



THE EXPERIENCE OF THE INDEPENDENT OFFICE OF
EVALUATION OF IFAD IN CONDUCTING EVALUATIONS DURING

COVID-19

LEARNING NOTE

December 2020

Cover photo:

Rwanda

Climate Resilient Post-Harvest and Agribusiness Support Project

Grace Mukamana, a smallholder farmer from rural Rwanda, looks at her mobile phone with another farmer from her cooperative in Eastern Province, Ngoma District.

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Sudan

A woman feeding her goats in Kordofan State.

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Introduction

1. The travel restrictions resulting from the outbreak of COVID-19 have adversely affected the design, implementation and evaluation of international development interventions, and the ability of the Independent Office of Evaluation of IFAD (IOE) to capture the consequences of the ensuing economic crisis facing the rural poor and the marginalized. This note focuses on the experience of the IOE in operating under such conditions. The implications of the pandemic and travel restrictions were particularly serious in IFAD. IFAD-funded operations in programme countries are implemented in remote areas that are socio-economically marginalized and not readily accessible remotely. Moreover, most IFAD-funded operations require community-level involvement; data collection and validation at that level are signature elements of IOE's evaluation approach.
2. **Responding to the pandemic: the main challenges.** As a response to the crisis, IOE has adopted a set of key principles (Annex 1, Box 1) to protect the health and well-being of the evaluation stakeholders and the evaluation teams, and to abide by guidance issued by international organizations, national governments and local authorities.¹ These principles have modified IOE's approach to data collection and analysis. Arguably, the main challenge was the inability to conduct international missions, as well as extensive field data collection, which had a number of implications for IOE's work:
 - a. How to maintain methodological rigour, and reduce chances of biases, amidst limitations in the conduct of surveys, establishing control groups, and collecting quantitative and qualitative data?
 - b. How to maintain credibility vis-à-vis corporate governing bodies, notably the Evaluation Committee and the Executive Board, and evaluation stakeholders, notably IFAD Management and Member States?
 - c. How to command sufficient attention from Management and government counterparts? In a situation of sudden crisis, much of their energy is devoted to ensuring project implementation continuity rather than supporting an external evaluation.
 - d. How to maintain IOE office functionality and working relationships? There were reduced opportunities for face-to-face exchanges between IOE lead evaluators, supporting staff and consultants. The same was true for informal and impromptu discussions with peers in the office, given that IOE was functioning primarily through remote access. This was particularly taxing

¹ Guidance prepared by WFP, IDInsight and REACH provides useful advice to assess the risks related to COVID-19 and adjust evaluation planning and data-collection practices: <https://www.reachresourcecentre.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/DataCollectionSOPCOVID-19.pdf>, <https://www.idinsight.org/data-collection-practices-and-recommendations-for-covid-19>, and <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/2800>.



India

Women leaders of the Tejaswini Mekalsuta Mahasangh Gorakhpur federation, which was established in 2013 and now implements Government projects in addition to running several commercial enterprises in Dindori District, Madhya Pradesh.

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for new staff members and consultants, and for building team(s).

- e. How to ensure the well-being of all staff members and consultants? Particularly new colleagues and those who were under lockdown conditions; without their family or close friends they might have felt isolated, while families needed to balance professional and family needs.

Using satellite imagery to assess infrastructure quality and performance before/after Project Performance Evaluation of the Coastal Climate-Resilient Infrastructure Project in Bangladesh (Tarali Bazar, Kaliganj, Satkhira)



