Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

BRIEFING NOTE

October 2019

Evaluation of the work of the FAO Subregional Office for Mesoamerica, 2012-2017

With around 200 million inhabitants, Mesoamerica boasts levels of poverty exceeding the average Latin American and Caribbean region as a whole. It also registers higher levels of food insecurity (10.3 percent) than South America (7 percent). Agriculture is a key focus of economic development (coffee, sugar cane, cocoa, fruit and livestock) and highly vulnerable to climate change. El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, in particular, are exposed to prolonged droughts that threaten food security.

Against this context, the FAO Office of Evaluation (OED) examined the work of the Subregional Office for Mesoamerica (SLM), located in Panama, from 2012 to 2017, to assess its contributions to the accomplishment of achievements by FAO in the development of the subregion, either through technical support to country offices, or by promoting synergies with other subregional and regional initiatives.

Map of Mesoamerica

Fuente: Mapa del mundo de Naciones Unidas

The evaluation first found that, in a situation where the FAO country offices have limited technical capacities, SLM provides technical support in a range of sectors, which is necessary for adequate performance by FAO at a national level. The proximity of the technical experts based at SLM to the subregion's countries gives them an increased ability to respond to technical assistance requests, and their detailed knowledge of the situation in these countries has led to the achievement of greater efficiency in the development of programme proposals.

Thanks to the technical support provided by SLM for the formulation and implementation of programmes, FAO has increased the number of operations in Mesoamerican countries. In addition, SLM's supranational perspective facilitates greater interaction between countries that tend to

share similar challenges and enables the achievement of results with lower transaction costs. SLM contributes towards achieving results in countries with respect to: i) improving practises and strengthening skills in sectors that are relevant for the subregion, such as sustainable forestry management and resilience to prolonged drought or hurricanes; ii) developing subregional strategies or normative products that are necessary for supporting key activities; and iii) promoting approaches geared towards indigenous communities and gender equality.

SLM has also made the most of its location to promote and facilitate political dialogues at subregional level with government and parliament representatives in the context of the work of the integration bodies. This, together with the work of the national representations, has played a key role in FAO having results that are of a wider scope in the subregion with a better effect on policies. In particular, the promotion of institutional frameworks in areas such as the Central American Integration System (SICA) and Parlatino, geared towards food and nutritional security and the development of family farming, has made it possible to better position these topics in the national political agenda and support the development of laws and strategies in several countries.

Enabling factors

The combined effect of actions of SLM at subregional and national level has been essential to achieving effective results. In particular, the effectiveness of the political support requires monitoring of the implementation – at a national level – of the regulatory or strategic arrangements discussed or initiated in the subregion. **SLM must continue to work closely with the national representations, in particular to monitor the scope of work on subregional and national policies, and to measure their impact, so that specific actions are generated to improve food security in the countries. (Recommendation 2)**

In the context of complex programming, which includes the presence of two levels of administration (regional and subregional), having established a clear vision of the respective roles and effectively distinguishing the duties of SLM and the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (RLC) has been instrumental in both offices complementing one another, without duplicating their work. The efforts geared towards defining work processes have served to achieve efficient management of the support that the technical officials based in SLM provide to the countries. An equally strategic vision of the role of SLM, which was established as an efficient technical partner for the subregional integration institutions, made the FAO actions in Mesoamerica more coherent, positioning it as a privileged point of contact.

The great scope and efficacy of the technical team established in SLM was key in making these achievements. SLM has a combination of essential capacities whose complementarity with RLC enables them to jointly cover many of the needs of Mesoamerica and other parts of Latin America


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and the Caribbean. The good coordination of regional and subregional employees has served to ensure a link with the regional programming framework and offers the necessary technical support. In particular, having the capacities in SLM to support the national representations in preparing competitive proposals to active donors in Mesoamerica such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF) or the Green Climate Fund (GCF), contributed towards capturing resources and increasing FAO presence in relevant topics.

