices at regional, subregional, and country levels for decision-making on implementation of priority work*."

Table 5. Common issues raised by resource partners during the 2022–2025 phase Resource Partners Advisory Group meetings

	Summary of action points raised by resource partners	Issue raised		
	Year	2022	2023	2024
1	Importance of alignment of FVC with strategic priorities		■	■
3	Discussion about criteria for FVC funding		■	■
4	Importance of regular meetings with resource partners			■
5	Cost-effectiveness of the FVC	■		■
6	Strategies to enlarge the resource partner base of the FVC	■	■	■
7	Concerns about the effectiveness of small subprogrammes	■	■	■
8	Resource partner visibility and communication		■	■
9	Alignment of FVC reporting mechanisms and reporting more generally	■		
10	Interest in outcomes and impact of FVC funds	■	■	■
11	Resilience, nexus and humanitarian-development linkages	■	■	■
12	Innovative approaches to FVC funding, including different windows			■

Note: The list is an approximation of the frequency of certain issues being raised by resource partners. It is based on a review of meeting minutes. It is not comprehensive, but is intended to provide an indication of high-frequency issues.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

91. Resource partners themselves have different views on some key aspects of FVC operations, which have been complex for FAO to navigate and respond to in a way that fully addresses these concerns. A review of these issues highlights a small number of high frequency concerns that were discussed in greater detail during interviews for this evaluation and which are examined in relevant sections of this report.

3.3.2 Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund identification and selection process

Identification of priorities for flexible voluntary contribution funding

92. For the 2022–2025 phase, one call for proposals led to 50 subprogrammes. A second call was recently launched, and the submitted proposals are currently under review. This was considered by interviewees as an improvement on past practice, as it has offered an opportunity for the Executive Committee to provide a strategic steer to applicants, strengthening the relevance and efficiency of the process.

93. A review of calls for proposals showed that they may include a thematic priority at the level of one of the four betters if funding had been soft earmarked. The call for proposals also provides the overall budget that is available and often provides direction in terms of the number of proposals that can be submitted by Regional and Subregional Offices, technical divisions and offices, and Programme Priority Area leads.[29] For funding that is not soft

[29] For example, the February 2025 call for proposals included the following guidance on proposal submissions: i) Each Regional Office: two proposals submitted through the Assistant Director-Generals only. Because of the relatively small funds available for allocation, the FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division will not receive a separate submission from Subregional Offices this time; ii) FVC has received part of the available funds as soft earmarked for better environment. This time, we would encourage that one of the two proposals from the regions be focused on climate change mitigation and/or adaptation, or biodiversity; iii) Each Technical Division/Office: one proposal submitted through the Division Director only. This can either be a proposal for the work of the division or a PPA that the Division leads. Because of the relatively small funds available for allocation, the FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division will not receive a separate submission from PPA leads this time.

earmarked, it is left to the technical units in headquarters and regions to indicate priority areas of work for the year that are critically important and underfunded.

94. During interviews, concerns were raised about the circulation of the calls for proposals, although it appears that it is common practice for the Coordination Unit to circulate them widely. The process of communicating calls for proposals has on at least one occasion been partnered by an explanatory web conference, which was considered to be extremely helpful, particularly by Decentralized Offices personnel. Importantly, it permitted a discussion about changes that had been made to the guidance or templates, as well as more general discussions about the focus and requirements of the call for proposals.

95. Feedback received in the online survey and from discussions with Decentralized Offices identified additional steps in the process for some Regional Offices, which took additional time. In some cases, the call for proposals was cascaded via Divisional Directors, and there were additional layers of management involved in clearing proposals (e.g. Director, Chief Economist) prior to submission to FVC, which made the process more protracted.

Selection of subprogrammes

96. Outside of the FVC Coordination Unit and the Executive Committee, interviews highlighted that there is limited knowledge about the process of subprogramme selection, with frequent references made to a level of opacity about decision-making.[30] This echoes a conclusion from the 2021 evaluation, which notes that "apart from the proposal assessment form that sets out the criteria to be used in the assessment, the Operational Guide does not provide details of how the assessment is to be conducted. It is not clear if the assessment is done by one individual, or by a pair or group, if there are internal quality assurance processes in place, if proposal drafters are asked to provide additional information or clarity on their proposals, if the individuals conducting the assessment have the technical expertise to do so, and if proposals are rejected, are the drafters given reasons for the rejection of the proposal" (FAO, 2021a).

97. Five years on from this finding, the governance documents continue to make scant reference to the selection process, and the concerns flagged in the previous evaluation have not yet been fully addressed. To address this perceived opacity, this evaluation included a review of the tools that are used by the Coordination Unit to inform the decisions of the Executive Committee for subprogramme selection.

98. From a process perspective, each proposal is first assessed against a set of criteria by a member of the FVC Coordination Unit, the rigour of which has been strengthened over time. The members of the Executive Committee then read and discuss the proposals with reference to this assessment. A summary record of the meeting is taken and circulated to the resource partners. The FVC informs technical unit and divisional focal points of the decision and the amount of funds allocated, inviting them to prepare a fully-fledged project document in liaison with a dedicated Funding Liaison Officer (FAO, 2023c). As a

[30] As outlined in section 2.4 of this report, a significant and persistent issue raised in all evaluations is the lack of clarity, formalization and transparency surrounding FVC procedures, particularly concerning the prioritization and allocation of resources (referred to in the 2013, 2016 and 2021 evaluation). Efficiency issues associated with the preparation of proposals is addressed in detail in section 5.1.3.

consequence, communications from the FVC on Executive Committee decisions may not always be shared with the individuals who drafted proposals, which might rely on communications being cascaded by designated focal points. While this approach is justified, it may have inadvertently contributed to the perceived lack of transparency around FVC decision-making.

3.3.3 Fund processes and the FAO Strategic Framework

99. Interviews with FAO personnel and resource partners revealed three specific challenges that were directly linked to the issue of alignment of the FVC with the FAO Strategic Framework.

Challenge 1: A lack of corporate prioritization to drive the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund selection process

100. A common concern among resource partners and senior FAO personnel was a perceived missing step in the subprogramme identification process; building on the findings of section 3.2.2, the identification of strategic priorities for the FVC is left to the discretion of the technical units and the Regional Offices. While these personnel members are well-placed to determine the priorities of their particular divisions or Decentralized Offices, the process invariably results in a diffuse set of proposals and funded subprogrammes across the FAO Strategic Framework. Interviews revealed a perception among some resource partners that this was evidence of either an inability or lack of willingness to determine corporate strategic priorities.

101. The finding echoes that of the 2024 Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network report, which acknowledged that FAO's mandate covers a very wide field of work but found that the "the current Strategic Framework 2022–31 does not adequately reflect prioritization across this broad mandate" and highlighted the need for FAO to "better articulate its specific role and added value within its broad mandate". The overarching strategic direction on priorities was considered by the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network to be an area for improvement (MOPAN, 2025).

102. With this finding in mind, it is noteworthy that concurrently with the evaluation, the FAO 2026–2029 Medium-Term Plan (FAO, 2025c) was published, and several interviewees suggested that the "game-changers" therein might offer a selection of prioritized programmes to assist in providing strategic focus for the FVC. Documented by the FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget, these are the outcomes from a comprehensive organization-wide process to identify areas of "high potential impact [that] could accelerate progress toward agrifood systems transformation, should additional resources become available". These 20 areas of "high transformative potential" share some important characteristics (outlined below) with the FVC selection criteria, but there is currently no link between the "game-changers" and the FVC subprogramme identification and selection process (FAO, 2025c).

Challenge 2: The small size of FVC allocations

103. A second challenge is related to grants being modest in value. Looking back to the 2018–2021 portfolio, 40 of the 53 subprogrammes awarded during that phase were between USD 500 000 and USD 2 million, with 9 subprogrammes each receiving between USD 2.5 million and USD 4 million and 5 subprogrammes each receiving less than

USD 500 000 (see the supplementary material for more details on award sizes). The 50 subprogrammes awarded during the 2022–2025 phase show even less variation in size, ranging from USD 500 000 to USD 1 million with only one single subprogramme receiving more than that range at USD 1.5 million (Figure 12, vertical axis).

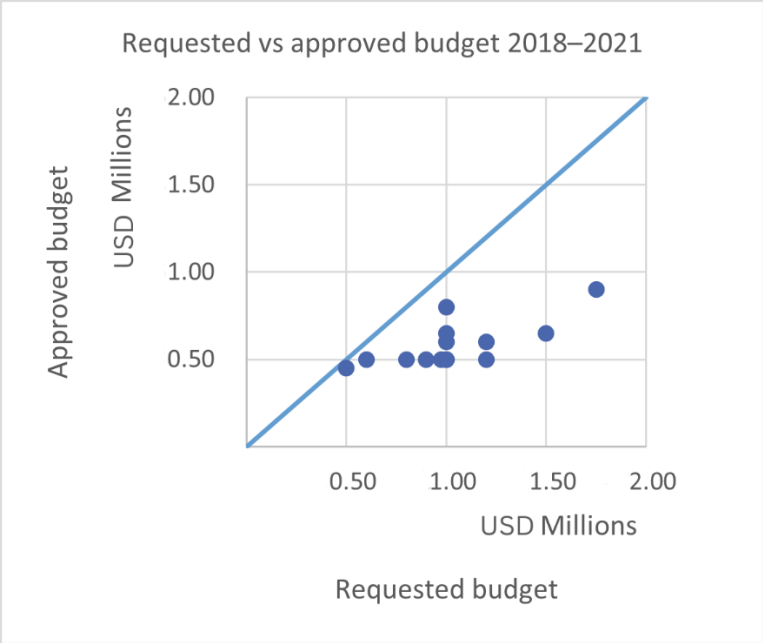
104. Several factors jointly contribute to this phenomenon. While the size of the grants is partially dependent on the volume of funding that has been made available by resource partners, it is also influenced by the number of FVC awards that are made in each funding round. This is in part due to efforts by the Executive Committee to accommodate the diverse groups within FAO that are targeted by the calls for proposals, but also reflects resource partners' preferences to make a fairly large number of awards. In some instances, resource partners have also verbally communicated a preference for their contributions to be awarded to specific countries that are aligned with their national development strategies (a form of informal geographic earmarking). In addition, almost all subprogrammes work across multiple Country Offices, which further reduces the size of funding disbursed to individual Country Offices. This is a direct result of FAO's rule that projects can only be managed by a headquarters unit if the activities span more than one of FAO's regions. Accordingly, proposals developed by units based at headquarters are almost always multiregional or global, so that the unit serves as the Budget Holder.

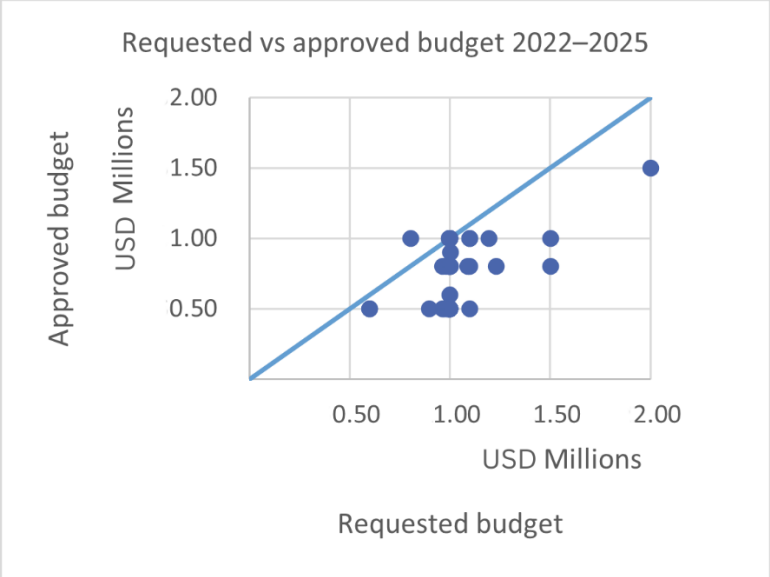
105. A related issue is that the budgets allocated through the FVC are often smaller than what technical units and/or Decentralized Offices request, which in turn limits the scope and scale of the subprogrammes. This is evidenced by Figure 12, which provides an analysis of the budget requested in each proposal (along the horizontal axis of each graph) against the final approved budget (along the vertical axis of each graph) for the subprogrammes awarded through the 2018–2021 additional call for proposals and the 2022–2025 phase (Figure 12).[31] According to the FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships, funding through the call for proposals has been capped at USD 1 million, but proposals continue to request more than the allowable amount. Anecdotally, some personnel interviewed for the evaluation reported that there was a general awareness that in many cases the Executive Committee would request a reduced budget such that there was some strategy involved in rescoping their proposed activities to correspond to the smaller budget. Indeed, while there are important differences in the selection process between the two rounds,[32] in both periods, almost all projects received less than the amount requested, and this is true even for proposals that were initially below the USD 1 million maximum.

[31] The diagonal dashed line indicates a scenario in which the requested amount was fully approved (i.e. a 1:1 ratio).

[32] The approval rates (i.e. approved proposals relative to total submissions) between the first call for proposals during the 2018–2021 phase and the subsequent call in the 2022–2025 phase are not directly comparable due to key contextual differences: the initial call, launched during the 2018–2021 phase, was limited in scope, relying on a residual funding envelope of approximately USD 8 million. It also marked the first time the FVC mechanism initiated a call for proposals, and as such, systems and processes were still being established. In contrast, the 2022–2025 call took place after the FVC had been replenished, with a significantly larger funding envelope of USD 36 million. By this time, the FVC had developed and institutionalized its proposal review and selection processes, enabling a more structured and competitive selection environment.

Figure 12. Comparisons of requested versus approved budget for the 2018–2021 and 2022–2025 phase





Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data provided by the FVC Secretariat.

106. The perception of many interviewees (Lead Technical Officers and Country Office personnel, in particular) was that while the funds were valuable, their small size often presented challenges. In the 2018–2021 phase, there was at least one country that turned down the FVC investment as it was considered too modest in scale to be effective. This issue was raised frequently in interviews across all stakeholder groups: resource partners,[33] Lead Technical Officers, and regional and country personnel.

[33] As outlined in Table 5 in section 3.3.1, the effectiveness of small subprogrammes was raised by resource partners in each of the RPAG meetings conducted during the present FVC phase.

Challenge 3: A perception of headquarters bias in the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund selection process

107. A third issue that was raised by a number of personnel members from Decentralized Offices in particular (but also noted by some headquarters personnel) was a perception that the FVC processes had an implicit headquarters bias. As outlined in section 3.3.1, the Executive Committee only includes headquarters representation and there is increasing appetite within Regional Offices to have greater reach into decisions that affect the strategic use of the FVC. This is a recurrent issue across previous evaluation reports, as outlined in section 2.4 and explained in more detail in Annex 2.[34]

108. In addition to the composition of the Executive Committee, the distribution of Lead Technical Officer units further reinforces this perception. Of the 53 subprogrammes funded between 2018 and 2023, only seven were led by units based outside headquarters – four of which were selected through the call for proposals process, introduced later in the 2018–2021 phase. This indicates a strong skew towards headquarters-led initiatives, particularly in the earlier funding cycles.

109. While the FVC Executive Committee and Secretariat have responded to the recommendations in the 2021 evaluation to be more deliberate in how they engage with Decentralized Offices, which is commendable, interviews suggest that there continues to be scope for further improvement. As indicated earlier in this report, the "subsidiarity principle" mandates FAO and FVC to "further empower its Decentralized Offices at regional, subregional, and country levels for decision-making on implementation of priority work" (FAO, 2022b). To date, the evidence suggests that the principle has been interpreted in a limited way, confining its use to determining subprogramme leadership. Implementation of the principle across the governance and implementation of the FVC would go further towards matching the aspirations of Regional Offices, which raised the importance of the FVC better understanding their specific needs, communicating more consistently with them and giving them greater reach into decision-making. This will doubtless add complexity, but it would also implement FAO's subsidiarity principle in practice.

3.4 Key criteria

How has the FVC responded to key criteria used for subprogramme selection, specifically addressing critical gaps, promoting scalability and fostering innovation?

Summary of findings: There is a lack of clarity and consistency in the definition and use of key terminology and criteria across different FVC guidance documents and templates, which is the cause of some confusion outside the FVC Coordination Unit. Regarding the specific criteria, interviewees widely perceived that, given the breadth of FAO's mandate and the fluctuating funding landscape, it was relatively easy to justify projects under the "*critical gaps*" criterion, although there was uncertainty about the benchmarking process for this. The criterion also

[34] The 2013 evaluation noted a need for stronger linkages between global, regional and country work, and pointed out poor communication between headquarters and Decentralized Offices. The 2016 and 2021 evaluations found that the process was highly centralized, with limited consultation and varying degrees of awareness among Country Offices and external partners. Recommendations consistently call for increasing the participation and ownership of Decentralized Offices in concept note design and implementation planning.

presents a definitional challenge, potentially encompassing data, gender or inclusion gaps, though evidencing these broader gaps within FAO was seen as difficult. The "*scalability*" criterion is considered increasingly important, focusing on proof of concept and potential for replication, with suggestions that prioritizing investment in proposal preparation to leverage external funding could be a clearer path to scale. For "*innovation*", feedback was mixed, with some doubt expressed about the consistent achievement of successful innovations, possibly linked to the existence of a separate fund within FAO for innovation.

3.4.1 Clarity and consistent use of Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund criteria

110. A necessary prerequisite for examining how the three criteria are used in subprogramme selection is clarity about their definition and consistency in their use, which was the subject of significant debate during the evaluation. While interviews with members of the FVC Coordination Unit showed a fair degree of clarity about both the definition of the criteria and how they should be applied, outside of the unit, there was confusion about the precise definition of the terms, which was exacerbated in part by the lack of consistency across FVC guidance and templates as outlined in Table 6.[35]

Table 6. Key assessment criteria outlined in the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund guidance documents and templates

Criteria	Governance document	FVC proposal templated	Pilot Annex	Theory of change
Innovation/potential for transformative change	Yes	Yes (Q4)	Yes	Yes x 2
Sustainable solutions	Yes	Yes (Q6)	Yes	No
Critical gaps	Yes	Yes (Q1)	Yes	Yes
Major beneficiary groups and countries	Yes	Yes (Q5)	Yes	No
Scalability of results and sustainability	Yes	Yes (Q6)	Yes	No
Intersectoral integration	Yes	Yes (Q8)	Yes	Yes
Focus on implementation and decentralized results	Yes	Yes (Q5)	Yes	No
Integrating cross-cutting areas	Yes	Yes (Q8)	No	No
Partnership/collaboration and joining efforts	Yes	Yes (Q3)	No	No
Value for money	No	No	No	Yes
Catalytic effect	No	Yes (Q7)	No	Yes
Seed funding	No	No	No	Yes
Contribution to at least two PPAs	No	No	Yes	No

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

111. Moreover, some of the definitions given conflate several different criteria. For example, the definition of the FVC criterion "catalytic effect" includes reference to a number of other funding criteria: "FVC is a catalytic Fund in the sense that it provides seed funding or support to underfunded priorities, emerging priorities and/or strategic priority initiatives that complements other regular or voluntary sources of funding at global, regional and/or country levels. Priority considerations will be given to opportunities that can help remove financial bottlenecks to kick-start and speed up innovative initiatives that have potential

[35] It is noteworthy that the pilot annex to the operational guidelines includes reference to eight criteria used by the Executive Committee to identify fundable subprogrammes, which contain different criteria to the proposal template included in the same document.

for transformative change. The allocation serves to accelerate the delivery of such results and remove obstacles".[36]

112. It is important to note that this is not a new issue but formed part of the recommendations from the 2021 evaluation, which noted that "FAO should also provide precise definitions of key concepts, for example, flexibility, catalytic effect and innovation".

3.4.2 Addressing key criteria in subprogramme selection

113. As outlined earlier in this report, the criteria play an important role in the identification and selection of subprogrammes, as they are a requirement of the proposal template and are reviewed as part of the selection process of the Executive Committee.

Addressing critical gaps

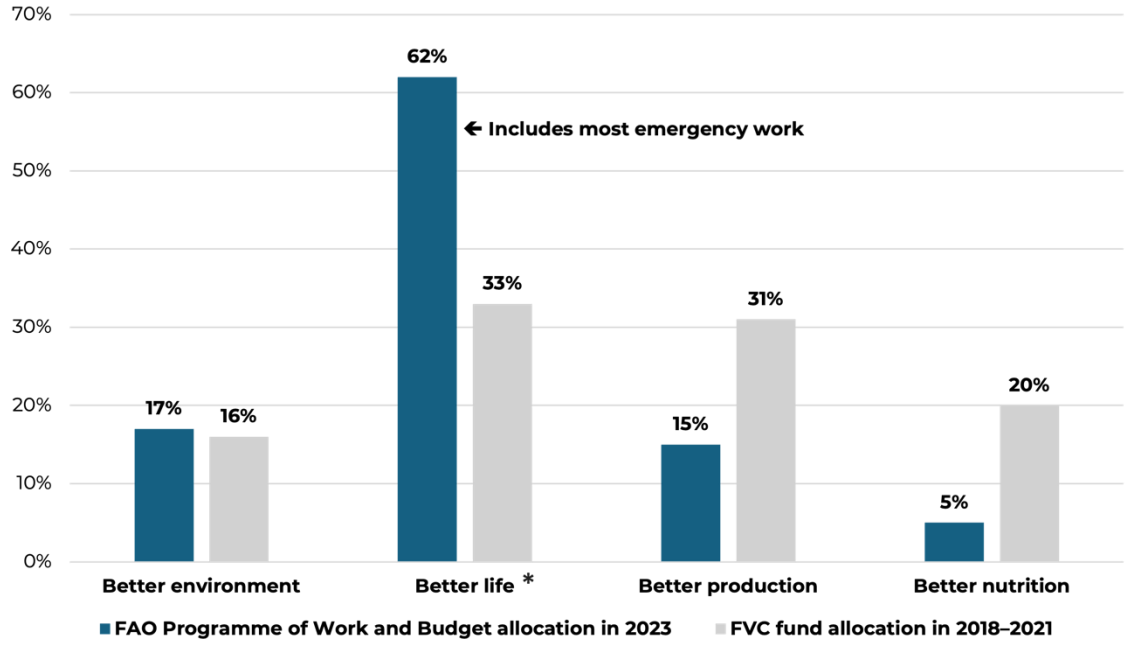
114. Interviews revealed broad consensus among FAO technical personnel that because of the breadth of FAO's mandate and the challenges posed by underfunding across the Programme Priority Areas, they were well-positioned to argue for the inclusion of key projects under their purview. For this same reason, there was also a corresponding view – with some caveats – that critical gaps tended to be in constant flux as the funding situation was changing constantly, and so today's critical gap could be tomorrow's funded programmes. Linked to this, there was some curiosity about how the criterion was benchmarked by the FVC Coordination Unit and the basis used by the Executive Committee for comparison between different proposals when they were examining how critical the gaps were.

115. It is noteworthy that several respondents considered better nutrition a "chronically underfunded better", and the case was made that if the FVC was targeted solely at underfunded priorities, better nutrition should fare far better than most other aspects of the FAO Strategic Framework, as it received the smallest proportion of FAO funding, estimated to account for just 5 percent of the total, and has few alternative sources of voluntary/extrabudgetary funding (Figure 13) (FAO, 2023b).[37]. Analysis of the allocations made in the 2018–2021 phase show 20 percent of FVC funding was allocated to better nutrition (FAO, 2023b). This suggests that FVC has not sought to replicate FAO's broader funding allocations but rather has distributed its funds more evenly across the betters.

[36] Emphasis on particular terms (by underlining) has been added by the Evaluation Team.

[37] Budget shares for projects contributing to multiple betters are calculated proportionally, based on percentage allocations indicated in the project proposals. These percentages are determined by the technical units, not by the FVC Secretariat.