Ensuring evaluation quality and sustained delivery under COVID-19 conditions

3. To address these challenging circumstances, IOE has taken a number of measures to ensure robustness (as much as possible) of the analysis, while maintaining the functional and behavioural independence of the evaluation team. Some evaluation products prepared in this context may be subject to limitations, depending on the scope as well as the country and local context. Overall, the evaluations have adopted a combination of the below:
- a) **Conduct remote interviews and mini-surveys where feasible.** Wherever it was feasible to use virtual formats (e.g. phone, Skype or Zoom), IOE directly interacted with stakeholders, e.g. government officials and staff in the capital as well as some local government representatives, project management unit staff, international organization representatives, non-governmental organizations, civil society groups and some of the end-clients in the field. Remote interviews faced the challenge of breaking the barriers of formality and allowing full engagement of all participants. Remote interviews were not practical for group interactions with project beneficiaries in the field. Moreover, it was difficult to arrange for interpretation when respondents could not speak the official language of the evaluation (e.g. English, French or Spanish). Additional tools included:
 - Mini-surveys (e.g. phone, email) with grassroots organizations (e.g. cooperatives of producers) were helpful in some cases, when no field visits could be undertaken (Dominican Republic).
 - Opinion survey using a questionnaire sent via email to stakeholders (governmental and non).
 - b) **Test alternative methods for primary and secondary evidence collection and validation.**
 - Geospatial data and analysis. This was useful for projects investing in physical infrastructure (e.g. roads and market sites, as in the case of a project in Bangladesh). However, there were also limitations: few projects were geo-referenced with 'polygon' coordinates available. Not all evaluative questions lent themselves to geospatial analysis (e.g. issues of gender equality and empowerment of marginalized groups are hard to explore from the sky). Geospatial data sometimes do not provide information on how facilities are used.
 - IOE also tested Rapid Evidence Assessment, a technique that synthesizes secondary evidence related to an evaluation from published literature and websites. Limitations are that evidence may be available for few evaluative questions, and data gathering may be expensive and time consuming, thus not affordable for all evaluations.
 - c) **National consultants and ensuring impartiality and behavioural independence.** When IOE staff and international consultants could not travel, more responsibilities were devolved to national consultants, in particular for: selecting, organizing and conducting

interviews with national stakeholders, leading field visits and interactions with end-users, and verification of project realizations (also by taking photos and videos). Indeed, national consultants played a vital role in planning and undertaking data collection. At the same time, there were also challenges and risks such as:

- **Preserving independence and objectivity**, particularly when national consultants may receive pressure from national stakeholders or have spent a significant part of their professional careers working with the Government and/or the IFAD Country Office.

- **Ensuring requisite expertise to deal with additional workload and responsibilities.** In the absence of the international team, national consultants with extensive experience, familiarity with evaluation methods and diverse thematic expertise were needed to deal with a broad range of evaluative questions and topics. This was not always feasible and sometimes they had to function at the margin of their expertise. In addition, national consultants could not visit the same number of project sites that a full evaluation team could have covered.

- In addition to extra care in identifying suitable national consultants, 'remote collaboration' required additional time for briefing them, to prepare questionnaires and checklists, and to agree on the scope of their work. It was also useful to encourage the team to use WhatsApp chats.

- To preserve behavioural independence and control the risk of biases, it was useful to emphasize national consultants' collection of factual data (as well as photographic and video evidence). It was further useful to ensure that the whole team, including IOE staff and international

consultants, was fully engaged in discussing and triangulating the data and information collected.

- Ensuring physical health and safety during the mission. A common challenge was that rules and regulations regarding the pandemic were not consistent, and that individual perceptions of risks differed. This required some awareness raising and agreement on accepted rules ('do no harm').

d) **Introduction of steps and processes to strengthen quality and validity of data.**

- **Frontloading and expanding the scope and rigour of document review** to better structure the field visits and remote interviews. Many evaluation consultants noted the benefits of increased time investment in document review and felt that they were better prepared for interviews (compared with 'normal' times). This also requires mechanisms to verify the status of preparation of team members, something that deserves institutionalization.

- **Enhanced used of secondary (monitoring and evaluation) data**, although these required careful review and scrutiny. In some cases, IOE was able to access and use the available datasets and gain additional insights from the analysis prepared.

