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Decentralized Evaluation

Addressing Climate Change Impacts on Marginalized Agricultural Communities Living in the Mahaweli River Basin of Sri Lanka

2013 - 2020

Final Report

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Executive Summary

1. This report concerns the external decentralized evaluation of “Addressing Climate Change Impacts on Marginalized Agricultural Communities Living in the Mahaweli River Basin”, Sri Lanka, a project financed by the Adaptation Fund (AF) and implemented by the World Food Programme (WFP) in partnership with the Ministry of Environment & Wildlife Resources (MEWR) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This evaluation, which has as its objectives accountability and learning, is commissioned by the WFP Sri Lanka country office (CO) and covers the full implementation period from 2013 to September 2020. Gender equality and empowerment of women (GEEW) is integrated throughout the evaluation. The main expected users of this evaluation are WFP CO, UNDP and MEWR, as well as field-level government partners.
2. Vulnerability to climate change in Sri Lanka is characterized by high exposure to extreme weather events, associated natural hazards such as droughts, floods and landslides, and high rainfall variability. Rural populations are generally harder hit, including those living in the Mahaweli River basin. The project, often referred to as the Climate Change Adaptation Project (CCAP), aims to secure livelihoods and food security against rainfall variability, and in particular droughts. It focused on climate shock-prone communities in three Divisional Secretariat Divisions (DSDs) of the river basin (Medirigiriya, Lankapura and Walapane), with a focus on smallholders who primarily rely on rainfed agriculture or minor irrigation schemes. Initially planned for a three-year period, CCAP has been extended at no additional cost on four occasions, the last one related to the COVID-19 crisis.

Methodology

3. The evaluation was designed to assess the CCAP against the following evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability and coherence. The main evaluation questions (EQ), as derived from the Terms of Reference, were: EQ1. Has CCAP achieved relevant and significant outcomes in the best possible way? EQ2. What are the risks to sustainability of CCAP outcomes and their linkages towards impacts? EQ3. What are the key internal and external factors influencing the achievement of CCAP results? EQ4. Has CCAP contributed to increase the resilience to climate variability and change at community, sub-basin and national levels? EQ5. How was the quality of CCAP monitoring and evaluation systems? In order to respond to these questions, the evaluation team (ET) used a mixed-methods approach, including secondary data analysis, interviews with key informants and project site visits. Limitations included travel restrictions for international team members (due to COVID-19), a limited institutional memory of CCAP, and the difficulty to retrieve some quantitative data, but mitigation measures were taken as much as possible, including strengthening the national team in charge of field data collection, and focusing on the most recent years of CCAP.

Key Findings

4. The key findings of the ET are summarized below, structured in accordance with the main EQs, and while indicating the type and strength of evidence supporting each finding.

EQ1. Has CCAP achieved relevant and significant outcomes in the best possible way?

5. CCAP is consistent with national priorities, including the development of home gardening and irrigation systems, which respond well to the needs of the marginalized rural communities in the project locations. CCAP has appropriately combined long-proven solutions to water scarcity (e.g. tank rehabilitation) with more innovative ones (e.g. micro irrigation). The project strategy, largely based on the combination of different types of adaptation measures and the diversification of income sources, is appropriate to the local context marked by long agricultural off-seasons with no income, and increasingly adverse climatic conditions (including recurrent droughts). There are several examples of activities, such as dairy, food preservation, and direct/short marketing channels, indicating that CCAP was effective in providing new cash sources, notably for women. In general, the value chain approach, brought in after UNDP joined in 2017, proved to be relevant to meet CCAP objectives. However, the project made significant investments in high-risk industries, and the majority of community enterprises that have been created or supported are not yet fully operational. The prospects for the development of these new community enterprises were hampered by the restrictions associated with COVID-19.
6. Most irrigation-related works, including the rehabilitation of minor tanks, were very effective in providing more secure water access, increasing the farming intensity and the cultivation extent. This was made possible by increased availability of water but also more efficient water use. The objective to build farmers’ capacities and bring change in their practices was relevant, but CCAP initial timeframe (3 years) was too short, and several innovations were introduced too late, meaning that there was not enough time for capacity development of farmers on new technologies (e.g. polytunnel, pitcher irrigation). The overall project efficiency was found to be low, mainly due to multiple layers of implementation.