Figure 13. FAO and Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund allocations by Strategic Objective



Note: * % does not sum to 100 due to a few projects that are not allocated to any of the four betters.

Source: FAO. 2023a. *Resource Mobilization Action Plan 2023*. Rome.; FVC. 2023b. *FVC Terminal Report, 2018-2021, November 2023*. Rome.

116. Interviews also highlighted an important definitional challenge with the critical gaps criterion; while it is frequently interpreted to relate to funding gaps, it can be argued that there are many other gaps that may also be relevant – data gaps (a lack of data or statistics), gender gaps (gaps that exclusively affect the participation of women) and inclusion gaps (gaps affecting specific vulnerable people). The challenge with this broader definition of the criterion is that there was considered to be insufficient data within FAO to evidence many of these; even in the case of funding gaps, personnel members questioned how this could be objectively evidenced.

Promoting scalability

117. Promoting scalability is a criterion that interviews suggest has grown in importance given the potential role that FVC funding can play in providing funds to potentially scalable subprogrammes. It is a standard question in the FVC proposal template (FVC Secretariat, 2023). Key indicators of scalability that were discussed included proof of concept, and there is some evidence of the use of the FVC to replicate projects that have been successful in one country in other countries.

118. Interviews with personnel at country level suggested that the criterion could have a slightly different focus, one which recognized the growing need to invest in proposal preparation to assist in raising funds (e.g. with international financial institutions and climate finance instruments). It was considered that an investment of this type might offer a clearer route to maximizing the value of the FVC in comparison to projects that had not identified specific sources of funding for the future and hence ran the risk of being orphaned after the FVC funds were exhausted. For this reason, some respondents suggested that the

scalability criterion should be prioritized over other criteria, particularly in view of the tough funding environment that exists.

Fostering innovation

119. Supporting innovative or transformative initiatives that are either not yet ready or unable to compete for funding is another extremely broad area that has applicability across many Programme Priority Areas. It is also a difficult criterion to objectively assess, as several interviewees acknowledged. For innovations to be successful, they often required scaling up and for this reason, there was broad agreement that the innovation criterion often went hand-in-hand with scalability. One of the key challenges that innovative proposals are scrutinized for is the time frame outlined in the proposal as new techniques, approaches or behaviour changes frequently take considerable time and frequently require nurturing to have effect. Some interviewees considered that this level of organizational support and longevity of funding was not best suited to the FVC.

3.4.3 Broader issues linked to the use of criteria for programme selection

120. Many interviewees considered that the FVC criteria were fairly easy to meet, given the breadth of the FAO Strategic Framework and the frequency with which aspects of it were underfunded or could be justified as being innovative or scalable.

121. While the scoring of the subprogramme proposals in the selection process appears to conflate a number of the criteria, making it difficult to understand what is being scored, the scores themselves also tend to be routinely high, as evidenced by analysis from the scoring of the FVC allocation in October 2023 (Table 7). While the application of a methodology to score proposals suggests a level of rigour in subprogramme selection, a review of the scores awarded suggests that they are routinely high. Indeed, of the 69 proposals submitted during the 2022–2025 phase, 50 were funded (approval rate of almost 75 percent). This poses a question as to whether guidance on how to score proposals in a way that permits different levels of achievement against the criteria might be helpful in more clearly determining priority proposals for FVC funding.

Table 7. Mean, median, mode and range of scores for each criterion

Criteria used to score proposals (max. of 2 points per criterion)	Mean[i]	Median[ii]	Mode[iii]	Range[iv]
1. Compelling rationale (urgency, critical gaps, underfunded)	1.76	1.8	1.8	1.4–1.92
2. Clear results chain and achievable results	1.69	1.8	1.95	0.8–1.95
3. Innovativeness, transformative change and feasibility	1.75	1.8	1.8	1.4–1.9
4. Scalability, potential impact and geographical focus	1.79	1.8	1.8	1.52–1.9
5. Intersectoral integration, cross-cutting and catalytic effects	1.77	1.8	1.8	1.5–1.92

Notes: [i] The mean is the average of the values.

[ii] The median is the middle value in a dataset arranged from smallest to largest.

[iii] The mode is the value that occurs most frequently in a dataset.

[iv] The range measures the difference between the smallest and largest values in a dataset.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

122. Given the perceived opacity of the selection process, greater clarity about how to score proposals linked to greater transparency in the decisions made by the Executive Committee would help build confidence in the subprogramme selection process and strengthen accountability.

3.5 FVC investments

To what extent have FVC investments considered the different needs, roles and opportunities of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities?

Summary of findings: Overall, the FVC seeks to integrate inclusion into its work, in line with the FAO Strategic Objectives. However, the FVC pays uneven attention to the needs, roles and opportunities of different marginalized or potentially marginalized groups. There is a relatively strong focus on gender and youth in FVC investments compared to Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities, the latter being particularly under-represented. This is consistent with FAO's overall approach, which similarly emphasizes consideration of women and youth as priority groups. The integration of cross-cutting issues is considered during the assessment and selection of FVC subprogrammes, but without significant detail about how specific groups will be targeted and supported in practice beyond brief descriptions provided in project proposals.

123. The FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031 indicates FAO's intention to consider the different needs, roles and opportunities of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities, primarily through the principle of "leaving no one behind" and integrating inclusion into its work (FAO, 2021b). In addition, FAO's policies and action plans on gender, Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, and youth set out how the organization intends to implement its commitments to address inequalities for these specific groups through its work (FAO, 2015, 2020, 2022). There is no dedicated policy or strategy explicitly addressing people with disabilities as a distinct cross-cutting issue within FAO (MOPAN, 2024).

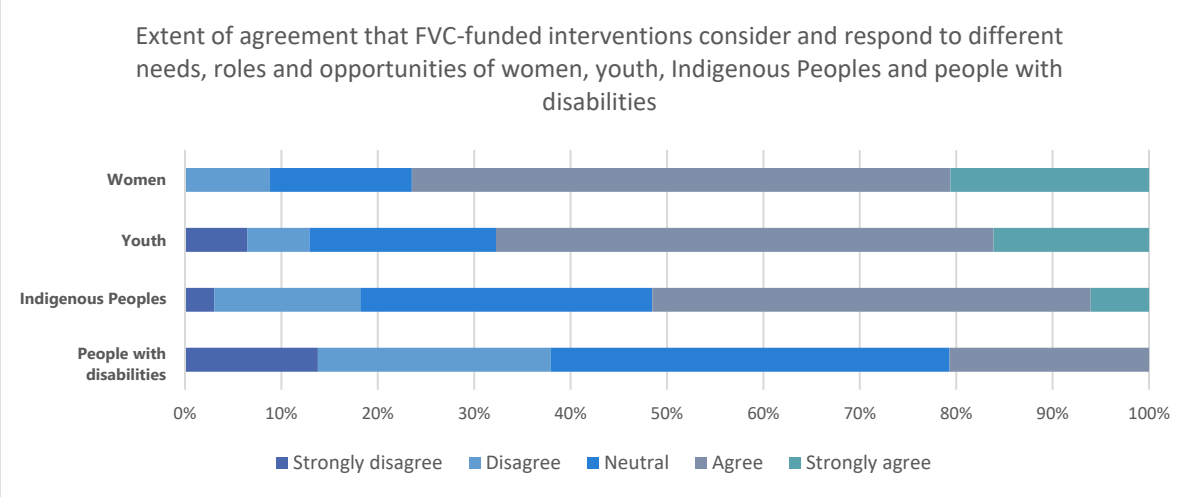
124. The FVC partially aligns with FAO's corporate approach to integrating inclusion into its work by emphasizing women and youth as priority groups within the previous and current funding phases. During the 2018–2021 phase, women and youth were specifically targeted through a dedicated Programme entitled "Generational Gaps, Gender and Decent Rural Employment (focusing on Women's empowerment and Gender equality, Youth employment and Child labour issues)" (FAO, 2018). In addition, gender (but not youth) was listed within governance documents as a cross-cutting issue to be integrated into thematic priorities. The previous evaluation concurred that the FVC provided support for subprogrammes with a specific focus on gender and also supported the integration of gender as a cross-cutting issue within broader FVC-funded subprogrammes and across large portfolios of other (non-FVC funded) programmes.[38] Within the current FVC funding phase – 2022–2025 – women and youth have continued to be clearly highlighted as priority cross-cutting issues for integration into thematic priorities within operational and governance documents (FAO, 2022a). In practice, this has resulted in FVC support for

[38] See Finding 20 of the previous evaluation on the integration of gender as a cross-cutting issue in FMM-funded initiatives, and Finding 18 on how the FMM's principle of complementing existing programmes enabled the introduction or strengthening of specific aspects, including gender (FAO, 2021a).

several subprogrammes which either explicitly or implicitly seek to target women and/or youth.[39]

125. Efforts to integrate other cross-cutting issues and groups, beyond women and youth, are less clearly articulated by the FVC. Governance documents for the previous and the present FVC funding cycles do not mention Indigenous Peoples or people with disabilities. Rather, there are frequent references to "inclusive" approaches, in support of the overall FAO strategy of supporting "the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems", wherein the consideration of all potentially excluded groups (including Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities) can be implied (FAO, 2018). This implied approach resulted in one dedicated subprogramme targeting Indigenous Peoples in the 2018–2021 phase, and two in the current funding phase (one of which was a continuation of a previously FVC-funded subprogramme).[40] There were no dedicated subprogrammes targeting people with disabilities in either FVC phase.

Figure 14. Survey responses on the FVC's consideration of marginalized groups



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on online survey, n=38 subprogrammes from the 2018–2021 portfolio.

[39] Subprogrammes explicitly focusing on gender in the current FVC funding cycle include FVC/GLO/205/MUL (Innovative gender responsive and transformative approaches for inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems); FVC/GLO/198/MUL (Boosting evidence on biodiversity and gender for sustainable livestock transformation); FVC/RLA/185/MUL (Rural Women Empowerment and Environmental Sustainability Acceleration Programme); and FVC/GLO/233/MUL (Scaling up mainstreaming gender and social inclusion under UNFCCC processes). Subprogrammes explicitly focusing on youth in the current FVC funding cycle include FVC/GLO/189/MUL (Empowering urban youth for accelerating urban greening and urban agrifood systems transformation and promoting green job opportunities at city level) and FVC/GLO/187/MUL (Youth Food Lab).

[40] 2018–2021 funding phase – FMM/GLO/168/MUL (Indigenous Peoples' food systems coalition and Indigenous Peoples Biocentric Restoration for climate action); 2021–2025 phase – FVC/GLO/228/MUL (Indigenous Peoples´ food systems Coalition and Indigenous Peoples' Biocentric Restoration for climate action: Second Phase); FVC/GLO/229/MUL (Strengthening the resilience of Indigenous Peoples' food and knowledge systems).

126. The differing degrees of FVC's focus on particular groups – women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities – in theory (as set out in operational and governance documents) and in practice (explicit references to marginalized groups in subprogramme documentation) – is borne from the perceptions of FAO respondents to the evaluation survey. More internal survey participants agreed that FVC-funded interventions consider and respond to different needs, roles and opportunities of women and youth, compared to Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities (see Figure 13).[41]

127. Integrating cross-cutting issues is explicitly listed as one of the criteria used for resource allocation decisions, and FAO interviewees generally indicated that integrating cross-cutting issues into FVC proposals and interventions was a straightforward process. The assessment of proposals conducted by the FVC Coordination Unit includes consideration of whether the proposal addresses cross-cutting areas such as "gender, nutrition and climate change" (FVC Secretariat, n.d.), but the ratings for this aspect are high across the board (with a median score of 1.8 out of a possible 2 points), suggesting that it is fairly straightforward to demonstrate that proposals meet the criteria. Moreover, the ratings for cross-cutting areas are conflated with those for intersectoral integration and catalytic effects, making it difficult to isolate the Coordination Unit's assessment of the extent to which projects target marginalized groups (see section 3.4.1).

128. Beyond a brief description in project proposals, there is limited further evidence of the extent to which the FVC considers cross-cutting issues at the design and selection phase. The gender marker is introduced at the project formulation stage – during the drafting of the project document, once FVC funding has already been approved (FAO, 2024a) – and there are no comparable markers or methods for articulating the extent to which FVC subprogrammes seek to integrate other potentially marginalized groups. Project budgets are not disaggregated according to their attention to particular population groups, nor are project monitoring plans set up to capture data relating to particular segments of societies, making it difficult to know in practice (beyond the stated aims of FVC proposals) the extent to which subprogrammes aim to consider the needs and capacities of potentially marginalized groups. Evidence reviewed during the evaluation highlights that these issues are not specific to the FVC, but rather a reflection of FAO's overall corporate approach to programme design and implementation and its integration of cross-cutting issues (see section 4.4 for further details) (FAO, 2019, 2021c, 2023d; UN Joint Inspection Unit, 2023).

[41] Survey respondents comprised Lead Technical Officers of funded subprogrammes during the 2018–2021 phase. The responses provided are the LTOs' own assessments of the extent to which FVC subprogrammes addressed these vulnerable populations.

4. How effective has the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund been in contributing to the implementation of the FAO Strategic Framework?

129. This section addresses the effectiveness criterion. It seeks to draw on the terminal reports, case study visits and key informant interviews to aggregate the key contributions made by the FVC to the FAO Strategic Framework. It also seeks to assess the extent to which the FVC subprogrammes have responded to the criteria that the fund seeks to advance through its disbursement of flexible funding.

4.1 What results have Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund investments contributed to?

Summary of findings: There is good evidence of results across the four betters as a result of FVC investments, covering the spectrum of FAO's work. FAO stakeholders at global and country level are able to cite the results that have been achieved and sustained since coming to the end of the FVC funding cycle, some of which were verified during country visits by the Evaluation Team. Interviews with government partners and beneficiaries confirmed that those external stakeholders were also appreciative of FAO's work, which in many cases had stimulated partnerships, investments and innovations.

130. FVC reports include numerous examples of the outputs and results achieved by FVC-funded subprogrammes. For the period covered by this question on effectiveness (i.e. 2018–2021), consecutive FVC annual reports and the FVC terminal report cite a broad spectrum of results linked to the FAO Strategic Framework through their relevance to the four betters. It was not feasible for the Evaluation Team to verify all the FVC's reported results. However, through data collection in case study countries (the in-person country case studies conducted in Mauritania, Uganda and Zambia and the light-touch desk reviews conducted for the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Barbados), the evaluation was able to review a sample of FVC-funded subprogrammes and partially verify their relevance and effectiveness through visits and discussions with internal and external project stakeholders and partners. This section of the report primarily relies on FAO's self-reporting of results; highlights from the country case studies were added to provide further detail (Boxes 6, 7, 8 and 9).

4.1.1 Better production

131. Under the umbrella of better production, FVC funding has supported FAO's efforts to foster more productive and sustainable agricultural, forestry and fisheries systems. During the 2018–2021 funding phase, better production accounted for the largest proportion of financial allocations and numbers of subprogrammes (35 percent of total allocated funding and 31 percent of subprogrammes). Flexible resources enabled work on promoting climate-smart agriculture (CSA) and agroecology, providing evidence and tools for transitioning towards more productive and sustainable systems (FMM/GLO/139/MUL). The fund also supported initiatives to scale up conservation agriculture, including conducting mechanization supply chain studies in the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia (FMM/GLO/146/MUL).

132. FVC interventions contributed to strengthening the capacities and competitiveness of small-scale producers. This included work on sustainable and resilient production techniques, agricultural extension services and business development. The fund supported efforts to combat significant agricultural threats, such as reducing maize yield losses due to fall armyworm in countries like Burkina Faso, India and Kenya, partly achieved through the development and improvement of the related monitoring app FAMEWS (FAO, n.d.b.) (FMM/GLO/154/MUL). In the Pacific region, FVC supported subregional work covering livestock, crops and forestry in countries including Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, benefiting from coordination with the Subregional Office and national ministries (FMM/GLO/167/MUL). Support for sustainable urban food systems also contributed to this area by focusing on capacity development in sustainable production and processing practices.

Box 5. Deep dive case study – supporting youth champions of agriculture in Uganda

The FVC-funded subprogramme "*Strengthening Capacity to Harness Positive Effects of Migration"* (FMM/GLO/133/MUL), implemented between 2019 and 2023, aimed to enhance the capacity of national and local stakeholders to design and implement policies and strategies to maximize the benefits of rural migration while mitigating its adverse effects. The subprogramme was implemented globally and in Nepal, the Republic of Moldova, Senegal and Uganda.

In Uganda, the subprogramme played a crucial role in fostering diaspora engagement in agribusiness, specifically through the establishment of the Uganda Diaspora Agribusiness Network. This network then became a platform for further diaspora engagement and investment. Through the subprogramme, FAO engaged 90 Ugandan diaspora agripreneurs across ten countries to act as a bridge between policymakers and diaspora. It also piloted the diaspora-youth agribusiness matching programme, connecting diaspora investors with young agripreneurs, which paved the way for further collaborations and potential future investments.

On the case study mission, the Evaluation Team spoke with one of the young agripreneurs who had participated in the matching programme. Thanks to the relationship with her diaspora investor, who is also her primary customer, the young agripreneur increased the quantity of the vegetables that she supplies for export. With the investor's backing, she was also able to purchase solar drying equipment and engage other youth workers to fulfil the increase in orders. In addition, she has taken a leading role within the Young Farmers Champions Network for western Uganda, working with other young agripreneurs to increase production and boost livelihoods.

Source: FAO. 2023d. *FVC Terminal Report, 2018–2021*, November 2023. Rome.

4.1.2 Better nutrition

133. The FVC provided support for strengthening data collection, analysis and dissemination related to food security and nutrition, a key component for achieving better nutrition outcomes. During the 2018–2021 FVC phase, better nutrition accounted for a relatively small proportion of funding, accounting for 16 percent of allocated funding. This included supporting countries in monitoring and reporting on SDG Indicators under FAO's custodianship. Specifically, the fund supported work related to updating critical indicators like the Prevalence of Severe Food Insecurity based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale, disseminated through platforms like FAOSTAT[42] (FMM/GLO/129/MUL), which helped countries improve their SDG monitoring and reporting rates. It also involved strengthening capacity for reporting on local breeds at risk of extinction (SDG Indicator 2.5.2) in countries like Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, leading to a reduction in species with unknown status.

[42] FAOSTAT provides free access to food and agriculture statistics (including crop, livestock, and forestry subsectors) for over 245 countries and territories and covers all FAO regional groupings from 1961 to the most recent year available. See (FAO, n.d.d.).

134. Further contributions were made through the subprogramme Closing agriculture data gap: contribution to the 50x2030 Initiative (FMM/GLO/125/MUL). This initiative supported countries in implementing integrated agricultural survey programmes to generate higher-quality data for SDG monitoring. Countries benefiting from this work included Armenia, Cambodia, Georgia, Ghana, Nepal and Uganda, where support involved activities like enhancing survey programmes, adopting rotating survey models and facilitating data collection despite challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. This strategic investment in data infrastructure and capacity development helped to provide the evidence base needed for nutrition-sensitive policies.

Box 6. Deep dive case study – strengthening household nutrition through digital innovation in Zambia

In Zambia, the FVC-funded subprogramme, *Economic inclusion and social protection to reduce poverty in the context of COVID-19* (FMM/GLO/157/MUL) established a Management Information System (MIS) for the existing Food Security Pack (FSP) programme. The FSP programme itself is a social safety net aimed at empowering poor and vulnerable farmer households with agricultural inputs and livelihood skills, ultimately enhancing their food, nutrition and income security.

The project's contribution to better nutrition in Zambia was achieved indirectly by supporting and improving the operational efficiency of the FSP through the development and piloting of the Food Security Pack Management Information System (FSPMIS). Utilizing the FSPMIS enhanced the delivery of the FSP programme, for example by reducing delays in input delivery, which in turn supported the FSP's stated goal of enhancing household nutrition security.

In total, 183 671 rain-fed farmers were registered in the FSPMIS by the end of 2023, significantly surpassing the target of 10 000 beneficiaries for the FSP module. In addition, 43 system-end users from the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services and three staff members from the Smart Zambia Institute were trained as "trainer of trainers" on the various FSPMIS modules, and a further 45 officers across relevant ministries were trained in the use of the system.

Source: FAO. 2023d. *FVC Terminal Report, 2018–2021*, November 2023. Rome.

4.1.3 Better environment

135. Contributing to a better environment, the FVC supported initiatives focused on climate action, the sustainable management of natural resources and biodiversity conservation within agricultural sectors. During the 2018–2021 phase, better environment accounted for a relatively small proportion of funding, accounting for 16 percent of allocated funding. The fund built upon previous FAO work to scale up interventions and strengthen policy related to climate-smart agriculture. Subprogrammes like Sustainable productivity in agriculture (in the context of CSA and agroecology) (FMM/GLO/139/MUL) and Integrated Climate Smart Agriculture approach through the Global Alliance for Climate Smart Agriculture (FMM/GLO/124/MUL), received FVC support to provide evidence-based guidance and policy advice. This also included exploring and testing climate-smart agriculture+ (CSA+) sustainability frameworks in countries such as the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Zambia.

136. The FVC also supported work under the Forest and Farm Facility (FFF) (FMM/GLO/147/MUL), which aided small-scale producers to access resources and support forest and farm producer organizations, contributing to biodiversity and climate resilience in countries such as the United Republic of Tanzania. Furthermore, the subprogramme Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors (FMM/GLO/163/MUL), implemented from late 2022 into 2023 with FVC funding, focused on aligning agricultural sectors with global biodiversity goals. Results included laying the foundation for future work in Ghana on restoration for resilience and recovery of agrifood systems.

Box 7. Deep dive case study – integrating biodiversity in agricultural policies and practices in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

The FVC-funded subprogramme, *Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors* (FMM/GLO/165/MUL) aimed to contribute to addressing biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation by mainstreaming biodiversity values across agricultural sectors, supporting policies for its sustainable use, conservation and restoration. It was implemented between June 2022 and December 2023 in Uganda, Madagascar and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, with outreach activities and dissemination in a number of other countries.

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, agricultural biodiversity is a key part of FAO's country priorities and is also reflected in government priorities and the UN's broader country programme. While highly relevant, there was little knowledge about how to progress in this area. The FVC-funded project focused on building knowledge and conducting advocacy on the importance of integrating biodiversity values into agricultural policies and practices. A core result was the analysis of national policies relevant to biodiversity, agriculture and climate change to identify gaps and needed alignments. This foundational work was complemented by extensive capacity building and awareness raising activities. The project also facilitated the sharing of good practices and lessons learned, including developing a guide for policy analysis and roadmap development, aimed at informing similar initiatives and disseminating knowledge on effective strategies for integrating biodiversity into agricultural sectors. These efforts helped to build the knowledge necessary for more sustainable land use. Drawing on the analytical and capacity building work, a key achievement was the development and agreement of a national roadmap in the Lao People's Democratic Republic for biodiversity mainstreaming across agricultural sectors.

Further investment in this area in the Lao People's Democratic Republic is still limited, according to FAO, and more work needs to be done to share knowledge on agrobiodiversity and change attitudes and behaviours.

Source: FAO. 2023d. *FVC Terminal Report, 2018–2021*, November 2023. Rome.

4.1.4 Better life

137. The FVC played a role in fostering inclusive rural transformation, reducing poverty and inequalities, promoting gender equality, and building resilience, thereby contributing to a better life. During the 2018–2021 phase, a better life accounted for the second largest proportion of financial allocations and numbers of subprogrammes, receiving 33 percent of allocated funding.

138. A key area of support in this category was the promotion of coherence and integration between agriculture and social protection, including through the subprogramme Economic inclusion and social protection to reduce poverty in the context of COVID-19 (FMM/GLO/157/MUL). In Guyana, for instance, the fund supported analysis informing the finalization of a report on coherence between agriculture and social protection policies, recommending the design and scaling up of Cash-Plus interventions. This work falls under broader efforts to build resilience to multiple shocks, which also saw activities in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines involving collaboration with other projects and analysis of disaster risk management systems.

