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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR EUROPE

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Learning from evaluations of FAO's work in Europe and Central Asia (2020–2023)

Executive Summary

The evaluations conducted in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region cover various aspects of FAO's work, including sustainable land and forest management, agricultural production, rural development and food security. These assessments emphasize FAO's crucial role in advancing sustainable agricultural development through its technical expertise, innovative solutions and strategic partnerships. This report underscores significant contributions made within the three Regional Initiatives, with a particular focus on the integration of new technologies and capacity-building efforts. It highlights the importance of partnerships in FAO's success and emphasizes the critical role of national commitment and ownership in establishing institutional frameworks and operational support to maintain achieved results. Lessons learned include the importance of addressing operational assumptions at the project design phase, adopting programmatic approaches for sustainability, maintaining strategic partnerships, utilizing credible data and technology, and prioritizing knowledge dissemination for operational success.

This 2024 report for the ECA region follows on the syntheses completed in 2020 and 2022 and responds to the request of the Thirty-second Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe, held 2–4 November 2020, to include an item on evaluation as a regular feature in future regional conferences.¹

Suggested action by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference is invited to encourage the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia to pursue actions in response to the topics and lessons highlighted in this report.

¹ FAO. 2020. *Synthesis of FAO Evaluations 2014–2019 in Europe and Central Asia Region*. Thirty-second Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe. Tashkent, Uzbekistan, 5–7 May 2020. <https://www.fao.org/3/nc230en/nc230en.pdf>

Documents can be consulted at www.fao.org

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I. This report aims to inform discussions in the Regional Conference²

1. This brief report provides findings and lessons from evaluations conducted by FAO's Office of Evaluation (OED) over the past four years (2020–2023). It also includes an analysis of OED recommendations to the region. The objective of this report is to inform discussions during the Regional Conference for Europe.
2. The information provided is based on the subset of evaluations completed (see Section II) and, therefore, does not cover the full spectrum of FAO's activities in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region.
3. The remainder of this report identifies the evaluations included (Section II) and highlights evaluation findings (Section III), recommendations (Section IV) and implications for the future (Section V).

II. This report is based on 11 evaluations completed in 2020–2023 in nine countries and covering 70 projects

4. Specifically, the analysis is based on:
 - a. three country programme evaluations that included a full review of project activities in Armenia³ (18 projects), Georgia⁴ (23 projects) and the Republic of Moldova⁵ (29 projects); and
 - b. eight individual project evaluations covering FAO's activities in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan,⁶ Serbia, Tajikistan, Türkiye and Ukraine.
5. These evaluations encompassed a wide spectrum of FAO's areas of work, ranging from sustainable land and forest management to agricultural production, rural development and food security, including all Regional Initiatives.

² FAO's Office of Evaluation conducts evaluations to assess the performance of the Organization against its objectives and provide accountability to Members Nations. This brief report responds to a call from the Thirty-third Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe in 2022: "Evaluations should serve to review and adjust ongoing interventions and feed into the design of new ones." See: **FAO**. 2022. *Synthesis of FAO Evaluations 2020–2021 in Europe and Central Asia Region*. Thirty-third Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Europe. Łódź, Poland, 10–13 May 2022. <https://www.fao.org/3/ni193en/ni193en.pdf>

³ **FAO**. 2020. *Evaluation of FAO's country programme in Armenia 2016–2020*. Country Programme Evaluation Series, 10/2020. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/CB1353EN/>

⁴ **FAO**. 2020. *Evaluation of FAO's contribution to Georgia 2016–2019*. Country Programme Evaluation Series, 03/2020. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8257en>

⁵ **FAO**. 2021. *Evaluation of FAO's contribution to the Republic of Moldova 2016–2019*. Country Programme Evaluation Series, 07/2021. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb5485en>

⁶ **FAO**. 2022. *Terminal evaluation of the project "Participatory assessment of land degradation and sustainable land management in grassland and pastoral systems"*. Project Evaluation Series, 02/2022. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb8597en>

III. FAO plays a vital role in the region

6. Findings from evaluations conducted over the past four years have unequivocally affirmed FAO's indispensable role in advancing sustainable agriculture development.

