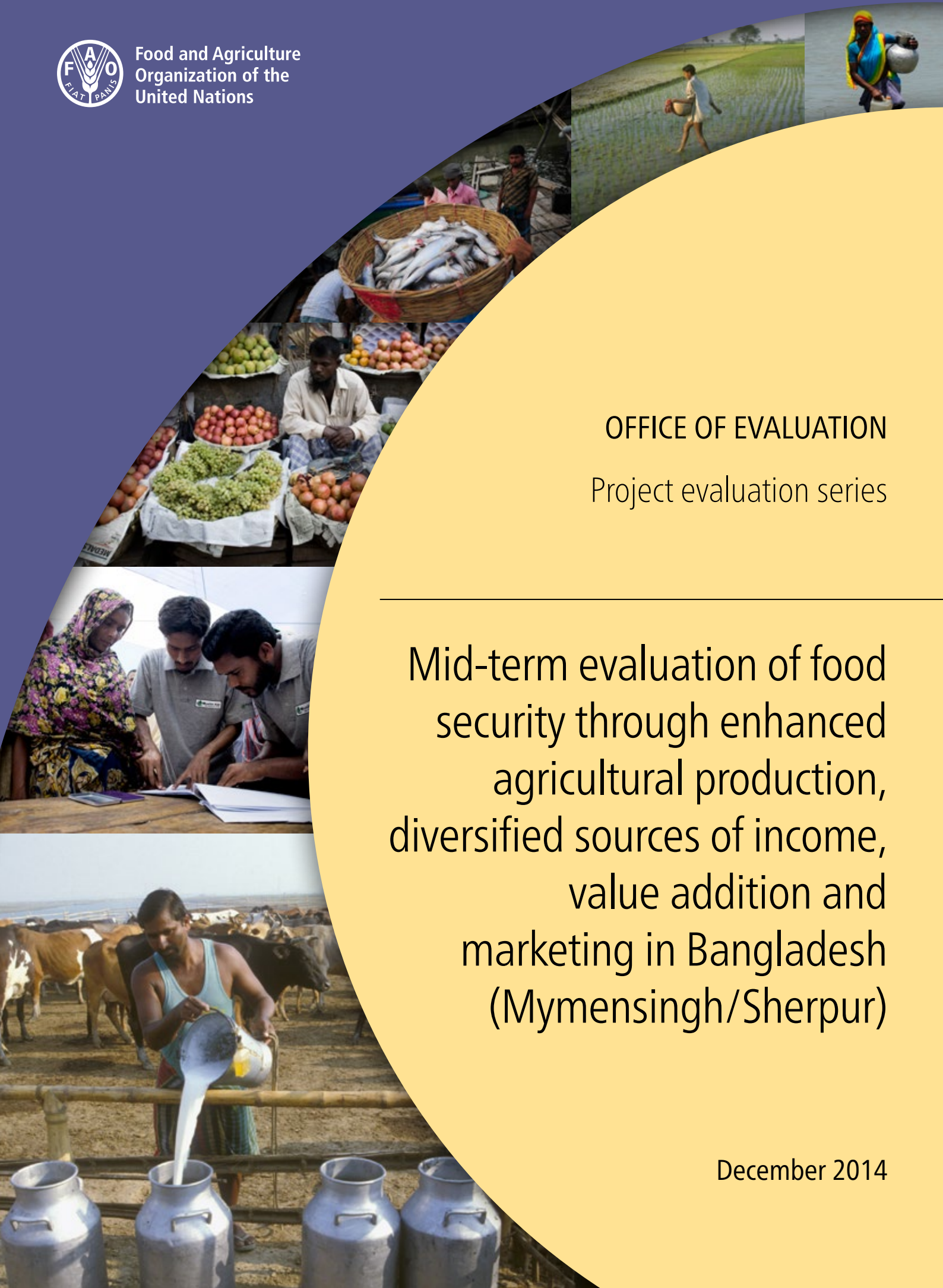




Food and Agriculture
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Project evaluation series

Mid-term evaluation of food
security through enhanced
agricultural production,
diversified sources of income,
value addition and
marketing in Bangladesh
(Mymensingh/Sherpur)

December 2014

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Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Office of Evaluation (OED)

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Finally, we must mention that the feedback and inputs received from the VBO leaders and the community was most useful. As ultimately the project is meant for them, their views have been important in formulating this report

Composition of the evaluation team

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AFIS	Agriculture and Food Information Systems for Decision Support in South Sudan
ANLA	Annual Needs and Livelihoods Assessment (WFP)
AWS	Automatic Weather Station
CAMP	Comprehensive Agricultural Development Master Plan
CD	Capacity Development
CFSAM	Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (FAO/WFP)
CLiMIS	Crop and Livestock Market Information System
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CTA	Chief Technical Advisor
DFID	United Kingdom Department for International Development
EC	European Commission
ECHO	European Commission Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection
ECTAD	Emergency Centre for Transboundary Animal Diseases (FAO)
ELRP	Emergency Livelihood Response Programme
ESA	Agricultural Development Economics Division (FAO)
ESS	Statistics Division (FAO)
EU	European Union
EWS	Early Warning System
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FEWSNET	Famine Early Warning System Network
FS	Food Security
FSC	Food Security Council
FSCS	Food Security Council Secretariat
FSIN	Food Security Information Network
FSL	Food Security and Livelihood
FSLNC	Food Security and Livelihood and Nutrition Clusters
FSN	Food Security and Nutrition
FSNIS	Food Security and Nutrition Information System
FSNMS	Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring System
FSTS	Food Security Technical Secretariat
GHACOF	Greater Horn of Africa Climate Outlook Forum
GRSS	Government of the Republic of South Sudan
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HICWG	Humanitarian Inter-Cluster Working Group
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
LAU	Livelihoods Assessment Unit (NBS)
LoA	Letter of Agreement
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
MAFCRD	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Cooperatives and Rural Development

MARF	Ministry of Animal Resources and Fisheries
MEB	Minimum Expenditure Basket
MIS	Market Information System
MLFI	Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries Industries
MoH	Ministry of Health
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NEWTWG	National Early Warning Technical Working Group
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
NITWG	Nutrition Information Technical Working Group
NRL	Land and Water Division (FAO)
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance
OECD-DAC	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee
OED	Office of Evaluation (FAO)
PSU	Project Support Unit
PTF	Project Task Force
RCA	Resilience Context Analysis
REOA	Regional Emergency Office for Eastern and Central Africa (FAO)
RRC	Recovery and Rehabilitation Council
RWG	Resilience Working Group
SC	Steering Committee
SIFSIA	Sudan Institutional Capacity Programme: Food Security Information for Action
SORUDEV	South Sudan Rural Development Programme
SPCRP	Sudan Productive Capacity Recovery Programme
SSRRC	South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition
TC	Technical Committee
TCE	Emergency Operations and Rehabilitation Division (FAO)
ToC	Theory of Change
TOR	Terms of Reference
TWG	Technical Working Group
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VAM	Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (WFP)
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organization
WFP	World Food Programme

Executive summary

- ES1 This report presents the findings of the mid-term evaluation (MTE) of GTFS/BGD/041/ITA "Food Security through Enhanced Agricultural Production Diversified Sources of Income, Value Addition and Marketing in Bangladesh (Mymensingh/Sherpur)". The MTE purpose is to inform key stakeholders: the Project Task Force (PTF), Government of Bangladesh, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Italian Development Cooperation about the project's progress and performance towards attaining expected outputs and outcomes during the project implementation (2011 – 2015). The MTE was carried out from May to December 2014 with field work in Bangladesh from 10 to 19 May 2014. The project has an overall budget of USD 3.6M and addresses food security, agricultural production, diversification of income sources, and value addition to production and market linkages to boost local economies,. It builds on earlier initiatives launched by the FAO Special Programme on Food Security (SPFS) project GCSP/BGD/033/JPN.
- ES2 The Project's goal is "Sustainable increase in food security among target community members". The Immediate objectives of the Project are: i) group organization, management and sustainability; ii) livelihood diversification, market access development; and iii) financial access, management and sustainability.
- ES3 The evaluation adhered to the UNEG Norms & Standards; it adopted a consultative and transparent approach with internal and external stakeholders throughout the evaluation process. The evaluation was guided by key questions framed along the internationally used evaluation criteria. The methodology also included triangulation of evidence gathered to underpin the validation and analysis to support conclusions and recommendations; review of main documents (see Annex 3), interviews in person with major stakeholders, beneficiaries. Special efforts were made to interact with women beneficiaries and to assess gender equality throughout the evaluation process.
- ES4 The evaluation Team (ET)¹ circulated drafts of the Terms of Reference (ToR) and of the evaluation report to FAO internal stakeholders for comments and suggestions, as well as to the Project Steering Committee (PSC) and to key stakeholders. Comments and suggestions received were taken into account in the finalization of the evaluation report.

Key findings

- ES5 The project is relevant to the sectoral government policies and strategies and to the FAO strategic framework. Its design is overall appropriate but has weaknesses in the project institutional set up. In addition, causal relationships assumed between the inputs/activities and expected outcomes, are too simplistic to be plausible in the complex context. Whilst there are clear logical linkages from activities to outputs, through outcome to impact, the outcome rationale and clear indicators are missing. Specifically, there were too many indicators at the outcome level. Benchmarks for outcome indicators have not been established. This obstructs the monitoring of results and the project team couldn't report the project contribution at outcomes and impact level.
- ES6 The ET did not find the management structure in the ProDoc clear. The project is headed by the Steering Committee (SC). This structure has proven to be complicated to implement because it involves a multi-agency arrangement between FAO and the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) leading to overlapping responsibilities in project's implementation and accountability. Project staff, VBO leaders and members were found generally to have insufficient grasp of their functions, roles and responsibilities at the different levels. Leadership capacities have remained underdeveloped, and knowledge of rights and responsibilities are inadequate in most cases.