139. The FVC also supported the Generational gaps and eliminating child labour in agriculture subprogramme (FMM/GLO/137/MUL), which aimed to create an enabling environment to prevent child labour and promote decent work in agriculture. This included advocating for and formulating projects to address the root causes of child labour in the context of climate change in countries like Malawi, Ghana, Uganda and Mali (see Box 9). Initiatives such as the Clear Cotton project in Burkina Faso, Mali and Pakistan were also supported in order to strengthen national dialogues to promote the sustainability of results. Additionally, FVC resources supported ongoing work focused on building livelihood resilience and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic challenges, for example, under the subprogramme Building livelihoods resilience and recovery from COVID-19 challenges in Latin America (FMM/GLO/166/MUL). The FVC's support for the expansion of the Dimitra Clubs approach

(a community-led gender-transformative methodology) in various countries also contributed significantly to women's empowerment and community mobilization, increasing the number of projects integrating this component (FMM/GLO/138/MUL) (see section 4.3).

Box 8. Deep dive case study – mitigating the risks of children working in agriculture and fisheries in Uganda

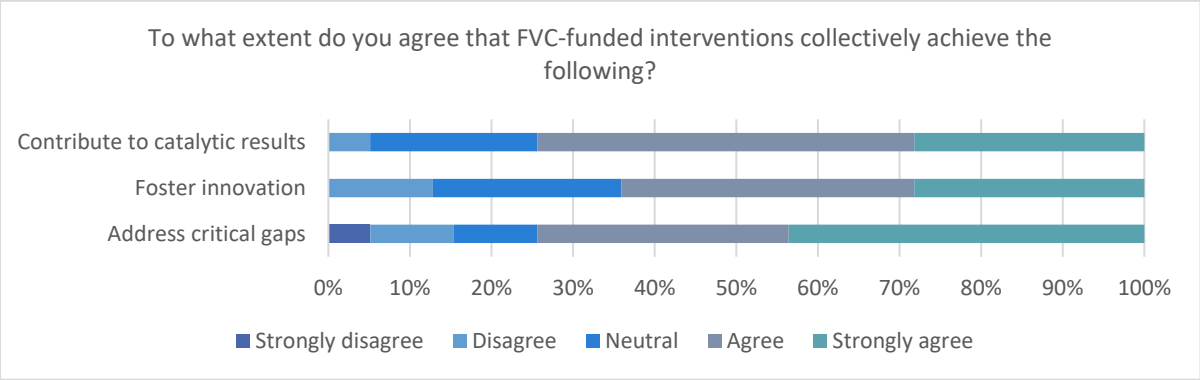
The FVC initiative *Generational gaps and eliminating child labour in agriculture* (FMM/GLO/137/MUL) was implemented between 2019 and 2023 with both a global scope and piloting activities in Lebanon, Pakistan and Uganda. In Uganda, the project contributed to mitigating the risks of children working in agriculture and fisheries through knowledge generation, capacity building and the development of safety tools. Not only has there been positive feedback on the tools developed and their uptake, but the process has supported FAO's collaboration with key stakeholders in Uganda. For example, FAO was invited to join the National Steering Committee on the Elimination of Child Labour, providing an opportunity to influence key decision makers. The project has also fostered closer collaboration with other UN agencies working in this area, particularly the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund.

Source: FAO. 2023d. *FVC Terminal Report, 2018-2021*, November 2023. Rome.

4.2 To what extent have FVC investments addressed critical gaps and contributed to catalytic results in FAO's programmatic areas?

Summary of findings: During the 2018–2021 phase, the FVC has played a role in providing seed funding to address critical gaps and underfunded areas, which has enabled FAO to pilot new approaches, gather evidence and establish foundations for future scale-up. The instrument has also supported innovative initiatives with potential for transformative change both in terms of the use of new technology or methods to promote positive change, piloting new approaches for potential scale-up, or in the brokering of new partnerships for policy and practice change.

Figure 15. Achievement of Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund criteria by subprogrammes



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on online survey, n=38 subprogrammes from the 2018–2021 portfolio.

140. Meeting FVC criteria is a requirement of FVC-funded subprogrammes and is captured in proposals as well as being a reporting requirement. Determining the extent and the ways in which FVC subprogrammes have addressed criteria is an important measure of the effectiveness of the Fund.

141. The achievement of "catalytic results" provides the raison d'être for the FVC, and in the online survey, the majority of participants considered this a strength of the Fund.[43] As outlined in the governance document, the definition of the term "catalytic results" incorporates the provision of seed funding to address critical gaps and support for kick-starting or speeding up fostering innovative initiatives that have potential for transformative change (FAO, 2022a). The analysis below draws on evidence from project reports, interviews, data from the online survey of Lead Technical Officers for subprogrammes in the 2018–2021 portfolio, and Barbados, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mauritania, Uganda and Zambia case studies to demonstrate how the FVC has addressed critical gaps and fostered innovation.

4.2.1 Critical gaps

142. The online survey provided very positive feedback on the performance of FVC-funded subprogrammes in addressing critical gaps, with close to 75 percent of participants agreeing with the statement (Figure 16). Annual reports and the terminal report provide context to the survey results, highlighting the role of the FVC in strategically deploying resources where they are required to initiate activities that might otherwise have lacked adequate support. The reports provide examples of FVC subprogrammes addressing policy and regulatory gaps and capacity and knowledge gaps.

Policy and regulatory gaps

143. Policy and regulatory gaps represent the absence or inadequacy of legal frameworks and official guidelines necessary for effective action and professional recognition. These gaps impeded the establishment of clear responsibilities, professional standards and supportive structures for development initiatives.

144. For instance, the subprogramme Leveraging global instruments and knowledge products (FMM/GLO/127/MUL) facilitated a review and assessment of regulatory and policy frameworks on the governance of pastoral lands in Mali and Mauritania to inform national policymakers about existing gaps, overlaps and contradictions in laws and legislations affecting pastoralism. Under the FMM/GLO/164/MUL subprogramme in Zambia and South Sudan, technical reviews of draft FAO Country Programming Frameworks were conducted to strengthen "systems lenses", which strengthened policy alignment; a policy brief on the Comprehensive Agriculture Transformation Support Programme (CATSP) was developed in Zambia to clarify key legal, institutional, budget and organizational implications for policymakers to address a critical gap hindering government policy and planning (see Box 9).

[43] Survey respondents comprised Lead Technical Officers of funded subprogrammes during the 2018–2021 phase. The responses provided are the LTOs' own assessments of the extent to which FVC subprogrammes collectively achieved the stated objectives.

Box 9. Deep dive case study – the role of the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund in strengthening agrifood systems transformation in Zambia

The FVC-funded subprogramme has significantly contributed to the agrifood systems transformation agenda in Zambia by supporting research and mapping through the development of key policy frameworks (FMM/GLO/164/MUL). Particularly important was the provision of support by FAO for the development of Zambia's Comprehensive Agriculture Transformation Support Programme, which serves as the Second National Agriculture Investment Plan. The CATSP was published in July 2024 and aims to improve the country's food and nutrition security.

The subprogramme facilitated this by supporting several foundational studies. These included a review of existing national and international policy and strategy documents, as well as relevant legislation and an analysis of the current governance structures within Zambia's agrifood sector. These reviews provided critical insights and formed the basis for policy improvement recommendations to guide the transformation of agrifood systems in Zambia.

Furthermore, the subprogramme supported a comprehensive mapping of Zambia's agrifood small and medium enterprises support ecosystem. This mapping was complemented by specific research into agribusiness incubators and experimental kitchens that could foster innovative product development. The analysis generated policy recommendations specifically targeted at strengthening the overall agribusiness ecosystem in the country.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Capacity and knowledge gaps

145. Capacity and knowledge gaps relate to the deficiencies in skills, expertise and readily accessible information among individuals and institutions involved in development projects. These gaps limited ability to implement best practices, manage data effectively and adapt to evolving challenges.

146. For example, the subprogramme on Improving country data for monitoring SDG achievements and informing policy decisions (FMM/GLO/129/MUL) specifically addressed capacity and knowledge gaps. Countries including Zambia, the Gambia, Eswatini, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan received technical assistance and tailored training, which enhanced their ability to understand, collect, compile and report on SDG Indicators. This addressed a deficit in their technical skills for data management and reporting. In Mali, a practical case study and subsequent technical assistance were provided to support the disaggregation of SDG Indicators 2.3.1 and 2.3.2[44] using microdata, which filled a perceived skills gap in advanced analytical capabilities.

147. Similarly, the Strengthening capacity to harness positive effects of migration subprogramme (FMM/GLO/133/MUL) addressed capacity gaps in Senegal. Six orientation and help desks (Bureaux Communaux d'Accueil, Orientation et de Suivi – BCAOS) were established to support migrants in rural areas. The coordinators of these desks received specific four-day training and tools to effectively assist return and prospective migrants in setting up agribusiness projects, which addressed the need for specialized capacities in local migration governance mechanisms. Under the FMM/GLO/173/MUL subprogramme to Support the SICA Carbon Neutrality and Adaptation to Climate Change Strategy of the AFOLU sector, over 20 technicians from 11 agricultural, environmental, financial and planning institutions in Honduras and Nicaragua had their capacities strengthened in

[44] SDG Indicator 2.3.1 measures the volume of production per labour unit by classes of farming/pastoral/forestry enterprise size. Indicator 2.3.2 measures the average income of small-scale food producers, by sex and Indigenous status.

preparing agriculture, forestry and other land use (AFOLU) sector investment notes using the Hand-in-Hand methodology, to address a knowledge gap in investment planning.

Addressing critical funding gaps at headquarters and Country Office level

148. A review undertaken by the FAO Office of Evaluation of FVC funding against underfunded thematic areas at corporate level presents a broadly positive picture, with a high degree of thematic alignment reported between the 2018–2021 FVC portfolio and the strategic areas of emphasis identified in the 2018–2021 Medium-Term Plan and 2018–2019 Programme Implementation Report, particularly in domains underfunded through traditional channels such as migration, social protection and decent employment.[45] The analysis extended to a review of country-level FVC contribution against underfunded thematic areas, a summary of which is provided in Box 10.

Box 10. FVC contributions to underfunded thematic areas at country level

Mauritania: The Country Programming Framework for Mauritania identified approximately USD 32 million in funding gaps. FVC supported four subprogrammes with a combined budget of approximately USD 1.39 million. These interventions were strategically aligned with four CPF-defined gaps: policy support, youth employment, value chain development and data systems. Thematically, FVC-funded projects focused on institutional governance, SDG-aligned data systems, women's empowerment and youth-led investment, matching national priorities. However, the scale was modest relative to the gaps, and 9 of the 13 CPF underfunded areas received no FVC coverage.

Uganda: Uganda's CPF identified more than USD 68 million in funding gaps. FVC contributed approximately USD 4.5 million through a diverse set of subprogrammes that were well aligned with CPF priorities. These targeted areas such as statistical capacity, inclusive agribusiness, governance innovation, sustainable aquaculture, and food systems transformation. Notably, several FVC projects addressed often underfunded social inclusion themes, including youth employment, gender equality, social protection and child labour, supporting CPF priorities related to vulnerable households and institutional coordination. Despite this strong alignment, most funding gaps in the CPF remained largely unmet.

Zambia: Zambia's CPF identified over USD 29 million in funding gaps. FVC provided support through targeted subprogrammes totalling an estimated USD 2 million. These projects contributed to several CPF-defined underfunded areas, with a focus on sustainable food systems, resource governance, social protection and climate adaptation. These interventions addressed around 8 of the 17 identified CPF priority areas, showing good thematic alignment, particularly in environmental sustainability, institutional innovation and inclusive growth. However, many underfunded areas, such as food safety regulation and market access, received limited or no FVC support, underscoring the limited scale of FVC resources relative to the needs.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Leveraging FVC to access other funding sources

149. The extent to which the FVC has played a role in leveraging additional funding and resources is difficult to objectively evidence. While 60 percent of the 2018–2021 subprogrammes that responded to the online survey reported that FVC had significantly or very significantly contributed to securing additional funding, there is a lack of quantitative funding data to verify this largely anecdotal evidence. The case studies highlighted particular challenges in determining causality and contribution. Fund

[45] During the 2018–2021 period, FAO did not quantify funding gaps in its strategic documents. However, organizational gaps and/or areas of underfunding were referenced qualitatively under areas of "*emphasis*" in the MTP 2018–2021 and highlighted more explicitly as funding challenges in the Programme Implementation Report 2018–2019.

leveraging by the FVC has occurred for four distinct sources of financing and partnership-building:

i. Environmental and development funds. There are several examples outlined in the terminal report of the use of the FVC to leverage funding from major environmental and development funds like the Global Environment Facility, Green Climate Fund, World Bank funds and the Adaptation Fund. Funds catalysed by FVC support reportedly enabled the expansion of activities in the Bureaux Communaux d'Accueil, Orientation et de Suivi initiative in Senegal (FMM/GLO/133/MUL). Funding from the regular programme through the FAO Regional Office for Africa was stimulated by FVC project activities. FVC reporting suggested that the MADAD project, funded by the European Union, was planning to scale up activities initiated by an FVC project in Lebanon (FMM/INT/278/MUL).[46]

ii. Private investment. The FVC has sought to leverage private investment as a component of its catalytic effect. This has been achieved through various approaches, including fostering partnerships with private sector actors and financial institutions, supporting the development of investment notes and business plans, and connecting producers and "agripreneurs" with potential financiers. For example, in Barbados, where FVC-supported activities focused on fish silage (FMM/GLO/131/MUL), the relatively small FVC investment triggered a private investment of USD 100 000 in a fish silage derived feed and fertilizer business. It also successfully mobilized resources for specific studies, including USD 5 000 for an update of data on fish waste production and USD 12 000 for an analysis of the costs of production. Furthermore, the initiative linked to and potentially catalysed a component within the larger FAO China South–South Cooperation project for Small Island Developing States, dedicating USD 500 000 for activities in Barbados. In total, the funds raised in Barbados amounted to tenfold the initial FVC project's funding for activities in the country.

iii. Internal FAO resources. Leveraging also happens through mobilizing and complementing internal FAO resources and building strong partnerships with other international entities. In Uganda, FVC support related to strengthening capacity to harness the positive effects of migration (FMM/GLO/133/MUL) positioned FAO for engagement on the new thematic area of diaspora and agribusiness development. The pilot activities in Uganda contributed to increased visibility and recognition of FAO's work in this thematic area, which spurred interest among stakeholders and internal FAO divisions, leading to additional internal funds being committed. The FAO Regional Office for Africa contributed funds in 2021 to cost-share a global lesson learned guide and toolkit on reintegration of returnees, catalysing funds from the Multidisciplinary Fund in response to COVID-19 reverse migration.

iv. UN agencies and international organizations. Collaboration with other UN agencies and international organizations is also a form of leveraging, seen in partnerships with the World Food Programme and the Commissariat Securité Alimentaire for studies in Mali (FMM/INT/278/MUL). Projects like the Blue Growth Initiative

[46] The MADAD Fund is a significant source of funding for the European Union's non-humanitarian aid to countries neighbouring the Syrian Arab Republic, addressing the economic, educational and social needs of refugees and host communities. See (FAO, n.d.e.).

(FMM/INT/277/MUL) and Integrated Country Approach for Decent Rural Youth Employment (FMM/RLA/215/MUL) were successful in building new partnerships.

150. Mauritania provides an illustrative example of how a modest FVC investment catalysed larger-scale follow-up initiatives. The subprogramme FMM/GLO/179/MUL, titled Fostering Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems by Young Agri-Entrepreneurs to Promote Territorial Development and Strengthen Sectors, allocated USD 150 000 to Mauritania and introduced the Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI) approach – an investment framework aligned with the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) principles, promoting economic viability, social responsibility and environmental sustainability. The intervention supported the development of a national RAI roadmap and associated capacity development, laying the groundwork for two subsequent projects: UNJP/MAU/046/PBF, funded by the UN Peacebuilding Fund (USD 1 800 000), and GCP/GLO/1206/GER, a German-funded initiative (USD 600 000), both of which aim to scale up the RAI agri-accelerator model. Notably, both follow-up project documents explicitly reference the foundational work conducted under FMM/GLO/179/MUL as informing their design and rationale.

151. While the specific financial value of all leveraged resources is not always quantified in the reports, and it is complex to evidence causality, these examples provide snapshots of the potential contribution made by the FVC to leveraging diverse funding sources and fostering collaborative efforts that extend the reach and impact of FAO's work.

4.2.2 Fostering innovation

152. The results of the survey were less unequivocal than for other criteria, with just under 65 percent of survey participants considering that the FVC had collectively contributed to innovative initiatives across its portfolio of funded subprogrammes (see Figure 16). The FVC has actively supported innovative initiatives with potential for transformative change, spanning a range of domains that include technical methodologies, social and community engagement approaches, and capacity development and partnerships.

Technical methodologies

153. A range of technical and methodological innovations were highlighted by the terminal report and the case studies. In Uganda, the FVC supported political economy analysis and modelling in partnership with research institutions. This application of robust analytical tools to provide evidence for policy review and institutional reform for food systems transformation was an innovative approach with potential to support systemic change.

154. Subprogrammes have also leveraged digital technology for innovation, including developing e-training materials in local languages and utilizing technology to support local businesses and bridge gender digital divides. A digital game on child labour and occupational safety and health, REEFI, was replicated in Mauritania.

Social and community engagement processes

155. Beyond technical advancements, the FVC has fostered innovation in social and community engagement approaches. The Dimitra Clubs, described as a community engagement and gender-transformative methodology, has proven crucial for enhancing the impact of development and humanitarian initiatives and is facing increasing requests for mainstreaming into other projects (FMM/GLO/138/MUL) (See Section 4.4). Similarly, the

Women's Empowerment Farmer Business Schools approach, often implemented alongside Dimitra Clubs, represents an adapted training methodology tailored to national contexts (FMM/GLO/138/MUL).

Piloting new approaches and establishing foundational elements for future scale-up

156. The FVC's flexibility has allowed for the piloting of innovative operational models and community-level interventions. Initiatives like conducting town hall meetings where project participants shared experiences through creative means like dramas and songs represent novel methods for gathering feedback and demonstrating effect at the grassroots level. The Forest and Farm Facility benefited from FVC support in its early phases (FMM/GLO/114/MUL), enabling it to simplify discussions with partners and build upon previous work. FVC funding was used to demonstrate the proof of concept for the pilot phase of FFF, helping to remove critical barriers and leveraging additional resources. These examples highlight how FVC seed funding supported testing, refining and demonstrating the potential of critical interventions before they are potentially scaled up or replicated.

Capacity development and partnership approaches

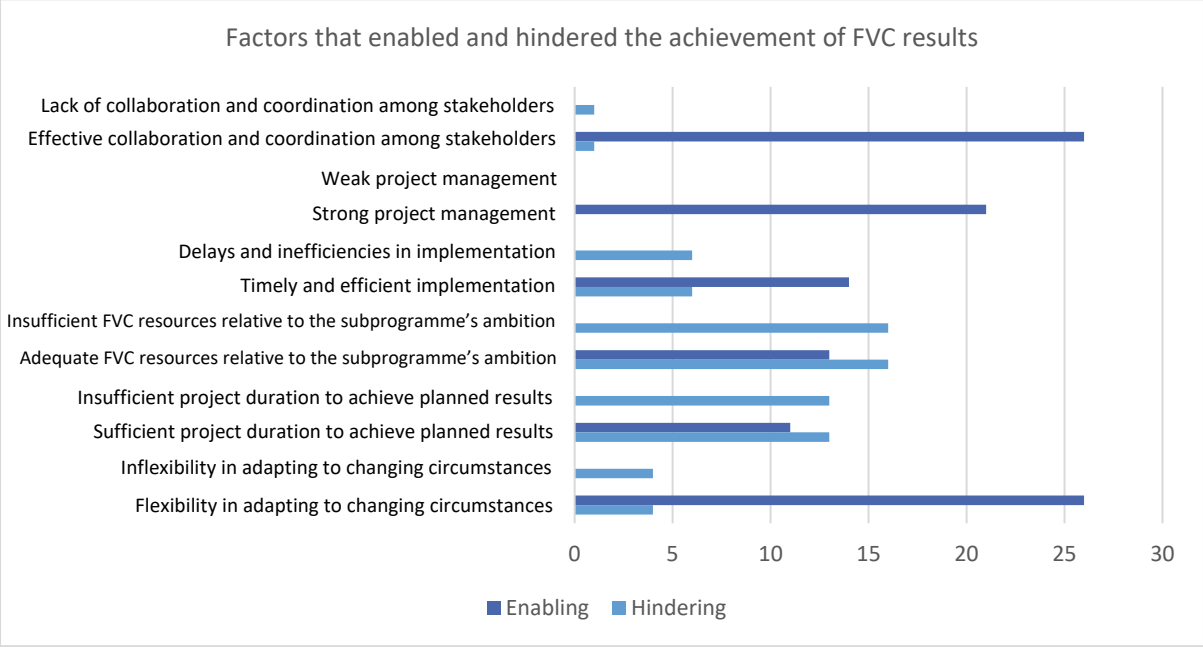
157. Innovation was also evident in capacity development and partnerships. A notable example was the innovative mentor programme for national focal points working on gender and agriculture under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which paired these focal points with regional mentors and young professionals (FMM/GLO/149/MUL), explicitly designed to address the intersectionality of climate change and gender.

4.3 Factors that enabled or hindered the delivery of FVC subprogrammes

Summary of findings: Both positive and negative influences, spanning internal governance, implementation processes, broader FAO support, and external dynamics, have impacted the effectiveness of FVC-supported subprogrammes. Enabling factors included the strengthening of the FVC over time, which has resulted in a solid administrative foundation through revised governance documents and guidelines. Building on the progress and relationships from previous FVC investments also facilitated implementation. Conversely, factors hindering delivery encompassed challenges in project management, delays, insufficient FVC resources relative to the ambition of subprogrammes, and insufficient project duration to achieve planned results. Other hindering factors included perceived lack of collaboration and coordination among stakeholders, inflexibility in adapting to changing circumstances, and external events such as extreme weather conditions.

158. Given the reach that the FVC has across the breadth of the FAO Strategic Framework and across its Decentralized Office, there has been a range of factors that have influenced its effectiveness. Patterns can be observed across these factors, which encompass internal governance, implementation processes, broader FAO support, and external dynamics, with some having a particularly significant impact on results.

Figure 16. Online survey results to enabling and hindering factors



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on online survey, n=38 subprogrammes from the 2018–2021 portfolio.

159. This analysis draws on a review of evidence from the terminal report, supplemented by interviews and case study visits. The survey findings presented in Figure 17 are referred to throughout the section.

4.3.1 Enabling factors for FVC investments

Factors linked to FVC governance and management

160. The Fund has been strengthened over time based on lessons from subprogramme implementation and regular consultations and strategic dialogues with resource partners. The periodic revision of the governance document and guidelines has ensured that the FVC benefits form a solid administrative and management foundation.

161. The oversight and support of the FVC Coordination Unit is a factor that has assisted in building confidence in the Fund. The shift to incorporating the FAO Strategic Objectives in project selection and implementation has strengthened synergies and complementarity with other FAO programmes. Furthermore, the shift to a results-based approach has assisted by ensuring that subprogrammes have more clearly defined results. The terminal report suggests that this has also improved the monitoring and reporting of project performance.