Leveraging its technical expertise, innovative solutions and strategic partnerships, FAO has played a pivotal role in promoting progress.

7. FAO's work in the region is driven by specialized technical expertise and innovative solutions. Substantial contributions have been made across the three Regional Initiatives,⁷ with a notable emphasis on new technologies and capacity-building efforts supporting various stakeholders. For example, the evaluation of the project "Sustainable Land Management and Climate-Friendly Agriculture"⁸ demonstrated that biodiversity mainstreaming into forest and rangeland management and restoration practices can be considered a model for designing new forestry projects. The evaluation showed that FAO developed an approach to be used throughout biodiversity management planning in Türkiye. The project promoted understanding and disseminated the technical approaches to promote conservation agriculture, such as no-till farming, wind breaks, biogas digesters and enhanced irrigation. The project's approach to integrated land management already has been taken up by governmental and international funding programmes.

8. Technical capacity development has been a powerful enabler in the region, with particular focus on developing technology for data collection. The evaluation of the project "Integrated Natural Resources Management in Degraded Landscapes in the Forest-Steppe and Steppe Zones of Ukraine"⁹ highlighted a new, integrated approach to soil management. This approach aims to stop soil degradation, creating the conditions for sustainable land use in arid conditions. This may have important long-term stabilizing and improving effects on ecosystems and soils. Similarly, the evaluation of the project "Contribution of sustainable forest management to a low-emission and resilient development in Serbia"¹⁰ concluded that the use of innovative technology was a contributing factor for the replication and potential scale-up of project results, leading to the likelihood of further implementation of the project results in the Serbian forestry sector. This may serve as a good foundation for the forthcoming partnership with the Green Climate Fund.

9. Partnerships have been instrumental for success. FAO is seen as a credible partner in the region, bringing a wealth of knowledge, technical skills and financial resources to partnerships. Multidisciplinary working groups at national and regional levels – including partners from the private sector, academic entities, government institutions and other United Nations agencies – have helped develop sustainable agrifood systems. A project in Armenia provides an example of a successful private sector collaboration. FAO adeptly oversaw the institutional dimensions of the partnership and played a key role in facilitating the creation and endorsement of a comprehensive public-private partnership agreement between the Ministry of Agriculture of Armenia and a local fish farm. As part of the partnership, FAO provided funding for essential equipment to a local company focusing on water resource utilization for fish production. Similarly, the evaluation of the FAO-Türkiye Partnership Programme¹¹ noted that the programme stood out for the depth and breadth of collaborative activities between Türkiye and the Central Asian region, creating additional opportunities for partnership development.¹² For example, FAO launched a subregional project targeting policy and grassroots community action for socially inclusive agrifood systems and joined efforts with United Nations partners in sharing knowledge, advocating for gender equality in food

⁷ For more information about the three Regional Initiatives/Regional Priority Programmes, please visit <https://www.fao.org/europe/work-in-the-region/regional-priority-programmes/en>

⁸ FAO. 2024. *Terminal evaluation of the project "Sustainable Land Management and Climate-friendly Agriculture"*. Project Evaluation Series, 06/2024. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc9450en>

⁹ FAO. (forthcoming). *Evaluation of the project "Integrated Natural Resources Management in Degraded Landscapes in the Forest-Steppe and Steppe Zones of Ukraine."* Rome. Publication in progress.

¹⁰ FAO. (forthcoming). *Evaluation of the project "Contribution of sustainable forest management to a low emission and resilient development in Serbia."* Rome. Publication in progress.

¹¹ FAO's Office of Evaluation evaluated the programme in 2019.

