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# PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

**Hundred and Thirty-fifth Session**

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**FAO Evaluation Strategy 2023-2025**

An Interim Strategy for the Office of Evaluation to build an architecture for excellence in supporting Management and Members' culture of evidence in decision-making

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This document includes the interim strategy of the Office of Evaluation (OED). The strategy builds on the initial information provided in the updated Work Plan for Evaluations 2022-25 (document PC 134/4) and the presentation made by the Director of Evaluation to the Programme Committee at its 134th Session (November 2022).<sup>1</sup> The strategy takes into account recommendations of the last Evaluation of FAO's evaluation function – which are aimed at strengthening evaluation capacity and improving quality, utility and use of evaluations – and feedback from FAO Senior Management and Programme Committee Members.
- This strategy will be used to enhance OED's capacity and delivery of services over the next couple of years, while the new evaluation policy is being developed and approved. Once the new policy is in place, OED will build on this interim strategy to develop an evaluation strategy for all of FAO that aligns with the new policy.
- This strategy articulates the mission of OED as enabling informed decisions. To achieve this mission, OED seeks to generate evidence and recommendations that inform *thinking, deliberations* and, ultimately, *decisions* of FAO, Members, donors, partners and other actors seeking to support the 2030 Agenda through the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems for *better production, better nutrition, a better environment* and a *better life*, leaving no one behind (FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31). The spirit behind the mission and vision of OED is *formative*, that is, focused on promoting improvements.
- OED will pursue its mission and vision through work in five focus areas over the next few years – namely, planning and monitoring, strengthening capacity, research and innovation, evaluations for use, and dissemination for broader impact. This document presents key activities in each of these focus areas, including enhancing procedures to select evaluations, reorganizing the Office, operating globally as “OneOED,” embracing research and innovation, conducting rigorous evaluations, and expanding quality assurance processes and dissemination activities. The aim of these changes is to ensure that OED produces high -quality evaluations that meet the needs of FAO stakeholders.
- OED has organized transition teams to flesh out how to execute the strategy in consultation with internal and external partners, including FAO Management, personnel and Members. OED is harnessing the experience, technical expertise, and commitment of its personnel to drive a transformation of the Office and its work. We welcome feedback on this strategy and look forward to engaging a wide range of stakeholders in further planning and in executing it.

### GUIDANCE SOUGHT FROM THE PROGRAMME COMMITTEE

- The Programme Committee is invited to review the content of the document and provide guidance as deemed appropriate.

<sup>1</sup> FAO. 2022. Work Plan of Evaluations 2022-2025 – Update. PC 134/4. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/nk098en/nk098en.pdf>

## I. Introduction

1. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) leads international efforts to combat hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition. The unprecedented events of the last few years – escalating conflicts, COVID-19, climate change, rising costs – have made FAO’s job all the more challenging and needed.<sup>2</sup> FAO Office of Evaluation (OED) plays a critical role in generating evidence that can help guide decisions – policy, programmatic, operational and financial decisions – made by Members and FAO Management.

2. The Programme Committee invited the new Director of OED to share her vision for the future of the Office under her leadership and to describe the changes needed to execute that vision. This document expands on the initial information provided in document PC 134/4 (Work Plan of Evaluations 2022-2025 – Update).<sup>3</sup> OED is also using this opportunity to follow up on the recommendations of the last Evaluation of FAO’s evaluation function (2016).<sup>4</sup> Recommendations included:

- a. Strengthening evaluation capacity by “tackling human resource issues,” in particular addressing gaps in technical expertise and providing “internal and/or external quality assurance” at different stages of the evaluation process.
- b. Improving the quality and utility of evaluations by using more robust and innovative methodologies and by focusing on assessing results.
- c. Promoting use of evaluations through dissemination of a wider range of products, such as briefs.
- d. Developing an evaluation policy for all FAO (draft scheduled for 136th Session of the Programme Committee in Autumn 2023).