Factors linked to the FVC implementation processes

162. At the implementation level, leveraging the expertise of FAO and its partners and complementing existing work have been important in strengthening the fund's effectiveness and relevance. Engagement with a wide network of relevant stakeholders was identified as helping to ensure internal FAO buy-in and external stakeholder ownership, which was considered to be important for project success and sustainability. The practice of experience sharing across target countries was found to have accelerated the adoption of best practices, with examples of South–South Cooperation being highlighted as beneficial. For example, the terminal report highlighted that utilizing national advisory

committee members and Forest and Farm Producer Organizations active locally proved useful in overcoming challenges, including those imposed by external factors like travel restrictions in place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Allowing for some built-in flexibility in workplans was important for adapting to changing circumstances and helping to ensure timely support; of the 38 subprogrammes that responded to the online survey, 26 cited the flexibility of the FVC to adapt to changing circumstances as an enabler of achieving results, particularly at a time when there was a need for change as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 17). Capitalizing on the advantages offered by new digital working modalities helped ensure timely support, expand reach and improve data collection and dissemination.

Factors internal to FAO

163. The FVC has enabled FAO to leverage its technical expertise and comparative strengths across a range of agrifood system domains. The Fund benefited from being able to draw on the achievements and expertise accumulated during previous FVC phases, ensuring continuity and building upon past successes (Box 11). Enhanced collaboration and synergies within FAO were facilitated by the FVC, contributing to intersectoral work and a more integrated "One FAO" approach.

Box 11. The benefits of building on progress from previous FVC investments

The implementation of FVC subprogrammes across more than a single funding phase resulted in benefits from working with known partners that had relevant knowledge and capacities. For instance, in the Gambia, the United Republic of Tanzania and Liberia, discussions with government agencies, development partners and beneficiaries were simplified due to their existing familiarity with the Forest and Farm Facility, which had been supported in earlier phases (FAO, 2023e).

Earlier FVC-funded projects on specific themes laid the groundwork for prioritizing and implementing work in related areas in subsequent phases (FAO, 2023e). For instance, previous work on value chain development, trade and food waste provided the foundation for a new FVC priority programme focused on resilient and sustainable food systems. There were several examples from the Zambia case study where previous FVC interventions permitted pilot initiatives to be taken to scale or policy development work could move to implementation.[i]

Note: [i] For example, the development of the National Agricultural Investment Plan (NAIP)/CATSP, where the development of a second NAIP supported by funding from the 2018–2023 phase is now being supported with funding in the 2022–2025 phase to develop a multistakeholder process of agrifood systems transformation.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

External factors

164. Strengthening partnerships with a diverse range of external organizations, including other UN agencies (such as the International Labour Organization, World Food Programme, United Nations Development Programme and International Organization for Migration), governments, civil society organizations, research institutions and the private sector, was considered to have leveraged comparative advantages and strengthened the coordination and coherence of subprogramme implementation. Multistakeholder approaches and coordination were deemed critical to the success of many initiatives, bringing together diverse actors, including community members, governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector; over two-thirds of the subprogrammes that responded to the online survey reported that effective collaboration and coordination among stakeholders was a key enabling factor (Figure 17).

165. Ownership and management by lead national institutions or countries were repeatedly highlighted in the documents and were evident from the case studies as crucial for the

sustainability of results beyond the subprogramme life cycle. These attributes were directly linked to government and national commitment and buy-in, which were considered essential for progress, enabling policy changes, institutionalization and scaling up of successful interventions. Capitalizing on momentum created by global events, such as the UN Food Systems Summit, helped FVC subprogrammes to advance national agendas and integrate key themes into national planning.

4.3.2 Hindering factors for FVC investments

166. In addition to the enablers outlined, the FVC encountered a range of challenges that hindered its effectiveness. These included internal processes and the external operating environments.

Internal factors

167. A lack of staffing to support project design and delays in recruiting dedicated project consultants to oversee subprogramme implementation were frequently reported challenges, particularly for Decentralized Offices with limited staff capacity, potentially leading them to prioritize larger, less labour-intensive projects. Staffing concerns were a recurrent feature in the terminal reports. There was a noted lack of continuity in national expertise in some areas, and the competing demands of multiple projects on FAO personnel and Country Offices often affected the timing and resources available for FVC-funded activities. Furthermore, difficulties in identifying suitable local partners and recruiting personnel with adequate expertise for specific technical areas necessitated more time and resources than anticipated (Box 12).

Box 12. Delays as a consequence of a lack of staffing or consultants

The terminal report indicates a general difficulty in identifying and recruiting suitable personnel and consultants with adequate expertise, and that insufficient human resource capacities at FAO Country Offices could lead to delays in establishing stable focal points and identifying activity entry points. Efforts were made to mitigate this by hiring national consultants, but the process could be challenging.

For example, at the commencement of a subprogramme in Paraguay, a key challenge was that the initial project design did not include the hiring of a national consultant to support its implementation. In Dominica, subprogramme implementation suffered significant delays specifically due to a lengthy process of recruiting national consultants. This indicates that even when the need for national consultants was identified, the administrative and logistical complexities involved in the recruitment process itself could become a major bottleneck, hindering timely progress on planned activities.

In Tajikistan, selecting suitable candidates and involving national consultants presented difficulties due to the short project life, implying insufficient time for a thorough recruitment and onboarding process. In Zambia, a specific "*delay in hiring a dedicated social protection expert delayed the implementation of activities*", demonstrating a direct causal link between a recruitment delay and project progress. Similarly, in the United Republic of Tanzania, implementation delays were partly attributed to the busy schedule of national and international personnel.

Source: FAO. 2023e. *FVC: 2018–2023 Terminal Report (Annex B2)*. Individual subprogramme reports. Rome.

168. Data from project reporting and the terminal report suggests that project management at times hindered the delivery of results; technical backstopping required from headquarters to Decentralized Offices to build expertise was not always sustainable over time due to insufficient human resources. The document review highlighted the need for a careful balance between resources dedicated to field operations and those allocated for monitoring and evaluation, acknowledging that this is a particular challenge for small-scale subprogrammes with limited budgets.

169. The duration of FVC subprogrammes was frequently considered to be a barrier to achieving results; this was highlighted across several of the case studies in addition to the online survey in which 13 out of 38 subprogrammes reported it as being a hindrance (Figure 17).

170. The limited overall volume of flexible funds available, relative to FAO's total resources, posed a challenge for the FVC to meet the growing demand for support and scale-up of successful interventions once initial funding was exhausted. The online survey found this to be a significant barrier, with 16 of 38 subprogrammes considering it a hindrance to achieving results (Figure 17). This survey result is particularly interesting given the far more positive evidence from interviews, which endorsed the contribution that the FVC has made to supporting scalable ideas. This suggests that while the FVC can effectively support innovation, it may be less suited to taking such subprogrammes to scale. Box 13 provides an example from the terminal report.

Box 13. Hindrance: Insufficient country-level resource allocation

Limited resource allocation at the country level posed a challenge to achieving the desired scale of impact for some FVC initiatives. For the Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR) project (implicitly linked to FMM/GLO/116/MUL), the amount of funding available per country was a significant constraint. This limitation necessitated the FLR team to actively seek partnerships and strategic alliances to maintain credibility and effectiveness at the national level. Critically, the available funds were insufficient to support large-scale restoration efforts on the ground in the selected pilot areas, despite such large-scale action being a strong request from the corresponding government counterparts. This meant that some planned actions in the FLR workplans had to be funded through other sources.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

External factors

171. External factors also impacted implementation timelines and outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant and widespread challenges. This included travel restrictions that severely affected regular field visits, monitoring activities and in-person meetings. The pandemic also led to logistical challenges and supply chain disruptions, impacting the timely delivery of inputs and resources. For participants from local communities, particularly in remote areas, difficulties with internet connectivity hindered effective participation in virtual meetings. Furthermore, the limitations of virtual interactions were noted as hindering the ability to build trust and establish better mechanisms for accountability, and limited the interaction between panellists and participants compared to in-person events. The pandemic also caused delays in the passage of legislation and necessitated the reorganization of events and activities. Although online engagements could secure verbal commitments, follow-up actions were sometimes limited, highlighting a challenge in translating virtual discussions into concrete steps.

172. Political processes and internal government dynamics in partner countries caused delays, for instance in the passage or evaluation of land-related laws or policy reforms. Political uncertainty in some countries also delayed work involving government institutions and policy processes. A lack of sufficient resources needed by national institutions to enforce national action plans also presented a barrier to achieving desired outcomes. Frequent turnover and coordination failures among government department staff and Country Office personnel posed challenges requiring recurrent capacity building and enhanced coordination; Figure 17 shows that one-third of online survey respondents considered this to be a key barrier to the achievement of FVC results. Limited awareness and knowledge of the importance of topics like biodiversity for agrifood sectors, even among policymakers,

required significant and sustained investment in awareness raising and capacity building at national and subnational levels. Examples are provided in Box 14.

Box 14. Challenges in subprogramme implementation related to FAO's engagement with government

In several countries, the protracted process of finalizing letters of agreement and securing the necessary administrative approvals proved to be far more convoluted and bureaucratic than originally anticipated, causing delays and complications in project commencement. This included obstacles around concluding letters of agreement and obtaining requisite administrative clearances, with the process in Kyrgyzstan noted as being particularly cumbersome. In Samoa, a specific letter of agreement did not happen due to government approval delays, necessitating the redirection of fund. In Timor-Leste, significant challenges and delays in obtaining government approval delayed the start of the subprogramme.

Unscheduled national elections and changes of government officials contributed to significant delays in Dominica. In Grenada, unforeseen and unplanned changes in the ministry and changes in government officials affected training and awareness raising events. In Kyrgyzstan, the structure of the government was changing frequently, and parliamentary elections distracted civil servants from their direct duties and postponed the development of official documents.

Source: *FAO*. 2023e. *FVC: 2018-2023 Terminal Report (Annex B2)*. Individual subprogramme reports. Rome.

173. Unpredictable extreme weather and climate change-related events, such as erratic weather patterns impacting fisheries in Malawi or broader extreme weather in Bolivia, resulted in unexpected delays and necessitated adaptive management.

4.4 To what extent have FVC investments reached and benefited marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities?

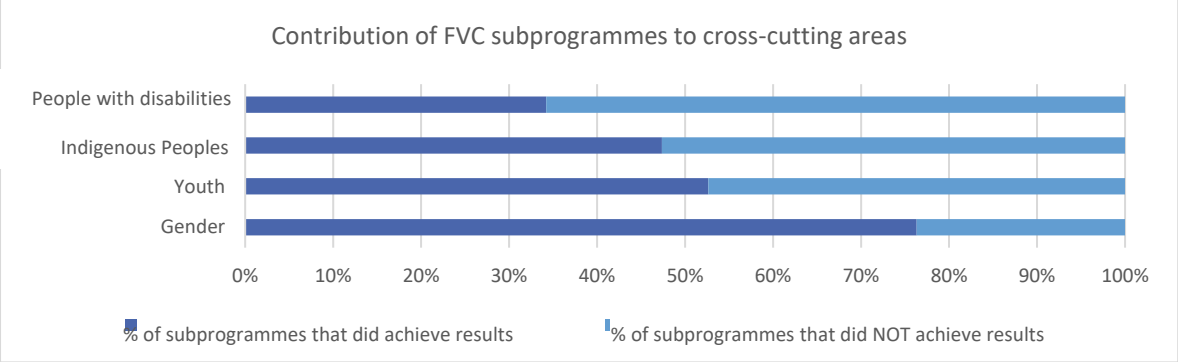
Summary of findings: The FVC has attempted to benefit and reach potentially marginalized and vulnerable groups according to the FAO approach to inclusivity. While there has been a strong focus on women and youth within FVC investments, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities have received less attention. A lack of clear tracking and monitoring data pertaining to these groups makes it difficult to determine with any certainty the extent to which marginalized groups have been reached by FVC initiatives. This lack of consistent disaggregated data on cross-cutting issues is symptomatic of FAO-wide challenges to determine results for marginalized and vulnerable groups.

174. As noted in section 3.5, the FVC has considered different marginalized and vulnerable groups within its processes to identify and support relevant subprogrammes to differing degrees by group. The evaluation also sought to understand the extent to which these different marginalized and vulnerable groups benefited from FVC investments in practice and what results were achieved.

175. FAO stakeholders were more positive about the extent to which FVC-funded subprogrammes had achieved results on gender, compared with results for youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities; respondents to the online survey considered that 76 percent of subprogrammes included in the survey had achieved results on gender, compared with youth (53 percent), Indigenous Peoples (47 percent) and people

with disabilities (34 percent) (Figure 18).[47] Comments from survey respondents reinforced these ratings, with numerous cited examples of how subprogrammes had targeted female beneficiaries and youth, even for initiatives that did not specifically set out to focus on gender or young people, compared with far fewer concrete examples cited for Indigenous Peoples and only one example of results cited for people with disabilities.

Figure 17. Survey responses on FVC subprogramme results in cross-cutting areas



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on online survey, n=38.

4.4.1 Women

176. Reporting on FVC subprogrammes includes clear examples of how investments have contributed to gender equality and women's empowerment. Within FVC reports and in case study countries, gender-focused activities have been targeted at women's economic empowerment, strengthening women's capacities, improving their access to resources and markets, and supporting women's empowerment through community engagement (see Box 15 on the Dimitra Clubs approach). There was also evidence of efforts to integrate gender considerations into policies and legal frameworks, particularly regarding land rights and climate action, and strengthening national capacities to produce and report on SDG Indicators that focus on women's ownership and/or control over agricultural land.[48]

Box 15. The Dimitra Clubs approach

The FVC has promoted the Dimitra Clubs approach as a way of supporting community engagement and women's empowerment in FAO activities. The FVC-funded subprogramme *Gender equality and women's empowerment in agriculture, food security and nutrition* (FMM/GLO/138/MUL) provided seed funding that enabled FAO to expand the reach of the Dimitra Clubs from six countries in 2019 (when Dimitra Clubs were integrated into 22 projects) to 17 countries in 2023 (at which point Dimitra Clubs were integrated into 84 projects).

By 2023, there were 10 095 Dimitra Clubs worldwide, reaching a total of 298 155 rural people (60 percent women and at least 20 percent young people) and indirectly benefiting an estimated 8 million rural people. The approach has been integrated into projects covering diverse technical areas, including resilience, peace, nutrition, climate action, value chains, migration, child labour and land. Additionally, FVC support contributed to raising the visibility and recognition of the Dimitra Clubs as a valuable approach, which supported uptake of the model within FAO and as part of UN joint projects.

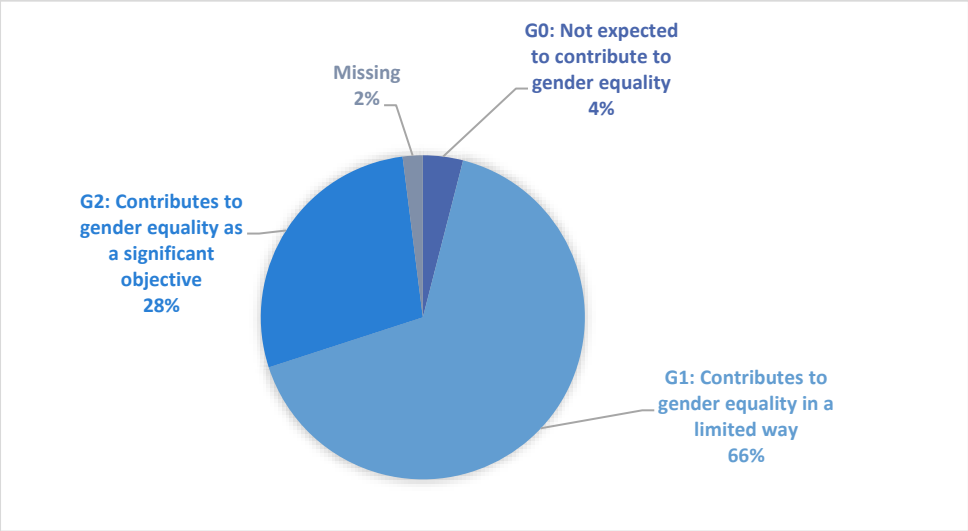
Source: FAO. 2023b. *FVC Terminal Report, 2018-2021*, November 2023. Rome.

[47] Survey respondents comprised Lead Technical Officers of funded subprogrammes during the 2018–2021 phase. The responses provided are the LTOs' own assessments of the extent to which FVC subprogramme addressed these vulnerable populations.

[48] See (FAO, 2023b) and FVC annual reports between 2018 and 2022.

177. The majority of FVC subprogrammes were designed to contribute to gender equality in a limited or significant way. Use of the gender marker is mandatory in FAO, and corporate guidance stipulates that a marker should be assigned at the project concept note phase and amended as necessary once more detailed project planning takes place (FAO, 2024a). A review of the data for FVC-funded subprogrammes in the 2022–2025 phase shows that two-thirds of interventions were expected to contribute to gender equality in a limited way (Gender Marker 1); 28 percent expected to contribute to gender equality as a significant objective (Gender Marker 2); and only 4 percent of subprogrammes did not expect to contribute to gender equality (Gender Marker 0) (Figure 19). The proportional categorization of subprogrammes using the gender marker differs somewhat across the four betters, with more projects expected to contribute to gender equality as a significant objective under a better life (40 percent) and a better environment (33 percent) compared with better production (21 percent) and better nutrition (11 percent). However, the marker is only applied at the beginning of the project cycle and is not updated later in project implementation, meaning that it is of limited use in terms of providing evidence on results related to gender equality, either during or post project implementation.

Figure 18. Gender marker codes assigned to flexible voluntary contribution-funded subprogrammes, 2022–2025



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on FVC project documents.

4.4.2 Youth

178. FVC documentation provides reasonably strong evidence of how its investments have reached and benefited youth. Youth have frequently been targeted alongside women for economic inclusion, capacity building and participation in agrifood systems. This includes opportunities in agribusiness (see an example from Mauritania in Box 16), digital literacy, income generation and ensuring their representation and voice in community initiatives.

Box 16. Supporting young agri-entrepreneurs in Mauritania

The FVC-funded subprogramme *Stimulate responsible investment in agriculture and food systems by young agri-entrepreneurs* (FMM/GLO/179/MUL) was implemented in Mauritania and Tunisia between 2022 and 2023.[49] It aimed to support investments by young agri-entrepreneurs and strengthen the overall ecosystem for responsible agricultural investment for youth in both countries.

In Mauritania, the project primarily achieved results for youth by contributing to the development of a national policy roadmap that identifies youth as one of its five priority areas; developing a blended learning programme for senior policymakers on agricultural investment for youth; ensuring the certification of 15 business coaches trained to accompany youth-led businesses; and carrying out foundational work designed to be expanded through the Agri-Accelerator model. Since project closure, the work has been continued with follow-up funding from a different source, and the Agri-Accelerator model is currently being applied to support 60 youth-led businesses in underserved rural and peri-urban areas of Mauritania.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

4.4.3 Indigenous Peoples

179. There is comparatively less evidence of results for Indigenous Peoples compared with women and youth, though FVC reports do include references to Indigenous Peoples as a vulnerable group requiring targeted support and inclusion in some instances. Activities involving Indigenous Peoples have resulted in policy processes related to biodiversity, supporting Indigenous Peoples' food systems, and engaging their organizations to reach remote communities and strengthen resilience. In addition, FVC reporting notes that knowledge products related to Indigenous Peoples' livelihoods, rights and food systems were developed (FAO, 2023b).

4.4.4 People with disabilities

180. While the FAO principle of inclusivity extends to people with disabilities, references to results for them from FVC-funded interventions are few and far between within FVC-related documents, indicating a lack of deliberate focus on this population group and hence limited opportunities for them to benefit from FVC subprogrammes, at least by design. For example, within the FVC terminal report covering the period 2018–2023, there were only two references to people with disabilities, compared with over 151 references to women and 51 references to youth.[50] Only one subprogramme – Building the resilience of the most vulnerable smallholder farmers for a transformative recovery from COVID-19 in Mali, Myanmar and Guatemala (FMM/GLO/151/MUL) – specifically targeted people with disabilities, and then only in Mali. Moreover, reporting on the project makes it difficult to differentiate results that were specific to people with disabilities (FAO, 2023f).

4.4.5 Challenges with tracking results on cross-cutting themes

181. The 2021 FVC evaluation indicated challenges with monitoring and reporting on cross-cutting themes, with specific reference to gender equality (FAO, 2021a). This evidence gap is not unique to the FVC but reflects FAO's performance in evidencing its support for cross-cutting issues more broadly. The 2024 Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network assessment of FAO, for example, notes that while FAO has policies and strategic commitments to support marginalized and vulnerable groups, including integrating gender equality and addressing Indigenous Peoples, the organization has faced challenges with mainstreaming cross-cutting issues, including tracking results using

[49] See (FAO, 2023b); interviews with FAO personnel and partners in Mauritania.

[50] See (FAO, 2023b); FVC Annual Reports between 2018 and 2022.

disaggregated data and providing clear evidence of impact, thereby hindering any in-depth assessment of the extent to which FAO is achieving results in these areas.[51] FAO's own evaluations of its programme have come to much the same conclusion, noting that while FAO strongly emphasizes inclusion in its work and has achieved successes in certain areas, particularly with women and in some geographical contexts for Indigenous Peoples, it has faced systemic challenges in consistently integrating the needs of various vulnerable groups into projects. This can be attributed to a range of factors, including a lack of disaggregated data, insufficient capacity for mainstreaming and limited attention to specific groups like people with disabilities (FAO, 2019, 2021c; UN Joint Inspection Unit, 2023).

182. These challenges were also apparent during this evaluation, making it difficult to find comprehensive evidence of the extent to which the FVC has reached and benefited vulnerable groups, particularly in the case of Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities, where the evidence was weakest.

[51] The 2024 MOPAN Assessment of FAO concluded that FAO's performance in supporting global frameworks for cross-cutting issues was mixed and awarded FAO an "*unsatisfactory*" rating for the key performance indicator related to its support for cross-cutting issues. See (MOPAN, 2024).

5. How efficiently is the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund implemented?

183. The section focuses on FVC process issues to determine the efficiency of the fund. This includes a cost analysis review and an assessment of the use of corporate systems for monitoring, reporting and communications, which has a specific focus on the use of corporate systems to monitor and report on impact and sustainability of funded interventions.

5.1 What are the costs of managing (including identification and selection) versus implementing Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund activities?

Summary of findings: The key finding from the cost analysis is that FVC coordination expenditure accounts for just 1.4 percent of the total FVC allocations. When costs for the members of the FVC Leadership personnel are added to this, the total investment is USD 1.265 million (FVC Coordination Unit – USD 769 815; Leadership personnel USD 1 884 043).[52] The analysis found significant variation in time among technical units and offices involved in the proposal development process, with the number of personnel involved and the total estimated time varying widely for similar tasks.

184. For the purposes of this evaluation, the cost of managing FVC was defined as expenditures incurred to lead and support FVC-related tasks, excluding approved project allocations. This distinction is drawn in recognition that typical donor cost interests may not align with standard accounting system outputs, which primarily detail how resource partner funds are allocated.

185. The analysis was structured to examine costs documented in the FVC Coordination Account, which is financed by a percentage of funding allocated to accepted FVC proposals and provides a detailed record of FVC management expenses paid directly by resource partners. It also includes an exploratory analysis of FVC resources supported through the FAO General Account, primarily focusing on leadership personnel costs due to the difficulty in isolating other costs (e.g. facilities, supplies) shared across FVC and non-FVC tasks. A summary of the tasks undertaken during the identification and selection process by stakeholder group are provided in Table 8.

[52] The FVC Coordination Unit Costs include management and support costs, including consultants, incurred from January 2022 to May 2025 paid directly from the FVC Coordination Account. Estimates for Leadership personnel reflect the time spent by three FAO personnel members on FVC-related tasks in the same time period, with compensation provided through the FAO General Account. These estimates do not include the costs for other critical FVC-related activities (i.e. time and resources used by the FAO Finance Division [accounting branch], FAO Legal Office, FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget [cost recovery policy], FAO Project Support Division [project cycle/operational clearances] or technical, Regional or Country Offices and the management of those units). FAO-related overhead costs are also excluded.