¹² For example, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Regional Coordination Centre for Food Security for the implementation of the ECO/FAO Regional Programme for Food Security.

systems and supporting the regional refugee response to the war in Ukraine. The intention behind this project's focus on intraregional cooperation was to economize the operations of the FAO–Türkiye Partnership Programme and to contribute to a greater self-reliance on the expertise available in the subregion (particularly in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan).

10. **FAO builds paths to data-driven public sectors.** FAO promoted several initiatives on digital technologies and information systems as powerful tools for advanced analytics in support of policymaking, interagency coordination and reporting.¹³ The evaluation of the project “Forest Resources Assessment and Monitoring to Strengthen Forest Knowledge Framework in Azerbaijan”¹⁴ found significant achievements related to the most strategic dimensions of the project linked to the national forest inventory, forest management plan, and associated capacity development activities at institutional and individual levels. Prior to the project, existing data on national forests were incomplete and outdated, with the last country forestry inventory having been conducted in 1988. FAO supported the implementation of the Agricultural and Rural Integrated Survey in Armenia, Georgia and Kazakhstan, with implementation support from FAO headquarters and Regional Offices, Subregional Offices and Country Offices. In Armenia, the agricultural census is seen as a game changer. The data have been used to develop the country's Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy 2019–2029. The country programme evaluation in the Republic of Moldova highlighted how FAO provided technical support to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry and the National Bureau of Statistics to collect and process national and regional data, calculate standard output coefficients and develop agriculture farm typology in line with European Union standards.

11. **An enabling environment is key to success.** National commitment and ownership are vital for establishing institutional frameworks and operational support to sustain achieved results. Frequent shifts in government development priorities, influenced by the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change pose challenges in the region, hindering the institutionalization and replication of project outcomes. The evaluation of the project “Integrated Natural Resources Management in Degraded Landscapes in the Forest-Steppe and Steppe Zones of Ukraine”¹⁵ identified favourable political support for environmentally sustainable natural resource management due to policy reforms. However, missed opportunities in legislation adaptation and the establishment of a national land degradation neutrality monitoring system occurred due to unclear institutional responsibilities and a volatile environment. To address these challenges, stronger political will, favourable contexts and vision from national governments are needed, along with increased capacity within Country Offices in terms of size and resources.

12. Similarly, the evaluation of the project “Forest Resources Assessment and Monitoring to Strengthen Forest Knowledge Framework in Azerbaijan”¹⁶ recommended engaging with the Government of Azerbaijan to enact essential modifications to legal and policy documents to promote the sustainability of project accomplishments and mitigate risks. Specifically, key stakeholders emphasized the need for heightened awareness and robust leadership to enhance sustainable forest management approaches, potentially involving updates to the outdated Forest Code, or addressing financial and resource challenges faced by the Forest Development Department in scaling up project outcomes. While acknowledging FAO's comparative advantage in assisting the initiation of the agrarian reform in Tajikistan, the evaluation of the project “Strengthening institutions and capacity of

¹³ One example is the Regional Technical Platform on Green Agriculture. For more information, please visit <https://www.fao.org/platforms/green-agriculture/about/en>.

¹⁴ FAO. 2023. *Terminal evaluation of the project “Forest Resources Assessment and Monitoring to Strengthen Forestry Policy and Knowledge Framework”*. Project Evaluation Series. 04/2023. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc3114en>

¹⁵ FAO. (forthcoming). *Evaluation of the project “Integrated Natural Resources Management in Degraded Landscapes in the Forest-Steppe and Steppe Zones of Ukraine.”* Rome. Publication in progress.

¹⁶ FAO. 2023. *Terminal evaluation of the project “Forest Resources Assessment and Monitoring to Strengthen Forestry Policy and Knowledge Framework”*. Project Evaluation Series. 04/2023. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc3114en>

the Ministry of Agriculture and State Veterinary Inspection Service for Policy Formulation”¹⁷ made a number of recommendations for successful policy reform. This included working closely with relevant ministries and stakeholders, guiding the process from the start through endorsement, and offering capacity building and training for involved ministries.