1 See Annex 2

- ES7 The financial management of the project by the Budget Holder (BH) is supportive and in line with budget allocations. Overall, financial management of the Project's funds is efficient.
- ES8 The ET found that the technical support provided by the FAO Lead Technical Unit (LTU) in Bangkok and earlier from Rome is good. However, the high turnover in the CTA position has weakened project's organizational structure.
- ES9 The project has achieved clear results under Component 1 "Group organization management and sustainability, establishment of Village Based Organizations (VBOs), **Common Interest Group (CIG)** and Farmer Field Schools (FFS)": Some of the 48 VBOs are still in formative stages and need to be supported. Out of the 396 planned FFSs, only 162 are established and 53 were being processed at the time of MTE. 3. In addition women have successfully assumed different positions in 42 percent of the formed VBOs.
- ES10 Component 2: "Livelihood diversification, market access development, broadening income opportunities, creation of individual or group enterprise, development of market infrastructure", is at an early stage of development. A total of 84 diversified opportunities have been created and benefited 1053 families. Some of these might turn into 'enterprises'. The progress of market linkages largely depends on VBO readiness and production enhancement. Community Agrimalls are envisaged as structures for marketing surplus production to bulk buyers and organized traders as well as platforms for buying useful products, services, training and information. Out of the 48 planned Agrimall sites, 11 were selected and additional 5 are in construction stages.
- ES11 The third set of outputs under Component 3 "**Financial access, management and sustainability, involving the establishment of revolving fund schemes in all communities and their operation in a sustainable way**": is also experiencing delays. Through a special provision of Vulnerability Assistance, the project is reaching out to the most disadvantaged who otherwise remain alienated. The Community-Managed Revolving Fund (CRF) is composed in 47 VBOs. Out of the 7326 registered beneficiaries, only 1995 have received CRF. A number of financial linkages with CCULB are still at early stages and need to be supported. The registration of VBO as Credit Union under the department of Cooperative is not completed.
- ES12 Whilst the project has done reasonably well in implementing the planned outputs described in the Project Document (ProDoc), it has fallen short in achieving its set outcomes.
- ES13 With regard to gender, the project has succeeded in achieving an average of 40 percent of participating women in component 1; however it has not clearly contributed to women's empowerment. Women members are still finding it difficult to operate as equal members, voice their opinions, become office bearers, or run/decide independently on the enterprises they are 'given'. The capacity building inputs do not include explicit focus on gender equity. Without adequate attention to gender equity the goal of individual level food security cannot become a reality.
- ES14 Efficiency and effectiveness of the operational management is hampered by problems in coordination between the DAE and FAO staff. Project efficiency is mixed. Initially the project suffered from problems in project management. The M&E system has remained weak and the baseline study was not adequately used. The ET feels that project efficiency could have been improved had there been an effective results-based management system in place from the outset.
- ES15 The Project's sustainability remains doubtful. Its financial sustainability is highly questionable as it depends on incentives paid by the project. No exit strategy has been elaborated yet. The ET strongly believes that sustainability of project activities will depend on functional maturity and financial stability of Institutions (VBOs and CIGs) that are expected to carry forward the project initiated processes.
- ES16 Overall, the data is inconclusive on "Impact". The indicator results reported on the project suggest that, on a pilot basis there is a positive increase in the food security of some the assisted beneficiaries

Conclusions

ES17 Despite weaknesses in the project design and difficulties in management, the project achieved promising results. These results are the formation of VBOs and FFS, the introduction of CRF, advocating for community participation, and the involvement of vulnerable families in project activities and making. In addition a key criterion set by the project to receive special assistance and funds is to ensure that 50 percent of membership is represented by women. The aim is to contribute to changing community mind-sets and leading to more active participation of targeted vulnerable groups in governance issues.

ES18 The project is very relevant and progress is being made in all components. By streamlining implementation, clarifying roles and responsibilities and improving M&E and MIS systems, the evaluators feel that it will be possible to achieve significant results and therefore an extension of the project is recommended.

ES19 In many developing countries, agricultural extension/rural development is moving from the public sector to the private sector to increase efficiency. This project has the potential to develop an alternative model where the 'public' takes charge of capacity development.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: To FAO Bangladesh team

It is recommended that a request of an additional 18 months no-cost extension is submitted to the Government of Italy. The request for no-cost extension should include: a budget revision, a modified work plan and a clear exit strategy to cover the remaining months of implementation

Recommendation 2: To project steering committee

Project SC needs to provide guidance and advice to the project management. It should support the project and ensure the successful completion of project activities and document lessons learnt.

ES20 To implement Recommendation 2, the ET suggests clarifying the role and responsibility of NPD and NPC. The accountability for the results has to be clearly defined along with required delegation of authorities. A modified organigram is proposed should the no-cost extension of the project be accepted see Annex 9.

Recommendation 3: To project implementation unit

Project management should work on improving the project logical framework and impact monitoring. This review should be done in close consultation with Government and partners. The project should engage an M&E expert for the remaining months to improve and strengthen the M&E system.

ES21 The ET proposes that a workshop be organized jointly by the DAE and FAO. The workshop must focus on:

- Developing strategies for strengthening of VBOs, starting with performance grading. A framework is proposed by the ET in Annex 10;
- Providing tailored capacity development trainings for the staff, VBO leaders, office and members, (particularly women.);
- Develop communication and visibility strategy; It is crucial to involve all the associate organizations and selected community leaders, including women. The present MTE report can serve as a background for the workshop;
- Prepare an exit strategy to be discussed with communities;

- Plan the launching of the annual sample surveys to establish benchmarks for income increase and nutritional status , and staff capacity development; and
- The M&E expert should design a report outline that is analytical rather than descriptive.

ES22 It is important to ensure VBO members' awareness, readiness and capacity for governance, so that at least CRF and technology introduced through the project will continue. At program level for "Sustainable" increase in food security the project will have to work on issues like water management and developing common property resources.

Recommendation 4: To project implementation unit

It is recommended to strengthen gender mainstreaming in project implementation and ensure that sex disaggregated data analysis where useful, is included.

ES23 The evaluation team suggests the following actions:

- Conduct gender training for project staff;
- Develop a module for gender sensitization of men, VBO leaders, youth, traders and government officers, so as to create a supportive environment for women to participate as equal members;
- The project should assist in linking these groups to promising markets;
- Organize monthly meetings with women executives in VBOs to prepare them for the leaders role;
- Hire a gender and livelihoods consultant for documenting women's empowerment of this project.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and purpose of the evaluation

- 1 The Mymensingh/Sherpur Project “Food Security through Enhanced Agricultural Production Diversified Sources of Income, Value Addition and Marketing in Bangladesh”, began in May 2011 and will end in April 2015 with a budget of USD 3 591 210. This includes in-kind cost sharing from the Government of Bangladesh in support of the operating costs. The Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE) of the project was conducted from May to June 2014. The project aims at increasing food security in the rural sector, not only restricted to agricultural producers, but also those rural inhabitants active, or wishing to be active, in small scale marketing. According to the ProDoc, particular attention is given to ensuring that project benefits are accessible also to women.

- 2 The purpose of the MTE, as stated in the Terms of Reference is to, “inform the Project Task Force (PTF), the Government of Bangladesh, FAO, the Italian donor and other stakeholders about the project’s progress and performance towards attaining the outcomes. The evaluation will draw specific conclusions and formulate recommendations for any necessary further action by PTF, Government, FAO and/or other parties. The evaluation may also identify specific good practices and lessons to be learned for the formulation and execution of other similar projects. The evaluation may contribute to identifying corrective actions if necessary” (see Annex 1).

1.2 Methodology of the evaluation²

- 3 The evaluation adheres to the UNEG Norms and Standards.

- 4 Throughout the evaluation process the ET has adopted a consultative and transparent approach and built upon the perspectives of the different stakeholders, namely the leaders and members of Village Based Organizations (VBOs); agricultural producers, women; government representatives from the partner organizations in particular from the Ministry of Agriculture, Department of Agricultural Extension. A list of persons interviewed/meeting held is in Annex 4.

- 5 The ET used the following methods and tools: review of existing reports: (including Grant Agreement and amendments, project document, inception and annual reports, back-to-office reports, baseline studies, some technical reports and financial reports/budget); semi-structured interviews with key informants; stakeholders at national, regional, district and village level. Particular emphasis was put on interaction with women beneficiaries and interview project staff on the gender aspect they observe and address. This was important in this project as all meetings were mainly with male VBO members. In addition the project has only one female project staff. The ET could conduct separate meetings with women, who thus could open up and share their views. The different methods used are detailed in Table 1.

2 See Annex 1

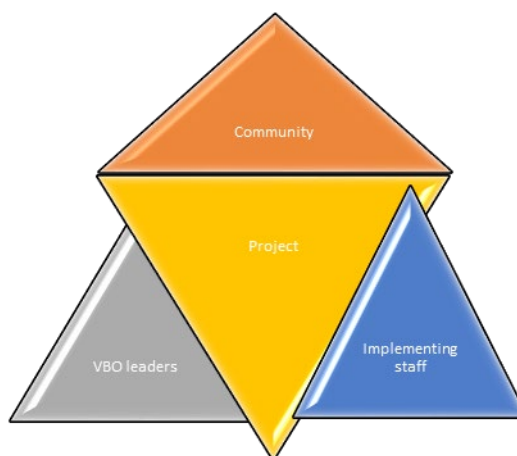
Table 1: Method and tools of data collection

Methods and tools	Respondents	Content
1. Interview Tool: Questionnaire	Community: Village-based organization (VBO) members	Key concerns / challenges Thoughts on how to address these challenges Changes brought by VBOs; Benefits of VBOs Participation in VBOs Vision for VBOs
	VBO leaders	Most common problems of the village Efforts for addressing the problems Changes brought by VBOs; Benefits of VBOs Participation of members Challenges of VBOs Vision for VBOs - Plans of the next phase
	Project and associated organizations' staff	Unique features about the project Effective, ineffective and popular interventions Maturity of VBOs in managing their own affairs Changes brought by VBOs Vision for VBOs - Plans of the next phase
2. Observation tool: Checklist	Community VBO members	Interest level in project related discussions Self confidence Involvement/Pride in the project activities Assets, land housing living standards, clothing, health
	VBO leaders	Communication and Listening skills Confidence level Relation with others Interest level in project related discussions Similarities and differences from VBO members Familiarity with records and office decor
	Project and associated organizations' staff	Interest level in project related discussions Relationship with community members and Team work
3. Focus group discussion ³ (FGD) Tool: Checklist	VBO leaders	Purpose of VBOs Functioning of VBOs Outcomes /changes brought by VBOs Challenges to VBOs Expectations from VBOs Future plans for VBOs Relevance of training received Help required/what more needs to be done.
	Project and associated organizations' staff	Project achievements Short falls, concerns Challenges ahead Suggestions for improvements /inputs required

³ The ET visited three out of four Upazillas/blocks. In the focussed group discussion conducted on 16th May, the project teams from all the four districts participated.

6 The information thus collected was analysed by triangulation, to check consistency and variations in perception of community, VBO leaders and project staff about the following aspects;

- key issues/challenges of the community: for assessing relevance of project activities;
- Changes brought by project interventions: for validating effectiveness of project outcomes;
- the extent of change/what has not changed: for commenting on adequacy, efficiency/outreach; and
- Concerns, Challenges and opportunities for growth: for making recommendations.



7 In each district, the ET made a presentation on project progress followed by visits to selected villages. In these villages, VBO meetings were arranged which helped in interacting with beneficiaries. The ET then interviewed VBO leaders and the beneficiaries. The presentations included activity coverage and the project achievements. During the presentations, the ET asked for more information to understand the level of community participation and qualitative aspects of the outcomes of the project interventions.

8 The ET conducted a debriefing session at Mymensingh with Project Director (PD), Deputy Project Director (DPD), National project Coordinator (NPC) and Project Implementation Unit (PIU) to share and seek agreement on the findings and recommendations. The agreed findings and recommendations were presented in the final debriefing at Dhaka with senior management of DAE and FAO.