Table 8. FVC subprogramme identification and selection tasks by stakeholder

Phase	Phase 2: Create call for proposals through funds disbursed					
FVC tasks	Create call for proposals	Screening of concept note for compliance	Assessment of concept note	Concept note approved or rejected	Internal clearances	Funds disbursed
Executive Committee				✓		
FVC Coordination Unit	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

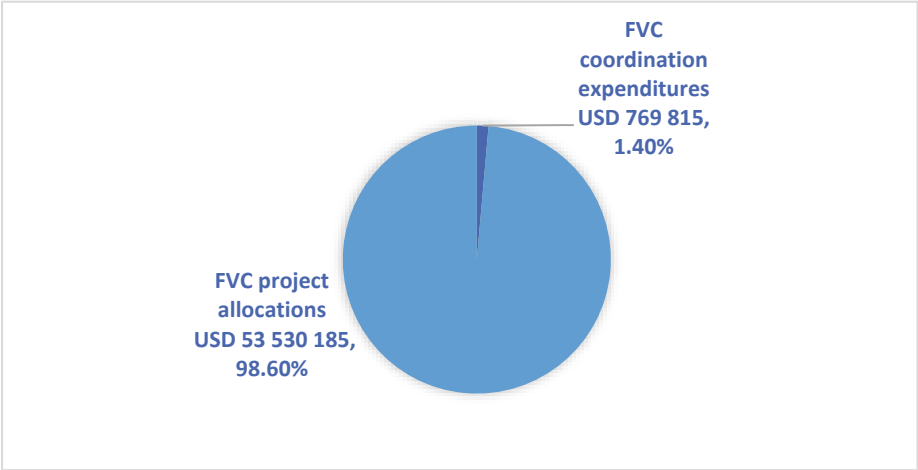
Source: Cost analysis expert's elaboration.

186. The cost analysis yielded findings across three primary areas: expenditures from the FVC Coordination Account, estimated personnel costs supported by the FAO General Account and observed variations in time required to complete each step of the FVC proposal process.

5.1.1 FVC Coordination Account expenditures

187. The FVC Coordination Account captures all FVC management and support costs paid directly by resource partners. Between January 2022 and May 2025, total expenditures from this account for FVC-related management and support amounted to USD 769 815. This figure represents approximately 1.4 percent of the total flexible funds contributed during the 2022–2025 phase, which amounted to USD 55.4 million in approved project allocations (Figure 19).[53] The confidence level in these expenditures is high due to their disaggregated, FVC-specific nature, and real-time capture in FAO accounting systems.

Figure 19. Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund project allocations and coordination expenditures, January 2022 to May 2025



Source: FAO. 2025. *F1 112-TF Expenditure Transaction Listing (Run Dates April 8 and July 1 2025)*. Rome.

188. An analysis of account types from January 2022 to May 2025 indicates that the predominant cost category within the FVC Coordination Account was consultants and professional salaries, accounting for approximately 72 percent, or USD 556 274, of the total expenditures. This aligns with personnel commonly being the most expensive resource

[53] These figures have not been adjusted for inflation.

type in cost analyses. General operating expenses, support costs, internal common services and support, and expendable procurement collectively represented roughly 27 percent, totalling about USD 208 136. All other account types were less than 1 percent of the total expenditures. These figures are considered the most accurate estimation of FVC's management and support costs directly paid by FAO resource partners. Tasks supported by these costs span the entirety of the FVC phase, which includes obtaining funds, creating and processing calls for proposals, funds disbursement, reporting, monitoring and closure.

5.1.2 Estimated FAO General Account personnel costs

189. FVC management and support are also partially financed through the FAO General Account, which pools FAO Member assessed contributions. Precisely identifying and calculating these costs is challenging, as resources are often shared across FVC and non-FVC activities. The analysis therefore focused on leadership personnel compensated from the General Account who undertake FVC tasks. Three such individuals were estimated to dedicate approximately 283 days annually to FVC-related work. The estimated annual cost for their time is over USD 288 000 (in 2025 USD, based on base salary).[54] It was noted that, with the exception of one full-time FVC leadership personnel member, the time dedicated by the Executive Committee on FVC tasks is low.

190. The level of confidence in these time and cost estimates is moderate, given the small sample size and the use of base salaries. This analysis explicitly excludes other FVC managerial and support costs (such as overhead, facilities, supplies or equipment) paid through the FAO General Account. It is acknowledged that the General Account supports shared operational tasks through existing departments like the FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget and Project Support Division. Leveraging these shared resources is considered cost-efficient, as it avoids establishing separate FVC-specific departments. However, increasing FVC inclusivity has augmented the time burden on some shared functions, and created more pronounced spikes in work during FVC calls, although some personnel view the increased workload as justified for a more inclusive fund.

5.1.3 Time variation in Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund call for proposals (technical units/Regional Offices)

191. An exploratory analysis examined time variations among a small sample (approximately 30 percent, or 8 out of 27) of technical units and Regional Offices participating in the third FVC call for proposals. The focus was on estimated time for developing concept notes and full project documents, and completing internal clearances.[55]

192. A notable variation was found among these units and offices in terms of the number of personnel involved and the estimated time for completing the same tasks on the same call. Across six different units and offices analysed, the number of people involved in one call ranged from 4 to 16, and the total estimated time to complete the four key tasks varied significantly, from 7 to 65 days of personnel time. Joint proposals and those involving country- and regional-level input generally require more time due to coordination needs.

[54] The cost estimates utilize base salaries, which may underestimate actual salaries inclusive of allowances.

[55] The findings are subject to error as they are based on estimates rather than real-time tracking.

193. Three distinct approaches to FVC proposal engagement were identified among these technical units and Regional Offices:

i. *low inclusivity*: a pre-determined idea exists, requiring less initial ramp-up and coordination time;

ii. *medium inclusivity*: diverse ideas are encouraged, investing more time upfront for collaboration to strengthen submissions; and

iii. *high inclusivity*: a pitching and screening process is utilized, potentially drafting multiple concept notes before selecting the strongest, which acts as a brainstorming and screening process. These approaches are determined by the units and offices themselves, not by FVC leadership, reflecting varying internal processes.

194. Other factors that were identified as impacting time estimates include:

i. the difficulty and time required to retrofit budgets significantly smaller than initially requested;

ii. challenges in adapting FVC budgets to align with FPMIS requirements due to structural differences;

iii. addressing aspects of the FVC proposal and budget preparation process, which lack clarity;

iv. the length of the internal clearance process, particularly for newly awarded units; and

v. the time taken negotiating letters of agreement with participating government agencies in the countries included in FVC proposals.

5.1.4 Advice for future cost analyses

195. This cost analysis addressed the question of managing versus implementing costs for FVC activities by estimating costs paid directly by resource partners through the FVC Coordination Account, providing preliminary insight into FAO General Account support and detailing variations in the proposal process among technical units/Regional Offices. The process provided lessons for future FAO or FVC cost analyses. One of the main lessons is that cost analyses are inherently comparative; once a cost figure is generated, the follow-up question is how that figure compares to other similar estimations. In this analysis, there is no comparator to the primary findings and therefore, no way to assess if these figures are high, low or reasonable. Any future comparative cost analysis should compare the FVC to similar global pooled funds, UN-managed funds or large bilateral managed instruments. Other lessons are outlined in Annex 3.

5.2 To what extent has the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund leveraged corporate FAO systems to manage and implement its funded interventions?

Summary of findings: The FVC has standardized and formalized its procedures to align with the corporate FAO project cycle, though there are still instances where processes and templates have deviated, mostly well justified but not always well communicated in advance. Similarly, the FVC restriction on staffing costs demonstrates a commitment to prioritizing delivery of interventions at country level, though the cap was not well explained. Ways of working within the FVC do not consistently support FAO's shift to a more programmatic approach and continue to favour a projectized mode of operating. Integrating the FVC into FAO's wider efforts to embody the programmatic approach requires action at senior management level within FAO, going beyond the remit of the FVC.

5.2.1 Management and budgeting of FVC activities

Project cycle management

196. Previous evaluations of the FVC all raised issues concerning the lack of clarity and formality of FVC procedures and recommended that the FVC adopt standardized templates and formats to harmonize its approaches and requirements with those of FAO more broadly (see section 2.4) (FAO, 2013, 2016, 2021a). Since the 2021 evaluation, the FVC has made efforts to standardize and formalize its procedures and align its project cycle with corporate approaches, minimizing the additional workload for those managing FVC-funded interventions as much as possible and clarifying where FVC processes deviate from the FAO project cycle and why.

197. Internal interviews indicated that there is a well-established link between the FVC Coordination Unit and FAO Project Support Division, both for the day-to-day running of the Fund and at key moments, such as the drafting/revision of important guidance documents. This relationship is evident within the guidelines for current FVC processes. For example, the most recent FVC Operational Guidance, published in 2023, includes instructions on programming, broken down by stages of the project cycle and noting where FVC processes align with the FAO project cycle and where they differ (FAO, 2023g). A dedicated annex to the Operational Guidance further explains how to apply the FAO Project Cycle Guide in the case of FVC-funded subprogrammes (FAO, 2023h).

198. Key aspects where the FVC deviates from FAO's corporate project cycle include:

i. the introduction of a "Phase 0", during which the FVC issues its call for proposals;

ii. the use of a customized project document that relates more closely with the FVC funding criteria and uses a modified budget format;

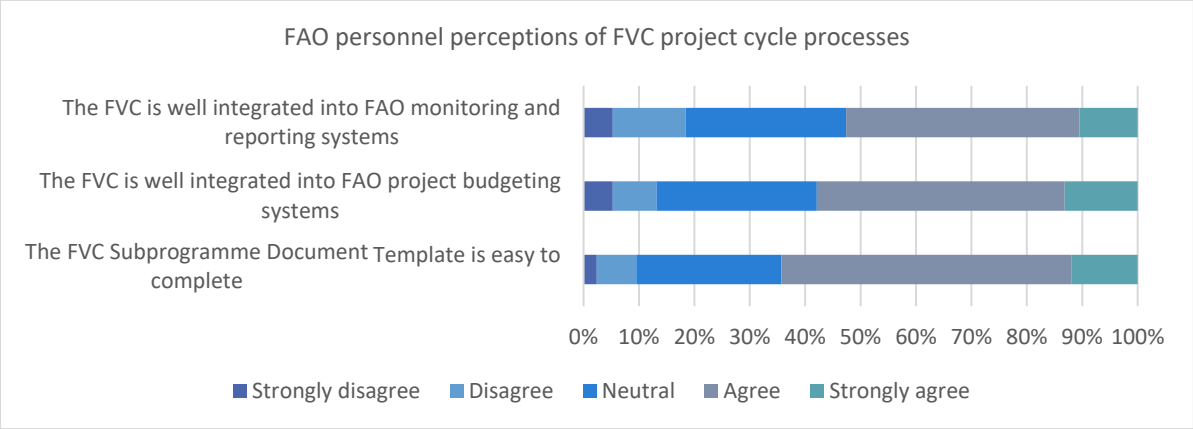
iii. the exemption of FVC interventions from standard project document appraisal and clearance processes, noting that the FVC has its own approval processes and governance entities; and

iv. customization of the "implementation, monitoring and reporting" and "evaluation" phases of the project cycle to allow the FVC to report on subprogrammes collectively and conduct evaluations of the Fund rather than evaluate at the level of individual subprogrammes (FAO, 2023h).

199. Key informants at headquarters expressed mixed but overall positive feedback about FVC's use and leverage of FAO corporate systems and processes. The majority of FAO personnel who responded to the online survey answered positively for questions on FVC subprogramme templates, budgeting approach, and monitoring and reporting systems (see Figure 21).

200. Comments from survey respondents and interviewees were more nuanced, particularly on the issue of FVC subprogramme reporting. Some FAO personnel with experience of managing FVC subprogrammes appreciated the flexibility that FVC has applied to the project cycle, and several noted that the FVC project reporting template has tended to be "lighter" than the standard corporate version, freeing up valuable time to focus on project implementation. Others, however, flagged experiences of sudden changes to processes, such as the project report template being amended at short notice, causing confusion and duplication of effort.

Figure 20. Online survey results for FAO personnel on the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund project cycle management processes



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on online survey, n=42.

201. These complaints appear to be related to a specific period during the FVC 2018–2021 phase, when a report template that had already been discussed and agreed (between the FVC Coordination Unit and FAO personnel with overall responsibility for corporate reporting) was subsequently modified with the aim of simplifying and streamlining inputs for the 2023 FVC Terminal Report (FAO, 2023b). While interviewees indicated that the modified template was indeed shorter and more streamlined than previous versions, it allegedly omitted some key fields, raising questions about FAO's ability to comply with basic project procedures such as project closure and reporting back to FAO Member Nations. FVC report templates have been revised again in the meantime and, while the format is still a customized version of the standard annual and terminal report template, interviewees did not highlight any particular shortcomings. It will be important to stabilize FVC templates and processes going forward to avoid any further risk of confusion or non-compliance.

Staffing costs

202. Another instance where the FVC has deviated from corporate FAO project cycle management norms is with the introduction of budget restrictions for staffing costs as a proportion of overall budgets. The current FVC proposal template includes a budgetary

restriction stipulating that "a maximum of 35 percent of budget can be spent on staffing for subprogrammes managed at the headquarters; an exceptional waiver can be considered for Decentrlized Offices, based on strong justification for staffing requirements for implementing the subprogramme" (FAO, 2023h). According to the FVC Coordination Unit, the rule was introduced to strike an appropriate balance between human resource (HR) costs and non-HR implementation expenditure, with the purpose of sending a clear signal to technical units in headquarters (in particular) that the FVC prioritizes delivery, especially at country level.[56] Along with setting a cap on staffing costs and encouraging staff costs to be shared with non-FVC-funded projects, the Coordination Unit has also monitored spending carefully and alerted Lead Technical Officers when expenditure deviates from agreed budgets.

203. Some key informants at headquarters level highlighted the difficulties of remaining within the 35 percent cap on staffing costs. It was considered particularly challenging for subprogrammes heavily oriented towards normative work and global initiatives, though there were instances of waivers being granted to exceed the ceiling in some cases. Limited communication on the reason for the cap led to a perception by some that it was an "arbitrary measure" (see section 5.3.1 on internal communications). Others described the challenges of complying with the restriction given the small size of FVC-funded subprogrammes, where a larger portion of budgets is required for oversight and project management compared with larger initiatives that can achieve economy of scale.

204. It is not possible for this evaluation to determine a "correct" proportion of funding to be allocated to staffing of projects, given the many different factors and variables to be considered. However, the lack of clear understanding among Lead Technical Officers about the rationale for the decision indicates a need for better communication about any new restrictions to be introduced in the future, particularly those that deviate from regular FAO project management and budgeting rules.

5.2.2 The Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund and the "programmatic approach"

205. FAO is committed to a "programmatic approach" to deliver results at the country level.[57] The Strategic Framework, structured around achievement of the four betters, articulates FAO's strategic vision to leverage its comparative strengths across the organization to deliver better and more impactful results through the programmatic approach (FAO, 2021b). This is reiterated in the Medium-Term Plan, which updates FAO's plans for working across the Organization and across the UN system through a set of programmes to support transformative change at the country level (FAO, 2025c).

[56] According to communications from the FVC Coordination Unit, spending on HR aspects of project implementation was as high as 60 to 70 percent of total budgets for some subprogrammes in previous FVC funding cycles. This could not be verified by the Evaluation Team.

[57] The "programmatic approach" is often referenced by development actors, but without a common definition or universal agreement on how it should be put into practice. For FAO, "the programmatic approach" may best be defined as, "*…a comprehensive and multi-dimensional way to focus, direct, coordinate and leverage human and financial resources for the most effective and efficient collective contribution to sustainable results (SDGs) in countries*" (Conte, 2021).

206. Strategically, the orientation of the FVC around the four betters during the current funding cycle (and retrospective reorientation of the previous funding cycle to report results against the four betters), as well as linking of FVC subprogrammes to specific Programme Priority Areas, demonstrates a commitment within the organization to use the FVC as a vehicle for supporting this "programmatic approach". Furthermore, the current FVC TOC references the application of FVC funding "in a more programmatic, harmonized and integrated manner" as one of its key assumptions underpinning transformative change (see section 2.3) (FAO, 2023c).

207. However, the current modus operandi for FVC-funded work continues to favour a somewhat fragmented approach to project management and reporting. The direction of travel has been positive, illustrated by drafting of a consolidated FVC report accompanied by an annex with details of progress for individual subprogrammes. However, according to internal stakeholders, opportunities to make more significant shifts to a programmatic approach – including dispensing with dedicated FVC reports altogether and fully integrating the FVC into corporate FAO reporting – have not yet progressed.

208. Mixed messages from the FVC's resource partners regarding FVC reporting (see section 5.4), as well as the nascent nature of FAO's programmatic approach and its translation into corporate processes, may partially explain hesitancy within the FVC to radically reimagine its project cycle management processes and outputs. Moreover, the responsibility for corporate FAO strategy and reporting rests with the FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget rather than with the FVC Coordination Unit and FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division. As noted in section 3.1, corporate FAO strategic plans and reports have not featured the FVC prominently, nor have they particularly emphasized the strategic importance of flexible funding for the Organization, which may indicate a limited corporate appetite to integrate the FVC into FAO's broader efforts to embody the "programmatic approach" at this stage.

5.3 To what extent has the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund leveraged corporate FAO systems to communicate about funded interventions?

Summary of findings: The emphasis of communications has been on outreach to external stakeholders, particularly resource partners. The FVC has struggled to strike the right balance with its reports, which has in part been due to shifting resource partner preferences. Despite this, there have been consistent messages for FAO to find ways to emphasize the contribution that FVC funding has made to FAO strategic results and to provide visibility for the way that resource partners have championed flexible funding. There has been less focus on internal communications, yet there have been notable improvements in awareness of the FVC among Decentralized Office personnel. Looking ahead, priorities for internal communications are less about outreach and more about improved transparency of FVC processes and decision-making and stronger knowledge management.

5.3.1 Internal communications

209. Previous evaluations of the FVC noted uneven awareness of the Fund across the Organization, and limited knowledge of the instrument in Decentralized Offices in

particular (see also section 2.4).[58] Since the last evaluation, there appears to have been some improvement in internal awareness of the Fund, particularly among regional and country-level stakeholders.

210. FAO interviewees demonstrated a relatively strong awareness of the FVC. Call for proposals are widely circulated (see section 3.3.2 for details) and a number of FAO personnel in technical units described the FVC Coordination Unit as being open to respond to comments and questions while proposals were being drafted and submitted. Of the Lead Technical Officers who responded to the online survey, the majority of whom are headquarters-based, more were positive than negative about communication of the FVC's purpose, priorities, achievements and challenges within FAO.

211. Where the FVC does appear to have made progress in terms of building awareness of the FVC is beyond headquarters. At least in the case study countries for this evaluation, FAO Country Office personnel were keenly aware of the FVC and considered it a valuable source of flexible funding, particularly for otherwise under-resourced aspects of FAO's portfolio. In Regional Offices that participated in interviews, personnel awareness of the FVC was modest, there was significant interest in the fund and an appetite for greater engagement (see section 3.3.3). For Country Offices, their main points of contact for FVC-related communications were technical units in headquarters and/or Regional Offices, both of which had reached out to Country Offices to generate FVC proposals and continued to engage throughout subprogramme implementation.

212. The FVC Coordination Unit currently includes a consultant whose role is focused on communications. However, the post remained vacant for a period of approximately two years during the current funding cycle and was only filled as the evaluation was getting underway. While the function covers both internal and external communications, the main initial emphasis appears to be on improving external communications. This appears to have had implications on the extent and quality of FVC's outreach to FAO personnel. Despite overall awareness of the FVC, FAO key informants demonstrated less knowledge of the FVC's detailed procedures, processes, guidelines and templates. As described in section 3.3.2, while the process of FVC subprogramme selection has become increasingly standardized and formalized, decision-making processes have remained opaque to some. In interviews, some FAO stakeholders voiced confusion about how decisions were made, as well as uncertainty about where to find up-to-date information on the FAO intranet and which templates to use at different times for project proposals and project reports. This would indicate less of an internal outreach and communications gap and more of a need for transparency on decision-making as well as stronger knowledge management to orient personnel on the latest processes and templates.

213. Experiences of internal communications and knowledge management are useful for the purposes of comparison with the FVC – see Box 17 on the ways in which FAO ELEVATE communicates internally within FAO throughout the project cycle. However, the different purposes, processes and sizes of the two funds limit the extent to which lessons can be transferred from one fund to another.

[58] Both the 2016 and 2021 evaluations of the FVC note uneven awareness and knowledge of the Fund within FAO and particularly a lack of awareness within Decentralized Offices (FAO, 2016, 2021a).

Box 17. Internal communications on FAO ELEVATE

FAO ELEVATE has a strong focus on communicating with internal stakeholders. A team of around seven personnel members within the FAO Office of Innovation manages the FAO ELEVATE Fund. Communication tools include a set of intranet pages containing key information about the fund, including details of the application and implementation processes, selection criteria, frequently asked questions and a glossary of key terms. Calls for proposals are announced on an annual basis, and the FAO ELEVATE team has offered webinars on the application process to FAO personnel as well as informal support on the development of proposals to encourage engagement across the Organization. Once an initial set of proposals have been selected, project teams go through an "incubation" process to further develop their ideas and narrow down the number of projects to a smaller number of innovations for piloting, evaluation and learning. The small number of projects selected for implementation allows for FAO ELEVATE to accompany teams throughout the project cycle and share learning between teams and more broadly within FAO.

5.3.2 External communications

214. Previous evaluations have critiqued the FVC's external communication efforts, particularly its efforts to attract and retain a broad base of resource partners and secure sufficient funding (see also section 2.4 and Annex 2). The 2016 evaluation noted that the FVC had a low profile among external stakeholders, limiting interest among potential new resource partners (FAO, 2016). Despite the critiques, external outreach and communication has been and continues to be a significant component of the FVC Coordination Unit's work, as noted by the 2021 FVC evaluation, which highlighted progress in communications and marketing to enhance the fund's visibility (FAO, 2021a).

215. The main ways in which the FVC communicates externally, particularly with resource partners, and a commentary on how the different approaches have been received is summarized in Table 9.

Table 9. The Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund's main ways of engaging and communicating with resource partners

	Method of communication	Purpose	Effectiveness
1	Meetings	Resource partner consultation meetings have included periodic informal consultations and more formal annual strategic dialogues.	A review of the minutes of meetings indicates strong FAO and resource partner engagement and two-way communication during discussions. The meetings have provided an opportunity for resource partners to share their detailed feedback on the FVC and for FAO and resource partners to openly discuss a range of topics. Table 5 in section 3.3.1 summarizes common issues raised by resource partners in those meetings.
2	Country visits	The FVC Coordination Unit organized resource partner visits to Uganda in 2023 and the United Republic of Tanzania in 2025. A "digital field trip" was also offered to resource partners in 2021 as a way of navigating COVID-19 pandemic-related travel restrictions.	Meeting notes and interviews with resource partners indicate positive feedback from the "digital field trip" and the Uganda visit, the latter of which was described as an opportunity for resource partners to meet with beneficiaries and project partners and understand the complexity of subprogrammes, including practical challenges and opportunities (FAO, 2023i). Interviews suggest that the United Republic of Tanzania visit was less well received by resource partners, some of whom critiqued the choice of subprogrammes for field trips (described as "small-scale" and "not strategic"), limited Country Office engagement and a lack of contextual briefings ahead of project visits.
3	FVC website	The FVC website provides access to key information about the fund: volumes of	At the time of the evaluation, the website was out of date (FAO, n.d.c.), with links to the 2018–2021 FVC funding cycle, but not the current funding phase. Minutes of resource partner meetings during the previous funding cycle indicate positive reactions to the website

	Method of communication	Purpose	Effectiveness
		funding, allocation of funding by strategic area and subprogramme, and links to resources such as articles, videos and podcasts.	during its initial development. However, capacity gaps had constrained the FVC Coordination Unit's ability to keep the website up to date as well as to initiate other communication products. The recent appointment of a communications-focused consultant after a two-year vacancy should allow the Secretariat to focus on updating the website; though interviews highlighted that generating content for the website and other communication products also requires capacity at country level, particularly for the development of stories of impact, which is likely to continue to be a limiting factor.
4	Newsletter	A newly launched biannual newsletter includes updates on the FVC and highlights from FVC-funded subprogrammes.	The first edition of the newsletter was published as data collection for the evaluation was wrapping up, limiting the ability of the Evaluation Team to gather feedback on how it had been received by external stakeholders.
5	Reports	The FVC publishes annual progress reports and terminal reports at the end of each funding cycle.	FVC reports have generated a significant amount of feedback from resource partners (their primary target audience) during meetings and during interviews for this evaluation, the main aspects of which are summarized in the following section.