13. **Improved communications and knowledge management emerge as critical for successful implementation and sustainability.** The evaluation of the project “Conservation and Sustainable Management of Türkiye’s Steppe Ecosystems”¹⁸ recommended a more holistic approach to connect direct and indirect beneficiaries through well-defined communication channels. Similarly, the evaluation of the project “Strengthening institutions and capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Veterinary Inspection Service for Policy Formulation”¹⁹ in Tajikistan noted that information generated by the project was not always available to interested stakeholders. For example, the Agency for Hydrometeorology was reluctant to share the data from the three pilots on agrometeorological forecasting of crops. The evaluation recommended that agreements to share tools and information be established before investments are made available – within the project’s scope – to interested stakeholders. Admittedly, some projects face challenges beyond their control; for example, the evaluation of the project “Forest Resources Assessment and Monitoring to Strengthen Forest Knowledge Framework in Azerbaijan”²⁰ concluded that several exogenous factors affected the project’s outreach and dissemination of results, such as ownership of online content created by the project, restricted to one partner (the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources).

14. **Responses to the 2022 FAO Regional Conference for Europe report actions.** The FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia has made progress in addressing actions related to the thematic areas of monitoring and gender. FAO’s Office of Evaluation acknowledges activities at country and regional levels to strengthen results-based monitoring by developing monitoring systems. This is critical to ensuring the availability of high-quality data. Additionally, the Regional Office has continued supporting socially inclusive and gender-equitable agrifood system policies and practices by conducting country gender assessments (in Azerbaijan and the Republic of Moldova they were delivered in 2022). Similarly, evidence of progress towards gender transformative change in project implementation can be found in the example of the extension component of the project “FAO support to Georgian agricultural sector under ENPARD III”.²¹

IV. Acting on recommendations of evaluations will catalyse progress towards objectives

15. The evaluations conducted in the ECA region over the past four years include 85 recommendations that were fully (75 percent) or partially (25 percent) accepted by FAO Management. These underscore the importance of robust and strategic intervention designs in collaboration with governments and other key partners, effective communications and knowledge management, and capacity development (Figure 1). These areas account for nearly 60 percent of recommendations. Details regarding the subareas of focus of these recommendations appear in Table 1.

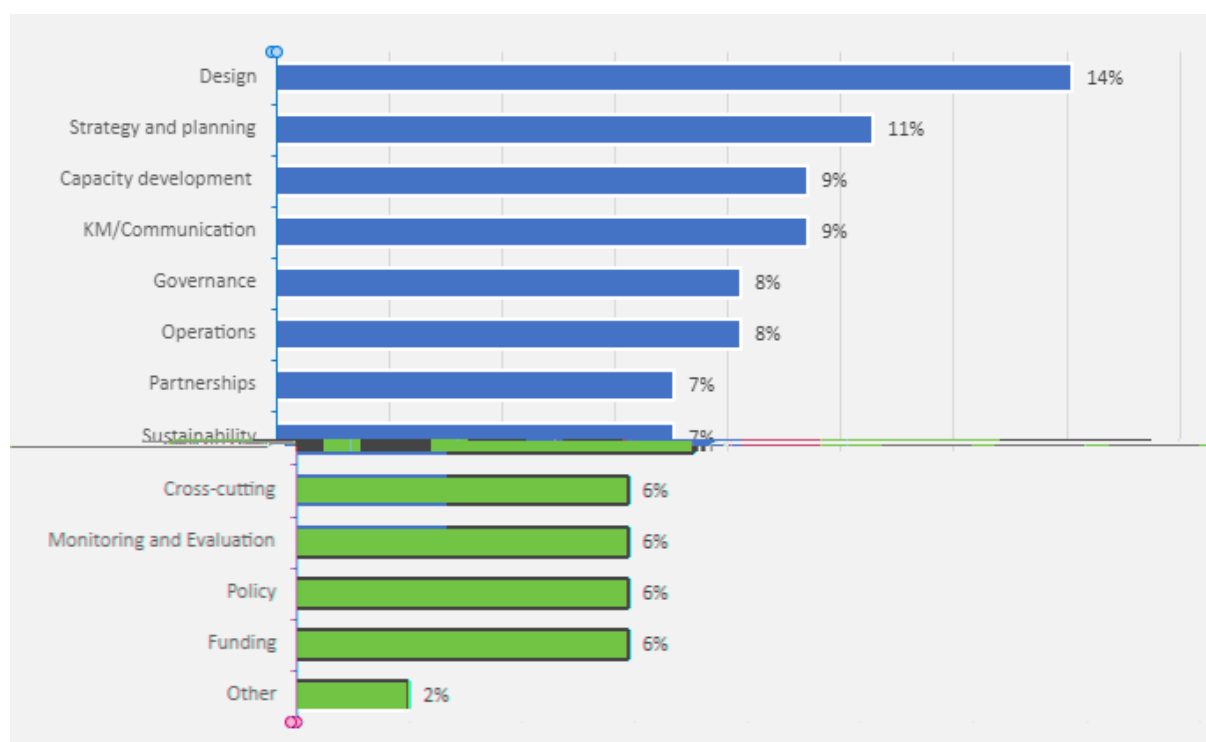
¹⁷ FAO. 2023. *Evaluation of the project “Strengthening institutions and capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Veterinary Inspection Service for Policy Formulation”*. Project Evaluation Series, 20/2023. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc7327en>