1.3 Limitations and constraints of the evaluation process

9 The ET experienced certain limitations in relation to conducting the evaluation, mainly because of:

- The limited time available (30-day work) in comparison to the project size and the two different districts: Mymensingh and Sherpur which are physically spread out 60 to 70 Kms from one another. Besides, the visits coincided with harvesting of the second rice crop and the community members were very busy;
- The timings of village visits were decided based on the convenience of travel plan. It may not have been suitable for the community, especially for the women, as we invariably arrived at lunch time;
- It was not possible to interact with non-members of the VBO in order to gain better understanding of the relevance and adequacy of the VBOs;
- OED team has clearly stated that the evaluation process should be an independent process, however, the ET has reported that they were accompanied by the project staff (PD/DPD and NPC), who were known as the senior-most government authorities. The ET feels that it is quite likely that the communities were conscious of, and cautious due to their presence while sharing their views about the project. The government officers in charge of the project were asking leading questions and the community tended to agree with them. It is difficult to make out whether it was out of respect or otherwise;
- No written records/accounts were kept by the VBOs or any of the families of the financial benefits accrued through the livelihoods activities taken up through project support. This was a constraint in drawing conclusions on farm economics; and
- Language was sometimes a barrier for the conversation, as English is the second or third language for all concerned.

2. Context of the project/programme

2.1 Background

- 10 Bangladesh, with a population of nearly 150 million, is the 7th most populous country in the world and has the highest population density. Half of this population lives below the poverty line with 42 percent living on less than USD 1.25 per day.
- 11 Most of the population (85 percent) resides in the rural areas and depends on agriculture (60 percent) for their livelihoods. Average land holding per family is one of the lowest⁴, subsistence is already very difficult. With further fragmentation in land holding due to population growth, food security and survival of rural livelihoods is a major concern in Bangladesh.
- 12 One third of the population of Bangladesh is food insecure. According to the World Bank, 33 million Bangladeshis consume less than the minimum requirement of 1800 KCL/per day and average consumption is 70 percent of the consumption level in developing countries. Additionally the country is frequently hit by disasters such as floods and cyclones further affecting food availability.
- 13 It must be noted that Bangladesh has made significant progress in recent years and is committed to come out of the poverty –food insecurity trap. GDP growth has been brought above 6.5 percent in the last few years.⁵ Bangladesh has boosted production of rice, fish, jute, tropical fruits and vegetables, and has become one of the world's leading exporters of fish, seafood and jute. Besides, more than three-quarters of Bangladesh's export earnings come from the garment industry. Bangladesh has gradually decreased its dependency on foreign grants and loans from 85 percent (in 1988) to 2 percent in 2010 for its annual development budget. The country also has a strong social enterprise and vibrant microfinance sector which has made significant contributions to its economy.
- 14 The government of Bangladesh has taken up food security as its top most priority and is working in collaboration with FAO in addressing it through several projects. Since 2009, the new government has taken up a pro-agriculture stand, and aims to achieve food security at national, household and individual level. The Country Program Framework (CPF) and UN Development Assistance Funds (UNDAF) provide an opportunity to revitalize the agriculture sector development programs. While it is recognized that agriculture can play a significant role in the growth and stability of the economy in Bangladesh, for it to be remunerative market linkages are critical and have to be backed by diversification of income sources to cope with risks.
- 15 The project under evaluation was designed in close coordination between FAO and the Department for Agricultural Extension - Ministry of Agriculture of Bangladesh, to address the above country priorities and has taken into consideration the lessons learned from FAO's Special Program for Food Security (2002 to 2007). The project is designed for two under developed districts; Mymensingh and Sherpur. The project area consists of 12 villages in each of the two Upazillas selected in the two districts; namely, Dhobaura and Haluaghat Upazilas in Mymensingh and Jhinaigati and Nalitabari Upazilas in Sherpur. The project covers 48 villages.
- 16 The project overall goal is intended to increase food security in the rural sector, not only restricted to agricultural producers and rural communities active, or wishing to be active, in small scale marketing. According to the ProDoc, particular attention is given to ensuring that project benefits are accessible also to women.
- 17 The project agreement was signed in November 2010 but only started 1 May 2011 with NTE as 30 April 2015. The overall project budget is USD 3 591 210, including USD 2 954 210 from the donor and USD 637 000 from the Government of Bangladesh (in-kind contribution.)

4 According to the World Bank only 0.45 ha per family or 0.05 ha per person arable land as last measured in 2011.

5 The population growth rate is also controlled from one of the highest in the world in the 1960s and 1970s, with its fertility rate reduced to 2.55 (lower than India's 2.58 and Pakistan's 3.07).

3. Analysis of project concept and design

Box 1: Key findings

Overall, the project design is appropriate. The Project's theory of change is well comprehended but, the Project's Logical framework (LF) is found to have missed the rationale behind the outcome indicators/targeting, which makes the output indicators/targets random

3.1 Project concept (theory of change)

18 The 'theory of change' is explicit in three inter-linked project components, which are expected to achieve these outcomes. The three components are;

- Institution Building: Group organization, management and sustainability including the establishment of Village-Based Organizations (VBOs), Common Interest Groups (CIGs) and Farmer Field Schools (FFS);
- Livelihood: promotion of livelihoods diversification, market access development, including a broadening of income opportunities, the creation of individual or small group enterprises, the development of market infrastructure (Agrimalls) and linkages forged between VBOs, CIGs and market outlets; and
- Microfinance: access to microfinance management and sustainability, involving the establishment of revolving fund schemes in all communities and their operation in a sustainable manner.



19 The conception of how to bring about change and realize the project goals is seen in the following sub-components as expressed by the project staff and VBO leaders as below;

- VBOs will play a pivotal role by facilitating both technical and financial aspects of livelihood enhancement to its members. VBOs will do what individual families cannot do on their own. They are expected to be an interface between communities and the external entities like markets, governments and financial institutions;
- FFS will accelerate transformation in farm production practices by making farmers aware, judicious and knowledgeable. Food Security cannot be achieved through interventions at family level alone; it requires collective efforts for boosting production, creating support structures, a culture of experimentation, and adoption of appropriate technologies. Farmers attending FFS are expected to be better producers and more competent to use microfinance;
- CIGs will be useful for making available essential inputs and service support for application of FFS learning;
- Market linkages through VBOs are expected to convert production surpluses into income through opportunities for value addition and marketing. Approaching markets collectively will give scales of quantities and assurance of continuity of supply to buyers. In turn the VBOs will be able to negotiate better rates and add to profit margins. Increase in income will improve purchase power affordability of producers.
- The community Agrimalls will be hubs for boosting the local economy. The Agrimall structures built within the project villages will store, process and channel surplus production to bulk buyers and organized traders; and serve as platforms for buying useful products, services, training and information;
- Microfinance given through VBOs for specific production/income generation activities, with collateral from fellow members will act as a binding force; and

- Vulnerability Assistance (VA) is necessary as a special provision for the most needy 20 percent of the group.

20 The ET found that the above subcomponents are logical, relevant and valid for the realities on the ground. They directly respond to the needs and priorities of the community members as they expressed these in the interviews and group discussions. However, the plan of simultaneously working on all of the above within the limited project period is ambitious, especially with existing realities. The community members' interviews revealed that they expect the government to 'help' and extend 'free services' and they are not used to 'repayment' and taking lead action themselves.

3.2 The project design

21 The project aims at addressing key issues concerning the country's development priorities and FAO's strategic objectives, namely food security, agriculture production, diversification of income sources, value addition to production and market linkages to boost local economies. Addressing these issues has become crucial for sustaining the progress made by Bangladesh in recent years and going to the next level of development. The project interventions are found not to be restricted to agriculture but aim at diversification by focusing on off farm enterprises, trading and marketing. The ET considers this an essential area which the project is exploring and might lead to considerable progress in Bangladesh's efforts towards poverty alleviation.

22 The project focuses on the rural sector, where the majority of the poor reside, one third of whom are food insecure. The Project Logframe (see Annex 6) clearly spells out the impact: (*Sustainable increase in food security among target community members*) and three well defined outcomes:

- Outcome1: group organization, management and sustainability;
- Outcome2: livelihoods diversification, market access development; and
- Outcome 3: financial access , management and sustainability;

23 However the ET observed that the rationale behind the results indicators in the LF is not explicit, which makes the output targets also rather random. The following examples explain this observation;

- For outcome 1: "increase in income" the indicator/target set in LF is "25 percent increase over a period of 4 years", which amounts to only 6.25 percent increase per annum equivalent to average GDP growth. This indicates that the project will not be able to improve relative poverty which will remain the same as the GDP growth;
- For outcome 1: "diversified incomes sources" the indicator/target set in LF is "20 percent increase in income sources". Given that 47.5 percent of the population is in the agriculture sector which contributes only 13.44 percent to the national economy. Thus even with 100 percent achievement, the project will make marginal and not significant contribution to FAO's strategic objectives;
- Besides which, how the diversity percentage is to be calculated was not clear, whether 20 percent families will have new income sources or new income sources will contribute 20 percent more income. This needs to be clarified before the annual sample survey begins. What qualifies as diversified is not defined;
- For the outcome 2: "capacity of individual to manage their own income generating activity". The indicator of output level. is "50 percent women receiving training and credit", which does not reflect that their capacities are built; and
- For the outcome 2: the first indicator "capacity of village based organizations is effectively managed" did not provide clear definitions of 'effective' and 'ineffective' management.. Additionally, the second indicator "50 percent Women assuming executive positions in all the VBOs" is not conclusive. It reflects a noble intent for gender equity but dose not measure the level of VBO development. It should be: women assume 50 percent of all positions in VBOs.

24 The four year time-frame for forming the VBOs as self-sustaining institutions, introducing repayment, increasing production, diversifying income sources, establishing market links and building Agrimalls for multiple services and ensuring women's participation in all these interventions was actually sufficient time for 48 villages; however it would require the inclusion of process guidelines and the usage of performance indicators which the Technical Project Plan (TPP) has missed out. Had they been included at the beginning of

upgrading each village in a step-by-step approach towards the outcome, the staffing and the time line would have been more realistic. The ET did not find any evidence of estimation of time required for achieving the expected results.