3. Against this backdrop, this document presents an interim strategy focused on OED. It includes the mission and vision for OED and reflects the strategic approach that will be used to enhance OED’s capacity and delivery of services over the next couple of years, while the new evaluation policy is developed and approved. Once the new policy is in place, OED will build on this interim strategy to develop an evaluation strategy for all of FAO that aligns with the new policy, as evaluations are conducted across the Organization, not just through OED. The intent in issuing this interim strategy is to match the urgency of the challenges that FAO is tackling and the ambition of FAO’s goals and work, as described in the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31, by moving forward with needed reforms (particularly those that respond to the above recommendations to strengthen OED).

4. This interim strategy also reflects OED’s commitment to conducting high-quality evaluations that provide useful and actionable evidence for FAO and its stakeholders. It underscores OED’s commitment to measuring results – outcomes and impacts – to support robust ongoing learning while continuing to ensure accountability for FAO’s work. OED also seeks to leverage the opportunities created by the evaluations of FAO’s breadth of work – including normative and policy advice, projects, programmes and other initiatives – to contribute to the knowledge base across fields in which FAO operates, whenever this may be achieved as a byproduct of OED’s work in support of FAO and its Members.

5. This interim strategy is guided by and upholds the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards for Evaluation, adhering to the principles of utility and credibility, independence and impartiality, ethics and transparency, human rights and gender equality in

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<sup>2</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2022. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022. Repurposing food and agricultural policies to make healthy diets more affordable. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0639en>

<sup>3</sup> FAO. 2022. Work Plan of Evaluations 2022-2025 – Update. PC 134/4. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/nk098en/nk098en.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> FAO. 2016. Evaluation of FAO’s evaluation function. PC 120/5. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/mr742e/mr742e.pdf>

evaluations.<sup>5</sup> This strategy is also guided by UN General Assembly resolution 69/237, which asks United Nations entities to support efforts to strengthen national evaluation capacity. Lastly, the interim strategy reflects General Assembly resolution 72/279 on “Repositioning the United Nations development system”, which intends to enable the UN to support the 2030 Agenda at country level.

6. For OED, this strategy is a living document intentionally designed as a tool for planning and to facilitate consultations with FAO stakeholders in fleshing out action plans to execute it. It incorporates useful feedback received from an informal consultation with Programme Committee Members, FAO Evaluation Committee Members and FAO Assistant Directors-General/Regional Representatives.

7. This document includes four sections in addition to this introduction. Section II describes the mission, vision, spirit and goals of OED. Sections III and IV present the overall strategic approach and some activities, respectively, that OED will carry out over the next couple of years to improve its ability to support FAO by generating useful evidence, making potentially transformative recommendations, and contributing to the knowledge base. This document presents an architecture for change. As noted in Section V (Next steps), a significant effort will be required to flesh out actions or implementation plans in consultation with FAO stakeholders in headquarters and across the regions.

## II. Mission, vision, spirit and goals

8. **Mission:** To enable well-informed decisions. The mission of FAO’s evaluation function is to support and promote stakeholders’ culture of evidence in decision-making.

9. **Vision:** OED generates evidence and recommendations that inform *thinking, deliberations* and, ultimately, *decisions* of FAO, Members, donors, partners and other actors seeking to support the 2030 Agenda through the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems for *better production, better nutrition, a better environment* and a *better life*, leaving no one behind (FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31).

10. **Spirit:** The spirit behind OED’s mission and vision is *formative*, that is, focused on promoting improvements by providing evidence and making recommendations that can guide decisions – such as strategic, policy, programmatic and funding decisions – in support of FAO goals.

11. **Goals:** OED will pursue its mission and vision by:

- a. Generating robust and useful evidence that supports learning and accountability.
- b. Making potentially transformative recommendations to FAO stakeholders.
- c. Contributing knowledge to the field(s) in which FAO operates.