¹⁸ FAO. (forthcoming). *Evaluation of the project “Conservation and Sustainable Management of Türkiye’s Steppe Ecosystems in Türkiye”* Rome. Publication in progress.

¹⁹ FAO. 2023. *Evaluation of the project “Strengthening institutions and capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Veterinary Inspection Service for Policy Formulation”*. Project Evaluation Series, 20/2023. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc7327en>

²⁰ FAO. 2023. *Terminal evaluation of the project “Forest Resources Assessment and Monitoring to Strengthen Forestry Policy and Knowledge Framework”*. Project Evaluation Series. 04/2023. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc3114en>

²¹ FAO. 2023. *Evaluation of the project “FAO support to the Georgian agricultural sector (European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development [ENPARD III])”*. Project Evaluation Series, 30/2023. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc9230en>

Figure 1. Distribution of topics of recommendations from evaluations of projects in Europe and Central Asia**Table 1. Key areas of focus identified in the past four years of recommendations**

Main topic in recommendation	Subtopic
Project design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting risk analyses • Developing a theory of change to drive project design • Pursuing an integrated programmatic approach • Conducting country-specific needs assessments • Integrating lessons from previous projects
Strategy and planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborating strategically with governments • Focusing on areas reflecting a comparative advantage
Capacity development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing Country Offices' technical capacities on food safety objectives • Providing training
Knowledge management and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing learning and guidance materials • Leveraging partnerships
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging with policy dialogue platforms • Providing technical support to governments
Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing flexible designs to adapt as contexts change • Actively managing risks • Improving decentralized procurement

16. Evaluation reports are followed by a management response. Responses from ECA management²² reveal that 32 percent of the accepted recommendations required the implementation of “new” actions, primarily in design and knowledge management. In 42 percent of the cases, ongoing actions were reaffirmed, particularly in governance, policy and resource mobilization. Notably, recommendations on policy, especially those related to policy reforms and diagnostic tools, exhibit the highest percentage of partially accepted recommendations (50 percent).

17. Management responses are followed by self-assessed follow-up reports prepared by management. As reported by ECA management, a majority of recommendations have follow-up scores between “adequate” and “good” (57 percent), followed by “poor” and “inadequate” (29 percent), with a fully implemented score “excellent” at 14 percent.²³ Poor performance in implementing accepted recommendations is identified in recommendations related to design and monitoring, sustainability and operations. The “excellent” rating is predominantly associated with strategy and planning.