Note: The FVC Newsletter April 2025 includes reference to the FVC website. It states that "The FVC website is undergoing technical renovations in 2025. A revamped platform will be launched to better showcase resources and connect visitors with FVC-funded programmes. A newly launched website will include FVC-related media, project stories, updated reporting, and programme information, while sections on completed and ongoing FVC-funded programmes will be added gradually" (FAO, 2025d).

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

FVC reports

216. The FVC annual progress reports and terminal reports are among the main ways in which FAO has sought to communicate with external partners. Different aspects of FVC reporting have attracted comments and feedback from resource partners. As shown in Table 5 in section 3.3.1, reporting-related issues have repeatedly been raised during RPAG meetings. The most frequently made comment was the need for FVC reports to focus less on activities and more on higher-level results – ideally at output and outcome level. This topic was raised in RPAG meetings every year between 2017 and 2024.[59] In response, FAO has made efforts to progressively shift the focus of reports to outputs and outcomes, but has also struggled with the challenge of attributing higher-level results to small-scale and relatively short-term subprogrammes (see also section 5.4).

217. The length and density of FVC reports has also attracted significant feedback from resource partners. RPAG meetings in 2017 and 2018 included requests for additional, more detailed reporting with fuller descriptions of subprogrammes and the value of FVC funding. During 2019 and in 2023 and 2024, the tone of comments changed, however, and resource partners predominantly expressed a preference for more concise reporting summarizing key FVC results or additional summary reports to accompany detailed versions.

[59] Based on an analysis of the meeting minutes of FAO–Resource Partner meetings between 2017–2024. Meeting minutes were not made available to the Evaluation Team for prior to this period.

218. Interviews with resource partners and the FVC Coordination Unit confirmed that different resource partners have different preferences for reporting based on their own home constituencies, and there is no common RPAG voice on this issue. This has made it difficult for the Unit to strike the right balance in the amount of detail that it provides, and there continue to be mixed messages from resource partners on their preferences. In an effort to satisfy both expressed preferences – for comprehensive yet concise reporting – the FVC 2024 Annual Progress Report (in development at the time of this evaluation) will include a full description of progress, a complementary short summary and an accompanying annex with details of individual subprogrammes available on request.

Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund visibility in corporate FAO reporting

219. Another strong and consistent message from resource partners is for FAO to find ways to better incorporate the FVC into corporate FAO reports and to emphasize the contribution that FVC funding has made to FAO strategic results. For example, in a 2024 RPAG meeting, resource partners asked how FVC reporting related to FAO's organizational reporting and how FVC-funded projects were reported on in FAO's overall annual report (FAO, 2024b). Resource partner interviewees reiterated similar questions, primarily with a view to wanting the FVC to position itself more centrally within the Organization rather than operating as a "quasi-independent department of FAO".

220. An analysis of recent FAO reports shows some degree of FVC visibility in corporate reporting. For example, FAO Programme Implementation Reports and mid-term reviews dating back to 2018 do reference the FVC, though only minimally and usually in the context of resource mobilization achievements and the importance of flexible funding.[60] Going beyond this and more visibly referencing the FVC within FAO corporate reports would be challenging given the relative size of FVC allocations within FAO's overall programme budget (see section 2.1). Moreover, responsibility for corporate reporting does not lie with the FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division, within which the FVC Secretariat is based, but with the FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget, as noted in section 5.2.2.

Visibility for resource partner contributions

221. Resource partner visibility – in terms of recognition of their contributions to the FVC and to flexible funding for FAO more broadly – was another area that came up several times in FVC-related meetings and again during interviews for this evaluation. While resource partners stressed that they are committed to the principle and value of flexible funding, some resource partners indicated that they would like FAO to publicly acknowledge their contributions and, where possible, link resource partner funding to specific subprogrammes and the results achieved. Some resource partners pointed to SFERA as a good example of how this had been done in the past – through social media posts, for example – demonstrating that FAO does have experience of linking flexible contributions to specific activities and outputs and providing resource partners with a degree of profile and recognition. Going beyond this, some resource partners also indicated that more prominent featuring of the FVC in FAO corporate reports should be accompanied by

[60] Programme Implementation Reports for 2018–2019 and 2022–2023, as well as the Medium-Term Review Synthesis Report for 2020 went further and referenced the FMM/FVC as contributing to results for specific subprogrammes.

recognition of the resource partners that have provided support and the important role that they had played in championing flexible funding.

5.4 To what extent are Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund monitoring and reporting processes appropriate for tracking the impact and sustainability of funded interventions?

Summary of findings: Demonstrating impact and sustainability have been challenging for the FVC as they have been institutionally for FAO.[61] Resource partners continue to stress the importance of understanding and conveying results that have been achieved and their lasting impact, and senior managers in FAO concur. In practice, however, achieving impact has been hindered by short project time frames, modest levels of funding, project design factors and lack of strategic focus. Piloting of impact evaluations has been promising, but taking them to scale across the FVC would require additional resources and prioritization.

222. Delivering and demonstrating impact and sustainability has long been a quest of the FVC and of FAO more broadly. Previous evaluations have highlighted historic shortcomings in this area (see also section 2.4), with recommendations suggesting the need for improved results monitoring and reporting (in the case of the 2013 evaluation) (FAO, 2013) and thematic evaluations to enable a deeper analysis of FVC's contribution to FAO's results (in the 2021 evaluation) (FAO, 2021a).

223. Corporately, FAO has faced challenges with its monitoring and evaluation systems, particularly at the decentralized level, hindering its ability to systematically measure results, track impact and sustainability, and use this information for adaptive management and learning. Successive programme evaluation reports and a UN Joint Inspection Unit review of FAO in 2023 have highlighted these limitations and proposed various recommendations for improvement in monitoring and evaluation (M&E), accountability, and reporting processes (FAO, 2019, 2021c, 2023d; UN Joint Inspection Unit, 2023).

224. Despite systemic weaknesses, FVC governance and operational documents for the 2018–2021 phase stress transformative impact as an underlying principle of the fund and highlight the importance of demonstrating impact as a way of generating additional income for the FVC (FAO, 2018; 2020). Revisions of these documents for the current funding cycle went further with the articulation of the impact (or change) pathway as part of the FVC's TOC (see section 3.2) (FAO, 2022b).

225. FAO stakeholders at all levels (headquarters and Decentralized Offices) emphasized the importance of striving for impact and sustainability during interviews and consistently agreed that demonstrating impact was an important element of the project cycle. Given the short time frames of FVC funding, Lead Technical Officers and Country Offices personnel frequently stressed the need to generate evidence and demonstrate proof of concept to convince project partners to continue the work at country level and generate additional investments to allow projects to continue beyond the initial seed funding stage.

226. Resource partners were less convinced and have repeatedly encouraged FAO to go further in terms of understanding and articulating the impact and sustainability of FVC-funded

[61] This section does not seek to demonstrate the impact and sustainability of FVC-funded interventions, but rather comments on FVC processes to track impact and sustainability.

interventions. The issue was raised in RPAG meetings every year from 2020 to 2024 and stressed again during interviews for this evaluation, including with a degree of frustration that FVC reporting is perceived to have continued to fall short in demonstrating results and impact (see section 5.2.2).

227. A range of challenges were associated with tracking the impact and sustainability of FVC interventions. During interviews, both internal and external stakeholders highlighted several hindering factors as follows:

i. the *short time frames* of subprogrammes, limiting the extent to which sustainability could reasonably be expected;

ii. linked to this, a *lack of continuity* between calls for proposals and between FVC funding cycles, contributing to short time frames in cases where alternative sources of funding could not be found;

iii. *modest budgets*, which again were perceived as constraining the ambition and reach of projects and limiting the extent to which impact and sustainability could reasonably be attributed to FVC investments, particularly when FVC funding was combined with other (often larger scale) resource streams;

iv. *project design*, which often did not anticipate tracking of impact and sustainability from the start, and hence baseline assessments were not routinely conducted, nor were impact assessments forecast for later in the project cycle. This challenge was noted by country-level FAO personnel as well as Lead Technical Officers, who also noted a lack of budget for tracking impact; and

v. *lack of strategic focus*, raised by resource partners in particular, who noted that the wide spread of modestly sized subprogrammes across the spectrum of FAO's work and a lack of strategic prioritization constrained FVC's ability to deliver and demonstrate impact in a few key areas of strategic importance.

228. FAO is cognizant of the need to demonstrate impact in the context of the FVC (and more broadly) and aware of the inherent challenges that it implies. In her opening remarks to resource partners as part of the RPAG January 2024 meeting, FAO's Deputy Director-General, Beth Bechdol, said that "showcasing the impact of FVC funding is part of the missing link where other Members can see the transparent value of the Fund to the Organization" (FAO, 2024b). Her remarks were in the context of pilot work introduced in 2022 to conduct impact evaluations for longer-running FVC-funded subprogrammes (i.e. those that received FVC funding from consecutive calls for proposals of funding phases) to draw out evidence of impact and for the purposes of lesson learning (see Box 18).

Box 18. Impact evaluations of flexible voluntary contribution-funded interventions

In 2022, the FVC commissioned impact evaluations of two of its longer-running subprogrammes as part of a broader impact evaluation exercise in FAO, led by the Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division.[i] The purpose of the studies was to generate evidence within existing FVC-funded initiatives using rigorous methodology to go further in terms of demonstrating the causal effects of activities using counterfactuals to compare with what would have happened in the absence of those activities.

The impact evaluations have already generated useful learning that can be applied to the continuation of projects as well as to related initiatives. This includes: lessons on technical aspects (such as the challenges of introducing new agricultural practices and the pros and cons of combining different project inputs, such as Farmer Field Schools with cash or in-kind transfers); learning on engaging with partners (e.g. the importance of leveraging government partnerships); and general lessons on the importance of sustained engagement (e.g. light-touch capacity building interventions, such as short-term training programmes, without sustained engagement, are unlikely to improve resilience and food security, especially in challenging contexts).

Note: [i] The subprogrammes selected for impact evaluations were: i) 'Promoting coherence between disaster risk reduction, climate action and social protection in sub-Saharan Africa' in Malawi (FMM/GLO/148/MUL); ii) 'Building Back Better and Greener: Integrated approaches for an inclusive and green COVID-19 recovery in rural spaces' in Zambia and Kenya (FMM/GLO/166/MUL); and iii) 'Strengthening Food Security Pack (FSP) Outcomes through Extension Services Delivered via Farmer Field Schools' in Zambia.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on resources shared by the Socio Economic Research and Analysis (SERA) Team in the FAO Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division, including impact evaluation reports and presentations.

229. The practice of integrating impact evaluations into selected FVC subprogrammes shows promise and could go some way to responding to the appetite for evidence of impact and sustainability. There is potential for the approach to be scaled up, though only with accompanying additional resources and still only for selected subprogrammes, or clusters of subprogrammes with a degree of continuity across funding cycles.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

230. This section draws on the evidence and analysis contained in this report to offer a set of conclusions by evaluation question and against the assumptions outlined in the FVC TOC, which are key to its performance. An overarching recommendation and four additional strategic recommendations are proposed.

6.1 Conclusions

6.1.1 Relevance

The FVC is highly relevant in principle, as it plays a valuable role amid a landscape dominated by tightly earmarked and fragmented funding. It is in high demand across the Organization because it helps fund emerging or underfunded priorities, supports the testing and scaling of innovative approaches, and fills critical financing gaps in ongoing or new initiatives. In practice, though, the volume of flexible funding remains modest, and its catalytic potential is unfulfilled.

231. Flexible funding offers a valuable contribution to FAO's work, particularly in mitigating the challenges posed by highly earmarked funding and overall fragmentation. While the FVC has shown an improvement in its earmarking compared to previous phases, with an average of 30 percent of its funding softly earmarked at the level of the four betters, its volume remains modest, accounting for a maximum of 2 percent of FAO's total voluntary contributions. Preliminary evidence suggests that the total amount of FVC funding may not increase in the current phase, and its proportion relative to FAO's total voluntary contributions appears to have decreased over time. Furthermore, a significant concern is that the FVC does not feature substantively in FAO's corporate plans or resource mobilization strategies, a recommendation from the previous evaluation that has not been addressed.

232. The FVC is now aligned with the FAO Strategic Framework**,** and its TOC and guidance documents have been updated to provide reasonable clarity regarding its purpose relative to other funding. However, a lack of consensus persists among resource partners concerning the use of flexible funding to address specific strategic priorities. This highlights a dissonance between strategic alignment (where FVC funding contributes to the four betters) and strategic prioritization (where FVC funding contributes to identified priorities within those betters), an issue that was identified in the 2021 evaluation and remains relevant. This discrepancy is evident across the FVC TOC and its various guidance documents.

233. Regarding the subprogramme identification and selection process, the FVC Coordination Unit has diligently adapted its processes, with the introduction of the call for proposals for the 2022–2025 phase being an improvement for guiding applications and enhancing both relevance and efficiency. Nevertheless, concerns were raised about the circulation of the call for proposals, the consistency of communications, and the adequacy of time provided for proposal preparation. A significant and persistent issue echoing findings from previous evaluations is the lack of clarity and transparency surrounding the subprogramme selection process. There is a perceived missing step in strategic prioritization, as the process is largely applicant-led by technical units and Regional Offices, which results in a diffuse set of proposals rather than a focused selection aligned with corporate strategic priorities or underfunded areas.

234. The subprogramme selection process is grounded in a review of FVC criteria, which provide assurance that proposals are change-oriented. The value of these is diminished by a lack of clarity and consistency in the definitions and use of key selection criteria across different FVC documents, making it relatively easy to justify projects but potentially hindering focused strategic investments and the achievement of outcomes.

235. The FVC generally seeks to integrate inclusion into its work, aligning with the FAO Strategic Objectives. However, the FVC exhibits uneven attention to the needs, roles and opportunities of different marginalized or potentially marginalized groups. There is a relatively strong focus on gender and youth in FVC investments, consistent with FAO's overall approach, but Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities are particularly under-represented. While the integration of cross-cutting issues is considered during the assessment and selection of FVC subprogrammes, there is a lack of significant detail on how specific groups will be targeted and supported in practice beyond brief descriptions provided in proposals.

236. It is important to stress that despite the concerns previously raised, the FVC has sought to address deficiencies identified in evaluations or through lessons from practice. The difficulty it faces is that many of the deficiencies raised in this evaluation – mobilizing flexible funding, prioritization within the FAO Strategic Framework, targeting and reaching different marginalized groups – are themselves areas of corporate challenge for FAO more broadly.

6.1.2 Effectiveness

The FVC contributed to aspects of the FAO Strategic Framework , particularly by enabling pilot initiatives and supporting normative work that would have been difficult to fund through core or earmarked resources. However, the fragmented nature of the portfolio and the comparatively small size of the awards means that the critical gaps that are addressed and the effects of the fund are diffuse and remain at a fairly modest scale.

237. The effectiveness of FVC investments demonstrates a mix of positive contributions and persistent challenges. On the positive side, there is good evidence of results across the four betters as a direct outcome of FVC investments, encompassing the full spectrum of FAO's work. Stakeholders within FAO, at both global and country levels, are able to cite specific results that have been achieved and sustained even after the FVC funding cycle concluded, with some of these verified during country visits by the Evaluation Team. External partners, including government representatives and beneficiaries, have also expressed appreciation for FAO's work, noting that in many instances, it has stimulated new partnerships, investments and innovations. Furthermore, during the 2018–2021 phase, the FVC played a crucial role in providing seed funding to address critical gaps and underfunded areas, which enabled FAO to pilot new approaches, gather essential evidence and establish foundational elements for future scale-up. The instrument also supported innovative initiatives with potential for transformative change, whether through the use of new technology or methods to promote positive change, piloting new approaches for potential scale-up, or brokering new partnerships for policy and practice change.

238. However, the delivery of FVC subprogrammes has faced both enabling and hindering factors. While the strengthening of the FVC over time has resulted in a solid administrative foundation due to revised governance documents and guidelines, and building on previous FVC investments also facilitated implementation, significant challenges persisted.

Hindering factors included difficulties in project management, delays, insufficient FVC resources relative to the ambitious scope of subprogrammes, and insufficient project duration to achieve planned results. Other obstacles identified were a perceived lack of collaboration and coordination among stakeholders, inflexibility in adapting to changing circumstances, and the impact of external factors such as extreme weather conditions.

239. While attempts have been made to reach marginalized groups, the same conclusion is true for effectiveness as it is for relevance; that greater emphasis has been placed on women and youth than on Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities. There is a lack of clear tracking and monitoring of data regarding these groups, symptomatic of FAO-wide challenges with disaggregated data, which makes it difficult to definitively determine the extent to which these groups have been reached and benefited by FVC initiatives.

6.1.3 Efficiency

FVC management costs are modest, and there has been notable progress made in leveraging corporate platforms for project management and other functions. At the same time, there continues to be scope for the FVC to improve on its communications, monitoring and documentation of impact.

240. Cost analysis shows the overall proportion of funds used to manage FVC processes is modest, but without a comparator, it is not possible to draw any specific conclusions on efficiency. A comparative cost analysis fell outside the scope and time limitations of this evaluation.

241. The FVC has standardized its procedures to align with the corporate FAO project cycle, but there are still instances of deviations, which have not always been clearly communicated to personnel. The FVC's ways of working continue to favour a projectized mode rather than fully supporting FAO's shift towards a more programmatic approach, though responsibility for this lies with FAO's senior management, as it goes beyond the remit of the FVC to integrate the Fund into corporate plans, strategies and reports. Doing so would demonstrate the valuable contribution that unearmarked funding can make to FAO's programmatic approach, provide recognition for the resource partners that have invested flexible funding to date and incentivize other resource partners to similarly commit.

242. Communication efforts have primarily focused on external outreach to resource partners, with less emphasis internally. Mixed messages from resource partners have made it difficult for FAO to strike the right balance in terms of communicating effectively, though they have consistently requested a clearer illustration of how the FVC has contributed to FAO strategic results and better visibility for their own contributions. While awareness among Decentralized Office personnel has improved, priorities for internal communication lie in enhancing transparency of FVC processes and decision-making and improving knowledge management.

243. The FVC has made little progress in evidencing impact and sustainability of its funded interventions, but this is consistent with FAO more broadly and has been hindered by factors such as short project time frames, modest funding levels, project design and a lack of strategic focus. While piloting impact evaluations shows promise, scaling this requires additional resources and prioritization.

6.2 Examination of the Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund theory of change assumptions based on the conclusions of this evaluation

244. Drawing on the findings and conclusions of this evaluation, it is instructive to test the assumptions outlined in the FVC TOC, as these present the conditions that are required for the Fund to perform as intended. Specific bottlenecks or blockages that are identified have informed the recommendations of this evaluation.[62]

Assumption 1. If increased pooled flexible funds are available in adequate volume and quality, it will help strengthen the FAO Strategic Framework and the delivery of SDG targets.

245. The FVC TOC assumption that increased flexible funds (in volume and quality) strengthen the FAO Strategic Framework and SDG delivery is partially supported in principle by the evidence, as FVC investments do contribute to results across the four betters and can leverage additional funding. However, the evaluation significantly challenges the premise of "adequate volume and quality". The FVC volume is modest, representing a maximum of 2 percent of total voluntary contributions, and its proportion is decreasing relative to the total. Crucially, the evaluation highlights a persistent lack of consensus and clarity in strategic prioritization within the Strategic Framework, distinct from mere alignment. The process for identifying and selecting subprogrammes is described as largely applicant-led, resulting in a diffuse set of proposals rather than a focused selection aligned with corporate priorities or underfunded areas, thus hindering the "quality" or strategic application of the funds as envisioned in the assumption.

Assumption 2. If increased pooled flexible funds are applied in a more programmatic integrated manner, it will reduce transaction costs, fragmentation and duplication, thus increasing value for money.

246. The assumption that applying flexible funds programmatically reduces transaction costs, fragmentation and duplication, and increases value for money, is significantly challenged by the evaluation findings regarding the current mode of operation. This evaluation found that the "ways of working within the FVC [...] continue to favor a projectized mode of operating" and do not consistently support FAO's shift to a more "programmatic approach". The FVC is not consistently applied programmatically in practice, nor is there evidence of an appetite within FAO to integrate the FVC into FAO's efforts to shift towards a programmatic approach, thus this evaluation does not find evidence that the assumed benefits – such as reduced costs or increased value for money through this specific pathway – are being fully realized. Efficiency challenges are noted and linked, in part, to the applicant-led selection process.

Assumption 3. If effective and responsive governance and strategic prioritization of flexible funds are placed at the centre of delivering results, it will enhance FAO's contribution to the achievement of the SDGs.

247. The assumption that effective governance and strategic prioritization are central to delivering results and enhancing SDG contribution is partially supported in principle regarding governance but challenged regarding strategic prioritization. The strengthening of the FVC and revised governance documents are identified as enabling factors for

[62] The FVC TOC and accompanying narrative is provided in Appendix 2. An outline of the TOC assumptions and comprehensive analysis is provided in Annex 4.

delivery. However, as noted previously, the evaluation explicitly identifies a persistent lack of clarity and transparency surrounding the subprogramme selection process and a perceived missing step in strategic prioritization. This indicates that strategic prioritization is not currently "at the centre" as the assumption suggests. Demonstrating impact and sustainable contributions to achievement of the SDGs is difficult due to factors identified like short project time frames, modest funding levels and a lack of strategic focus in the selection.

Assumption 4. If both FAO and its Members fulfil their shared responsibilities for the UN Reform in the context of the UN Funding Compact, it will accelerate the achievement of the SDGs.

248. The assumption that FAO and Members fulfilling Funding Compact responsibilities accelerates SDG achievement is conceptually sound but challenged by findings on the extent to which the necessary conditions are being met. While the FVC contributes to SDG-aligned results, the evaluation indicates that the volume of flexible funding remains modest, suggesting that Members' responsibilities regarding increasing flexible funding may not be fully realized according to the evaluation data. Internal FAO challenges, such as difficulties in consistently tracking disaggregated data for marginalized groups, also affect the complete fulfilment of responsibilities envisioned under the Compact.

6.3 Implications

249. The FVC is at an inflection point. In its current incarnation, the FVC operates as a microcosm of FAO: its identification and selection process leads to resources being spread thinly across many issues and geographies, and the types of subprogrammes funded by the FVC are not sufficiently distinct from what is funded through earmarked contributions and technical cooperation programmes. While the FVC continues to provide added value for FAO, after several years of implementing the recommendations from the previous evaluations, further change is required if the assumptions underlying FVC's TOC are to be fully validated.

250. The need to hasten the process of change in the FVC is all the more urgent as a result of the changing context of resource mobilization; at the time the evaluation was being conducted, the FVC had lost a well-established resource partner, and others were considering their commitment. For the FVC to be sustainable, it needs to fully deliver its value proposition. For this reason, it is now urgent that FAO and its resource partners should take this opportunity to either reinvigorate the FVC by reinventing it or determine how best to use the funds for other purposes.