- **Appoint a peer reviewer or a panel of expert reviewers** with sound knowledge of the rural agricultural development context of the country and, ideally, familiarity with IFAD operations. This cannot replace direct country visits but may help bring better balance to, and reassurance regarding, the findings.

e) **Being candid about limitations.** Limitations of the evaluations during

COVID-19 have to be clearly stated up front, where possible indicating the level of confidence of findings, as well as those where more field visits would have helped. It is important to highlight the substitute methods undertaken to warrant the level of confidence claimed. These include, for instance, the site visits undertaken by national consultants, additional data from geographic information systems and other data sources, consultation with local experts, and supplementary evidence. The level of confidence brought about by substitute methods can be adequate when evaluating completed operations, especially for those with good, monitored evidence. This may not be the case for new and ongoing projects.

4. **Costs.** An important learning point was that evaluations conducted in remote or semi-remote modality were not always less costly than in the 'traditional' modality. Savings from the cancellation of international travels were often offset by the need to increase the workload for international consultants – for example to conduct more thorough desk review or studies, and to collect alternatives to primary evidence, such as geospatial data and analysis, and secondary evidence – or by the increased level of effort by (and number of) national consultants. Moreover, organizing field visits has been, in some countries, very cumbersome. Instead, net savings were realized by replacing in-person workshops in the countries with virtual learning events.
5. **Controlling biases.** The methods described above enabled IOE to triangulate findings derived from desk reviews. However, a common challenge noted by all evaluations was that these methods risked reinstating the biases which evaluations under normal conditions would try to overcome. Access to (virtual) technology and limited access to field sites make it challenging to interact with those who are already difficult to reach: women, farmers in remote locations and

non-government partners. As noted, another challenge is to appreciate the (local) context.

6. **Staff/team well-being and team building to ensure sustained delivery.** Informal bilateral meetings, business team meetings and staff meetings were held during the lockdown and partial lockdown period, and information exchanged. This helped ensure business continuity. However, engaging the whole team remained a challenge in the absence of more informal and unplanned opportunities for interactions and gatherings. Given the rapid turnover of consultants and interns critical for delivery, team building and orientation of new staff through remote means were challenging.

Sierra Leone

Some representatives of Kasiyatama Cocoa Cooperative in front of their shop in Koidu town, Kono District.

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Opportunities and way forward

7. Overall, these alternative approaches and methods do not provide a perfect substitute for traditional evaluation approaches, such as face-to-face meetings, interviews and primary data collection through field visits. No available technology can replace in-person interactions with stakeholders, visits to project sites and interaction with the beneficiaries. However, the 2020 experience in dealing with COVID-19 offers opportunities to revisit some of the evaluation practices and processes that can be considered not only for future crises but also for 'normal' times, to add evidence and simplify processes (in terms of methodology, Annex 1, Table 2 provides some examples). Some of these are presented below:
- a) **Rationalize travels and reduce the 'carbon footprint' of evaluations.**
Rethink existing assumptions about what steps can be done remotely and what needs to be done face-to-face in terms of processes such as collecting primary data, workshops (at the design stage or at the conclusion of the evaluation). Expand the repertoire of evidence sought (geographic information systems, secondary evidence).
 - Part of the evaluation design and team-building activities may be held remotely. In particular, part of the design and consultation workshops for corporate and thematic evaluations can be held remotely.
 - Some parts of desk research work may be done remotely, depending on the experience of the consultants and familiarity with the topic.
 - b) **Enhance efficiency of country missions through a combination of remote and face-to-face, in-country interviews and greater emphasis on project site visits.** Identify those interviews that can be held remotely with minimal impairment of quality of data collected. This may be the case for interviews with some government stakeholders, and with representatives from international organizations and non-governmental organizations. Many of these do not need to wait for a country visit. The aim is to minimize running-around time during missions (part of which is often spent in the peak-hour traffic of capital cities!). Remote interviews with some stakeholders based in the capital can 'buy' time to expand the face-to-face interviews with critical beneficiaries at the project sites.
 - c) **Develop mechanisms and practices to ensure more in-depth document review and preparation for missions and interviews.** COVID-19 experience shows the importance of spending more time reviewing documentation and preparing for interviews than was done previously. In future, more time should be devoted to preparing and ensuring that the team has a sound understanding of what is to be tested during interviews and site visits. This also provides an opportunity for engaging younger colleagues and consultants, while honing their skills in conducting targeted research.
 - d) **Consider the potential of information technology to augment evidence and analyse secondary evidence.** While

