Democratic Republic of the Congo

Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme in Orientale Province

Project performance evaluation

Executive summary

1. **Evaluation.** In 2016, the Independent Office of Evaluation (IOE) conducted an evaluation of the performance of the Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme in Orientale Province (PRAPO) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The main objectives of the evaluation were to: (i) provide an independent assessment of PRAPO performance and results; and (ii) formulate conclusions and recommendations for the design and implementation of present and future interventions in DRC.

1. Project. PRAPO was approved by IFAD in late 2005 for a duration of six years and a total cost of US$26 million, of which US$15.8 million was to be provided by IFAD, and US$6.26 million to be granted by the Belgian Fund for Food Security for the component on access to basic social services. The project's development goal was to help improve food security, incomes, nutritional status and living standards of up to 55 000 households including the households of 25 000 farmers and 6 000 fishers in the Tshopo district. It was structured around four components: (a) crop, livestock and fish production; (b) access to markets and support to marketing; (c) access to basic social services; and (d) project management.

2. The project did not actually start up until 2008 and concluded in October 2013. Given the poor performance of the access to basic social services component, the Belgian Fund for Food Security reduced its grant by more than 70 per cent, forcing the project to sharply reduce the quantitative targets set for the component.

3. PRAPO operated in a particularly challenging context marked by a post-conflict situation, weak public and private services, a highly isolated project area, and communities that were living in extremely poor and food-insecure circumstances. The project was to help improve food security, incomes, nutritional status and living conditions of the targeted population – 50,000 smallholder households of full-time crop and livestock farmers and fishers, with a special focus on highly disadvantaged groups – by intensifying, diversifying and adding value to crop, livestock and fish production; sustainably improving access to markets and production hubs; and sustainably improving access to basic social services.

4. A very important role was assigned to farmers' organizations to be set up by the project. Over the long term, their role was to manage: an improved seed multiplication system; farming and fishing equipment and input supply; and product commercialization. A key assumption was that the targeted population groups were members of producer organizations supported by the project. Another key assumption was that the public services involved in seed production and social services would be able to provide quality services over time, in order to achieve project effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of results.

5. The project's physical execution rate was 76 per cent of the initial target and 93 per cent of the target set at midterm review. The disbursement rates were 75 per cent of the initial target and 90.5 per cent of the target set at midterm review. The agriculture and fisheries revival component achieved the best implementation rate, while the market access and commercialization support component (which included rehabilitating rural roads and watercourses) and the access to basic social services component posted lower implementation rates,

owing to an underestimation of costs and significant delays in infrastructure construction and rehabilitation.

6. **Relevance.** The project is considered relevant in view of the strategic orientations of both the Government and IFAD, and the urgent needs of the target population in the project area. However, numerous shortcomings in PRAPO design and implementation modalities limited the project's effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. The design did not sufficiently take into account an intervention context characterized by very weak capacities in the productive sector and among public technical services, and an extremely isolated project area. As a result, the objectives and targets set were overly ambitious given the project duration, and both the operating costs and the need for external support were underestimated.

7. Although the project design underscored that special attention would be paid to the most vulnerable groups, PRAPO did not actually have a strategy for approaching such groups. Attempts were made to reach vulnerable people with specific actions, which however remained on a very small scale and did not turn out to be sustainable. In addition, PRAPO did not give sufficient consideration to support for commercialization, which is essential to boost market-driven production and avoid overproduction and falling prices.

8. In theory, delegating project management under an outsourcing approach ought to have lowered costs and guaranteed sound expertise and a proper pace of implementation. In practice, however, this approach was undermined by weak capacities among subcontractors, leading to an overload of administrative work and technical oversight for the Project Management Units (PMUs) and therefore significant implementation delays. In addition, the project involved provincial and territorial government services very little in project planning, management and monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

9. **Effectiveness.** The project made a commendable effort to revitalize the rural sector and set up grass-roots organizations. Capacity-building was provided for many grass-roots organizations created by the project in organization, management, developing community development plans and business plans for microprojects, and other topics. However, the intensity and duration of the support provided to the organizations and their unions was not sufficient to enable them to win full ownership from beneficiaries, and they continue to exhibit numerous shortcomings – necessitating monitoring and support arrangements to be put in place over the longer term.

