

COVID-19 Learning Note #6 – Multi-Country Initiatives

March 2022

This note summarises insights from a seminar featuring three multi-country projects financed by the Rural Poor Stimulus Facility (RPSF) – IFAD's fund for supporting the rural poor through the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

Multi-country crisis-response initiatives can have considerable advantages and challenges. While offering an efficient way to reach multiple countries and foster cross-country collaboration; they also involve many diverse stakeholders and can be hard to coordinate, monitor, and tailor to local contexts.

i. Implementation through non-State actors

Speed is essential for projects responding to COVID-19 and other crises, and non-State actors have served as agile implementing partners both for single- and multi-country RPSF projects. For multi-country projects, their success is thanks to their streamlined structures and procedures and their ability to build consensus and coordination across Governments and other partners.

In an RPSF project in the Horn of Africa (see Box 1), Seed Systems Group, an international NGO, had already implemented projects across the region, and had existing relationships and goodwill with the Governments. This helped them to gain buy-in and to develop a cross-country approach that was aligned with national COVID-19 response activities.

Regional Farmers' Organizations have also emerged as key implementing partners for multi-country COVID-19 response initiatives (see Box 2), allowing for regionally coordinated / locally managed approaches that pair wide outreach with a participatory design. While providing oversight for Financial Management, M&E, etc., their membership-based structures enable effective local targeting and tailoring. Working through regional federations also enables national Farmers' Organizations to access support that they may not have been able to access alone.

ii. The role of intergovernmental bodies

Such bodies have provided a key channel for cross-country dialogue and knowledge sharing for multi-country projects across the project cycle.

For the Horn of Africa project, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an eight-country

trade bloc in East Africa, facilitated cross-country dialogue to reach agreement on common activities, and helped to tailor activities to the local impacts of COVID-19 on seed supply. IGAD will also use lessons from the initiative to inform a new policy agenda for building resilience of the seed sector across the region.

Box 1. RPSF grant in the Horn of Africa

This US\$2.5m grant to Seed Systems Group (a Kenya-based NGO) will stimulate local production of climate resilient seeds in Djibouti, Eritrea, Somalia and South Sudan. By introducing improved varieties developed by local and international research centres to local seed multipliers (incl. government agents, NGOs, and private sector) the project aims to secure seed access for 90,000 smallholders despite COVID-related restrictions.



Training of village-based seed advisors in South Sudan

Box 2. RPSF grants with Regional Farmers' Organizations in Asia and Africa

Assuring Resiliency of Family Farmers (ARISE): This is an RPSF grant of US\$2m to the Asian Farmers' Association to establish a revolving fund to solve COVID-induced liquidity issues. Local implementation is through eight national Farmers' Organizations covering 100,000 smallholder members.

Support African Farmers in 2020 Emergency (SAFE 2020): Aiming to complement IFAD's ongoing Farmers' Organizations for Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Programme, this US\$1.5m RPSF grant was provided to six regional Farmers' Organizations, plus an alliance of agri-agencies, reaching 300,000 of their members across 22 African countries. Coordinated by the pan-African Farmers' Organization, each regional organization is providing tailored support to secure members' access to inputs, markets, financial services, information, and digital technologies.

iii. Cross-country knowledge sharing

This has been one of the main advantages of the RPSF's multi-country projects, in terms of learning within projects, as well as external communications, particularly with Governments and regional forums.

For the RPSF projects implemented through Farmers' Organizations, the Organizations are using their existing knowledge transfer mechanisms to facilitate internal learning and feedback loops, helped by their membership-based structures, which allow for information to flow easily between the local, national and regional-levels.

These actors have also leveraged their voice on international platforms for knowledge sharing and policy engagement. The partners implementing the SAFE 2020 project, for instance, are involved in IFAD's Farmers' Forum process, a platform for dialogue between Farmers' Organizations, IFAD, and its Member States. Through the ARISE project, the partner uses both the Farmers' Forum alongside an online platform to share knowledge products, and also dialogues regularly with Governments. This has led to the project's revolving fund model being replicated by the Government of Laos through an upcoming grant from the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP).

IGAD's use of RPSF lessons to inform regional policies in the Horn of Africa further highlights the value of knowledge sharing through these projects.