this may not be generalizable across all evaluation types, topics or countries, opportunities may be seized in selected cases.

- Use remote sensing data and geographic information systems. This may be applicable to projects that, for example, delivered infrastructure or introduced new crops, cropping patterns or livestock and pastoral practices.

- Software for qualitative data analysis (e.g., NVivo) may be used in evaluations with a thematic or corporate focus, to draw from existing evaluative evidence for a deep-dive, and for comparing/classifying findings.

- Machine-learning applications may also be tested as a way to explore information, where there is a large quantity of documentation or literature on a topic. Attempts conducted in other organizations (e.g. Asian Development Bank, The World Bank) deserve some attention.

e) **Clarify the desirable profiles and roles of national consultants** across all teams and evaluations. While these will depend on the evidence to be collected and team composition, it is important to: (i) protect national consultants from undue pressure and risk of retaliation in the country; and (ii) reduce risks of biases when national consultants have previous consulting history for some of the national stakeholders. Reviewing and triangulating evidence within the evaluation team is a good point of departure. In some cases, focusing national consultants' contributions on fact-finding and project-output verification (including photographic evidence) may reduce pressure from national stakeholders. In any case, it will be important to clarify that evaluation contents are the responsibility of the evaluation office, not of individual team members.

f) **Incorporate an initial evaluability study more explicitly into all future evaluations**, based on a document review. Identify key results to track and brief interviews with key personnel, to identify the quality and availability of data, including geospatial data. Ensure adequate time is allocated for this study.

g) **Use external reviewers (or resource persons) to cross-check contextual information and enhance the quality of the analysis.**

h) **Social support to staff and consultants.** In case of (partial) lockdown, ensure that teamwork is not interrupted, while recognizing the social-psychological burden this entails. In particular, pay special attention to colleagues who are away from their family/friendship networks; advocate for institutional support, as required, for families to balance professional and family needs. At the same time, avoid overwhelming staff and teams with formal gatherings and very lengthy video interactions.

i) **Recognize the challenges early on and manage the annual evaluation workplan, when travel restrictions apply.** In a future situation of crisis (even if not health-related), evaluators should react promptly to the emergency (rather than assume that the 'business as usual scenario' will resume soon), be cognizant of the repercussions in terms of workload and responsiveness for some stakeholders (e.g. national public agencies), and be mindful of the health-related risks for evaluation team members when conducting site visits. In particular:

- **If government liaison offices or IFAD country offices are overloaded, consider hiring a local facilitator** to help organize interviews and field visits. Sudden crises wreak havoc in the civil service

and organization's local representation outfits. Local persons with strong networks may help palliate the disruption of official communication channels.

- **Take stock of experience and ensure that time allocated to complete evaluation products is realistic** during crises. There may be space to renegotiate deadlines with governing bodies and Management. Include risk-related elements in the calendar of individual evaluations, knowing that the scheduling of interviews may be time-consuming during crises.
- **Consider delaying or cancelling evaluations that require intensive primary data collection** (such as large household-level surveys or focus group discussions or collective interviews). These activities can expose evaluators, enumerators and respondents to serious health hazards.
- **When possible, bring forward evaluation works that rely less on primary data collection**, such as desk review-based validations or document-based evaluation syntheses (see for example Table 1, Annex 1).
- **Manage the transparency-credibility trade-off.** Carefully balance the need to gain the confidence of the governing bodies and Management on evaluation products, and the need to protect reputation and credibility by being transparent about the limitations of the methods pursued.
- **Ensure staff well-being and promote team building.** Take steps to identify the social-psychological burden involved with involuntary teleworking, and the steps necessary to ensure that the workplan reflects this additional burden.