251. Such a process of reinvention will necessarily require compromise on the part of each of the resource partners as well as all the involved units of FAO. To at least maintain current funding levels going forward, FAO will need to demonstrate to the resource partners how the flexible funds they are contributing are enabling FAO to undertake activities that it otherwise would not be able to do. For their part, resource partners need to embrace the value of flexible funding, aligning with the UN Funding Compact's recommendations and empowering FAO to operationalize the FVC without having to comply with multiple resource partners' suggestions on how it should manage the FVC.

6.3 Recommendations

252. During the implementation of this evaluation, multilateral aid has experienced significant challenges, including funding cuts and shifts in priorities. This poses a specific challenge to the task of proposing recommendations, as it is now extremely difficult to determine resource partners' aspirations with regard to flexible funding. The sudden and unanticipated shift brings further reform of the FVC into question, particularly if there is a likelihood that changes in the external context may result in a downturn in resource partner contributions to the FVC irrespective of any changes that FAO makes to the Fund. At the same time, the value that FAO places on flexible funding is considered by many resource partners as unclear, potentially disincentivizing them from stepping up their provision of unearmarked funds, or even maintaining current levels. For this reason, an overarching recommendation is proposed which is then followed by four strategic recommendations.

Overarching recommendation. Determine the future of the FVC through strategic dialogue.

This could be accomplished through the following actions:

i. Use the findings of this evaluation to engage in an open and strategic dialogue with FVC resource partners to determine their ongoing commitments to the FVC, accompanied by a high-level discussion within FAO regarding the value of flexible funding, how to ensure it is used in a catalytic way to advance corporate priorities, and how to incentivize resource partners to contribute. Use these discussions as a basis to determine the future viability of the Fund and ways of maximizing the investments from resource partners.

   - **Action by:** Executive Committee, FVC Secretariat, FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division, FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget and resource partners.

253. If FAO continues to support the FVC, based on the findings and conclusions of this evaluation linked to the assumptions outlined in the FVC TOC, four specific recommendations are proposed.

Recommendation 1. Improve FVC's potential to be a catalytic instrument.

This could be accomplished through the following actions:

i. Refocus the FVC on forward-looking initiatives that could be transformational for FAO. Utilize FVC funds to pursue opportunities that have the potential to yield higher rewards for FAO, even if that means that they also entail higher risks.

ii. Be more selective. Shift away from funding a high share of proposals and asking each of them to reduce their proposed scope and budget to instead make it possible for funded teams to pursue their full ambition.

iii. Scale back the selection criteria to enable projects to work intensively in one country rather than driving them to spread support thinly across multiple countries in order to be funded. Similarly, allow proposals to focus on being either innovative or focused on scaling rather than requiring that each funded proposal attempt both simultaneously.

iv. Set aside resources to continue to track the longer-term outcomes of FVC subprogrammes even after their implementation periods end, to substantiate the

catalytic returns on FVC investments. In particular, set up processes to carefully monitor the extent to which FVC investments enable FAO to access other sources of funding, build new partnerships and establish FAO's expertise in new areas.

- **Action by:** Executive Committee, FVC Secretariat and FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget.

Recommendation 2. Enhance strategic prioritization in the FVC selection process.

This could be accomplished through the following actions:

i. Develop and implement a clear, transparent and criteria-based process for strategically prioritizing FVC investments within the Strategic Framework, distinguishing this from simple alignment with the four betters. This should move beyond the current largely applicant-led approach and be driven by a systematic analysis of corporate strategic priorities, including identified underfunded or high-impact areas and communicated transparently to applicants through calls for proposals.

ii. Strengthen accountability and align with the FAO principle of subsidiarity, perhaps by reformulating the Executive Committee to include two Deputy Director-Generals and one Assistant Director-General serving on a rotational basis.

- Standardize and clearly define key selection criteria – such as "critical gaps", "scalability" and "innovation" – across all guidance documents, assessment templates and decision-making processes. To enhance clarity, consider consolidating all FVC operational and guidance documents into a single, comprehensive document (e.g. manual) that articulates explicit definitions, benchmarks and application procedures.

iii. Improve attention to marginalized groups. Continue to provide explicit and targeted attention to women and youth within FVC investments and consider how to target other marginalized groups, such as Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities, moving beyond broad alignment to concrete actions in project design and implementation.

- **Action by:** Executive Committee, FVC Secretariat and FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget.

Recommendation 3. Strengthen resource mobilization and visibility for the FVC.

This could be accomplished through the following actions:

i. Develop a comprehensive resource mobilization plan and related action steps for the FVC that clearly articulate its value proposition, targets and objectives. It should include specific incentives for donors to provide unearmarked or softly earmarked funds – such as recognition, preferential partnership opportunities or alignment with strategic priorities – and outline commitments from FAO to maximize the use of flexible funds, including recognition of resource partners' contributions.

ii. Increase the visibility of the FVC within FAO's corporate resource mobilization strategy and Medium-Term Plan in line with aspirations for it to be at the centre of delivering results for FAO.

- **Action by:** Executive Committee, FVC Secretariat and FAO Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division.

Recommendation 4. Increase efficiency and continue to improve FVC processes.

This could be accomplished through the following actions:

i. Review and adjust FVC ways of working to better support FAO's shift towards a more programmatic approach, including better integration of the FVC in corporate planning and reporting.

ii. Continue to strengthen efforts to monitor outcomes of FVC investments and generate evidence of impact. Address the FAO-wide challenge of insufficient disaggregated data by establishing clearer requirements and systems within the FVC to track and monitor the extent to which marginalized and vulnerable groups are reached and benefit from FVC initiatives.

iii. Build on the progress that has been made in strengthening internal communication, focusing on increasing transparency of FVC processes, decision-making and enhancing knowledge management regarding funded subprogrammes and results.

iv. Consider lessons learned from the cost analysis exercise for future evaluations, including the need for comparative analysis to determine the cost-efficiency of the FVC in relation to other similar funding mechanisms.

- **Action by:** FVC Coordination Unit in coordination with the FAO Project Support Division and FAO Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget.

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Summary of documents reviewed during the evaluation

Document	Description	No.
FVC information	Fund governance, processes, annual reports, terminal report, impact assessment	177
FVC evaluations	Previous FVC evaluations (2013, 2016, 2021), recommendations and management responses	13
FVC financial information	Status reports, transaction lists	83
FVC Subprogrammes	Subprogramme reports	63
FVC donors and funding	Partner agreements, strategic dialogue, RPAG visit reports, yearly contribution analysis	101
Other FAO funds	ELEVATE, SFERA, ASTF	14
Other FAO evaluations	Biennium evaluations, country evaluations, Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) evaluation	16
Other FAO documents	Corporate reports, Medium-Term Plan, REMAP	12
External documents	MOPAN assessment, Joint Inspection Unit Reports, other agency flexible funding reports and analysis, gender, youth and Indigenous Peoples	30
	TOTAL	509

Appendix 1. People interviewed

Last name	First name	Institution/agency	Role
FAO headquarters (62)			
Abdurakhmanova	Aysel		Operations and Management Support Specialist
Aburto	Nancy	Nutrition and Food Systems Division	Deputy Director
Ahern	Molly	Fisheries and Aquaculture Division	Fishery Officer
Akinnifesi	Festus	Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division	Senior Coordinator
Alpizar Rojas	Daniel	Office of Sustainable Development Goals	Sustainable Development Specialist Agrifood Innovation and Agrifood Systems
Arimbi	Victor	Office of Innovation	Innovation Specialist
Bechdol	Beth	FAO	Deputy Director-General
Belanger	Julie	Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment	Natural Resources Officer
Bizier	Valerie	Statistics Division	Senior Statistician
Braude	Jermey	Res Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division	Reporting Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist
Brighton	Mary Helen	Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division	Communication and Knowledge Management Specialist
Cammaert	Bruno	Forestry Division	Forestry Officer
Chen	Zhongxin	Digital FAO and Agro-informatics Division	Senior Information Technology Officer
Confort	Piero	Statistics Division	Deputy Director
Conte	David	Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget	Deputy Director
Conti	Valentina	Statistics Division	Statistician
Crawford	Beth	Office of Strategy, Programme and Budget	Director
Crespi	Valerio	Fisheries and Aquaculture Division	Fishery Officer
De La Puente Arevalo	Maria		Virtual Learning Centers Coordinator
Demeranville	Jacqueline Ann	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division	Social Protection Officer
Dhingra	Madhur	Animal Production and Health Division	Senior Animal Health Officer

Last name	First name	Institution/agency	Role
Fielder	Yannick	PSUR	Capacity Development Officer
Gandiwa Mudede,	Charmaine	Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division	Fund Resource Flow Specialist
Genthon	Ariane	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division	Programme Officer
Gheri	Filippo	Statistics Division	Statistician
Hayashi	Naoto	Finance Division	Finance Officer
Hendrickson	Cary	Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division	Programme Officer-Reports Group Team Leader
Jones	Alexander	Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division	Director
Kalamvrezos Navarro	Doarian	Statistics Division	Statistician
Kalikoski	Daniela	Fisheries and Aquaculture Division	Fishery Industry Officer
Keller	Leo	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division	Project Management Specialist
Kelly	Siobhan	Agrifood Systems and Food Safety Division	Agribusiness Officer
Khan	Arbab	Statistics Division	Statistician
Korzenszky	Anna	PSU	Partnerships Officer
Lannou	Anna	Forestry Division	Forest and Landscape Restoration Specialist
Murekezi	Pierre	Fisheries and Aquaculture Division	Fisheries Officer
Ndiaye	Tacko	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division	Senior Officer
Neufeld	Lynette	Nutrition and Food Systems Division	Director
Njie	Divine	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division	Deputy Director, Agrifood systems and food safety
Nolan Clark	Catherine	Resource Mobilization and Private Sector Partnerships Division	Programme Officer
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Park	Clara	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division	Senior Gender Officer
Pastorelli	Francesca	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division	Child Labour Specialist
Patrick	Jacqueson	Office of Emergencies and Resilience	Senior Emergency and Rehabilitation Officer

Last name	First name	Institution/agency	Role
Petrics	Hajnalka	Office of Sustainable Development Goals	Programme Officer
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Pierri	Francesco	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division	Land Tenure Officer
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Tandon	Varun	Fisheries and Aquaculture Division	International Fisheries Specialist
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Vignoni	Arianna	Office of Evaluation	Budget Associate
Westlund	Lena	Fisheries and Aquaculture Division	International Fisheries Analyst
Zaridze	Dioguen	Digital FAO and Agro-informatics Division	Information Technology Officer
FAO Regional Offices (5)			
Hayder	Malek	Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa	Programme Officer (Partnership)
Brito	Claudia	Regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean	Policy Officer
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Last name	First name	Institution/agency	Role
Reeves	Matias	Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean	Regional Resource Mobilization Expert
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FAO Zambia (6)			
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Mainda	Geoffrey	FAO Zambia	AMR National Coordinator
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Mulanga		Ministry of Agriculture	
Mwenya	John	Ministry of Community Development	
Namilonga		Ministry of Community Development	
Sikantongwe	Gambwe	Department of Livestock and Veterinary Services	
Simutowe		Ministry of Agriculture	
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FAO Uganda (9)			
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Emuria	Paul	FAO Uganda	National Project Coordinator Ending Child Labour In Supply Chains
Mbatidde	Irene	FAO Uganda	Animal Health Partnerships Specialist
Nakitgo	Grace	FAO Uganda	Project Coordinator
Ocan	Godfrey	FAO Uganda	Field Coordinator, Kiryandongo
Ogwang	David	FAO Uganda	Programme Specialist and Field Office Coordinator
Olwo	Jacob	FAO Uganda	National Project Coordinator (Small-Scale Fisheries)
Tanyima	Edward	FAO Uganda	National Policy Officer
Tereka	Stella	FAO Uganda	Gender and Climate Change Officer

Last name	First name	Institution/agency	Role
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Kanzomba	Imelda	Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industries and Fisheries	
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Muhima Nyangoma	Rose	Local Government, Western Uganda	Ministry of Agriculture
Nyakato	Moreen	Greeco Organic Farm	Manager
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FAO Mauritania (2)			
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Sidi Mohamed	Mohamed Moctar	Ministry of Agriculture	Senior Adviser
Ndiaye	Ali	SONADER	Chief of Horticulture Service
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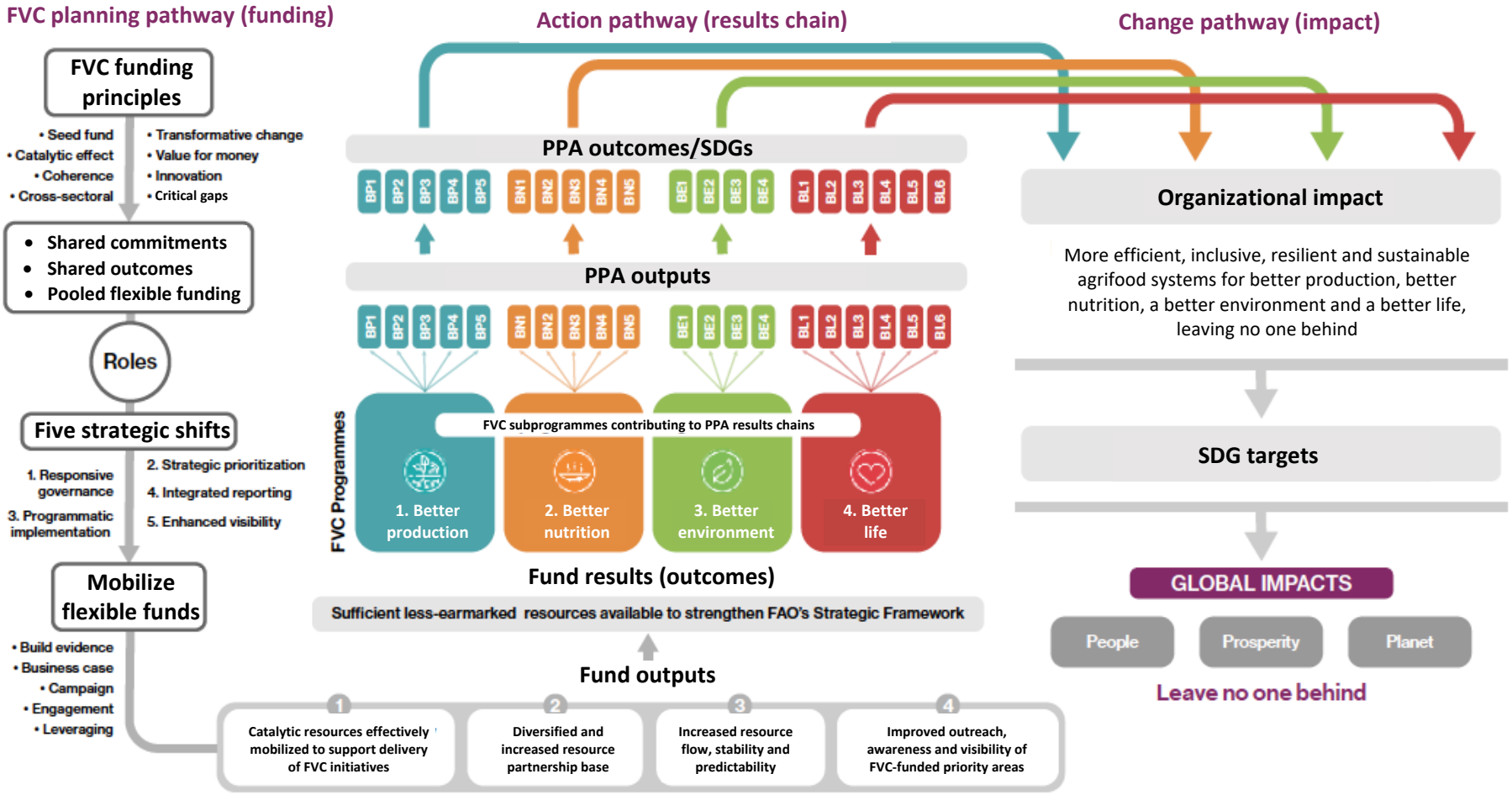
FAO Barbados (1)			
Diei Ouadi	Yvette	FAO Barbados	Fishery and Aquaculture Officer
FAO Lao People's Democratic Republic (the) (1)			
Singvilay	Olayvanh	FAO Lao People's Democratic Republic	National Project Coordinator
Resource partners (9)			
Aberg	Mats	Sida	Senior Programme Manager
Bende	Krisztina	Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations Organizations in Rome	Ambassador
De Wolf	Laurence		Deputy General Representative of the Government of Flanders to Italy
De La Marche	Lieven		Belgium Ambassador

Last name	First name	Institution/agency	Role
Dypedokk	Kristin	Norad	Senior Adviser, Department for Economic Development
Germonprez	Lieselot	Permanent representation of Belgium to the Rome-based UN agencies	Attache, Policy Officer
Gyssel	Lise		Policy Officer on Agriculture and Food Security
Oskarsson	Karin	Sida	Programme Manager
Thesen Tveteraas	Astrid	Norad	Head of Section, Food

Appendix 2. Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund theory of change

This appendix reproduces the FVC TOC and provides a description summarized from the TOC and results framework document (FAO, 2023c).



The TOC for the FVC aims to strengthen the delivery of FAO's desired results in accordance with the Organization's Strategic Framework and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The FVC's TOC statement is based on four key assumptions:

i. if increased pooled flexible funds are available in adequate volume and quality, it will help strengthen FAO's Strategic Framework and the delivery of SDG targets;

ii. if increased pooled flexible funds are applied in a more programmatic integrated manner, it will reduce transaction costs, fragmentation and duplication, thus increasing value for money;

iii. if effective and responsive governance and strategic prioritization of flexible funds are placed at the centre of delivering results, it will enhance FAO's contribution to the achievement of the SDGs; and

iv. if both FAO and its Members will fulfil their shared responsibilities for the UN Reform in the context of the UN Funding Compact, it will accelerate the achievement of the SDGs.

The FVC TOC illustrates the pathways through which FVC-funded subprogrammes contribute to the four betters and relevant SDG targets. The FVC's TOC has three main components or pathways:

i. *The planning pathway (funding):* This covers everything needed to develop, nurture and grow the FVC as a funding mechanism. It focuses on sustaining and increasing resource flow and improving financial management and efficiency based on the FVC's five strategic shifts. The ultimate outcome of the FVC as a funding instrument is to achieve the outcomes of the four betters and the SDGs.

ii. *The action pathway (results chain):* This focuses on how the funded FVC subprogrammes contribute to organizational outcomes, which are based on the four betters and the 20 Programme Priority Areas. This pathway directly correlates to the organizational results framework and risk analysis. It demonstrates how funded programmes and subprogrammes contribute to results at the organizational level. FVC resources are directed towards development efforts contributing to four FVC programmes, each mirroring one or more of the four betters. The FVC-funded work feeds into the results chain (outcomes and outputs) of the PPAs, which in turn contribute to the outcomes of the four betters.

iii. *The change pathway (impact):* This captures how the planning and action pathways contribute towards achieving the four betters and SDGs, as well as other global impacts. At the organizational level, the four betters are set as the aspirational impacts of all FAO's work. The change pathway builds on FAO's implementation arrangements to achieve intersectoral integration and break down silos. FVC efforts contribute to wider organizational goals and the achievement of the SDGs through the results framework, which links the outcomes of PPAs with the aspirational impacts of the four betters and SDG targets.

The revised TOC for the FVC is aligned with FAO's Strategic Framework 2022–2031, which is underpinned by the four betters and 20 PPAs for the 2022–2025 funding cycle. The four betters represent the aspirational impacts of the Organization: i) better production; ii) better nutrition; iii) a better environment; and iv) a better life. These impact statements are rooted in the SDGs. FVC support at the country level is aligned to national priorities within the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, and fully aligned with the Country Programming Framework.

In summary, the FVC TOC explains the strategic process from mobilizing flexible funds (planning pathway) to implementing programmes and subprogrammes that deliver results contributing to FAO's outcomes and outputs (action pathway), ultimately leading to the desired long-term aspirational impacts captured by the four betters and contributions to the SDGs (change pathway), all based on key assumptions about funding and programmatic approaches.

Appendix 3. Flexible Voluntary Contribution Fund list of subprogrammes for the 2018–2023 phase