- 25 The ET thinks that the causal relationships assumed between the following inputs/activities and expected outcomes are too simplistic to be plausible in the complex context:
- Institution building: Enrolling members, selecting local leaders, being registered and having a bank account has not yet resulted in democratically functioning VBOs. The project has developed VBO bylaws, Community Revolving Fund disbursement guidelines. The nine members' management committees are expected to function independently. But most of the VBOs are still in the 'forming', stage of Tuckman's model group functioning. Of the seven meetings ET attended only one was found in the 'storming' stage. The stages of 'norming' and 'performing' were not observed by the ET;
 - Sustainability: Registering these VBOs with the Department of Cooperatives (DoC) and getting them audited does not in itself imply that they are "sustainable". The VBOs will require some funds of their own besides institution building stages to be achieved. When the VBO leaders of the 7 VBOs were asked whether they know of any independently functioning VBO, they admitted that they did not. Such exposure of VBOs in the stage of formation to existing democratic people's institutions at grass roots is essential at this stage;
 - Membership: Being a member of a VBO may give access to credit, but there is more required for gaining food security, increasing production, and diversifying income. VBO programs and services for this purpose are not defined;
 - Vulnerability Assistance: Financial assistance can at best treat financial vulnerabilities, these sections suffer from multiple vulnerabilities and will have to be supported to overcome social, psychological and physical deficits/disadvantages, which are not incorporated in the project design;
 - Women's empowerment: Getting microfinance in their name for an enterprise may help the process of empowerment, but is not equivalent to women's empowerment;
 - Income gains: Taking up Income Generating Activities (IGA) may not always and immediately translate into increased income. Success of IGA depends on several factors, demand and supply, skills, etc. Some families may change the IGA, so number of IGAs cannot be counted as number of families with additional income. Some IGAs may even fail;
 - Technology adoption; a useful and appropriate technology getting introduced is not equivalent to increased production. Any technology will need testing, validation and if not useful, adaptation or alteration. The ultimate objective of a poverty alleviation project should be helping families decide for themselves; and
 - Agrimalls: While the project has rightly included the need to link up with markets and in the concept there are interventions like facilitating trading, value addition and storage, in both budget and work plan there is overemphasis on Agrimalls.
- 26 The project design has given particular attention to women by insisting that 50 percent of the beneficiaries' should be women. The gender disparities in Bangladesh require this focus. However it is not translated in the gender balanced project team, gender agenda for VBOs, gender budgeting or gender auditing. Neither Practical nor strategic gender needs are identified to be addressed. The capacity building inputs lack this focus on gender equity most.
- 27 The districts selected for the project are adjacent to each other and therefore easier for implementation. It is noted in the project document that geographical dispersion is avoided for improving efficiency, especially as a range of components are to be implemented. This makes sense. At the same time, it must be noted that for the objective of creating a model for the entire country, the approach will require adaptation in different socio-economic and geo-climatic areas.
- 28 According to the project design, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)/Management Information System (MIS) is a joint responsibility of NPD, CTA, NPC with Bangladesh

Agricultural University⁶ (BAU) expected to make a major contribution in designing, implementing, supervising M&E and disseminating findings. Support of the M&E system is foreseen only in the first year.

- 29 The project document has an important section on communication and visibility. It has conceptualized some workshops and seminars at different levels to disseminate project achievements and lessons. This is thoughtful as such a transformative project needs a wider civil society support.

3.3 Institutional set-up and management arrangements

- 30 The project implementation modality is as follows: (i) The Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) of the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) is the executing agency for the project, with FAO playing a key role in project support and implementation. The FAO Lead Technical Unit is expected to be the Agricultural Management, Marketing and Finance Service (AGSF). A Japanese volunteer was expected to take the responsibility of overseeing the M&E in close collaboration with the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU). In addition to the latter, the principal provider of technical services to the project will be the Cooperative Credit Union League of Bangladesh (CCULB) which will take primary responsibility for conduct and management of the project's Community-based Revolving Funds (CRF).
- 31 The project SC, chaired by the Director General of the DAE, and including representatives from local governments of both Mymensingh and Sherpur districts, other relevant MOA divisions (Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council and Department of Agricultural Marketing), the Ministry of Finance, the non-governmental sector (Bangladesh Agricultural University) and from FAO. The National Project Director (NPD), assisted by the National Project Coordinator (NPC) and by the project administrator, would act as Secretary to the SC. Directors of other projects with which this project is expected to collaborate closely would be invited to attend on either an occasional or regular basis, as determined by the SC chair. A representative of the donor will also be invited to participate in the SC meetings through the Funding Liaison Officer TCSR.

⁶ Specific faculties will be included: Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Fishery and Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology. The latter includes departments of agricultural statistics, marketing agricultural finance and rural sociology among others

4. Analysis of the implementation process

Box 2: Key findings

The project management has a multi-agency arrangement for implementation which is always more complex than a single agency. The M&E system has remained weak and the baseline study was not adequately used. The institutional oversight of the project is not working well. Reports are generated regularly but are descriptive, not analytical. PTF and SC did not address these issues despite their being raised. The Project has no exit strategy in place. Financial management of the Project's funds was efficient.

4.1 Project management

- 32 The management structure established in the ProDoc and explained in Section 3.3 of this report is considered by the ET to be complicated to implement as it involves a multi-agency arrangement; the ET found that it is not clear who is responsible for the implementation and accountable for results, whether it is DEA or FAO. The ET is not able to identify clear plans on how the Faculty of Rural Sociology's department of Agriculture Marketing will be contributing to the project's M&E system.
- 33 The frequent turnover and long absences in the CTA position created a gap in the project's hierarchy, which in turn contributed to a lack of leadership on strategic issues (*result-based M&E and addressing strategic gender needs*). As some of the project's senior positions have been left unfilled (currently the most senior technical staff hired by FAO is the NPC, who is carrying out the role of CTA, but according to the ProDoc should be the NPD), the ET found that the current project management has not done enough to provide monitoring and guidance to VBOs, CDS and AEDFs. (The ET also noted that project staff directly interacting with communities and VBOs are on short-term contracts, giving the VBOs the impression that the support they receive is less important.)
- 34 The limited interaction with VBOs, CDS and AEDFs was perhaps also caused by the absence of a qualified consultant to design and manage the Project's M&E system. According to the ProDoc, a Japanese intern was supposed to take the M&E role, but that didn't happen. Since project management did not manage to fill the position with a national expert, there is no dedicated staff for this task and this has led e.g. to a delay in contracting BAU for sample studies. Although staff raised the absence of an M&E expert as an issue, the topic was never brought up by the CTA or discussed by the PTF.
- 35 The ProDoc stated that the M&E system is expected to support the following:
- Baseline study: completed with minor delay, but only partially used for planning interventions, goal setting, training designs or tracking progress;
 - Support the PIU to produce different types of reports; annual, monthly, progress etc. for wider circulation and national/international levels. ET found that reports were prepared regularly and in a timely manner, however their content is more descriptive than analytical. ET thinks that if these reports were more analytical, they could have supported decision making;
 - Organizing internal and external workshops for sharing lessons learned. ET found that information collected is used only in workshops related to capacity building for project implementation rather than generating information for dissemination;
 - Specific studies to be conducted in support of implementation. ET found that some were done for marketing but not disseminated to VBO leaders.
 - Studies for decision making and needs assessments which it would be useful to conduct in the next phase.
- 36 As a result of the above M&E/MIS shortcomings the system has remained more mechanical than dynamic and is not able to assess the quality of implementation. The monthly reports are a list of planned and completed activities with short remarks for every village, but timeliness of the activity, adequacy of the coverage, acceptance by the beneficiaries, extent of effectiveness or reasons of ineffectiveness are not included. The outcomes are

neither tracked nor reported. The reports include numbers of beneficiaries, but not how many have increased their income; numbers of women members but not how many feel 'empowered'. The number of VBOs is reported but not the grading of maturity of their performance. For giving higher levels of inputs, whether a second instalment of CRF or linkage with other government programs for convergence of investment for Agrimall investments, such monitoring of performance is necessary.

- 37 Minutes of the Monthly Reviews Meetings (MRM) are kept but do not include analysis and strategy for improvement. The ProDoc stated that BAU is responsible for supporting the design of the M&E system, coordinating and supervising M&E activities, collecting output/outcome data, conducting independent sample surveys or studies, assisting in impact assessment and organizing workshops for the dissemination of findings. But all this has not taken place. The ET could not find any clear plans on how the responsible faculty of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology including its concerned departments of agricultural statistics, marketing, agricultural finance and rural sociology, would contribute to the project M&E. The ET think it is high time that benchmarking for outcome indicators begins as the project has only one year left.
- 38 The ET found that the CCULB are able to generate system reports from the microfinance software they are using. These reports contain VBOs and performance of repayment rates on a village basis, but these reports are not widely circulated. ET thinks that it would be very useful if these reports would be discussed at VBO level and disseminated for lesson learned.
- 39 In terms of the general management of operations, the ET has identified a number of constraints that affected the overall efficiency and effectiveness of project delivery throughout the Project implementation period; Lack of steering committee meetings dedicated to management issues. The last SC meeting was convened nine months ago; allowing cash withdrawals instead of "Vulnerable Family In-Kind Repayment" (VFIKR)⁷; announcing Agrimall construction prematurely (*even before the designs were approved by FAO*) that has raised expectations⁸. limited microfinance amount, which is 5000–6000 BDT which is not even enough to buy a goat or to take a rice crop in one acre⁹; there is no clear exit strategy; processing the Funds Requisition of VBOs through CCULB to FAO, and not through PD/DAE, which has led to a feeling that they are bypassed, and an opportunity of assessing validity of the funds requisition is also lost; not giving CRFs to the two VBOs carried forward from the previous project; they are agitated and the funds are underutilized; and Establish a new review mechanism of the Funds Requisition by the VBOs instead of CCULB directly to FAO to keep it as an independent channel for efficiency.
- 40 However, the ET acknowledges that the project team is making a strong effort to re-direct the implementation process towards achieving the set objectives. The most noteworthy achievements include:
- Making attending FFS and receiving training in preparedness on effective utilization of funds preconditions for receiving microfinance;
 - Establishment of a consultative process for identification of Vulnerable Families, short-listing through recommendation by members and self nomination by families and actual visits by VBO leaders to verify the selection. This has minimized the lapses in selection;
 - Conducting a series of community Field Schools after realizing the need for training;
 - Harmonize the concept of 'Technology' villages to increase competitive advantage of a village in selected products like banana, papaya, chicken etc. In the selected villages best practices of production of the selected product will be introduced. There will be exchanges of experiences among many producers and the scale of production will increase. This will attract traders/market chains to source the product from these villages;

7 The TPP (page 15) suggests that the fund be used for purchase of agriculture equipment by CIGs, such as weeders, threshers, winnowers, hand tractors etc. But it is given away in cash as a grant

8 The assumption of NPD and DAE officials shared in the first debriefing at Mymensingh that every VBO will be equally capable of managing an Agrimall-like facility and/or requires one within the village for better profit margins is not supported by facts and figures;

9 It made microfinance not attractive and deserving families will have to seek additional support externally;

- Giving equal opportunity to women’s membership and in receiving income generating activities and enterprises ;
- Distinguishing between Income Generating Activities (IGA) and Enterprise, first for subsistence farming and based on its potential giving inputs to make it commercially viable; and
- Though it is done on a small scale, engaging local traders in marketing links before going for Agrimall construction.

4.2 Financial resources management

41 Details of budget and expenditure of the project can be found in Annex 7. The project budget was USD 3 591 210. The ET observed that 40 percent of the budget is still available to support remaining activities. However, the balance available for general operating and travel expenses is likely to be insufficient but there are adequate amounts available for technical support and training. (See graph 1).