10. Nearly 90 km of rural roads were rehabilitated by PRAPO and are being maintained by the Roads Bureau, facilitating physical access to markets for farmers. However, this represents a minor part of the road network that needs rehabilitation in the project area. Planned information systems on administrative bottlenecks, prices and marketable volumes did not materialize. The infrastructure and equipment made available by the project to the unions – rice huskers and storage warehouses – were greatly reduced in number, and very little or no support was provided to organize group transportation and sales by farmers' organizations, so that minimal results were seen in this regard.

11. The project temporarily improved access to farming and fishing goods and services by providing technical advice and distributing seed and toolkits. However, the capacities of the producer unions that were to take over upon project completion remain too weak to ensure sustainable access for smallholder producers to production goods and services. A large number of agri-multipliers were trained within the farmers' organizations, but their activities depend upon local availability of certified seed, which is not guaranteed. In addition, government support services for the agriculture sector are still lacking in operating resources, which limits the impact of the project's efforts to build the capacities of government

support services, as well as the intensity and quality of their services to the population.

12. The project strengthened co-management capacities for the community health care system by training and equipping community liaison workers and various management committees. Just three health care centres were built and equipped, and although 24 health care centres were provided with medicines, the centres do not have a sustainable supply. Access to primary education improved with the rather modest improvement in the quality of school infrastructure – 12 schools built or repaired and equipped – but these are not being properly maintained by the barely functioning parent committees set up by the project. The uniforms distributed helped to lower schooling expenses for 10,000 children. Finally, access to drinking water improved with the installation of 62 wells and sources of drinking water, although they are poorly maintained.

13. **Efficiency.** The gains made by the project were significantly more costly than projected as a result of overly low estimates of the cost of works and materials and the failure to comply with deadlines. Moreover, the project's operating costs, projected at design to be 11 per cent of total cost, had risen to 36 per cent by the time of closure. The internal rate of return estimated by the evaluation is 12.15 per cent, higher than the 10 per cent calculated in project design; at a discount rate of 10 per cent, the project's net value-added is US$2.63 million. Nevertheless, these returns could be jeopardized in the long run by a collapse in agricultural productivity. The cost per beneficiary for the agriculture and fisheries revival component and the market access and commercialization support component taken together was about US$286. This was almost double the estimated cost per beneficiary for the equivalent components of the Agriculture Revival Programme in Equateur Province.

14. Although the project entered into force in November 2007, actual sustained implementation occurred only in 2012 with the Priority Programme and Reactivation Plan that followed the midterm review. The significant delays seen in implementation are attributable mainly to high turnover among United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) and IFAD programme officers and the project team, limited capacity of contractual service providers to pre-finance contract works, difficult access to the target areas (complicating project interventions), and implementation problems in partnerships developed with several public agencies. In addition, project staff were not fully familiar with procurement procedures. Implementation accelerated in the final years as a result of various recovery plans, recruitment of more qualified project staff, and closer monitoring by IFAD. However, this acceleration, in combination with a lack of rigour on the part of inspection engineers supervising entrepreneurs, had negative repercussions on the quality of the achievements. The Belgian Fund for Food Security was highly disappointed with the performance of the basic social services component and in 2011 decided to terminate funding, with only 24 per cent of the initial amount disbursed.

