

CONSOLIDATED END-NOTE OF THE MID-TERM REVIEW OF RIKOLTO PROGRAMME

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1. Background

This note is an outcome of a collaborative process of reflection and review on Rikolto's global programme 2017-2021. The process was designed and coordinated by Rikolto's international PLA coordinators and the other members of the international PLA team.

The objective of the mid-term review was twofold:

- a. to feed discussions on the strategic orientation of Rikolto beyond 2021;
- b. to orient the last two years of implementation of the 2017-2021 programmes funded by the Belgian government (13 country programmes)

An external team consisting of one international (IC) and 7 national consultants (LCs) was contracted 'to feed the mid-term review process with critical-constructive questions and guidance that further and deepen the analysis and reflection'¹ by the Rikolto teams at different levels and locations.

Activities to realise objective A above were implemented in the period June – November 2019.

Outcomes and findings of strategic reflection exercises at regional levels were brought together and reviewed by the international consultant who produced a *Consolidation note – lessons learnt from Rikolto's 2017-2021 strategy* (November 2019). This note was used to inform the *beyond 2021 strategic reflection* of the international Management Team meeting in November 2019.

As far as objective B was concerned, this principally concerned the Mid-Term Review of DGD-funded country programmes. The MTR was designed and implemented as a self-evaluation exercise by the Rikolto teams. The evaluation was informed by

1. an effectiveness review (and contribution analysis)
2. the outcomes of strategic workshops at regional level in October 2019
3. relevance / impact assessment
4. assessment of business and organisational capacities of partner organisations using SCOPEinsight assessment tool
5. assessment of production, environmental sustainability and value chain involvement at farm level using the Rikolto farmer survey
6. other sources of information as appropriate

Local consultants contributed to the MTR through a constructive-critical review of the draft MTR reports pointing at strengths & weaknesses in the assessment and analyses. Upon initiative / invitation of respective Rikolto teams, some LCs were more pro-actively involved in the actual assessments and drafting of the MTR reports. In addition, at the end of their assignment, each LC formulated comments and recommendations on the country-based exit strategies as presented in the MTR report. In addition, each LC briefly reflected on perceived strengths and weaknesses of the MTR process in a separate submission to the IC.

In this end note, the international consultant has tried to consolidate some outcomes of the 13 MTR reports and to present cross-cutting observations in a concise format. After consultation with and upon advice of Rikolto's senior management, it was decided to structure this note along the 3 strategy blocks and 9 sub-strategies as presented in the draft *programme framework for Rikolto beyond 2021* that is being developed by the international management team. In this way, the

¹ Source: ToR of 'Support Rikolto's mid-term review with strategic reflection and guidance'

analysis can feed into the ongoing discussions on strategic priorities and pathways for future programming.

In addition, this note will present a brief reflection on the exit strategies as presented by the teams and related recommendations by the LCs. Finally, in line with the Tor of the consultant's assignment, this note ends with a short section with methodological and process-related reflections and recommendations to improve future effectiveness analyses based on good practices and challenges encountered during the MTR and strategic reflection process.

2. Challenges and limitations

The consultant faced some **challenges** and **limitations** in the production of this note (see also section 5 with methodological and process-related reflections)

- ✓ This document is first and foremost an attempt to consolidate observations and findings from 13 country reports (focus of the reports is strongly on accountability) and that **this is not a meta-evaluation!**
- ✓ The consolidation presented in this report was based on the information and data presented in 13 MTR reports. It was not possible to study entire content of all reports within the contract period. A full assessment would have demanded a much more substantial investment in terms of time and effort. Therefore, the information was based primarily on the sections with executive summary, lessons learned and exit strategies. The conclusions presented in this note may therefore not be comprehensive or complete.
- ✓ While all MTR reports had similar outlines², there was quite a lot of variation in the nature and quality of the data and their assessments presented in the different reports.
- ✓ Reports are largely informative and little contemplative in nature by and large focusing on the indicators laid down in guidelines developed by global PLA – see also introductory remarks of section 3.
- ✓ In most reports, some (limited³) efforts were made to present lessons learnt but these reflections were often very context-specific (read: for one specific commodity in a country or for a single partner). Meaningful aggregation at programme level was not feasible.
- ✓ The volume of the reports ranges from 28 to 120 pages (average is around 60 pages) and accordingly so did the richness and level of details therein. Long reports were not necessarily the most informative.
- ✓ Late production and delivery of draft reports delayed the production of this note and consolidation could only start after the deadline for submission of country reports to DGD had expired. Consequently, it was decided to have this note prepared to inform the international management teams' own reflection on the MTR process as well in preparation for the programme review discussion with DGD scheduled for June 2020,