Opportunities

Given the importance of continuing to mobilise resources, the competencies of the global officials based in SLM could be better used to support the development of technical proposals and achieve better synergies between technical officials of SLM and investment officials (of the Investment Centre Division [TCI]) and the managers of extra-budgetary programmes with global scope. **SLM should pay particular attention to FAO's positioning with respect to the most influential donors in the subregion, highlighting FAO's comparative advantages in several topics and sectors. It could be implemented as a strategy for the mobilisation of its own resources, in line with the corporate, regional and national strategies, geared towards specific donors that have a presence or interests in the subregion. This action requires having the right technical profiles to respond to relevant opportunities and maximise the coordination between TCI and SLM, to make better use of the synergies offered by FAO partnership with international financial institutions and the donors in the region. (Recommendations 5 and 7)**

Considering that the value of SLM lies to a great extent in its technical offer, the evaluation draws attention to the importance of regularly maintaining technical skills, and ensuring that these remain in line with the needs of the subregion. **SLM must regularly review, at least every two years, the alignment of its technical offer (human resources) with the priority topics of the subregion's countries to continue to adequately respond to its needs. (Recommendation 3)**

SLM work agendas in terms of policies have the potential to be a success, provided that they are relevant to the countries' priorities. Given the substantial number of subregional and regional organizations present in the subregion, the time each official invests must be optimised so that the contributions to subregional policies do not act to the detriment of direct support to the countries that must be maintained as a priority of SLM. **With a view to maintaining its technical value in the subregion, SLM must ensure that its plans and areas of work are aligned with the needs of the countries. The accompaniment of subregional policies must be subordinated to these priorities and leave adequate space for direct attention to requests from countries. (Recommendation 1)**

Challenges

Due to the constant growth of its activities in recent years, the SLM team responds to a high demand for work, which is largely met through the support of consultants, even for strategic positions. In some areas, reliance on short-term human resources has put the continuity of work at risk. The introduction of restrictive regulations for the recruitment and mobility of employees has created additional challenges. SLM has limited financial resources from the regular budget. Projects such as Mesoamerica Sin Hambre or the use of the vacancy budget have allowed for flexible management in the provision of technical assistance to countries; however, such strategies carry long-term risks. **SLM must be able to ensure an adequate operational capacity to fulfil its tasks, which means defining the required minimum levels of regular employees and operating funds, based on the level of participation it aims to have and the needs it expects to meet. (Recommendation 8)**

In relation to this, the administrative cost of employees seconded to SLM (from RLC or headquarters) is not adequately covered; a better distribution of the administrative and technical income (administrative and operational support and technical support services) could allow SLM to increase its resources to finance operations. **Considering that of the 30 permanent SLM officials in 2017, only 17 were assigned to the subregional office (the rest are seconded or project employees), we recommend that the officials seconded at present be administratively integrated into SLM structure, in order to improve the alignment of work at the subregional level and ensure a more equal distribution of resources for administrative costs as well as those generated by the technical support services provided by the seconded officials. (Recommendation 9)**

SLM did not make sufficient use of the platform of Panama, as a city that hosts several potential partners and donors active in the region and subregion, to create synergies or cooperation frameworks with entities of the United Nations system or with the private sector. In fact, there is some competition for resources among United Nations agencies, so donors have a responsibility to promote programming strategies that encourage joint and complementary actions among agencies. In this context, **the FAO country programming strategies could benefit from better coordination with the global programming frameworks of the donors and the United Nations. (Recommendation 6)**

In addition, there is room for increased South-South cooperation among the subregion's countries, and **FAO needs to continue to communicate and promote durable options for such cooperation, based on long-term strategic frameworks. (Recommendation 10)**

The importance of collaboration between SLM and country offices justifies SLM investing in maintaining a close relationship with the countries, providing feedback to FAO representatives based on the systematisation of experiences and managing the general programming coherence in Mesoamerica. More particularly, SLM can serve as a link to accompany the reform process affecting United Nations country programmes. **It is recommended that a role be created within SLM to promote a subregional programming vision, in collaboration with country representatives. (Recommendation 4)**

For further information please contact:
Aurelie Larmoyer, Evaluation officer • Aurelie.Larmoyer@fao.org

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OFFICE OF EVALUATION
E-mail: evaluation@fao.org • Web address: www.fao.org/evaluation
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla – 00153 Rome, Italy