Evaluation overview

Agroecology and Safe Food System Transitions (ASSET) Project

Countries: **Lao PDR, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar**

Topic: **Agriculture**

Assessed by: **IRAM**

Date of evaluation: **Sept 2023 to March 2024 for AFD/EU funding (January to June 2024 for FFEM funding)**

Key FFEM support data

Project name: Agroecology and Safe Food System Transitions (ASSET)

Project number: CZZ 2868

Amount financed by the FFEM: €2,871,000

Project grant date: 12/01/2020

Duration: 53 months

Context

The agricultural sector of Southeast Asian countries is at a crossroads between conventional agricultural models that rely heavily on chemical inputs and capital and innovative agroecological systems. Continuous intensification of the former is leading to a simplification of agricultural landscapes, land degradation and biodiversity depletion, and increased health risks for farmers and consumers. Beyond food and nutrition security, food safety is a rising concern, especially in relation to high pesticide residues, and to the contamination of soils and aquifers.

A main challenge for the research and development community is to generate and share contextualized knowledge to support the transition from a relatively standard and simple Green-Revolution based model of intensification, to a mosaic of production models (agroforestry and crop-diversity, crop-livestock integration, conservation agriculture, etc.) with increasingly diverse and strengthened connections to safe food systems, including domestic and export value-chains.

Actors and operating method

The project is implemented by a consortium of 24 partners, including national partners, research institutes, NGOs, and universities. The project coordination is under the responsibility of GRET and CIRAD. Theory of Change based action-research, networking, policy advocacy, capacity development, awareness raising and communication have been used by the project to achieve the objective of promoting a shared vision of Agroecology (AE) and Safe Food System (SFS) Transitions in South-East Asia and building synergies between initiatives and actors.

Participants and operating methods

ASSET project's objective is to make food and agricultural systems in Southeast Asia more sustainable, safer and inclusive, through harnessing the potential of AE to transform them.

Expected outputs

By the end of the project, two key outcomes are targeted:

Impact-oriented stakeholder engagement into AE and SFS transition: The AE Learning Alliance in South-East Asia (ALiSEA) network will become a fully autonomous member-managed network and be able to share a common vision. The knowledge hub will become a major resource to synergize stakeholders' engagement and initiatives at the regional level.

Scaling-up AE and SFS innovations from local to regional levels: innovation processes will be strengthened at flagship site and robust evidences on their performances and impacts will support strategy and political processes at larger scales. The policy dialogue at national and regional levels (notably ASEAN level) will be fostered, strengthened, better integrating sectorial issues and supporting the AE and SFS transitions.

AFD and EU funding component is covering a large spectrum of AE innovations, technics and production models.

FFEM funding component is more focused on carbon sequestration in soils and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions mitigation. It implies a consortium of 5 partners and is in priority implemented in Cambodia.

Aims

The main objective of the project was the monitoring and management of coastal risks in West Africa and the promotion of "soft solutions" for preventing and protecting against these risks, through the consolidation of a regional cooperation mechanism for generating and disseminating information and implementing pilot experiences.

Specific objectives:

- 1. The observation mechanism for the West African coast has effective coordination.
- 2. Knowledge of the coast and coastal risks is improved, and the competences of the national coastal management authorities are strengthened.
- 3. Pilot actions for promoting and implementing "soft solutions" are undertaken in Benin, Senegal and Togo.
- 4. Information on the evolution of coastal risks is made available to managers and decision-makers of the West African coastlines.

Performance appraisal (AFD/EU-funded part)

Relevance

Overall relevance of the project is good. The project addresses key challenges of agricultural sectors and AE transitions. The project is relevant for policies at country level and strategies of involved stakeholders and donors. The project is based on a thorough analysis of the context

Coherence

The overall coherence of the project is good. Coherence between components and sub-components is very good with project activities aiming at activating a variety of levers of the AE and SFS transitions within three spheres of influence (public, policy and technical/economic). However, there is incoherence between the overall and specific objectives which are more development oriented and some subcomponents which are more action research-oriented. Additionally, coherence between the levels of intervention (local to regional) is still under construction. The project's coordination unit and the participative approach contribute to build the coherence of activities although the importance of these tasks and the means allocated were under-estimated during the project design.

Effectiveness

The overall effectiveness of the project is average. The implementation was delayed due to the pandemic of COVID 19, the MOU signing process and the challenging nature of the participatory Theory of Change methodology. However some key results can be highlighted, in particular for the ALiSEA network and ASSET activities at local and national levels. In addition, the project managed to be recognized as a reliable partner for the policy dialogue at ministries and ASEAN level. Yet, due to the remaining time for implementation, the project will unlikely fully achieve expected results.

Efficiency

The overall efficiency of the project is average. The main factors affecting the efficiency are (i) the high number of partners (24) involved and their status, procedures and rules limiting implementation flexibility, (ii) the small budget allocation for national partners, limiting their involvement in the project, (iii) limits in the human resources means to manage and coordinate efficiently at subcomponent, national and regional levels., (iv) practices of implementation in silo (between subcomponents and countries) not yet fully overcome and lastly (v) the lack of flexibility of donor's procedures. Despite its relatively rigid frame, the project has shown good capacity of adaptation to the changes in the context.