18. A number of lessons emerge from an analysis of recommendations offered through evaluations completed over the past few years:

- a. **Explicit operational assumptions need to be made at project design phase.** Political and institutional contexts should be explicitly addressed in project designs, incorporating flexibility for unforeseen disruptions. Complex projects that encompass multiple activities and expected outcomes should consider phased implementation approaches to avoid compromising quality.
- b. **Sustainability may be enhanced through programmatic approaches.** Projects, particularly single ones, have greater potential for sustainability when nested in medium- to long-term programmes and/or institutionalized through relevant ministries and agencies. Future projects should ensure that local partners possess the necessary skills to sustain the effort over time. Policies, financing and exit strategies should be in place before project conclusion.
- c. **Strategic and inclusive partnerships need to be maintained or developed.** FAO’s success in the region is attributed to strong partnerships with governments, producer organizations, United Nations entities and other development partners. The importance of strategic partnerships with the private sector is highlighted for addressing emerging challenges and contributing to fundraising.
- d. **Credible data and technology should inform evidence-based design and project implementation.** Evaluations underscore the role of data and technology in accelerating results. Improving the quality of agricultural surveys and making data accessible can enhance analytic capacity, benefiting farmers and civil society and enhancing FAO’s contributions to regional development objectives.

²² To promote accountability for evaluation recommendations, the United Nations Evaluation Group requires a formal and systematic management response. This allows management to indicate whether they agree, partially agree or disagree with each recommendation. The management response also must indicate which actions will be put in place to address each recommendation that is agreed upon or partially agreed upon. All actions indicated in the management responses need to be tracked and reported through a follow-up report submitted by management.

²³ Two years after submitting the management response to recommendations of an evaluation, a follow-up report is due. This report includes a Management Action Record, which is a quantitative self-assessment of progress in implementing the actions proposed to address each recommendation. The scores are the following: 1 – None: no action was taken to implement the recommendation; 2 – Poor: plan and actions for implementation of the recommendation are at a very preliminary stage; 3 – Inadequate: implementation of the recommendation is uneven and partial; 4 – adequate: implementation of the recommendation has progressed; there is no evidence yet of its results on the intended target; 5 – Good: the recommendation has been fully implemented and there is some initial evidence of its impact on the intended target; 6 – Excellent: there is solid evidence that the recommendation has had a positive impact on its intended target.

- e. **The dissemination of knowledge is paramount to operational success.** Knowledge management techniques can promote dissemination project results to wider audiences to cross-fertilize good practices and innovative approaches. For example, establishing platforms such as websites for educational materials enhances the visibility and use of knowledge products, contributing to greater regional impacts.

V. Future evaluations will respond to regional learning priorities and existing obligations while adhering to the FAO Office of Evaluation’s new strategy

19. FAO’s Office of Evaluation will continue assessing FAO’s activities in the ECA region, selecting opportunities to advance learning from evaluations through a pool of approximately 40 projects scheduled for completion in the next five years. To guide decisions regarding which evaluations to conduct, the Office of Evaluation will follow the selection criteria included in its new strategy.²⁴ Examples include alignment with regional learning priorities, timeliness to inform decisions, and compliance with existing obligations.

20. In addition, the Office of Evaluation is currently in the process of developing a regional learning agenda that will include critical questions that respond to regional learning priorities. These will guide the design of new evaluations, reviews or studies conducted in the region. FAO’s Office of Evaluation will also align plans for country programme evaluations with the timing for developing country programming frameworks and consultations with the management of the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia. Lastly, given existing obligations, in 2024, the Office of Evaluation will prioritize evaluating FAO’s response to the war in Ukraine and evaluations of Green Climate Fund and Global Environment Facility projects.

²⁴ For more information on the FAO Evaluation Strategy 2023–2025, please see <https://www.fao.org/evaluation/highlights/detail/fao-evaluation-strategy-2023-2025/en>.