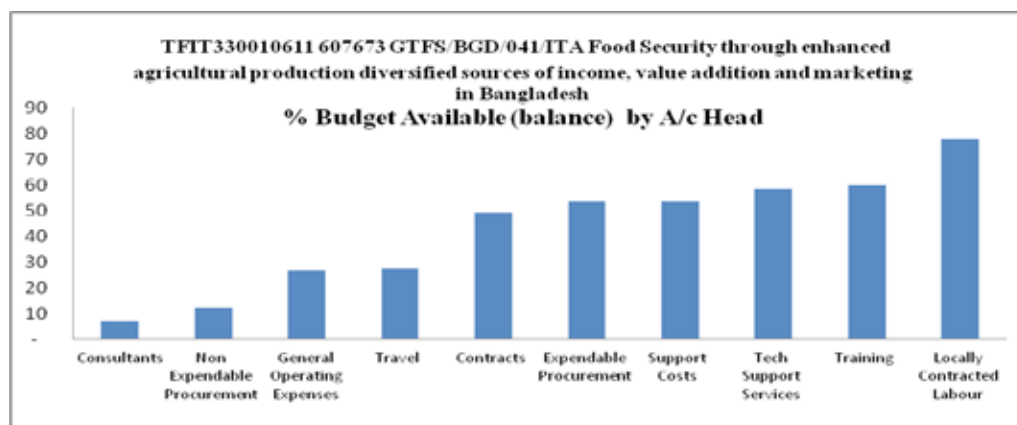


Figure 1: Projected budget

42 The ET observed that provisions for community level disbursements are less utilized compared to those for project management (vehicles, office rent, travel etc). At this stage of the project substantial budgets have remained unspent in two interventions, CRF and Agrimall. 84 percent of the CRF provision is not utilized yet, mainly due to lack of readiness of the VBO members to absorb the provisions. A positive observation is that the conditions for accessing loans were not lowered. The repayment rate is reasonably good (consistently above 90 percent) in March 2014, but Portfolio at Risk (PAR) was 26.2 percent which is too high. In ET’s assessment the VBOs are not ready for Agrimall management which explains the unspent budgets allocated to construction.

43 The ET noted that for a number of activities under the different components there is a need to increase the overall provisions, however in case this is not viable the unit costs may need to be increased or adjusted by reducing the number of units to be covered. According to the families interviewed: the amount of BDT 5000 – 6000 of an Income Diversification Loan Fund (IDLF) per family is not enough; this amount is only sufficient to support investment in farming of small plot or vending businesses, while an IDLF of BDT 20000 would allow a family to invest in dairy animals or an irrigation facility which will boost farm production. Similarly the provision of USD 10 000, may not be enough to implement the concept of Agrimalls, but as the number of Agrimalls may decrease due to lack of readiness and time availability, the available budget provision may suffice.

4.3 Backstopping and institutional arrangements

44 The overall recruitments and subcontracting in consultation with government to the project are followed by the FAO country office. They have sought timely involvement of FAO headquarters (HQ) for technical reviews of the civil construction designs, as well as technical assistance for livestock and microfinance systems from the FAO regional office Bangkok. These supports are appreciated by the project staff. However, the issue of the recruitment of the CTA has left a gap in the project’s organizational hierarchy.

- 45 The technical support through various consultants has been useful, but the recommendations are not fully utilized or tracked by the country or regional offices. The level of administrative support given by the FAOR office is appreciated by the NPC while the NPD expressed that the support is not efficient enough.
- 46 The ProDoc refers to the importance of the principle of “exchange learnings” from earlier FAO and other programmes or projects in the country, but no field visits by FAO officers’ or exchanges with staff from other projects were organized, except for the FAOR visits to the project area. In addition the DAE and BAU are implementing partners of FAO in different projects but there are no inter-project exchanges or sharing of lessons learned.
- 47 The Government’s obligation to the project in the form of recruiting project personnel has been fulfilled in a timely manner. It is not clear to the ET how DAE¹⁰ monitors performance of the personnel allocated to the project. Within the DAE, there is more scope for utilizing the Upazila training facilities, the SAAOs. The evaluation did not cover this aspect, but it will be useful to assess the potential DAE has for better contributing to the project through its in-house resources. The evaluators found that CCLUB is not as engaged in the field as required. For carrying out responsibilities as listed in Letter of Agreement (LOA), it will be useful for the CCLUB staff to understand how the other components are working. The VBOs are guided on the roles and responsibilities of CCULB, various banks and the Department of Cooperatives, but their relationship with VBOs, FFS, and CIGs are not defined. Whether these institutions could access support from other Credit Unions is doubted by the VBO leaders. The ET was told that the transformation process to Credit Unions will be made known to the VBOs at a later stage.
- 48 Though the BAU conducted the baseline study, it should have continued engagement to build benchmarks and data for reporting progress on the outcomes indicators; such as increase in farm production and productivity, income and market realization. Various sample studies for tracking progress *vis-a-vis* outcome indicators are lagging behind. Coordination of these associated organizations needs to be improved for increased effectiveness.
- 49 The project document has listed some measures for sustainability but no specific time is mentioned for an exit strategy. The ET found that though there is awareness among the project staff about the need to phase out, the VBO leaders have yet to think about the post-project scenario. Some elements for an exit strategy are embedded in the implementation strategy, which is in process:
- Registering VBOs with the Dept of Cooperatives for statutory controls;
 - Installation of FAO/GTZ MBwin Microbanking software in CCULB laptops and project’s desktop computers and training of CCULB assistants on their use;
 - linking beneficiaries with DAE for training inputs and technology transfer; and
 - Creating linkages with traders and bulk buyers.

10 The DAE has been involved in the last project such as SFFS (GCSP/BGD/033/JPN), SAIP (IFAD/ WFP), North West Crop Diversification, Integrated Horticulture & Nutrition Development Project (UNDP), and FAO supported Livelihood Adaptation for Climate Change (LACC). There is scope to improve coordination, which is reflected in delays in organizing Steering Committee meetings, DAE could have proactively involved the project staff in assessing the earlier projects – especially the projects which had ‘institution building’ and ‘Agriculture Markets’ as major components as these are relatively more challenging for DAE than enhancing production and Technology Transfer.

5. Analysis of results and contribution to stated objectives

Box 3: Key findings

Achievement of outputs is satisfactory under the two outcomes; however, the project has yet to convert these into a satisfactory outcome achievement. Gender equality: The project design has a strong emphasis on women's inclusion. Capacity Development: the project has an extensive capacity building component. Most of the capacity building efforts seemed to be effective; FFS, VBO leaders training in VBO management and the training of treasurer/accountants by CCULB. However, in the absence of a comprehensive M&E performance data gathering system, the concern is that capacity building inputs are not evenly spread or effective, otherwise they have the potential of positively improving the project performance.

5.1 Achievements at outputs level

5.1.1 Achievements at outputs level for component 1 (see Table 2)

- 50 The ET considers that output 1.1 is achieved. All the 46 new VBGs are formed and 2 VBOs from a previous project are strengthened. Inputs were provided with a clear vision of the linkages of VBG with global and mid-term objectives, activities and partners and alliances. The ET found that records of output level indicators are consistent and reported regularly. While reviewing past reports, it became clear that most of the achievements have taken place in the last six months. The FFS process has also significantly contributed to capacity building and performance of the producers. The ET tends to link the progress made to the benefits of FFS and VBO management. In addition 180 women have assumed executive positions in the formed VBOs (1 chairperson, 38 vice chair, 7 secretaries, 15 treasurers and 119 directors).
- 51 The achievements for output 1.2 are quite encouraging as a total of 162 FFS and CFS are formed and 53 FFS are in the process of being formed, with a total of 3852 FFS graduates, out of which 1579 graduates are receiving CRF.

5.1.2 Achievements at outputs level for component 2 (see Table 2)

- 52 The ET confirms that this output is largely achieved based on: a scoping survey conducted which contributed to identifying 85 different diversified IGA for 1053 beneficiaries who will receive the CRF (621 male 432 female) with an increase of 35 above the 50 opportunities set as a target.
- 53 While for output 2.2; the set indicator for constructing Agrimalls is 16-32, the project has managed to select eleven Agrimall sites, out of which five are in the process of registration of land and design: two in Halughat and one each in Dobaaural, Jhenaigati and Nalitbari. The evaluators found that VBO readiness to handle community agrimalls falls far below expectations.
- 54 Based on the scoping survey which confirmed that the 1053 beneficiaries who received the CRF have started new IGAs, it is assumed that some of them will be transformed into enterprises as this output is based on the assumption that linkages between VBOs and market outlets will be forged and no final results are obtained. For achievements at outputs level for component 3, see Table 2.

5.1.3 Achievements at outputs level for component 3 (see Table 2)

- 55 Under output 3.1, CRFs are established in 47 target communities, and managed by duly elected committees with approved procedures and practices. The CRFs amount to BDT 26.04 million given to 1995 beneficiaries (the project fund is BDT 10.36 and the VBO's own fund is BDT 15.68 million). Of the 1995 beneficiaries 1183 are male (59 percent) and 812 female (41 percent). However, the set indicator for measuring the output is to have the CRFs in all targeted communities. Moreover, none of the VBOs are registered as credit unions

under the Department of Cooperatives. Based on this evidence, the ET considers this a limited achievement.

56 The ET tends to conclude that the factors contributing to good achievements at outputs levels are largely related to the socio-economic context of the project area, which made livelihood interventions more likely to be effective. The project is considered a new type of intervention which many of the beneficiaries' villages have never before experienced.

Table 2: Achievements at outputs level

Component	Output	Indicator/target	Achievement
i Group organization, Management & sustainability, establishment of VBO, CIGs and FFSs	1.1 Village based groups formed and strengthen	At least 48 VBOs created or strengthened	*100 percent achievement, with 48 VBOs; 46 VBOs formed and 2 VBOs strengthened from previous project
		50 percent Women assume executive positions in at least 50 percent of all VBOs	* 84 percent achievement 42 percent, 180 women executives, 1 chairperson, 38 Vice chair, 7 secretaries, 15 treasurers, 119 directors
	1.2 FFS established and operating effectively	At least 396 FFS formed and graduated in target communities	* 54 percent achievement with 162 FFS and CFS formed and 53 undergoing
		At least 50 percent of FFS graduate receive CRF	* 41 percent achievement with 1579 out of the 3852 FFS graduates receiving CRF
ii. Livelihood diversification, market access development, broadening income opportunities, creation of individual or group enterprise, development of market infrastructure	2.1 Diversified income opportunities for men and women in equal Proportion	Scoping survey will provide current status of marketing activities 50 percent women getting new income generating opportunities	* 85 different diversified opportunities identified by FAO's Scoping survey; 1053 (621 male 432 female) availing new opportunities. CIGs formed based on suitability of IGA. Loans given after training; Facilitation continuing for gender equality
	2.2:Market infrastructure developed	16 to 32 Agrimall designed and constructed	11 Agrimall sites selected of which 5 are in the process of registration of Land and design in Haluaghat2, Dobaura1, Jhenaigati1, Nalitabari-1
	2.3 Linkage between VBOs and market outlets forged	A minimum 192 value adding and/or income diversification micro or small, individual or group enterprises (average 4 per community) created with support from CRF.	1053 beneficiaries utilized CRF and started new IGAs, some will be transformed to Enterprises; 3 informal linkages initiated – Imran enterprise Dhaka; Shohanur enterprise Bipile Gazipur & Kader enterprise Haluaghat; 2 more companies under process, Deep international & Golden harvest
iii. Financial access, management & sustainability, involving the establishment of revolving fund schemes in all communities and their operation in a sustainable way	3.1 CRF established and operating	CRFs established in all target communities, and managed by duly elected committees with approved procedures and practices and operate on a sustainable basis with the base fund maintained at no less than 95 percent of its original level by end of the project.	CRF established in 47 VBOs managed by VBO management committee following approved procedures and practices; CRF of BDT 26.04 million to 1995 beneficiaries (donor fund BDT 10.36 & VBO own fund 15.68 mil.) Covering male 1183 (59 percent) and female 812 (41 percent)
		At least 60 percent VBO registered as Credit Union under the dept. of Cooperatives.	Not completed
	3.2 Financial linkages between VBOs & financial institutions	Number of financial linkages forged	Financial linkage development is under process with CCULB