15. **Impact on rural poverty.** Overall, PRAPO had significant positive results and impact on people living in the project area. Despite the project's limited effectiveness, it brought about quite noteworthy social and economic changes as a result of making substantial investments in priority areas with high immediate impact – rural roads, improved seeds and planting material and basic social services. The incomes of beneficiary households rose significantly, mainly as a result of growth in agricultural productivity and production with the use of improved seed, the adoption of new cropping techniques and the increase in cultivated areas. This growth in agricultural production may be attributed, at least in part, to the project interventions. PRAPO supported the establishment of a fabric of associations by encouraging farmers and fishers to set up first-tier organizations and second-tier unions. Structuring and upgrading these organizations enabled

them to improve their internal management and adopt action plans aimed at greater empowerment. These interventions developed the spirit of solidarity and assistance among the population, even though the organizations created are still very incipient and have numerous shortcomings in management. In terms of people's access to basic services, upgrading and equipping health care centres and building and maintaining schools brought about major improvements. Together with the rehabilitation of access roads and higher incomes, they effected a considerable increase in school attendance and in consultations at health care centres. It should be underscored, however, that the breadth and depth of project impact could have been much greater if better project effectiveness and efficiency could have been achieved, and social targeting had been more precise.

16. **Sustainability.** The impact described above is built upon a fragile foundation in view of the low level of professionalization among producers' organizations and the inadequate resources available to public and private agencies needed to monitor and ensure the sustainability of project gains. The dubious quality of most of the project achievements also suggests that their positive impact could dwindle rapidly. However, the existence of an exit strategy involving the project actors and calling for a post-PRAPO partnership with other projects and donors raises the possibility for project gains to be sustainable.

17. **Innovation and scaling up.** Locally, PRAPO has many innovative features at the technical, social and environmental levels. Some of these innovations have been replicated by private actors and projects operating in the same area as PRAPO – in particular, Belgian technical cooperation. These include setting up and training first-tier and second-tier farmers' organizations, introducing more productive rice varieties, installing rice huskers at unions, and setting up farmer field schools and community listening clubs. However, there are few indications of scaling up beyond the project area outside of other IFAD-funded projects.

18. **Gender equality and women's empowerment.** Most of the beneficiaries of PRAPO were members of producers' organizations, and women's participation in them was about 35 per cent, an acceptable rate given the context. The project design called for specific activities to promote gender equality, but women-specific efforts did not begin until around 2012, at which time the project promoted several activities and microprojects to improve women's living conditions. In addition, the project supported the creation of several associations of women considered particularly vulnerable – two widows' associations, one unwed mothers' association and one association of women living with HIV/AIDS. These women were supported in carrying out income-generating activities. Following the project, these associations were integrated with farmers' and fishers' unions. Special attention was also paid to improving schooling for girls by distributing uniforms and bicycles, promoting school gardening and providing various incentives.

19. **Environment and adaptation to climate change.** Although the project design took the environment into account, no action was taken to improve natural resources management. In fact, the project involuntarily promoted environmentally harmful practices such as destroying forests to expand cassava and rice crops and engaging in prohibited artisanal fishing practices such as the use of small mesh nets and fishing in spawning grounds. Neither did PRAPO design, implementation, M&E and supervision incorporate climate change risks.

20. **IFAD performance.** IFAD designed a project that was relevant in terms of the population's needs but overly ambitious and complex given the local context. IFAD paid insufficient attention to the project during the first four years, owing mainly to delegating supervision to UNOPS and frequent changes in the country portfolio manager in Rome. However, IFAD began to pay considerably more attention after direct supervision was undertaken in 2010, particularly once the country portfolio

manager had been out-posted to Kinshasa in early 2012. Extensive supervision and technical support during the final two years led to a partial recovery of the project.

21. **Performance of the Government.** The central Government played a key role in steering the Project but PMU performance was very weak, leading to multiple implementation delays. This situation improved during the final years of the project with the installation of a new team and technical support arranged by the IFAD country office. On the other hand, the country's deconcentrated public services were not equipped with sufficient resources to fulfil the project mandate satisfactorily, and their significant under-resourcing also calls into question their continued involvement in the development of family farming and fishing in the project area.

22. **Conclusions.** PRAPO was designed and implemented in a highly challenging context that was not sufficiently taken into account in its design. Project efficiency was low as a result of very high operating costs, the management team's limited capacities and inadequate supervision. Nevertheless, the project intervened in an initial context of communities living in highly precarious conditions and took actions with immediate impact, thereby unquestionably contributing to reviving the agricultural economy and instilling a participatory local development dynamic in the project area. Still, there are serious doubts about the sustainability of the changes it brought about.