Nepal

A woman belonging to the Shiva Shakti Women Farmer's Group discussing the Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project's Rukum district, Nepal.

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Annex 1

Table 1 **Reliance on data sources by different evaluation products**

Evaluation product	Documents review; secondary data analysis*	External (country) stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions**	Primary data collection; field visits***
Project completion report validation	High	None	None
Project performance evaluation	Medium	High	High
Impact evaluation	Medium	Low to medium	High
Project cluster evaluation	Medium	High	High
Country strategy and programme evaluation	Medium	High	High
Subregional evaluation	High	High	Medium
Thematic evaluation	Medium (depending on the topic)	High	Medium to high
Corporate-level evaluation	High	High	Low
Evaluation synthesis	High	Medium	None
Annual report on results and impact of IFAD operations	High	None	None

*Documents review/secondary data analysis: products that primarily rely on these data sources are less affected by the current pandemic situation; they can continue as planned.

** External stakeholder interviews/focus group discussions:

- Products that rely on external stakeholder interactions/interviews/focus group discussions may be replaceable to some extent with virtual tools (e-surveys, Zoom meetings or blogs).

- Risks: selectivity/biases; exclusion of stakeholders without access to Internet connection; process issues (facilitation, communication) may not allow people to express themselves sufficiently clearly; people may be less familiar with these forms of communication and/or afraid of confidentiality breaches.

*** Primary data collection/field visits:

- Timing of field data collection may have to be rescheduled and/or some may have to be conducted by national consultants.

- Alternative tools and methods (geographic information systems, virtual tours and visits, phone or e-surveys) may help to obtain alternative (or additional) data, but cannot replace face-to-face interactions with beneficiaries and (physical) reality checks, which are important for 'ground-truthing' our evaluations.

Table 2 **Alternative data collection tools**

Tools	Not recommended for standard adoption in IOE evaluations	May be used to substitute for conventional data collection tools under certain conditions	Could be integrated into the IOE toolbox
Virtual interviews and focus group discussions (e.g. Zoom)			X
Missions carried out by local consultants only	X	X	
E-surveys (e.g. Survey Monkey) and/or qualitative opinion survey		X	X (Can be a standard tool for corporate-level, thematic evaluations)
Phone surveys		X	
Expert panels			X
Geospatial data analysis			X (depending on the project type)
Secondary data harvesting (could include testing machine-learning)			X
Blogs or online discussions			X
External reviewers			X

Box 1 Key principles that IOE has followed in 2019, in response to the COVID-19 crisis:

- (i) Respect the health and safety priorities and the guidance provided by the World Health Organization, IFAD and concerned countries, and abide by international and local travel restrictions applicable to the programme countries.
- (ii) Respect the health and well-being, ethical principles and cultural values of the evaluation stakeholders and IOE staff when conducting evaluations.
- (iii) Minimize international travel. Carry out evaluation events and data collection remotely (including by virtual meetings), to the extent possible. Optimize the use of existing documents, databases and other secondary data.
- (iv) Pursue technologies amenable to remote data collection and validation, to the extent feasible, such as analysis of geospatial data for geo-referenced interventions when relevant.
- (v) If considered safe and allowed by national rules, have national consultants conduct selected field visits to triangulate findings from other sources. National consultants will be required to abide by all local travel restrictions and health guidance.
- (vi) Collaborate with other evaluation offices, networks and professional organizations to foster exchange of experiences and practices. Draw lessons from this collective wisdom on good practices, risks and pitfalls to promote efficiency gains during the crisis. Use this crisis experience as an opportunity to reflect on and inform future evaluation practices.

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Investing in rural people

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