5.2 Achievements at outcome level

- 57 In the absence of result-based data to substantiate outcome indicators, it is not possible for the ET to make definite comments on the outcome achievement. The DAE staff expressed satisfaction over the achievements though the FAO staff expressed concerns.
- 58 Achievement of outcomes would be highly influenced by the successful completion and achievements of outputs. Though the outputs achievement is satisfactory, it has yet to be converted into satisfactory outcome achievements. The project is half way through and it was expected that the outcome level results be monitored and reported, but this is not the case. The annual household sample surveys to be done by BAU have yet to be designed.
- 59 While analysing gaps between the current status and the expected outcomes, the evaluators have identified the following trends that need to be considered in the remaining project period.
- 60 Community perspective: The community presumes that all government support/projects are grant-based. In this project the community members are expected to adopt the loan modality. However, the time required for convincing the community of adopting the self-financing arrangement required for continuity of VBOs, forming a discipline of timely repayment, financial management and generating surpluses was a challenging task. Perhaps this was not considered in the project time frame. Though the financial discipline has been adopted in 90 percent of the VBOs, it has taken longer than expected. In addition the delays in achieving work plans makes the project look as if it's lagging;
- 61 Experience of the local leaders: The selection of leaders has not taken into account the likelihood of political vested interests or interference. As a result self-nomination seems to have crept in some politically motivated individuals. Developing a local leadership cadre is a good idea but the selection process could have been better thought through. Faith in democratic functioning, sensitivity, inclusiveness, knowledge and information about government schemes could have been given more importance. Though, the component of capacity building of VBO leaders needs to be planned more elaborately and comprehensively than it is; one-time training is not enough. At each level of VBO development newer skills and abilities are required;
- 62 Lack of local models of people-led collective, livelihood improvement initiatives, sustained beyond project life: the VBO concept is excellent but there are no references or examples to follow. The experience from the SPFS could be used better here;
- 63 Focus on activity level more than outcome level. The project staff is so occupied with delivery of activities that little time and attention is given to check whether these activities contribute to the project's objective of "food security". How to market agro produce is being discussed more than checking whether enough food is available for participating families. The project has no guidelines for integrating a food security agenda across all its components, selection of livelihood options, crops, storage methods, value addition and topics for capacity building. It is important to ensure that markets are not accessed at the cost of consumption deficits;
- 64 Alienation of the vulnerable: in the way they carry themselves, their indebtedness, basic insecurities and inhibitions make their mainstreaming an 'easier said than done' task; it requires not only financial but social engineering. Handholding support to invest amounts distributed wisely and with return in shorter gestation periods is as essential as boosting their self-esteem/confidence. This component is not well conceived or taken care of;
- 65 Another issue is that of the process of selecting the Vulnerable Families. Though it is done in a consultative manner, the disclosures of the criteria and the Interventions are not designed to rule out any errors and doubts. The rationale for 20 percent is not well explained. Besides, the diversity within the vulnerable sections is neither considered nor addressed. They are treated alike and could have been classified by reasons and combinations of vulnerabilities, like physical (e.g. disability), social (e.g. widowhood) financial (e.g. landlessness) to prepare and offer suitable livelihoods options and capacity building inputs; and

- 66 External market forces are affecting both consumption patterns and competitive pricing of the local produce. For example milk powder being cheaper than milk production, fried chips and biscuits being available year round and everywhere compared to fruits which are more expensive.

Outcome 1: Sustainable improvement in small producers' incomes and increase in food security (see Table 3)

- 67 ET found that all the beneficiary families visited reported increases in income and production, the extent of increase could not be verified. All the families with new income sources reported increase in income, again how much is not recorded, verified or reported; the diversified sources were additional sources, not primary. There is visible change in their confidence according to the VBO leaders and project staff but not in their quality of life, clothing or assets owned.

Outcome 2: Capacity of village based organizations, producer interest groups and individual farmers to manage their activities in a profitable and sustainable way (see Table 3).

- 68 Women members could not give details of CRF received, interest rate or conditions, cash flows and provision for repayment. Both the families visited as successful case studies of women's empowerment were actually run by men in their families; only woman family members' names were used. Based on staff reports, 20 percent of VBOs have issues like poor repayment, leaders misusing CRF, favouritism and another 20 percent need support for conducting regular proceedings, have poor attendance or conflicts. This can be verified only through financial as well as social audits and grading performance of each VBO.

- 69 The following remarks are made based on the observations and direct interactions of evaluators with beneficiary families see Table 3.

Table 3: Project Outcome targets

Outcome	Indicator/targets	Remarks
Sustainable improvement in small producers' incomes and increase in food security	Income increased by at least 25 percent in participating households Increased diversity of income sources by at least 20 percent	All the beneficiary families visited reported increase in income and production, the extent of increase could not be verified; All the families with new income sources reported increase in income, again how much is not recorded, verified or reported; the diversified sources were additional sources not primary. There is visible change in their confidence according to the VBO leaders and project staff but not in their quality of life, clothing or assets owned.
Capacity of village based organizations, producer interest groups and individual farmers to manage their activities in a profitable and sustainable way	At least 50 percent participants (training, FFS and credit) are women At least 70 percent of the village based organisations are effectively managed women assume executive positions in at least 50 percent of all VBOs;	Women members could not give details of CRF received , interest rate or conditions, cash flows and provision for repayment Both the families visited as successful case studies of Women's empowerment, were actually run by men in their families; only woman family members' names were used; Based on the staff reported 20 percent VBOs have issues like poor repayment, leaders misusing CRF, favouritism and another 20 percent need support for conducting regular proceedings, have poor attendance or conflicts. This can be verified only financially as well as social audits and grading performance of each VBO.

5.3 Gender equality

- 70 Gender equality is central to FAO's mandate and evaluations are expected to ensure that FAO-supported projects are not only non-discriminatory but are proactively addressing underlying causes of inequality. CEDAW obligation mandates all member countries promote, protect and fulfil equal rights of men and women. This requires that development policies and projects must extend substantive equality and take appropriate measures to modify socio-cultural patterns and stereotypes, and to eliminate prejudices and cultural practices based on sexist ideas.

71 The project under evaluation has the right intent but has yet to find a way to work for the ultimate goal of equality. The project design emphasises inclusion of women in equal numbers, as members of VBOs, as recipients of training inputs and CRF and more importantly as office bearers in the institutions for local development. It must be noted that the project staff has made attempts to achieve the quantitative targets, but did not get enough guidance to bring qualitative changes.

Table 4: Sex disaggregated data

Indicator/target	Number of women out of total beneficiaries	Percentage of women
VBO members	3110 of 6880	45
VBO Executives	180 of 428	42
Recipients of CRF	812 of 1995	41
Availing diversification opportunities	432 of 1053	41
Recipients of VA	468 of 1170	40
Recipients of capacity building inputs	568 of 1802	35
Secretaries of VBOs	7 of 48	15
Chairpersons of VBOs	1 of 48	2

72 Therefore, from the evaluators’ perspective, the project achievements are commendable on output level indicators. The social norms are restrictive and had it not been for explicit attempts, women would not have found spaces in VBOs and FFSs. As the sex disaggregated data (see Table 4 above) indicates, it has been easier to include women as members than in the decision making (power) positions. The VBO leaders have accepted that it is important to be inclusive, but feel that women will not be able to lead VBOs as they are not literate or have no experience. When pointed out that some male leaders are also illiterate and have not seen a world outside of their village they admitted that ‘it will take more time for ‘society’ to accept women leaders’. This shows that stereotypes are not yet challenged.

73 Based on the evaluators’ findings from the seven VBO meetings attended, women sit behind and rarely talk. The situation was relatively better in the tribal and minority (Hindu) communities, where women were more vocal. When asked simple questions about their families and farms the women were first to respond. In all the VBO meetings men leaders presented the VBO work and impact. Except for two women leaders, none of the women could tell the evaluators what their roles and responsibilities are as office bearers. They had not read the minutes of the meetings and didn’t know what records are kept by the VBOs.

74 When the ET conducted separate meetings with women, they opened up and shared their views on inequity issues. There was a distinct difference in the way men and women expressed their concerns and development priorities. Here is a compilation of the top 10 responses collected from the 7 VBO meetings by the evaluators.

Table 5: Difference perceptions among beneficiaries

As perceived by men	As perceived by women
Market for the produce	Health/medical facilities
Jobs for educated youth/ industries	Women doctors
Productivity of land	Safety of women
Transportation/ fuel prices	Water scarcity
Cost of seeds and fertilizers	Drudgery of farm work
Government schemes for housing	Weakness among children
Cell phone charges	Conflicts in the community
Electricity	Education of girls
Political differences in leader	Streetlight
Inflation / cost of living	Cleanliness/hygiene

75 VBOs are intended to address the local issues and women member’s priorities cannot be ignored. It is important to create an empowering environment where they will be able to

speak out, be heard and influence the VBO agenda and outcomes. Giving micro finance to equal numbers of women and men is just a token of importance to equality, but in the current context of Bangladesh a gender approach (GAD), not women in development (WID) approach is required. Engaging men is equally, if not more important in changing gender relations and gender norms.

- 76 The project aims at women's empowerment and that is going to require gender sensitization of men and social institutions. But the project staff is talking about 'changing women' and not men. The project interventions or processes are neither addressing practical nor strategic gender needs. In fact the interventions are gender neutral. The women members are treated as the most vulnerable and disadvantaged group but are given the same inputs and interventions as men.
- 77 The staff agrees that it is more satisfying to work with women. As even when similar inputs are given, women take more interest and are more sincere in applying FFS learnings and repayment etc. The transformation is visible in the minority communities, where many families are female headed by default, as the men migrate in search of jobs. The women in these families have to fend for children. But as they have no land or assets to use as collateral, these women did not have access to institutional finance. To them this project has made the biggest difference, as they received capacity building inputs along with microfinance. Besides, the emphasis on women's empowerment has led to project staff giving more attention to women heads of households and this is reflecting in pride and confidence among the women beneficiaries.
- 78 The evaluators found that there is no gender balance in the project staff, only one woman as Community Facilitator in the entire project. If 50 percent women's participation is expected in project activities, the same should have been provided in the staff with 50 percent of positions reserved for women, especially those directly interacting with the community members. The gender norms in Bangladesh demand that the women are approached at a time, location and manner that is acceptable to all. There was a visible difference in participation of women members in Nalitabari, where the Community Facilitator is a young woman. In Sherpur, one woman leader said that women do have distinctly different, and more numerous, issues bothering them like domestic violence, security of girls, reproductive health, and mobility etc. In the words of NPC the "ice has just started melting, there is a long way to go".