## III. Approach

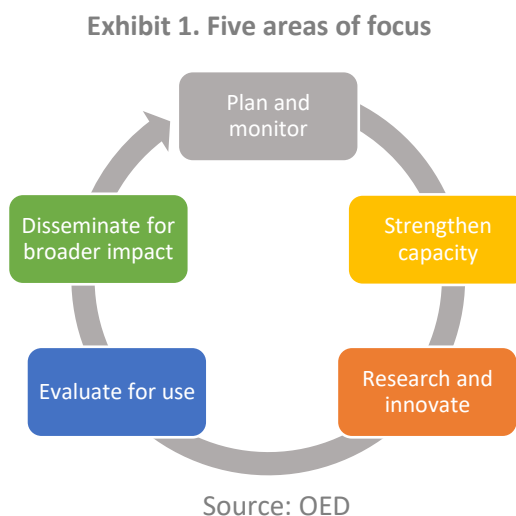
12. OED will pursue work that:

- a. Is useful to stakeholders – generating actionable evidence to inform decisions.
- b. Adds value to the knowledge base – avoiding unhelpful duplication.
- c. Complements work of others in the field – through knowledge management and coordination.

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<sup>5</sup> UNEG. 2016. Norms and Standards for Evaluation (2016). <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914> (available in the official UN languages).

13. OED will pursue its work through five focus areas and two objectives to achieve in each area:



- a. Plan and monitor
 

Objective 1.1: Promote strategic use of resources in alignment with FAO information needs by regularly assessing demand to identify priorities for evidence-building activities.

Objective 1.2: Develop policies and processes to support human and financial resources decisions, promote effectiveness and efficiency, and monitor performance of OED.
- b. Strengthen capacity
 

Objective 2.1: Operate as OneOED. Develop a human resources and decentralization strategy to strengthen capacity to conduct, manage and partner to carry out the work of OED globally.

Objective 2.2: Expand quality assurance processes to provide supportive and robust quality assurance throughout the life cycle of OED's work.
- c. Research and innovate
 

Objective 3.1: Embrace research as critical to designing evaluations, answering stakeholder questions, and supporting policy and process development.

Objective 3.2: Use cutting-edge data science and information technologies (IT) solutions in support of organizational success (in planning, monitoring the portfolio, collecting data and other activities).
- d. Evaluate for use
 

Objective 4.1: Design evaluations to include measuring results of intervention approaches (outcomes and impacts) whenever possible and appropriate.

Objective 4.2: Conduct rigorous evaluations to ensure high quality and the needed standard of evidence to promote use.
- e. Disseminate for broader impact
 

Objective 5.1: Strengthen and diversify internal dissemination to facilitate use of evidence and to adapt OED's work based on stakeholder feedback.

Objective 5.2: Expand the toolkit of external dissemination strategies to promote transparency and support broader use of evidence in the UN system and beyond.

## IV. Key elements of the strategy

### A. Plan and monitor

Objective 1.1: Promote strategic use of resources in alignment with FAO information needs by regularly assessing demand to identify priorities for evidence-building activities.

Objective 1.2: Develop policies and processes to support human and financial resources decisions, promote effectiveness and efficiency, and monitor performance of OED.

14. All of OED's work will stem from and feed into planning and monitoring efforts in a circular loop that will ensure continuous adaptation of OED's strategy based on experiences implementing it and changes in the operating environment (see Exhibit 1).

15. Examples of OED activities in this area of work include:

- a. Developing or revising policies, such as the new FAO evaluation policy that will guide evaluations across the Organization.
- b. Developing procedures for OED evaluations, such as a process and criteria to select priority evaluations given growing demand (see Exhibit 2).
- c. Leveraging advances in technology and data science in support of project management, portfolio monitoring and evaluations.
- d. Reorganizing OED to structure the work and the personnel in ways that promote efficiencies in the conduct of work and provide enhanced support for the personnel.

#### Exhibit 2. Selection criteria

These criteria will be used to guide the selection of evaluations:

1. Respond to learning priorities from Governing Bodies or the Director-General.
2. Fill a gap in evidence for FAO.
3. Have the potential to support decisions.
4. Can be adequately resourced given the learning objectives.
5. Have potential to yield knowledge of broad use.