Recommendations for future COVID-19 and other crisis-response activities

1. Key characteristics for non-State implementing partners

Through the RPSF, non-State actors have offered an effective alternative to working through Governments thanks to their streamlined processes and strategic advantages. Nevertheless, our experience shows that Government involvement is also key to their success, and future initiatives must ensure these partners have existing relationships with Governments and inter-Governmental bodies, so that they can build consensus, embed activities in national response plans, and find opportunities for scaling-up (see ARISE in Laos for example).

Non-State partners must also be flexible enough to adapt activities to each national context—for which strong on-the-ground presence is key—while having the capacity to enforce some core cross-country principles on aspects such as targeting.

2. Implement strong knowledge sharing mechanisms at design

For RPSF multi-country initiatives, good Knowledge Management has enhanced implementation, policy engagement and scaling-up. To maximise these benefits for future crisis-response, a strong M&E and Knowledge Management component should be built into the design. Priority should be placed on timely information and feedback loops, so that the project can adapt as the crisis situation evolves. This highlights the benefits of partnering with Regional Farmers' Organizations whose structures enable fast information sharing within and across countries. Designs should also have strategies for external engagement for policy engagement and scaling-up.

3. Build on initiatives post-COVID

In addition to crisis-response, the efficiency and scale that can be achieved through multi-country projects mean they are also an attractive option for promoting long-term development. But they remain rare, mainly because of difficulties in achieving cross-country consensus. Through the RPSF, such initiatives were possible because the pandemic brought countries (plus other partners) together around a common challenge, and it is essential that we build upon these cross-country collaborations post-COVID to solve other shared issues. A key example of this is the recent US\$180m joint initiative by the Rome-Based Agencies in the Sahel that combines COVID-19, climate change and conflict-related support to promote long-term development in the region. The recent Food Systems Summit provides another opportunity. The rural development community has called for post-COVID-19 policies to focus on building more resilient and inclusive food systems,ⁱⁱ and there are many similarities in the national food systems transformation pathways developed around the summit that could provide fertile ground for future cross-country collaboration.

More information on IFAD's Rural Poor Stimulus Facility (RPSF)

Shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, IFAD quickly formed the RPSF and mobilised US\$92m to finance emergency grants to support small-scale rural producers through the pandemic. Support is focused on securing access to inputs, markets, finance and digital services to mitigate restrictions on movement and gatherings and damage to the local economy. Alongside financing for country-focused grants to 59 priority countries, 15% of RPSF funds are allocated for a small set of larger multi-country initiatives, intended to take advantage of cross-country synergies and efficiencies.

As of March 2022, the RPSF has financed 55 single-country and nine multi-country projects, covering over 60 of the most at-risk countries. All projects are scheduled to complete at the close of the facility in June 2022.

Links for further information on ongoing projects

- **RPSF Horn of Africa:** See website of [Seed Systems Group](#), the projects implementing partner
- **ARISE:** [Platform](#) for knowledge products by implementing partner; [Video testimony](#) of beneficiaries in Laos.
- **SAFE 2020:** [Blog post](#) on the progress of the project; [More information](#) on IFAD's wider Farmers' Organizations for Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Programme, to which SAFE 2020 is linked.
- **Sahel Regional Initiative:** [Press release](#) to mark launch of the initiative.

This note is the sixth edition of IFAD's [COVID-19 Learning Note Series](#). The note was written by Daniel Higgins (Regional Specialist and KM Focal Point, East and Southern Africa Division, IFAD).

Endnotes

ⁱ The event was moderated by Ashley Davidson (Program Officer, RPSF). Panellists were: Alice Van Der Elstraeten (Analyst, Sustainable Production, Markets and Institutions Division (PMI), IFAD); Antonella Cianiotta (Technical Specialist, PMI, IFAD); Bernadette Mukonyora (Country Director, Eritrea & South Sudan, East and Southern Africa division, IFAD); Lany Rebagay (Program Manager, Asian Farmers' Association); Lwazi Mamba (Executive Director, Eswatini National Agriculture Union); Joe DeVries (President, Seed Systems Group).

ⁱⁱ See: (i) *Rural Development Report 2021: Transforming food systems for rural prosperity* ([IFAD, 2021](#)); (ii) *State of Food and Agriculture 2021: Making agrifood systems more resilient to shocks and stresses* ([FAO, 2021](#)); (iii) *COVID-19 pandemic offers rare chance for food systems transformation* ([Swinnen and McDermott, 2021](#))