5.4 Capacity development

- 79 The project has had an extensive capacity building component. See Annex 8 for all the training events, which were nearly 40 and covered 1802 participants. PIU has maintained the training reports and feedbacks, which reflect a positive impact.
- 80 The ET found that, the community, VBO leaders and the project staff have ranked FFS as the most popular and useful activity implemented by the project. Although, the numbers of FFS formed so far represent only 54 percent (162 completed and 53 underway) of the planned 396 FFS, hence it is difficult to predict whether the 3852 FFS graduates can serve as a 'critical mass' for transformation in farming practices at the project area level, though in their own farms these graduates could show the difference to the evaluators.
- 81 The evaluators agree that the success of FFS was evident during the interactions with FFS graduates. Out of the total 3852 FFS graduates 1579 have accessed CRF. The evaluators met about 10 of them, they shared their newly acquired learnings with details and were keen on showing how they have applied these on their farms and improved production. Though no records are kept/studies done of the difference between the FFS graduates and the others, the evaluators feel confident in noting that FFS has been effective, popular and transformative. The FFS graduates have not only improved farming practices, but also their confidence levels and communication. It is highly recommended that the Community Field Days are regularly convened. There is a need for trouble shooting, clearing doubts as well as encouragement by fellow farmers.
- 82 In order to multiply the adoption of technology, the FAO team working on the project came

up with the practical solution of conducting Community Field Schools, which is nothing but rapid, interactive sessions with farmers to cover small topics of farmer's interests. Here is an opportunity for DAE to revisit its training design and include what it found effective in FFS/CFS, both content wise and pedagogically. The 'learning while doing' approach is most appropriate for farmers and not class room teaching. DAE will be able to take forward the methodology through the DAAOs.

83 The other capacity building efforts that seemed to be effective are VBO leaders training in VBO management and the training of treasurer/accountants by CCULB. Their effectiveness is reflected in timely completion of the records and microfinance activity. The repayment rates are above 95 percent. The software used for microfinance management is working smoothly. This aspect is very empowering for the VBOs, that they are able to manage their own accounts – compared to earlier projects.

84 However, in the absence of a comprehensive M&E performance data gathering system, the following capacity building inputs are not evenly spread or effective, otherwise they have the potential of positively improving the project performance;

- Membership training on rights and responsibilities as VBO members, so that they can participate more effectively in governance; especially regarding women members;
- Farmers awareness about the Low External Inputs Agriculture (LEISA) techniques, to be suitably adopted by them;
- Financial illiteracy of all the families in the selected village, for budgeting, and keeping records of expenses to be able to decide what is economical for themselves;
- Information about Government schemes that can be availed by different sections in society; at least ICT material on these can be displayed on a larger scale;
- Training of local traders and vendors in negotiating to increase profit margins; and
- More importantly and urgently: capacity building of the staff and exposure to similar projects within and outside the country, for effectively facilitating member-centric institutions to function democratically and manage their own affairs.

85 Moreover, sensitization of men VBO members and leaders regarding gender norms and making them responsible for inclusive culture and practices.

5.5 Human-Rights-Based Approach

86 The project focuses on the basic human rights, Right to Food and Right to Livelihood, especially for the disadvantaged rural sections. The project has a special focus on 20 percent of the most needy population, most of whom are in that group due to denial/neglect of basic rights, such as education, health, livelihood and equality.

87 The ET agrees that there is scope for emphasizing a 'rights-based approach'. The project staff needs training in participatory approaches and facilitation skills for helping the community members make their own decisions, rather than 'giving' the solutions. The ET found it is not acceptable that the beneficiaries were identified by the project staff as 'vulnerable' and 'not vulnerable'

5.6 Partnerships and Alliances

88 According to the project design, it is expected to have linkages with other public and private organizations working on food security and poverty alleviation: department of agriculture, fisheries, livestock, cottage industries, water, health, youth development, women and child development, cooperatives, and NGOs which are operational in the project area which is crucial for project sustainability. However, no evidence of such collaborative efforts was found by the ET.

89 It would have been useful to exchange experiences and efforts across staff and community leaders from similar projects for continually evolving strategies for self-sustaining development models.

6. Analysis by evaluation criteria

Box 4: Key findings

The project is most relevant for the current development priorities declared by the Government of Bangladesh, food Security, MDGs and to the Strategic Objectives for FAO.

6.1 Relevance

- 90 The project is directly contributing to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which is priority of the Italian Cooperation to achieve by 2015. It is relevant to fulfil the “ethical imperative of solidarity towards those who lack the basic essentials” emphasized by the Programming Guidelines and Directions of the Italian Development Cooperation. The project directly addresses 3 out of its 5 priority sectors, namely (1) Agriculture and food security (2) Human development, with particular reference to health (3) land use and natural resource management. The project is also in line with Italian Development Co-operation’s commitment to the cross-cutting issues of women’s empowerment and vulnerable groups.
- 91 The project is relevant to the Strategic Objectives (SOs) for FAO in 2010 as well to the refined SOs of FAO, namely “Help eliminate hunger”, “Food insecurity and malnutrition”, “Make agriculture, forestry and fisheries more productive and sustainable” and “Reduce rural poverty”. For the fifth Strategic objective “Enable inclusive and efficient agricultural and food systems and increase the resilience of livelihoods to disasters” there are no specific project interventions, but the project will indirectly create resilience in its area which will minimize impacts of disasters. FAO’s competitive advantage of being associated with GoB on similar projects and proven FFS approach are not only relevant but crucial for this project.
- 92 The project is most relevant for the current development priorities declared by the Government of Bangladesh, Food Security. The Government of Bangladesh is working in collaboration with FAO in addressing it through several projects. The new government (since 2009) has taken up a pro-agriculture stand, and aims to achieve Food Security at national, household and individual level. The Country Program Framework (CPF) and UN Development Assistance Funds (UNDAF) provide an opportunity to revitalize the agriculture sector development programs. While it is recognized that agriculture can play a significant role in the growth and stability of the economy in Bangladesh, for it to be remunerative market linkages are critical and have to be backed by diversification of income sources to cope with risks. This is exactly what the project aims to achieve.
- 93 The project is built upon the evaluation findings of Special Programme for Food Security projects (SPFS) in particular – which bears similarity with the current project and helps address weaknesses such as: high geographical dispersion, late introduction of CRF, poor linkage between community mobilization, technology transfer and market linkages. The project is focussing on the disadvantaged rural population, particularly small and marginal farmers and women – which is a priority of all the partners in the project. The project is given more importance as it is expected to come up with a model of self-sustaining people-led institutions that will take care of local development priorities, including food production and income generation, but not limited to these.
- 94 The project is relevant to the target communities as all the interventions fulfil their urgent needs (food and income). At the same time all their needs cannot be fulfilled through one project. One major section of beneficiary communities is youth, who expressed that their priority is for ‘jobs’, and if possible in ‘foreign’ countries. The Gulf Arab states and India have huge attraction among the youth. Training in employable skills, guidance for safe migration and placement services are more relevant for them, More than one third of the target community is youth and their aspirations have to be taken into consideration.

Table 6: Relevant interventions suggested by the baseline study

Family level requirements	Area level requirements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of adequate institutional credit under simple terms and conditions and at a reasonable rate of interest for farm activities like crops, vegetables, livestock and fish farming as well as agricultural equipment and non-farm activities; • Supply of good quality seeds of rice and vegetables in time; • Ensured supply of pure fertilizers and insecticides at the door steps of the farmers • Electricity connection to each of the household for better social and cultural life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair prices for main commodities; • Training on various new agricultural and non-agricultural technologies • Agro-processing industries in suitable places • Formation of producers' cooperative for using some modern agricultural equipment (like DTW, STW, LLP, threshers, harvesters, sprayer, etc) • Excavation of rivers and digging of canals for holding water round the year for crop irrigation • Control Flash floods by constructing heavy embankments on the local rivers nearer to hilly areas; • improved roads and communication between villages and towns and city markets for better prices of agricultural commodities

95 These are the desirable interventions based on the beneficiary needs and aspirations as captured by the BAU through the Baseline Study. Only half on these are addressed by the project interventions so far. The ones which are not addressed through the project are underlined in the table above. Similarly a range of development issues expressed by men and women (captured the Gender equality section 5.3) are also crucial to address. The project will have to look into convergence with appropriate government programs to increase its relevance.

6.2 Efficiency

Box 5: Key findings

The project efficiency is significantly weakened by a number of issues; delayed start, inadequate preparatory work (no operational work plan, realistic timelines, no monitoring systems to track output and outcome level targets, no market studies for different products, lack of record keeping at family level, activity calendars and feedback mechanism etc), no relevant staff experience and rushing social mobilization analysis.

96 The project had a delayed start, and began without operational guidelines for complex components like institution building, monitoring systems to track output and outcome level targets, analysis of lessons from previous projects, staff exposure, market studies for different products, identifying existing good production practices, record keeping at family level, activity calendars and feedback mechanism etc., and defining inter-departmental commitments for convergence of resources. The initial phase of community mobilization and staff capacity building was rushed to make up lost time due to delayed start. Formation of VBOs, FFS, selecting vulnerable families for special assistance and disbursing funds all started simultaneously. This shortened the time required for changing community mind-set from grant based projects to participating in governance; for leaders to sharpen their facilitation skills and faith in democratic functioning, for beneficiary families to make informed choices of agro-enterprises before opting for microfinance etc.

97 Some decisions taken by the project management were helpful in increasing efficiency like keeping the project HQ in Mymensingh, the process of selecting village leaders and vulnerable Families, making 50 percent women's members mandatory, Community Field Schools (CFS) for rapid dissemination of practices, use of software for tallying the CRF transactions, display of basic information about VBOs on the boards for everyone to see etc. The evaluators observed that inefficiencies came in the project in its early stages and are yet to be fully addressed:

- Delays in staffing, not having an adequate number of staff with experience of handling

similar projects; gaps in communication amongst i.a. FAO and DAE staff, work pressure on GoB line departmental staff like SAAO who are expected to support the project but have no clear mandate;

- Rushing social mobilization: though the TPP mentions social capital building as first step it was expedited without assessing the quality of outcomes. The VBOs were expected to manage CRF before leaders were adequately trained. The VBOs were convened as democratic bodies to address village problems, were first expected to disburse VA (instead of VFIKR) - a welfare activity and are now busy managing Microfinance. This could have been done step by step.
- Inadequate preparatory work, not having operational guidelines for complex components like institution building, monitoring systems to track output and outcome level targets, analysis of lessons from previous projects, staff exposure, market studies for different products, identifying existing good production practices, record keeping at family level, activity calendars and feedback mechanism etc.