EQ2. What are the risks to sustainability of CCAP outcomes and their linkages towards impacts?

7. There are no major financial or economic risks associated with the development of irrigation infrastructure, other community assets, and the capacity building component of CCAP. Economic sustainability is questionable for some of the alternate livelihoods promoted. Most community enterprises face sustainability issues such as inadequate managerial experience, the lack of working capital and varying levels of success in the selected market strategies. More capacity strengthening is required as the support from the Department of Cooperative Development (DCD), under which they were registered at project closure, cannot cover all their needs. It is worth noting that some women self-help groups were successfully supported by the Department of Agriculture (DoA), linking crop diversification with microcredit.
8. Community assets such as tanks and agri-roads will certainly be safeguarded, because the Department of Agrarian Development (DAD) and other line agencies were directly involved. However, due to the lack of a social mobilization phase prior to irrigation asset rehabilitation, internal disputes at FO level are frequent. Also, a number of shortcomings were observed, such as poor leadership, lack of rules/guidelines to manage the assets or difficulty in bringing users together to carry out maintenance work, which may jeopardize the sustainability of these infrastructures. Interviews with FOs showed that their sense of ownership and interest in future maintenance of community assets is higher when they are strongly involved in the works, which was rarely the case when going through external contractors.
9. The level of technical know-how of local stakeholders (FO, government officers, etc.) on key CCAP topics such as resilient livelihoods, climate risk reduction, or watershed management, has globally improved, although this cannot be ascertained by pre- and post-intervention assessment. According to the different project stakeholders, CCAP has not had any major externalities or negative impacts on natural resources. The pilot ecological restoration of some tanks had a wide range of benefits for the environment (watershed conservation, reduction of soil erosion, and increase in vegetation cover).

EQ3. What are the key internal and external factors influencing the achievement of CCAP results?

10. CCAP objectives and components were clear. However, the project was relatively ambitious, with a large number of activities in different sectors. Following the midterm review, it would have been useful to take specific steps to realign the project and revise its targets, especially as regards the cash-for-work component. The decision to have UNDP on board to accelerate project delivery but also to bring in new perspectives was a major change. Despite efforts to improve this dimension, culminating with the recruitment in late 2019 of a project coordinator, the level of supervision and backstopping by WFP was insufficient. Executing agencies were working somewhat in silos in the early stage after UNDP joined, but coordination has improved afterwards. There were variable degrees of field-level coordination, mostly related to the level of interaction between government line agencies. Although CCAP has not adopted an explicit approach to gender transformation, livelihood diversification and group work are likely to have positive impact on GEEW through income generation and confidence-building.
11. WFP put in place effective control procedures and released financial resources on time. The problem was the delay in disbursements, mainly due to the capacity of the MEWR. There were considerable implementation delays at the start of the project, for a variety of reasons at government level (slow recruitment processes, initial management team with too many other responsibilities, high staff turn-over, etc.). In 2019-2020, several external factors (political crisis, Easter Sunday attacks and the COVID-19 crisis) disrupted the implementation of activities in the final stretch of CCAP. Discontinuity was exacerbated by the various successive extensions of the project. As a consequence of both internal and external factors, many activities, including infrastructure works, were rushed in the last weeks of CCAP or not fully completed before project closure. The restrictions imposed by COVID-19 in the final months of the project adversely affected its achievements. Community enterprises suffered from the blockage of business activities.

EQ4. Has CCAP contributed to increase the resilience to climate variability and change at community, sub-basin and national levels?