These criteria shall be assessed as follows:

- i. Criteria 1 and 4, together, are a sufficient condition for selection.
- ii. Criteria 2, 3, and 4 are necessary but not sufficient conditions for selection.
- iii. Evaluation (and research) questions meeting criteria 2 to 5 are likely to be selected.

Note: The universe of potential evaluations to be considered by OED will adhere to the decisions reflected in the Report of the 132nd Session of the FAO Council (June 2007), adjusted for inflation.

Source: OED

### B. Strengthen capacity

Objective 2.1: Operate as OneOED. Develop a human resources and decentralization strategy to strengthen capacity to conduct, manage and partner to carry out the work of OED globally.

Objective 2.2: Expand quality assurance processes to provide supportive and robust quality assurance throughout the life cycle of OED's work.

16. OED will develop and implement a comprehensive human resources and decentralization strategy based on five pillars:

- a. Targeted hiring to fill skills gaps, relying on duty stations throughout the regions in which FAO operates to expand the pool of qualified candidates and identify subject matter specialists for evaluation teams.
- b. Intentional mentoring, support, and on-the-job training of personnel, pairing junior and senior personnel strategically on evaluations and providing more robust support through expanded quality assurance processes (described in item 12).
- c. Strategic development of new partnerships, promoting internal collaborations within FAO, such as with personnel in technical units conducting evaluations, and external collaborations with academic, research, UN and other organizations.
- d. Pivoting to OneOED or “integrated decentralization” as described in paragraph 17.
- e. Leveraging OED’s work to enhance collaborations and partnerships at country level to contribute to building national evaluation capacity of its Members.

17. OED will continue to refine its approach to decentralization based on early experiences and in alignment with FAO Management feedback on the critical need to maintain the independence of the evaluation function.<sup>6</sup> Starting in 2023, OED will proceed with the creation of regional evaluation teams by outposting OED personnel (as originally proposed) and also hiring personnel in duty stations outside headquarters. Coined OneOED or “integrated decentralization,” it is best described as one team, in

### Exhibit 3. Brief overview of decentralization (2020-2022)

Decentralization of evaluations started in 2020 in response to a recommendation of the 2016 Evaluation of FAO’s evaluation function and following the endorsement by the 128th Session of the Programme Committee, in May 2020, of OED's proposal entitled “Enhancing FAO’s capacity to evaluate contributions at country level: Proposal for Strengthening Evaluation in Decentralized Offices”.\* A key element of the proposed plan was the creation of regional evaluation teams.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the plan was adapted and, instead of outposting OED personnel to the regions as originally envisioned, six regional evaluation specialists (RES) were hired with OED funding to work in FAO’s five Regional Offices. These specialists report to the Regional Offices, oversee a growing portfolio of project evaluations in their regions, and receive technical support from headquarters through the OED decentralization support team. To ensure continuity and stability of the role at regional level, five P4 positions (one in each Regional Office) have been created and are expected to be filled soon.

Ongoing consultations with stakeholders in the regions, stakeholders in headquarters and evaluation colleagues from other UN agencies – as well as OED and RES experiences over the past two years – will inform revisions to the decentralization approach. As appropriate, these will be documented in an action or implementation plan, the new evaluation policy, and the future FAO Evaluation Strategy.