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
1. Evidence-based policy and global instruments and knowledge products	1.3.2 Closing agriculture data gap: contribution to the 50x2030 Initiative	FMM/GLO/125/MUL	2 850 000	Armenia Senegal Nigeria Cambodia Uganda Georgia Nepal	Statistics Division		15/06/2019	31/12/2023	BP1 (50%) BL1 (50%)
	1.1 Leveraging global instruments and knowledge products	FMM/GLO/127/MUL	2 000 000	Mauritania Tunisia Sierra Leone Liberia Lao People's Democratic Republic Mali	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		01/12/2019	30/06/2023	BL2 (50%) BN1 (20%) BP4 (30%)
	1.2 Nutrition-sensitive agriculture and social protection (closed)	FMM/GLO/128/MUL	1 000 000	Kyrgyzstan Guyana Ethiopia Grenada	Nutrition and Food Systems Division		01/02/2020	31/12/2022	BL2 (40%) BN2 (20%) BP1 (40%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	1.3.1 Improving country data for monitoring SDG achievements and informing policy decision	FMM/GLO/129/MUL	2 600 000	Morocco Algeria Tunisia Libya Mauritania	Office of Chief Statistician	Additional funds were awarded through the first call 2018–2021	01/08/2019	31/12/2023	BP1 (10%) BP2 (10%) BP4 (10%) BN1 (10%) BN2 (10%) BN4 (10%) BN5 (10%) BE3 (10%) BL1 (10%) BL6 (10%)
	1.4 Accelerating innovation through the Hand-in-Hand Initiative	FMM/GLO/158/MUL	1 725 000	Ethiopia Peru Lao People's Democratic Republic	Agrifood Economics and Policy Division / Governance Unit (DDCG)		01/07/2021	31/12/2023	BL5 (100%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
2. Resilience and sustainable food systems	2.1.1 Sustainable, resilient and inclusive food systems development	FMM/GLO/131/MUL	2 560 000	Afghanistan Uganda Suriname Barbados Uzbekistan Egypt Palestine Eswatini United Republic of Tanzania (the) Jamaica Ukraine Kyrgyzstan Zambia Republic of Moldova (the) Myanmar	Statistics Division		30/09/2019	31/12/2023	BL2 (35%) BN4 (35%) BN5 (30%)
	2.2 Feeding urbanization: building prosperous small cities and towns (closed)	FMM/GLO/132/MUL	1 655 000	Ecuador Senegal Rwanda	Agrifood Economics and Policy Division		31/01/2020	31/12/2022	BE4 (100%)
	2.3 Empowering women in food systems and strengthening the local capacities and resilience of Small Island Developing States in the agrifood sector	FMM/GLO/145/MUL	1 000 000	Samoa Saint Lucia Sao Tome and Principe Comoros Barbados Palau	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		01/02/2020	31/12/2022	BL1 (50%) BP1 (30%) BP2 (20%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	2.1.2 Governance innovation for sustainable development of food systems	FMM/GLO/150/MUL	3 000 000	Indonesia Uganda United Republic of Tanzania (the)	Chief Economist		16/03/2020	31/12/2023	BL5 (30%) BN1 (60%) BP1 (10%)
	2.4 A Global Network on Digital Agriculture Innovation Hubs	FMM/GLO/159/MUL	900 000	Morocco Grenada Dominica Ethiopia	Office of Innovation		01/09/2021	31/12/2023	BL1 (40%) BP1 (20%) BP4 (20%) BP5 (20%)
	2.5 Food systems transformation focusing on COVID-19 response and recovery in East and Southern Africa	FMM/GLO/164/MUL	1 000 000	Zambia Burundi Zimbabwe Comoros South Sudan	Statistics Division		01/04/2022	31/12/2023	BL4 (30%) BL6 (35%) BP4 (35%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	2.7 Strengthening biosecurity for resilient and sustainable agrifood systems with One Health approach in the Pacific	FMM/GLO/167/MUL	1 000 000	Palau Tonga Solomon Islands Fiji Vanuatu Kiribati Samoa Marshall Islands Tokelau Federated States of Micronesia Tuvalu Nauru Cook Islands Niue	Subregional Office for the Pacific Islands		01/06/2022	31/12/2023	BE3 (20%) BL4 (20%) BP3 (60%)
	2.6 Indigenous Peoples' food systems coalition and Indigenous Peoples Biocentric Restoration for climate action	FMM/GLO/168/MUL	1 000 000	Kenya India	Partnerships and UN Collaboration Division		01/06/2022	31/12/2023	BE1 (33%) BL1 (34%) BN2 (33%)
	2.8 Empowering women and boosting livelihoods through agricultural trade: leveraging the African Continental Free	FMM/GLO/169/MUL	800 000	Senegal United Republic of Tanzania (the) South Africa Malawi Ghana Nigeria	Regional Office for Africa	First call 2018–2021	14/10/2022	31/12/2023	BL1 (50%) BL2 (25%) BN5 (25%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	Trade Area (AfCFTA)								
	2.9 Leveraging the Digital Village Initiative and Small Island Developing States Solutions Platform in the Pacific	FMM/GLO/170/MUL	550 000	Vanuatu Solomon Islands Samoa Marshall Islands Tonga Federated States of Micronesia Fiji Palau	Subregional Office for the Pacific Islands	First call 2018–2021	14/10/2022	31/12/2023	BL1 (10%) BP5 (90%)
	2.10 Piloting digital villages in Central Asia	FMM/GLO/171/MUL	500 000	Kyrgyzstan Uzbekistan Tajikistan	Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia	First call 2018–2021	02/11/2022	31/12/2023	BP5 (100%)
	2.12 Stimulate responsible investment in agriculture and food systems by young agri-entrepreneurs for territorial development and strengthened value chains	FMM/GLO/179/MUL	500 000	Tunisia Mauritania	Partnerships and UN Collaboration Division	First call 2018–2021	01/11/2022	31/12/2023	BL6 (70%) BP4 (30%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	2.11 Supporting food system transformation through strengthening aquaculture development and innovative public–private partnerships	FMM/GLO/180/MUL	650 000	Guinea Senegal Rwanda Madagascar Uganda Malawi Philippines (the)	Fisheries and Aquaculture Division	First call 2018–2021	01/12/2022	31/12/2023	BL6 (70%) BP2 (30%)
	2.13 Walking the talk of food systems transformations: enacting food systems for people, planet and common prosperity	FMM/GLO/181/MUL	500 000	Uruguay Indonesia Uzbekistan Lesotho Nigeria	Office of Sustainable Development Goals	First call 2018–2021	02/11/2022	31/12/2023	All PPAs
3. Migration and fragility	3.1 Strengthening capacity to harness positive effects of migration	FMM/GLO/133/MUL	1 000 000	Uganda Senegal Republic of Moldova (the) Nepal	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		13/12/2019	31/12/2023	BL2 (100%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
4. Generational gaps, women's empowerment and decent rural employment (DRE)	Boosting the decent rural employment and Dimitra work (bridging support in 2018) (closed)	FMM/GLO/122/MUL	425 000	Niger Lebanon Uganda Central African Republic Mali Democratic Republic of the Congo (the) Senegal Ghana Burundi Guatemala	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		01/06/2018	30/06/2020	This subprogramme concluded in 2020, prior to the adoption of the current FAO Strategic Framework (2022–2031), and was therefore not mapped to any of the PPAs under the current framework.
	FAO International Symposium on Agricultural Innovation for Family Farmers (closed)	FMM/GLO/123/MUL	225 000	Global	Animal Production and Health Division		08/11/2018	31/12/2020	This subprogramme concluded in 2020, prior to the adoption of the current FAO Strategic Framework (2022–2031), and was therefore not mapped to any of the PPAs under the current framework.

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	4.1 Transforming the future face of agriculture: Promoting socioeconomic inclusion	FMM/GLO/136/MUL	1 500 000	Uganda United Republic of Tanzania (the) Paraguay Philippines	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		16/09/2019	31/07/2023	BL2 (30%) BL4 (30%) BP4 (40%)
	4.2 Generational gaps and eliminating child labour in agriculture	FMM/GLO/137/MUL	1 470 000	Lebanon Uganda Pakistan	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		12/09/2019	31/12/2023	BL2 (70%) BP2 (15%) BP3 (15%)
	4.3 Gender equality and women's empowerment in agriculture, food security and nutrition (including Dimitra)	FMM/GLO/138/MUL	3 710 000	Mali Syrian Arab Republic (the) Niger Cambodia Burkina Faso Democratic Republic of the Congo (the) Mauritania Haiti Senegal Kenya Uganda Madagascar Malawi	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		16/09/2019	31/12/2023	BL1 (60%) BL2 (20%) BL3 (20%)
	4.4 Economic inclusion and social protection to reduce poverty in the context of COVID-19	FMM/GLO/157/MUL	1 000 000	Zambia Timor-Leste	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		01/05/2021	31/12/2023	BL4 (30%) BN2 (30%) BP4 (40%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	4.5 Building livelihoods resilience and recovery from COVID-19 challenges in Latin America	FMM/GLO/162/MUL	1 000 000	Nicaragua Plurinational State of Bolivia (the)	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		01/02/2022	31/12/2023	BL2 (30%) BL4 (30%) BP4 (40%)
	4.6 Building livelihoods resilience and recovery from COVID-19 challenges in East and Southern Africa	FMM/GLO/163/MUL	950 000	Malawi Kenya	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		01/01/2022	31/12/2023	BL2 (30%) BN2 (20%) BP4 (50%)
	4.7 Building back better and greener: integrated approaches for an inclusive and green COVID-19 response in rural spaces	FMM/GLO/166/MUL	1 125 000	Kenya Zambia Sri Lanka	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		01/06/2022	31/12/2023	BL2 (50%) BP1 (50%)
5. Climate change and agriculture	Blue Growth Network and Secretariat (closed)	FMM/GLO/121/MUL	200 000	Global	Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment		01/03/2018	15/07/2021	BP2 (100%)
	Integrated climate-smart agriculture (CSA) approach through the Global Alliance for	FMM/GLO/124/MUL	500 000	Global	Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment		01/01/2019	31/12/2021	BE1 (100%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	Climate Smart Agriculture (closed)								
	5.1 Sustainable productivity in agriculture (in the context of CSA and agroecology)	FMM/GLO/139/MUL	1 500 000	United Republic of Tanzania (the) Bangladesh Zambia Lao People's Democratic Republic North Macedonia	Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment		25/11/2019	30/06/2023	BP1 (100%)
	5.2.2 Strengthening coordination and partnerships for scaling up conservation agriculture in Southern Africa	FMM/GLO/146/MUL	3 000 000	United Republic of Tanzania (the) Namibia Zimbabwe Lesotho South Africa Madagascar Zambia Malawi Eswatini Mozambique	Regional Office for Africa		12/05/2020	31/12/2023	BP4 (100%)
	5.2.3 Forest and farm facility phase II. Climate-resilient landscapes and improved livelihoods – expanding the	FMM/GLO/147/MUL	1 500 000	Gambia (the) United Republic of Tanzania (the) Liberia	Forestry Division		01/05/2020	30/04/2023	BE1 (20%) BP4 (80%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	work in Africa (closed)								
	5.4 Promoting coherence between disaster risk reduction, climate action and social protection in sub-Saharan Africa	FMM/GLO/148/MUL	3 000 000	Malawi	Rural Transformation and Gender Equality Division		01/04/2020	31/12/2023	BE1 (100%)
	5.5 Scaling up implementation of the Enhanced Lima Work Programme on Gender and its Gender Action Plan in Agriculture and the Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture (KJWA) under UNFCCC (closed)	FMM/GLO/149/MUL	1 000 000	Solomon Islands Zambia Uganda Samoa Kiribati Senegal	Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment		01/05/2020	31/12/2022	BE1 (40%) BL1 (30%) BP1 (30%)
	5.6 Boosting the resilience of the most vulnerable smallholders for a transformative COVID-19 recovery	FMM/GLO/151/MUL	1 000 000	Guatemala Myanmar Mali	Office of Emergencies and Resilience		01/01/2021	31/12/2023	BL3 (60%) BL4 (40%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	5.7 Support to the Secretariat of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture	FMM/GLO/152/MUL	600 000	Global	Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment		01/06/2021	31/12/2023	BE3 (50%) BP1 (50%)
	5.8 Strengthening implementation of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture	FMM/GLO/153/MUL	600 000	Global	Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment		01/05/2021	31/12/2023	BE3 (100%)
	5.9 Global Action for Fall Armyworm Control	FMM/GLO/154/MUL	2 000 000	Burkina Faso Mozambique Malawi Cameroon Philippines (the) Ghana Kenya	Plant Production and Protection Division		01/07/2021	31/12/2023	BL4 (20%) BP1 (80%)
	5.10 Implementing the Small-scale Fisheries Guidelines for gender equitable and climate resilient food systems and livelihoods	FMM/GLO/155/MUL	4 000 000	United Republic of Tanzania (the) Philippines (the) Ghana Indonesia Sierra Leone Madagascar Uganda Malawi Namibia	Fisheries and Aquaculture Division		01/06/2021	31/12/2023	BN2 (15%) BP2 (45%) BP4 (40%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	5.11 Mainstreaming nutrition into FMM portfolio to promote nutrition-sensitive food production	FMM/GLO/156/MUL	1 500 000	Ethiopia Papua New Guinea Niger Haiti South Sudan Malawi Mali	Nutrition and Food Systems Division		01/01/2021	31/12/2023	BN1 (30%) BN2 (50%) BP1 (20%)
	5.12 Green Cities initiative (GCI): building back better for climate and resilient sustainable transitions	FMM/GLO/160/MUL	1 000 000	Senegal Honduras Uganda Cameroon Rwanda Chad Sri Lanka Côte d'Ivoire Bangladesh Dominica	Plant Production and Protection Division		01/08/2021	31/12/2023	BE4 (40%) BL4 (30%) BP1 (30%)
	5.13 Building resilience to climate change and recovery from COVID-19 in the Caribbean	FMM/GLO/161/MUL	550 000	Grenada Saint Vincent and Grenadine Guyana	Subregional Office for the Caribbean		31/01/2022	31/12/2023	BL3 (60%) BL4 (40%)
	5.14 Mainstreaming biodiversity across agricultural sectors	FMM/GLO/165/MUL	1 000 000	Lao People's Democratic Republic Uganda Madagascar	Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment		15/06/2022	31/12/2023	BE1 (20%) BE3 (80%)
	5.16 Food and Diet Domain	FMM/GLO/172/MUL	450 000	Global	Nutrition and Food Systems Division	First call 2018–2021	14/10/2022	31/12/2023	BN1 (100%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	5.15 Support the carbon neutrality strategy and adaptation to Climate Change of the agriculture, forestry and other land use sector of SICA	FMM/GLO/173/MUL	900 000	Nicaragua Honduras	Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean	First call 2018–2021	10/11/2022	31/12/2023	BE1 (50%) BL6 (50%)
	5.17 Restoration for resilience and recovery (3R)	FMM/GLO/174/MUL	500 000	Ghana Cambodia	Forestry Division	First call 2018–2021	10/11/2022	31/12/2023	BE1 (100%)
	5.18 Scaling up climate actions to enhance nationally determined contributions and climate and livestock policies and action plans	FMM/GLO/175/MUL	500 000	Zambia Senegal Bangladesh Burkina Faso United Republic of Tanzania (the) Kenya Zimbabwe Pakistan Rwanda	Animal Production and Health Division	First call 2018–2021	01/11/2022	31/12/2023	BE1 (60%) BP1 (40%)
	5.19 SoLaWISe: Soil-Land-Water digital Information System	FMM/GLO/176/MUL	500 000	Mozambique Tunisia Pakistan	Land and Water Division	First call 2018–2021	18/01/2023	31/12/2023	BP1 (100%)
	5.20 Innovative approaches for better plant production	FMM/GLO/177/MUL	500 000	Trinidad and Tobago Bangladesh Uzbekistan Egypt Malawi	Plant Production and Protection Division	First call 2018-21	24/10/2022	31/12/2023	BE1 (20%) BN1 (20%) BP1 (60%)

Main programme	Subprogramme	Project symbol	Amount (USD)	Implementing countries	Technical unit	Call for proposals	EOD	Not-to-exceed date	PPA (24/25)
	5.21 Equipping veterinary para-professionals and local service providers	FMM/GLO/178/MUL	650 000	Uganda Nigeria	Animal Production and Health Division	First call 2018–2021	01/11/2022	31/12/2023	BL1 (20%) BP3 (80%)
	FVC coordination entity (FVC Secretariat)	FMM/GLO/126/MUL-F	877 864	Global			15/06/2019	31/12/2023	All PPAs

Appendix 4. Evaluation matrix

This appendix comprises the evaluation matrix. It outlines the evaluation questions, subquestions, indicators, methods and data sources.

Evaluation questions	Indicators	Methods	Data sources
EQ 1: What is the value added of the FVC mechanism in supporting the FAO Strategic Framework?			
1.1 How has the FVC applied its identification and selection process?	▪ Documentation of the process of identifying and selecting subprogrammes for FVC funding ▪ Metrics and trends on subprogramme selection (numbers of subprogrammes proposed vs selected; patterns in types of subprogrammes selected vs not selected) ▪ Evidence of the extent to which FVC governance and operational guidance documents are followed and/or deviated from ▪ Documented evolutions of FVC identification and selection processes within and between phases, including the addition or reduction of steps ▪ Perceptions of the appropriateness and quality of the FVC subprogramme identification and selection process ▪ Lessons on alternative approaches to identification and selection of investment priorities by other FAO flexible funds	Document review Key informant interviews (KIIs) (global, regional) Online survey (global and regional; FAO and resource partners [RPs]) Comparative learning exercise	Documents FVC concept notes/proposals FVC selection criteria FVC assessment matrix FVC Executive Committee/selection meeting minutes Relevant documents for other FAO funds Stakeholders FVC Coordination Unit Resource partners Executive Committee FAO technical units FAO personnel managing other flexible funds
1.2 What is the geographic distribution of FVC investments (countries and regions where projects have been implemented, including a breakdown by income levels)?	▪ Breakdown of FVC subprogramme implementation in different countries and regions ▪ For FVC subprogramme implementation at country level, disaggregation of those countries by income level (HIC/UMIC/LMIC/LIC) ▪ Number and value of subprogrammes targeting global, regional and country levels ▪ Differences between geographic, income level and global/regional/country allocation of resources between the 2028–2021 and 2022–2025 FVC phases	Document review Data analysis	Documents Terminal report and annexes World Bank classification of income levels by country Data Field Programme Management Information System (FPMIS)
1.3 How has the FVC responded to	▪ Evidence of efforts within subprogramme proposals to demonstrate compliance with FVC criteria at the design stage	Document review	Documents FVC concept notes/proposals

Evaluation questions	Indicators	Methods	Data sources
the criteria set? To what extent and in what ways have subprogrammes been designed to address critical gaps, promote scalability and foster innovation? How are these criteria aligned with the FAO Strategic Framework?	▪ Evidence of a selection process that interrogates subprogramme design according to the FVC criteria ▪ Extent to which FAO stakeholders are clear and consistent on the definitions of "*critical gaps*", "*scalability*" and "*innovation*" ▪ Extent to which subprogramme proposals demonstrate consistent or inconsistent understandings of "*critical gaps*", "*scalability*" and "*innovation*" ▪ Evidence of alignment between FVC selection criteria and the FAO Strategic Framework ▪ Documented evolutions of FVC's application of its selection criteria, including efforts to align with the FAO Strategic Framework ▪ Perceptions of the extent to which the design of FVC subprogrammes aligns with the FAO Strategic Framework ▪ Lessons from the use of alternative selection criteria within other FAO flexible funds, application of those criteria and the extent to which they align or not with the FAO Strategic Framework	Online survey (global and regional; FAO and RPs) KIIs (global, regional) Comparative learning exercise	FVC selection criteria FVC assessment matrix FVC Executive Committee/selection meeting minutes Relevant documents for other FAO funds <u>Stakeholders</u> FVC Coordination Unit Resource partners Executive Committee FAO technical units FAO personnel managing other flexible funds
1.4 To what extent have FVC investments considered the different needs, roles and opportunities of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities?	▪ Evidence of efforts to articulate how FVC subprogramme proposals seek to consider the different needs of: i) women; ii) youth; iii) Indigenous Peoples; and iv) people with disabilities ▪ Extent to which subprogramme proposals consistently articulate how interventions are designed to consider the different needs of: i) women; ii) youth; iii) Indigenous Peoples; and iv) people with disabilities ▪ Documented use of the gender marker within the identification and selection of subprogrammes ▪ Perceptions of the extent to which FVC subprogrammes adequately seek to consider the different needs of: i) women; ii) youth; iii) Indigenous Peoples; and iv) people with disabilities ▪ Evidence and perceptions of notable shifts in the extent to which FVC subprogrammes seek to consider the different needs of women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities between the 2028–2021 and 2022–2025 FVC phases ▪ Lessons from other FAO flexible funds on investing in interventions to meet the different needs of: i) women; ii) youth; iii) Indigenous Peoples; and iv) people with disabilities	Desk review KIIs (global, regional) Online survey (global and regional; FAO and RPs) Comparative learning exercise	<u>Documents</u> Concept notes and assessment process; proposals and criteria for scoring Gender marker Relevant documents for other FAO funds <u>Stakeholders</u> FVC Coordination Unit Resource partners Executive Committee FAO technical units FAO personnel managing other flexible funds

Evaluation questions	Indicators	Methods	Data sources
EQ 2: How effective has the FVC mechanism been in contributing to the implementation of the FAO Strategic Framework?			
2.1 What results have FVC investments contributed to?	▪ Evidence of contributions from FVC subprogrammes to fund results, outputs and outcomes (as articulated in the TOC) ▪ Evidence of contributions from FVC subprogrammes to FAO's PPA results (and by extension to the four betters) at output level (and at higher levels to the extent possible) ▪ Perceptions of the value added of FVC funding to the achievement of FAO results	Document review KIIs (country, regional, global) Project visits	Documents FVC annual reports and terminal report FVC-funded impact assessments Stakeholders FAO Country Offices personnel FAO headquarters and Regional Offices technical personnel Beneficiaries (government, civil society organizations, private sector, community members)
2.2 To what extent have FVC investments addressed critical gaps and contributed to catalytic results in FAO's programmatic areas?	▪ Evidence of critical gaps that have been addressed by FVC investments, including support for underfunded programmatic areas ▪ Evidence of catalytic results attributable to FVC investments, including additional funding leveraged, accelerated delivery of results, increased collaboration with other UN agencies/international financial institutions (IFIs) and/or removal of obstacles to progress ▪ Perceptions (internal) of the added value or otherwise of FVC funding to address critical gaps and achieve catalytic results ▪ Perceptions (external) of the added value or otherwise of injections of FAO funding (regardless of internal funding source) to address critical gaps and achieve catalytic results	Document review KIIs (country, regional, global) Project visits	Documents FVC annual reports and terminal report FVC-funded impact assessments Stakeholders FAO Country Offices personnel FAO headquarters and Regional Offices technical personnel Beneficiaries (government, civil society organizations, private sector, community members)
2.3 To what extent have FVC investments reached and benefited marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities?	▪ Evidence of benefits of FVC subprogrammes to marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities ▪ Perceptions (internal and external) of the added value of FVC funding to benefit marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples and people with disabilities	Document review KIIs (country, regional, global) Project visits	Documents FVC annual reports and terminal report FVC-funded impact assessments Stakeholders FAO Country Offices personnel FAO headquarters and Regional Offices technical personnel

Evaluation questions	Indicators	Methods	Data sources
			Beneficiaries (government, CSOs, private sector, community members)
EQ 3: How efficiently is the FVC mechanism implemented?			
3.1 What are the costs of managing (including identification and selection) versus implementing FVC activities?			
3.2 To what extent has the FVC leveraged corporate FAO systems to manage, implement and communicate about the FVC-funded interventions?	▪ Evidence that FVC subprogramme management is integrated into corporate FAO project management, budgeting and reporting systems ▪ Perceptions of the extent to which FVC subprogramme management is effectively integrated into FAO project management, budgeting and reporting systems ▪ Estimates of additional workload or otherwise of implementing and reporting on FVC subprogrammes ▪ Extent to which the FVC is embedded in FAO's internal communications, including via the FAO intranet, email circulars, learning events, communities of practice, etc. ▪ Extent to which FVC is prioritized within FAO's external communications to donors and other key partners ▪ Perceptions of the extent to which the purpose, modus operandi, achievements and challenges of the FVC are effectively communicated to internal and external stakeholders ▪ Evidence and perceptions of notable shifts in efforts to leverage corporate FAO systems within FVC processes between the 2028–2021 and 2022–2025 FVC phases ▪ Lessons from other FAO flexible funds on leveraging FAO corporate systems to manage, implement and communicate about their interventions	Document review Review of FAO corporate systems KIIs (global, regional, country) Online survey (global and regional; FAO only) Comparative learning exercise	<u>Documents</u> FAO corporate reporting and communications <u>Stakeholders</u> FAO Country Offices personnel FVC Coordination Unit Resource partners Executive Committee FAO technical units FAO personnel managing other flexible funds
3.3 To what extent are FVC monitoring and reporting processes	▪ Evidence and perceptions of the extent to which FAO corporate monitoring and reporting processes adequately track impact and sustainability ▪ Evidence of efforts to track and report on the impact and sustainability of FVC-funded interventions, within and outside of FAO corporate processes	Document review Review of FAO monitoring and reporting processes and systems	<u>Documents</u> FVC annual reports and terminal report FVC-funded impact assessments

Evaluation questions	Indicators	Methods	Data sources
appropriate for tracking the impact and sustainability of funded interventions?	▪ Evidence and perceptions of notable progress or otherwise on tracking and reporting of impact and sustainability between the 2028–2021 and 2022–2025 FVC phases ▪ Lessons from other FAO flexible funds on tracking and reporting on impact and sustainability, either within or outside of FAO corporate monitoring processes	KIIs (global, regional, country) Online survey (global and regional, FAO only) Comparative learning exercise	FAO corporate reports Stakeholders FAO Country Offices personnel FVC Coordination Unit Executive Committee FAO technical units FAO personnel managing other flexible funds
3.4 How has the FVC responded to recommendations from previous evaluations, specifically those related to the governance and the allocation process?	▪ Evidence of actions taken/not taken in response to recommendations from previous evaluations, specifically related to changes to the governance and allocation processes ▪ Perceptions of the adequacy and effectiveness of actions taken in response to recommendations from previous evaluations, specifically related to changes to the governance and allocation processes	Document review KIIs (global, regional)	Documents Previous FVC evaluations Management responses to previous FVC evaluations Follow-up reports on actions taken Stakeholders FVC Coordination Unit Executive Committee FAO technical units Resource partners

Annexes

Annex 1. Terms of reference

http://www.fao.org/3/cd7172en/FVC_Annex_1.pdf

Annex 2. Summary of prior evaluations and respective evaluation recommendations

http://www.fao.org/3/cd7172en/FVC_Annex_2.pdf

Annex 3. Lessons for future FAO/FVC cost analysis

http://www.fao.org/3/cd7172en/FVC_Annex_3.pdf

Annex 4. Examination of the theory of change assumptions based on the findings and conclusions of the evaluation

http://www.fao.org/3/cd7172en/FVC_Annex_4.pdf

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