12. The project is strongly aligned with the objectives of the AF and remained in line with national priorities on climate change adaptation (CCA) from the design stage till the end. The involvement of a large number of government stakeholders, together with effective forums at national level, have led to a good level of information sharing on adaptation strategies. Overall, beneficiary farmers are more knowledgeable about adaptation measures and specifically water saving techniques, but CCAP did not take clear steps or specific activities to promote wider dissemination. A concrete result in terms of resilience is the increase in cultivated land area in target communities, mainly because more water is available and losses are reduced. Target communities have also diversified their income and thus started to increase their adaptive capacities. Introducing non-agriculture livelihoods in CCA strategies of rural communities was an important step towards building their climate resilience.

EQ5. How was the quality of CCAP monitoring and evaluation systems?

13. There was no monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan and CCAP was characterized by an overall lack of human resources and financial means for M&E in its very design. MEWR had no proper system to compile the data. The monitoring system of the UNDP component was stronger, but there was no joined process of periodic data collection other than that aggregated in the project records for the annual reports to AF. There was no system resembling a complaints and feedback mechanism (CFM) to allow beneficiaries' voices to be heard and uphold the accountability principles.
14. Components of the logical framework are clear. However, the disconnect between indicators and outputs/outcomes made the indicator measurements inconsistent throughout CCAP implementation. There were no clear guidelines on indicators, so there were different ways to collect the data. In addition, 2017 baseline surveys did not clearly address CCAP logical framework indicators. To overcome some of these design issues, WFP advised UNDP and MEWR to report against the targets rather than the indicators, when needed. Nevertheless, M&E efforts practiced by executing and implementing agencies proved to be insufficient to generate clear, focused evidence for timely decision making.

Overall conclusions, lessons learnt & good practices

15. In response to EQ1, the ET concluded that CCAP was and remained very relevant to the needs of the communities and to build their resilience to climate variability and shocks. CCAP was able to deliver numerous significant outcomes, notably in terms of irrigation infrastructure and livelihood diversification. However, effectiveness varied across activities, and efficiency was relatively low. In response to EQ2, the ET concluded that there were limited environmental and climate-change related risks for the sustainability of the project. However, there are some concerns over the sustainability of social businesses created, and concerning the maintenance of some of the collective assets built. Late implementation, delays and discontinuous capacity building meant that some of the gains were not fully consolidated. In response to EQ3, the ET concluded that the project was affected by several issues, both internal and external, which explain delays and lower efficiency in project implementation. The project is likely to have important impacts on GEEW, but this was not adequately tracked. In response to EQ4, the ET concluded that the project was and remained aligned with national CCA priorities and AF objectives, and has had a positive impact on community resilience. But the project has failed to measure it appropriately. In response to EQ5, the ET concluded that design issues and lack of dedicated resources have weakened the M&E system of the CCAP.
16. For WFP, one of the lessons learnt from CCAP is to create a strong dialogue with government counterparts at an early stage in the preparation of future joint projects, and to work on weak points before moving forward. In addition, the impact of CCAP could have been increased through better linkages with other activities in the portfolio of WFP. One area for improvement in future adaptation projects at the river basin level is the search for closer links between upstream and downstream areas. CCAP promoted several climate-smart agriculture practices such as rice transplanting using the 'parachute system', which are promising and could be further disseminated in future projects.

Recommendations

17. The findings and conclusions led to the ET making the below recommendations, which are addressed to WFP, UNDP, MEWR, relevant line agencies, and/or AF.
18. Recommendation 1 is to consolidate activities related to livelihoods diversification and short/direct marketing channels by providing further technical guidance to beneficiary households and groups. Recommendations 2 and 8 are linked to value chain and micro-enterprise development, with recommendation 2 looking at the involvement of private investors to ensure financial sustainability, both for the social enterprises created within the CCAP and for future projects, and recommendation 8 focusing on the need for an incremental approach to business support and to giving sufficient time for communities to acclimatize to business culture. Recommendation 3 and 4 are linked to the further capacity building of individual farmers or their FOs on irrigation-related activities, both for infrastructure already developed (recommendation 3) and for micro-irrigation systems in future projects, with adequate planning from the beginning (4). Recommendation 5 is related to the dissemination of project results and replication, with a suggestion to proceed through exposure visits and farmer-to-farmer exchanges. Recommendation 6 is to strengthen the role of the Ministry of Agriculture in the management of activities, in line with WFP and AF objectives. Recommendation 7 is linked to the necessary strengthening of M&E and CFM for future projects. Recommendation 9 is for future projects to map existing women livelihoods support initiatives to further strengthen them, based on the success of the support to existing women group by the CCAP. Recommendation 10 suggests stronger integration of resilience and CCA objectives in the Country Strategic Plan (CSP) of WFP, and making more explicit linkages with other core WFP activities.

