

Evaluation summary

Mid-Term Evaluation of the Transition to Agroecology Project and a safe food system (ASSET)

Country: Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar

Theme: Forests and agricultural lands

Evaluator: IRAM

Date of evaluation : January to June 2024

Key data of the FFEM support

Project number: CZZ2868

Funding amounts: €2.871 million **Disbursement rate:** as of 31/12/2023, 51%

Signing of the financing agreement: 07/29/2021

End date: 12/31/2025

Total duration: 53 months

Context

The agricultural sector in South-East Asian countries is at a crossroads between conventional agricultural models, which rely heavily on chemical inputs and capital, and innovative agroecological systems. The continuous intensification of these leads to a simplification of agricultural landscapes, land degradation, depletion of biodiversity, and increased health risks for farmers and consumers. Beyond food and nutritional security, food safety is becoming a growing concern, particularly due to high pesticide residues and soil and groundwater contamination.

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

Stakeholders and operating procedure

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. The project used an approach based on Theory of Change, action research, networking, policy advocacy, capacity development, awareness raising and communication to achieve the objective of promoting a shared vision of transitions towards agroecology (AE) and safe food systems (SFS) in Southeast Asia, while building synergies between initiatives and actors.

The objective of the ASSET project is to make food and agricultural systems in South-East Asia more sustainable, safer and more inclusive, by harnessing the potential of agroecology (AE) to transform them. At the end of the project, two key results are targeted:

1. Impact-driven stakeholder engagement in the transition to AE and SFS: The Southeast Asia Agroecological Learning Alliance (ALiSEA) network will become a self-sustaining, member-driven network and be able to share a common vision. The knowledge centre will become a major resource for merging stakeholder engagement and initiatives at regional level.



2. Scaling up AE and SFS innovations from the local to regional level: Innovation processes will be strengthened at flagship sites, and strong evidence on their performance and impacts will support broader-scale policy strategies and processes. Policy dialogue at national and regional levels (including ASEAN) will be encouraged, strengthened, and better integrated with sectoral issues while supporting transitions to EA and SFS.

The AFD and EU funding component covers a wide range of AE innovations, techniques and production models.

The funding component of the FFEM is more focused on carbon sequestration in soils and greenhouse gas (GHG) mitigation. It involves a consortium of 5 partners and is primarily implemented in Cambodia.

Objectives

The objective of the ASSET project is to make food and agricultural systems in South-East Asia more sustainable, safer and more inclusive, by harnessing the potential of agroecology (AE) to transform them.

Specific objectives

At the end of the project, two key results are targeted:

- 1. Impact-driven stakeholder engagement in the transition to AE and SFS:** The Southeast Asia Agroecological Learning Alliance (ALiSEA) network will become an autonomous, member-driven network and be able to share a common vision. The knowledge centre will become a major resource to synergize stakeholder engagement and initiatives at regional level.
- 2. Scaling-up of AE and SFS innovations from local to regional level:** Innovation processes will be strengthened at flagship sites, and strong evidence on their performance and impacts will support policy strategies and processes at a larger scale. Policy dialogue at national and regional levels (including ASEAN) will be encouraged, strengthened, and better integrated with sectoral issues while supporting transitions to EA and SFS.

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Performance assessment (AFD/EU funding)

Relevance

The overall relevance of the project is good. The project addresses the main challenges of agricultural sectors and agroecological transitions (AE). It is relevant for policies at national level and for the strategies of stakeholders and donors involved. The project is based on a thorough analysis of the context.

Coherence

The overall consistency of the project is good. The coherence between components and sub-components is very good, with activities aimed at activating a variety of levers for AE and SFS transitions in three spheres of influence (public, political and technical/economic). However, there is an inconsistency between the global and specific objectives, which are more development-oriented, and some sub-components, which are more action-research oriented. Moreover, the coherence between levels of intervention (local to regional) is still under construction. The project coordination unit and the participatory approach contribute to strengthening the coherence of activities, although the importance of these tasks and the resources allocated were underestimated during the design of the project.

Efficiency

The overall efficiency of the project is average. Implementation has been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MOU signing process and the complex nature of the Theory of Change participatory methodology. However, some key results can be highlighted, notably for the ALiSEA network and ASSET activities at local and national level. In addition, the project has managed to gain recognition as a reliable partner for policy dialogue at ministerial and ASEAN levels. However, due to the time remaining for implementation, the project is unlikely to achieve all expected results.

Efficiency

The overall efficiency of the project is average. The main factors affecting efficiency are: (i) the high number of partners (24) involved and their statutes, procedures and rules limiting implementation flexibility, (ii) the low budget allocation for national partners, limiting their involvement in the project, (iii) the limitations of human resources to effectively manage and coordinate at sub-component, national and regional levels, (iv) silo implementation practices (between sub-components and countries) that are not yet completely overcome and finally (v) the lack of flexibility in donors' procedures. Despite its relatively rigid framework, the project has shown a good capacity to adapt to changes in context.

Impact

It is too early to discuss the impact of the project or even its potential impact at this stage of the evaluation, given that the majority of activities have been implemented recently (less than 2 years ago) and the intervention logic is only beginning to fully function. The project will likely contribute to a better understanding of EA and capacity building of local and national stakeholders. At the flagship sites, there are good signs of the project's contribution to the diversification of cropping systems and the adoption of more sustainable practices. The project will also contribute to a stronger integration of EA and FSS issues into national and regional policies.