\*Source: FAO. 2020b. Enhancing FAO’s capacity to evaluate contributions at country level: Proposal for Strengthening Evaluation in Decentralized Offices. PC 128/6. <https://www.fao.org/3/nc856en/nc856en.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> In responding to the original proposal to create regional evaluation teams, FAO Management noted: “Regarding the proposed Regional Evaluation Teams composed of outposted OED staff, Management concurs that such teams are likely to benefit from better understanding the regional programmatic context and from collaborating with programme managers at regional and national levels. Management stresses, however, that the need for OED to preserve independence is paramount and that any new arrangements must not compromise this core principle.” FAO. 2020. Management observation of the Proposal for Strengthening Evaluation in Decentralized Offices. PC 128/6 Sup.1. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/nc927en/nc927en.pdf>

multiple locations, leveraging technology solutions to (a) keep OED connected while close to the ground; (b) ensure deeper understanding of stakeholder needs and FAO's work; and (c) build resilient, adaptive strategies across contexts that promote work continuity and success in conducting evaluations. Evaluation personnel in the regions will have dual reporting lines – to headquarters and to the regions – and will collaborate with personnel in headquarters and in other regions in conducting or managing evaluations. Coordination with FAO regional personnel will continue throughout this year to flesh out details of this decentralization model.

18. To support this global network of evaluators and ensure that evaluations are of the highest quality and meet the needs of FAO stakeholders, existing quality assurance processes will be expanded to include *ex ante* and *ex post* components. *Ex ante* quality assurance will be provided mostly by internal experts in several critical stages of an evaluation before it is completed, including design, data collection and analysis, and development of evaluation findings and recommendations. *Ex post* quality assessments will be conducted by external experts reviewing completed evaluations; it will be used to diagnose areas for improvements, inform yearly OED strategic planning, and promote credibility and accountability.

### C. Research and innovate

Objective 3.1: Embrace research as critical to designing evaluations, answering stakeholder questions, and supporting policy and process development.

Objective 3.2: Use cutting-edge data science and information technologies (IT) solutions in support of organizational success (in planning, monitoring the portfolio, collecting data and other activities).

19. Three pillars will guide OED's efforts to provide robust support for evaluations and promote improvements in the practice of evaluation. These are:

- a. Embracing research. Many questions about FAO's portfolio – such as what are the characteristics of participants in FAO programmes? – are research questions, not evaluation questions, and may result in useful descriptive information needed by project personnel to monitor, for example, success in targeting, and produce data needed by OED for designing evaluations. OED will aim to build capacity to answer these types of questions rigorously and in support of future evaluations. In so doing, OED will not pursue research for its own sake, but in support of its evaluation function and in alignment with the needs of FAO and its Members.
- b. Seeking innovations. Every evaluation is an opportunity to innovate and pilot test methods that add to the knowledge of what works to conduct evaluations in diverse and challenging settings. OED will efficiently institutionalize and quickly scale-up a focus on innovations by formally integrating expectations into OED's processes, such as quality assurance of designs.
- c. Leveraging technology. OED will use technology advances – such as natural language processing to mine and merge unstructured with structured data for data analysis or artificial intelligence for forecasting – to create efficiencies and reduce burden on respondents (FAO personnel, participants and others). To this end, OED will conduct research to identify relevant advances that may be cost-effectively integrated into our work, possibly through partnerships.



#### *D. Evaluate for use*

Objective 4.1: Design evaluations to include measuring results of intervention approaches (outcomes and impacts) whenever possible and appropriate.

Objective 4.2: Conduct rigorous evaluations to ensure high quality and the needed standard of evidence to promote use.

20. Objectives 4.1 and 4.2 focus on the essence of OED's work – designing and conducting evaluations that result in useful evidence for organizational learning and accountability and, in so doing, advance potentially transformative recommendations and contribute to the knowledge base.

21. To this end, OED will:

- a. Continue focusing on evaluating the extent to which normative activities, policy-related work, projects, programmes and other initiatives of FAO promote the implementation of the FAO Strategic Framework – including the Programme Priority Areas and accelerators, namely, technology, innovation, data and complements (governance, human capital, institutions) – as well as the principle to leave no one behind. It also includes continuing to assess FAO's work at country level to support FAO efforts to strengthen capacity in the context of the ongoing repositioning of the UN development system. This work remains foundational for OED.
- b. Design evaluations to focus on results, that is, integrate measuring outcomes and, whenever possible, impacts. This entails:
  - i. Designing evaluations at the appropriate moment in the implementation cycle, often at project/programme formulation, soon thereafter, or once a model is mature and ready for evaluation.
  - ii. Selecting the most rigorous designs possible, given constraints.
  - iii. Collecting baseline data, quantitative and qualitative.
  - iv. Establishing data collection intervals aligned with project/programme goals and reporting requirements, such as mid-term and final evaluation reports.