23. **Recommendations.** A number of key recommendations are outlined below to improve the impact and performance of IFAD's operations in DRC. These recommendations relate to taking the context into account in programme and project design, to ensuring the sustainability of results, and to taking into account market and environmental risks.

24. Recommendation 1. The design of future projects should better reflect the very difficult country context by having more realistic objectives and geographical coverage, more closely adapted duration and phasing, a functional M&E system based on contextual risks, and up-front technical assistance declining over time.

    (a) Future projects should take into account the difficulties inherent in implementation in the field by having a simpler design focusing on a limited number of objectives and themes, and a realistic number of targeted results and actions in the field. In view of the vast size and diversity of the country's territory and the volume of funding allocated to IFAD projects, it is also important to better focus interventions geographically. At the same time it is essential to seek coordination with national institutional partners operating in other sectors and maximize synergies with other projects locally, other technical and financial partners, and the government agencies operating in the area.

    (b) Considering the limited absorption capacity of the project management structures and local service providers, longer implementation periods need to be planned, preferably with a series of phases initiated by triggers. Annual workplans and budgets should be less ambitious for the first few years, becoming gradually more complex as the PMU and project service providers gain experience. Increasing the duration of implementation and phasing projects will also allow for a gradual expansion in project areas.

    (c) The projects should have M&E systems that are functional in operational, human and budgetary terms and that pay special attention to risks. In this way, the projects will be able to anticipate risks and quickly take action to make adjustments, remedy errors and mitigate adverse impacts on project effectiveness and efficiency. Collaboration between the M&E system and other PMU members and key project partners should be expanded.

(d) Technical assistance that makes use of national as well as regional and international competencies should be provided for as soon as project start-up, in particular to support preliminary studies, preparation of the first few annual workplans and budgets, and initial procurement exercises. Technical assistance should be employed to train PMU members to gradually take over during the implementation period.

25. Recommendation 2. To ensure project sustainability, it is imperative to build capacities among local private and public actors, in particular community-based organizations and deconcentrated government services.

(a) The sustainability of achievements such as the local seed multiplication system or rehabilitated roads and social infrastructure is contingent upon the management capacity of local actors, the resources available to them and the local availability of sound technical knowledge and appropriate tools and inputs. Future projects should pay more attention to capacity-building for local actors to protect results and make them sustainable over the long term.

(b) To enable producers' organizations and their unions to take over responsibility from the project, they need to become professional organizations in order to then become true actors of local development as well as permanent structures. Hence the need to support them for a long enough period of time to allow for sufficient empowerment and gradual integration with market mechanisms.

(c) Management committees for socio-economic infrastructure – a guarantee of sustainable investments – must be trained and provided with sufficient resources to enable them to perform management and maintenance. Options for self-financing operations and maintaining infrastructure should also be given greater consideration.

(d) It is necessary for the Government to continue to be involved after project completion, through agriculture sector support structures such as the National Institute of Agricultural Research and the National Seed Service for seed certification. However, government services should not supply services and inputs to producers when they could be supplied by the private sector.

26. Recommendation 3. It is crucial that future projects give greater consideration to environmental issues and access to markets, in order to diminish risks relating to overproduction, environmental degradation and climate change.

(a) In close collaboration with producers' organizations and their unions, storage and processing capacities should be improved in the project areas. In addition, group transportation and sales should be encouraged to place producers in a better negotiating position. To this end, one or more information systems on prices for agricultural products in various markets should also be promoted.

(b) Considerations relating to sustainable natural resources management should be included in the design of all future projects by encouraging sustainable and environmentally friendly farming practices. Similarly, populations should be provided with capacity-building in good fishing practices to avoid destroying spawning grounds and overfishing. Measures to adapt to the effects of climate change – such as greater seasonal variability and heavier rainfall – should be included in all projects. In the PRAPO area, consideration should be given to developing valley bottoms with simple hydraulic improvements to check deforestation and reduce farmers' dependence on rainfall.