Viability/sustainability

As with the impact criteria, it is very difficult to analyze sustainability at this stage. The results are under construction. However, the project pays great attention to building a collective vision on AE transitions and using participatory approaches with stakeholders to increase knowledge and awareness about AE and FSS transition. These should be key factors for sustainability. At the local level, however, the current political context, the diverse priorities of decentralised agriculture actors or internal factors could undermine sustainability.

Added value of AFD and FFEM support

The project was built on a long-term vision and was guided by AFD's and FFEM's notable experiences in supporting agroecological transition around the world and in Southeast Asia.

Recommendations and teachings

At the end of the evaluation, most expected results have not yet been achieved, but the project is fully operational and the implementation logic is fully applied. The project has very rich content and activities have a potential for positive outcomes. The project will generate a large amount of data. In this context, several recommendations were made by the consultant.

First of all, the evaluator highlights the need for an extension of the project duration: most activities require more time to obtain solid results and share them widely, in order to fully exploit their potential for use by a variety of stakeholders and, consequently, for scaling up.

In terms of coordination and management, the evaluator recommends intensifying communication between sub-component managers, the coordinating unit and other key project stakeholders. It also recommends paying particular attention to the coordination of activities at the flagship sites in order to develop synergies between operational partners.

Regarding operations, he recommends: (i) to focus on capturing data/results of the implemented activities by prioritizing a few topics (through collective reflection) that are key elements for the project. Priorities should take into account the potential for developing synergies between activities or with other actors, the number of stakeholders working on the topic, the level of innovation, the potential impact, and the link to the Theory of Change (ToC). (ii) to promote and disseminate the results of the activities implemented. This knowledge should lead to the production of technical notes, policy papers or videos that can be widely disseminated to practitioners, the scientific community, policymakers and the global public, and should not only be valued by individual partners.

In terms of monitoring and evaluation, the evaluator recommends a focus on documenting progress and results, particularly at local level.

Regarding the planning and implementation process, the evaluator recommends continuing to support national partners and build their capacity in order to facilitate project ownership.

Assessment of performance (FFEM financing)

Relevance

The overall relevance of the project is good. The project addresses the main challenges of agricultural sectors and agroecological transitions (AE). It is relevant for policies at national level and for the strategies of stakeholders and donors involved. The project is based on a thorough analysis of the context.

Efficiency

The part financed by the FFEM is generally carried out efficiently. Progress is consistent with original objectives and contributes to the achievement of project deliverables.

Internal consistency

There is good coherence between the part funded by AFD/EU and the part funded by FFEM, as well as between sub-components within the part funded by FFEM, thanks to a narrower scope of intervention.

Added value

The specific focus on the environmental approach (carbon sequestration and GHG emission reduction) complements the overall approach taken by the ASSET project as a whole. The added value also lies in the ability to design and test many innovations at different levels (technical, economic, organizational). The reasonable size of the part financed by the FFEM facilitates its implementation and coordination. Finally, it has a leverage effect by attracting additional funding for existing initiatives.

Innovation

The part funded by the FFEM is fundamentally innovative in terms of both approaches, methods and tools, as well as the knowledge generated. The field studies in PhD and post-doctorate present many innovative aspects compared to the existing academic work on the subject of SOC and GHG (such as long-term trials, the diachronic approach...).

Replicability

The part funded by FFEM supports certain activities and tools that could be replicated beyond the ASSET project (such as MIR measurements or soil health measurements via Biofunctool, the carbon database...). Capacity building activities will contribute to the appropriation and extension of the approaches developed by the project.

Visibility

Visibility is ensured both internally and externally.

Learning ability

The main challenge until the end of the project lies in learning, knowledge production and knowledge sharing actions, which are planned for 2024 and 2025, and coherently integrated into the overall capitalization process of the ASSET project.

Responsiveness & efficiency, flexibility

No major constraints or gaps requiring significant changes were noted. Despite delays in the process of signing agreements, the part funded by the FFEM shows good flexibility and efficiency to overcome the difficulties encountered by the project.

Recommendations and teachings

The evaluator mentions 3 main recommendations:

- 1. Ensure the valorization of the knowledge produced by the project:** The main challenge for the project will be to promote its results among a wide audience before the end of the project. It is recommended to continue publishing academic productions. It is also advisable to use these results through operational interventions and practices of stakeholders involved in the field of agricultural development.
- 2. Ensure the appropriation and transmission of the approaches and tools developed to local partners:** The project should continue to lay the foundations for the appropriation of innovations tested by local partners by identifying "champions" who could become focal points within their institutions, in order to continue testing, developing and scaling up approaches and tools.
- 3. Strengthen the internal coherence of the part funded by FFEM on its central theme while ensuring synergies with the global ASSET project:** It is recommended to continue presenting the progress of the part funded by FFEM during the committees and workshops of the ASSET project as a whole. In terms of the implementation schedule, the end of the part financed by the FFEM should be aligned with that of the part funded by the AFD/EU and could also be extended to facilitate the work of capitalization of its activities, the links with the results of the part funded by AFD/EU and their dissemination. A specific workshop in 2024 bringing together all the researchers involved is recommended to link their results and contribute to the overall outcome.