#### *E. Disseminate for broader impact*

Objective 5.1: Strengthen and diversify internal dissemination to facilitate use of evidence and to adapt OED's work based on stakeholder feedback.

Objective 5.2: Expand the toolkit of external dissemination strategies to promote transparency and support broader use of evidence in UN system and beyond.

22. OED will seek to enable use of evaluation through engagement in a robust set of dissemination activities. These will include internal and external dissemination efforts aligned with Objectives 5.1 and 5.2 and carried out at different stages of the research and evaluation lifecycle.

23. Dissemination activities will be led by a (new) knowledge management work stream within OED and will include developing new, and improving existing, approaches to encourage use of evaluation findings and conclusions, and follow up on evaluation recommendations.

24. OED will strengthen its dissemination activities through:

- a. Active engagement of key stakeholders and target audiences including donors, management, FAO communications personnel, beneficiaries and partners, such as

through workshops and events to discuss implications of evaluation findings and raise awareness about OED's work.

- b. Tailoring dissemination efforts to meet the specific needs of different stakeholders (syntheses and reviews are two examples of stakeholder requests).
- c. Diversifying evaluation products – including briefs and infographics, in addition to videos and blogs – focused on brevity and visualizations to facilitate use.
- d. Integrating metrics of engagement and use as part of OED's monitoring efforts (see Objective 1.2).
- e. Enhancing OED's online presence (via an updated website and social and professional media) to engage a wider global audience and promote use and transparency.

## V. Next steps

25. This interim strategy provides an initial architecture for excellence in supporting FAO Members and Management's culture of evidence in decision-making. It lays out the vision and approaches through which OED will aim to strengthen its capacity to respond to the evidence needs of FAO, its Members, and donors.

26. Based on an analysis of OED internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and risks, this strategy relies on several conditions for success. These include developing a shared culture of evaluation, with shared values, at FAO; accessing needed infrastructure – physical, human, and financial – to enable high quality and efficient work; and creating a supportive and enabling environment for success.

27. A significant effort will be required for OED to flesh out how to execute this strategy and manage changes carefully. To this end:

- a. OED transition teams are leading planning efforts in different areas outlined in this document.
- b. Continued regular team updates will help monitor progress and provide timely feedback.
- c. Identification of, and outreach to, internal and external partners is already ongoing and will be expanded as it is critical to operationalize this strategy in a consultative way.

28. This interim strategy will guide OED efforts over the next couple of years and, once a new evaluation policy is in place, will be revised to ensure it aligns and promotes adherence with that policy. OED will revisit this and future strategies yearly, taking stock of experiences in the prior year and challenges and opportunities that lie ahead to consider revisions. Indeed, the foundation created through the reforms that are at the heart of this interim strategy will position OED to incorporate new initiatives in the future. These may include integrating insights from:

- a. FAO Management and experts throughout the Organization, as well as Members, to identify priority evaluation questions for developing a learning agenda that would guide OED's work and a comprehensive program of evaluations that integrates rapid-cycle, short-term and long-term evaluations to better serve evidence needs.
- b. Complexity science and systems change in conducting evaluations that consider the complex reality that FAO seeks to influence.
- c. Convergence research in creating multi-disciplinary evaluation teams that bring together professionally diverse researchers and evaluators to tackle complexity in evaluation in innovative ways and help advance our evaluation practice.

29. OED is harnessing the experience, technical expertise and commitment of its personnel to drive a transformation of the Office and its work. We welcome feedback on this strategy and look forward to engaging a wide range of stakeholders in further planning and in executing it.