1. Introduction

1.1. Overview of the Evaluation Subject

1. This Report concerns the decentralized **activity evaluation of “Addressing Climate Change Impacts on Marginalized Agricultural Communities Living in the Mahaweli River Basin”**, a climate change adaptation (CCA) project funded by the Adaptation Fund (AF) and implemented in the Medirigiriya, Lankapura and Walapane Divisional Secretariat Divisions (DSDs) of Sri Lanka. Throughout the rest of the report it is referred to as the Climate Change Adaptation Project (CCAP), in accordance with how project stakeholders refer to it. It has two broad components, one that seeks to strengthen the livelihoods of rainfed farming households, and another that deals with capacity building on CCA at local and river basin / sub national levels. It targeted over 14,000 households in the three DSDs, farmer organizations (FOs), as well as local government officers. This evaluation has been commissioned by the WFP Sri Lanka country office (CO) and covers the period from 2013, the start of the project, to September 2020, the end of the project.
2. **Objective of the evaluation.** The main objectives of this evaluation are accountability and learning. Accountability is a central objective for both WFP and the AF, both internally and externally, towards the Sri Lankan government, donors, partners and beneficiaries. The evaluation is also an opportunity to gather experiences and take stock of the successes and challenges of the project, and to identify lessons to be learned for future interventions. This is particularly important, for two reasons: i) as the WFP Sri Lanka Country Strategic Plan (CSP) for 2018-2022 is arriving at its midway point, learning from this experience can support a redefining of priorities and engagements on CCA for the CO, and ii) as the first project funded by the AF in Sri Lanka, learning both in terms of results on CCA and project implementation processes will be useful for the design of future projects funded by the AF in Sri Lanka.
3. **Users of the evaluation.** The main expected users are i) the WFP Sri Lanka CO, and in particular the evaluation manager (EM), the evaluation committee (EC), the programme team and CO management; ii) the executing partners of WFP – the Ministry of Environment and Wildlife Resources (MEWR, formerly the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment, MDDE) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); iii) the Evaluation Reference Group (ERG), which includes representatives from WFP CO, MEWR, UNDP, the WFP Regional Bureau and WFP headquarters (HQ); iv) the Office of Evaluation of WFP; v) the AF.
4. **Timing of the project.** The CCAP was approved by the AF Board in December 2012, for a three year period. The inception phase started in March 2013 and the implementation phase of the project in August 2014, with Standard Operating Procedures signed in October 2014. In May 2017, an 18 months-extension was approved, pushing the completion date from August 2017 to February 2019. A contribution agreement between WFP and UNDP was signed in October 2017 to include UNDP as an executing entity alongside the Ministry of Environment. After that three additional no-cost extensions were approved: in November 2018 (12 months), February 2020 (4 months) and then for another 3 months due to the COVID-19 crisis. The project was completed on 30 September 2020.
5. **Objective and activities of the project.** The objective of CCAP was to secure community livelihoods and food security against climate change-induced rainfall variability leading to longer droughts and more intense rainfall, for marginalized agricultural communities in climate shock-prone areas in the Mahaweli River Basin. Table 1 provides the details of outcomes and outputs of the project. Planned activities under the project include: support for the establishment of home gardens, distribution and training on micro-irrigation tools, rehabilitation of tanks, wells, roads, irrigation canals and other collective assets, training on drought resilient agronomic practices, creation of seed banks, building of community enterprises, establishment of post-harvest centers and provision of post-harvest technologies, training of officials and elaboration of village development plans and of micro watershed

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