6.3 Effectiveness

Box 6: Key findings

The project achievements at the level of outputs are good; however, the project still has to demonstrate effectiveness in achieving its planned outcomes.

- 98 The project has covered the intended population. The families which received Vulnerability Assistance were found to be genuinely needy; the project has successfully enrolled more women than men as members, trainees and recipients of CRF; many new IGAs have been started; the families interviewed by the evaluators reported increases in income and reported satisfaction about the project introduced interventions. However in the absence of any records of production/income earned before and after the project interventions, the effectiveness of the interventions cannot be reported with evidence.
- 99 In the following table, an attempt is made to grade effectiveness of components without considering the efficiency/timeliness aspect. The effective ones are highlighted in green, not so effective in yellow and the ineffective ones in red.

Table 7: Effectiveness in the ET perspective

Component	Output achievement	Effectiveness of the outputs/outcomes
Institution building, management for and sustainability	VBO Formation 48/48 VBOs; 7 326 members registered against 13 319 planned	Most of the VBOs are still in formative stages; approximately 10 percent are able to perform independently with competent leaders who are democratic, and at least 10 percent are reported as having undesirable practices like favouritism, dominant leadership, not following rules & regulations.
	Women membership 54 percent/ against 50 percent planned	No gender analysis is carried out, the strategies are not for addressing gender gaps, women are able to express/amounts to tokenism
Livelihood promotion Livelihoods diversification	FFS/ CFS/ spot trainings 215 out of 400; 5 000 trained against the 7 000 planned	Majority have adopted practices and technologies; they report satisfaction over outcomes; FFS have shown results; - spot training and CFSs have scope for improving
	Agro enterprise 1 173 enterprises supported against the 7 326 registered	Enterprise options were discussed with families, there is no drop out reported, and families are expressing interest and satisfaction with the enterprises.
Microfinance: Financial access	Vulnerability Assistance 1 170 families covered against 2 664 planned	Though selection Special assistance is as grant not kept as collateral; use is not strategic but ad hoc; in the absence of handholding support
	Community Revolving Fund given to 46 out of 48 VBOs; approximately 1 Crore BDT disbursed against 6.46 Crores BDT Crores planned	Members are not readily coming forward to receive funds as they are at a interest rate; the IGAs are yet to generate surpluses, 91 percent are making timely repayment; portfolio at risk 23 percent;
	Marketing Linkages/Agrimalls Physical planning only five are ready with land and design	Poor preparedness, VBOs are not ready for 10 percent share, current and projected profit margins are not known to members; 3 local market linkages/ trading made more in the process.

6.4 Sustainability

Box 7: Key findings

The Project's sustainability remains doubtful. Its financial sustainability is highly questionable as it depends on incentives paid by the project. No exit strategy has been elaborated yet.

- 100 The project sustainability will depend on self-sustaining mechanisms for the three components. The institutions must become member centred and have good governance, technology transfer must be adopted so widely that livelihoods improve, production increases, the market linkages must be self-financed from profits made by producers and traders, and CRF should generate enough surplus to take care of overheads.
- 101 It must be acknowledged at the outset that sustainability is not easy to measure at this stage. The project has completed all the formation of VBOs, FFS, CRF, CIGs. The evaluators looked at the extent to which the project objectives are understood, internalized and owned by the VBO leaders and members. As they are the ones who will ultimately carry forward the work on the ground. The interviews and discussions made it clear that there is a lot of hope among the VBO members and leaders, but they still expect the government and FAO to provide support. In all the villages visited, the office bearers directly or indirectly demanded honorarium for the role they play and the time it takes to manage the VBOs. It is very natural to expect that they will be compensated, it happens in most places when

VBOs are in the initial stages. The test of the project is now how they will start seeing the benefits of VBOs and if they will be able to generate enough surpluses to compensate from member's contribution rather than the project.

- 102 The project is expected to have linkages with other public and private organizations/ initiatives working for food security and poverty alleviation; particularly by sharing experiences and exchange learnings with Vulnerable Group Development for Ultra Poor (VGDUP) and Food Security for Sustainable Household Livelihoods (FOSHOL), and linkages with Bangladesh Rural Development Committee (BRDC), World Food Programme (WFP), Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank (WB) and other donor organizations. There was no evidence or mention of how the project is attempting to follow this mandate. Such linkages would certainly be worthwhile, as the project implementation team is learning by doing and can benefit from field models.
- 103 Sustainability of project activities will depend on functional maturity and financial stability of VBOs and CIGs that are expected to carry forward the project initiated processes. Historically the projects are not discontinued after the external funding has been stopped, until the government has found a new source. In this project too, it is better not to expect that Government resources will flow at the same rate as during the project period, sustainability will depend on the extent to which the VBOs can revolve CRF. They will need training in financial management. The project has not yet come up with a clear exit strategy for handing over funds to the VBOs.

6.5 Impact

Box 8: Key findings

Overall, the data is inconclusive on "Impact". The indicator results reported on the project suggest that, on a pilot basis there is a positive increase in the food security of some the assisted beneficiaries.

- 104 The expected project impact is "Sustainable increase in food security among target community members" reflected in better nutritional status in 5000 HHs. In the absence of any evidence from the intended consumption and nutrition studies, the progress towards impact could not be verified.
- 105 However, production is increasing and new income sources are tapped by over 100 families. Most of the families with whom the evaluators interacted expressed satisfaction over increases in production or/and income from the project supported interventions. The extent of increase in production could not be verified, but it is likely to be slower than required for the project to achieve surplus food in the next two years. The 20 percent vulnerable families at the bottom of the pyramid are struggling today and will have to be monitored to achieve food security. In case of the rest it will be only a quantitative difference.
- 106 Gender equality is an imperative for food security as intra household distribution also has to be fair and equitable. The project has a lot more to do in this aspect.
- 107 For "Sustainable" increase in food security the project will have to work on an area level not just at the family level. Water scarcity is perceived as the major challenge for increasing crop intensity and livestock production. Adopting a water shed area development approach will be highly beneficial for further increases in food production.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

- 108 The project is very relevant and progress is being made in all components. By streamlining implementation, clarifying roles and responsibilities and improving M&E and MIS systems, the evaluators feel that it will be possible to achieve significant results and therefore an extension of the project is recommended.
- 109 The project concept and design is appropriate. The Project's theory of change is explicit but, the Project's LF is found to have missed the rationale behind the outcome indicators/targets. This hampers the monitoring of high level results and the project team is not able to report the project contribution at outcome and impact level.
- 110 Despite weaknesses in the project design and difficulties in management, the project achieved promising results. These results are the formation of VBOs and FFS, the introduction of CRF, advocating for community participation, and the involvement of vulnerable families in project activities and making. In addition a key criterion set by the project to receive special assistance and funds is to ensure that 50 percent of membership is represented by women. The aim is to contribute to changing community mind-sets and leading to more active participation of targeted vulnerable groups in governance issues.
- 111 Though the outputs achievement is satisfactory, it has to be converted into overall satisfactory outcome achievements. The project is at mid-way through and the outcome level results have not been monitored and reported. The annual household sample surveys to be done by BAU have yet to be designed. The project intended to include 50 percent women as members, trainees and recipients of funds. Nevertheless, the gender mainstreaming has not achieved clear outcomes and is not well demonstrated in the VBO processes. The capacity building inputs did not include explicit focus on gender equity. The project has an extensive capacity building component. Most of the capacity building efforts such as FFS, VBO leaders training in VBO management and the training of treasurer/accountants by CCULB seem to be effective. . In the absence of a result-based M&E system, the concern is that capacity building inputs are not evenly spread or effective. The Project has no exit strategy in place. Financial management of the Project's funds was efficient.
- 112 The project team could do a final round of participatory reviews and planning with the communities, which is supposed to feed into the next planning cycle. It is important to ensure the awareness, readiness and capacity for governance of VBOs members', so that at least CRF and technology introduced through the project will continue. At programme level for "Sustainable" increase in food security the project will have to work on issues like water management and developing common property resources. During the remaining months of the project, the team should try to strengthen the existing groups and discuss strategies for moving forward sustainably.
- 113 The evaluation team is convinced that a phase two of the project is recommended. In the remaining period and in follow-up projects more focus needs to be put on strengthening structure, systems and performance of the VBOs including specific modules for women and men leaders. Furthermore the establishment of micro-plans for each VBO to become viable and sustainable groups with clear vision and strategy, embedding the right to food and market development approaches should be focused upon.
- 114 In many developing countries, agricultural extension/rural development is moving from the public sector to the private sector to increase efficiency. This project has the potential to develop an alternative model where the 'public' takes charge of capacity development.

7.2 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: To FAO Bangladesh team

It is recommended that a request of an additional 18 months no-cost extension is submitted to the Government of Italy. The request for no-cost extension should include: a budget revision, a modified work plan and a clear exit strategy to cover the remaining months of implementation

Recommendation 2: To Project Steering Committee

Project SC needs to provide guidance and advice to the project management. It should support the project and ensure the successful completion of project activities and document lessons learnt.

- 115 To implement Recommendation 2, the ET suggests clarifying the role and responsibility of NPD and NPC. The accountability for the results has to be clearly defined along with required delegation of authorities. A modified organigram is proposed should the no-cost extension of the project be accepted see Annex 9.

Recommendation 3: To Project Implementation Unit

Project management should work on improving the project logical framework and impact monitoring. This review should be done in close consultation with Government and partners. The project should engage an M&E expert for the remaining months to improve and strengthen the M&E system.

- 116 The ET proposes that a workshop be organized jointly by the DAE and FAO. The workshop must focus on:
- Developing strategies for strengthening of VBOs, starting with performance grading. A framework is proposed by the ET in Annex 10;
 - Providing tailored capacity development trainings for the staff, VBO leaders, office and members, (particularly women.);
 - Develop communication and visibility strategy; It is crucial to involve all the associate organizations and selected community leaders, including women. The present MTE report can serve as a background for the workshop;
 - this workshop is an opportunity for preparing an exit strategy to be discussed with communities to be able to function without FAO;
 - Plan the launching of the annual sample surveys to establish benchmarks for income increase and nutritional status, and staff capacity development; and
 - The M&E expert should design a report outline that is analytical rather than descriptive.
- 117 It is important to ensure VBO members' awareness, readiness and capacity for governance, so that at least CRF and technology introduced through the project will continue. At program level for "Sustainable" increase in food security the project will have to work on issues like water management and developing common property resources.

Recommendation 4: To Project Implementation Unit

It is recommended to strengthen gender mainstreaming in project implementation and ensure that sex disaggregated data analysis where useful, is included.

- 118 The evaluation team suggests the following actions:
- Conduct gender training for project staff;
 - Develop a module for gender sensitization of men, VBO leaders, youth, traders and government officers, so as to create a supportive environment for women to participate as equal members;

- The project should assist in linking these groups to promising markets;
- Organize monthly meetings with women executives in VBOs to prepare them for the leaders role;
- Hire a gender and livelihoods consultant for documenting women's empowerment of this project.