Impact

It is too early to mention the project impact or even potential impact at the evaluation stage considering that the majority of activities were recently implemented (for less than 2 years) and that the logic of intervention is only starting to fully operate. The project will most likely contribute to a better understanding of AE and strengthen capacities of local and national stakeholders. At flagship site levels, there are good signs of the project' contribution to the diversification of cropping systems and the adoption of more sustainable practices. The project will also contribute to a stronger integration of AE and SFS stakes in policies at national and regional levels.

Viability/sustainability

As for the impact criteria, it is very difficult to analyse the sustainability at this stage. Results are under-construction. However, the project pays really strong attention to building a collective vision on the AE transitions and having participative approaches with stakeholders to increase the knowledge and awareness on AE and SFS transition This should be key factors to sustainability. At local level however, the current political context, the miscellaneous priorities of decentralized agriculture actors, or internal factors could hamper the sustainability.

Added value of AFD and FFEM support

The project was built on a long-term vision and was guided by notable experiences of the AFD and FFEM on the support to the AE transition worldwide and in SEA.

Recommendations & learnings

At the completion of the evaluation, most expected results are not yet reached, but the project is fully operational and the logic of implementation is fully implemented. The project has a very rich content and activities have a potential of positive results. The project is going to generate a large amount of data. Regarding this situation, various recommendations have been made by the consultant.

First, the evaluator mentions the need for an extension of the project duration: most activities require more time to achieve robust results and share them broadly, thereby harnessing more fully their potential for use by a variety of stakeholders and hence, for scaling up.

In terms of coordination and management, the evaluator recommends to intensify communication between leaders of subcomponents, coordination unit and other key actors of the project. He also recommends to pay attention to coordination of activities at flagship levels to develop synergies between operational partners.

In terms of operations, he recommends :

(i) to focus on capturing the data/results from activities implemented by prioritizing a few topics (through collective reflection) that are key elements for the project to invest. Priorities should take into account the potential to develop synergies between activities or with other actors, the number of stakeholders working on the topic, the level of innovation, the potential impact, the link with the ToC.

(ii) to valorize and disseminate the results from the activities implemented. These knowledge must lead to the production of technical notes and policy documents or videos that can be largely disseminated to practitioners, the research community, decision makers and the global audience, not only valorized by individual partners.

In terms of Monitoring & Evaluation, the evaluator recommends to emphasize the documentation of progress and results especially at local level.

In terms of the planning and implementation process, the evaluator recommends to keep supporting national partners and building their capacity in order to facilitate the project appropriation.

Performance appraisal (FFEM-funded part)

Key finding from the Mid-term evaluation.

Efficiency

FFEM-funded part is globally conducted in an efficient manner, their progress is in line with the initial objectives and are contributing to the fulfilment of the expected achievements in the project's timeframe.

Internal coherence

There is a good coherence with the ASSET AFD/EU-funded part and between the sub-components within the FFEM-funded part thanks to a narrower area of intervention.

Value-added

The specific focus on the environmental approach (carbon sequestration and GHG emission) is complementary to the global approach adopted by the overall ASSET project. Added value also lies in the ability to design and test many innovations at different level (technical, economical, organisational). The reasonable size of the FFEM-funded part eases its implementation and coordination. And at last it has a leverage effect in bringing match funding to existing initiatives.

Innovation

The FFEM-funded part has a fundamental innovative character, in terms of approaches, methods and tools, and knowledge generated. The PhD and post-doc field research studies present many innovative aspects with regards to the existing academic work on the topic of SOC and GHG (like long term trials, diachronic approach…).

Replicability

The FFEM funding part support some activities and tools that could be replicated beyond the ASSET (MIR measurements or soil health measurements through Biofunctool, Database on Carbon…). The capacity building activities will contribute to the ownership and scale-up of the approaches developed by the project.

Visibility

The visibility is ensured internally and externally.

Learning capacity

Main stake till the end of the project and knowledge, knowledge production and sharing actions are planned for 2024 and 2025, coherently embedded into the overall ASSET project's capitalization process.

Responsiveness & effectiveness, flexibility

No major constraints or gaps that would imply significant changes have been noticed. Despite delays in agreements signature process, the FFEM funding part shows good flexibility and effectiveness to overcome difficulties faced by the project.

Conclusions and lessons learnt

The evaluator mentions 3 main recommendations

Ensure valorisation of the knowledge produced by the project : The main stake for the project will be to valorise it for a broad audience before the end of the project. It is recommended to keep publishing academic productions. Using these results through operational interventions and practices of the stakeholders involved into the agricultural development area is also recommended .

Ensure the ownership and the handover of approaches and tools developed to local partners: The project should continue to lay foundations of the ownership of the tested innovations by local partners through identified "champions" who could become focal points within their institutions in order to keep testing, developing and scaling up the approaches and tools.

Strengthen the internal coherence of the FFEM-funded part on its core topic while ensuring synergies with the overall ASSET project: It is recommended to keep presenting the progress of the FFEM-funded part during the overall ASSET committees and workshops. In terms of implementation timeline, the ending of the FFEM-funded part should be aligned with the AFD/EU-funded part's ending and could also be extended in order to ease the capitalisation work of its activities, links with AFD/EU-funded part's results and dissemination. Specific workshop in 2024 gathering all researchers involved is recommended for linking their outcomes and contributing to the holistic outcome.