² except Belgium because of its specific programme format and set-up

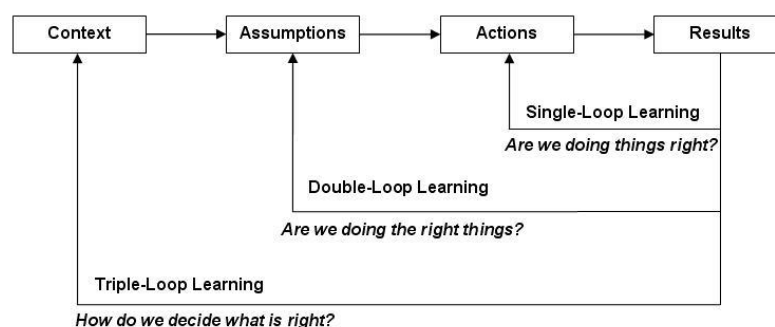
³ See sections 3.1 and 5 for reflection on the (limited) strategic nature of the MTR reports

3. Consolidation of observations and findings

A brief reflection on the strategic character of the MTR assessments

Going through the reports, it was noted that that only in a few cases, the outcomes / findings of 2019 strategic reflections (at regional levels) were taken along in the 2020 MTR. Similarly, while all reports indicate with colour score the attainment (or not) of (intermediate) outcomes in the different pathways of change in each country, only very few reflections were found to substantiate the soundness and validity of these pathways and their underlying assumptions based on the findings of the MTR. As one Local Consultant (LC) wrote in a reflection on the process: *the MTR had a practical orientation: it generated and processed information for decision-making on Rikolto's follow-up actions in the programme (and not for strategic learning based on strengths and weaknesses of the programme)*. Another LC

wrote: *the draft reports provided a lot of information on interesting interventions and realisations but the information missed coherence and depth. The linkages between pathways of change and realisations were not always perceptible for an outsider*. On the whole, learning from MTR was therefore largely limited to single-loop learning (did we do things right?).



3.1. Strategy block: Sustainable Crop production

Similar to what was observed in the strategic reflection, a large number of achievements (especially in the South) are situated in Rikolto's more *traditional work area*, i.e. *'interventions focusing on strengthening producer organizations to support improved productivity or product quality and negotiate better market access through inclusive business arrangements with formal buyers'*.⁴

3.1.1. Professionalisation of farmer organisations

A few lessons learnt (extracts from the reports)

- Many partners have not (yet) got the right capacity and mandate to work on inclusive business and facilitating market linkages.
- There are more structured relationships worth exploring than the ones through FOs alone such as between agribusiness service providers and other actors in the ecosystem such as nursery service providers.
- In order to maintain the commitment of its member base, FOs must establish a direct dialogue between the management and the members on all major issues.
- Work to enable FOs to meet the standards and volume is required to prove their importance in the sector and to earn respect from the other actors.

This is clearly a key focus in all reports and an area in which Rikolto can demonstrate a strong quality track record. Obviously, the reports mention numerous and very differentiated achievements from support to farmer organisations. Many of the achievements in this sub-strategy relate to aspects that will be covered specifically in later sections e.g. market research, market linkages,

⁴ Source: paper "Input for Rikolto 2021" by International Board member Mark Lundy

inclusive business modelling, policy influencing, access to finance, to name a few. To avoid repetitive narratives, these will not be discussed here but rather under their respective headings. However, in general terms, capacity strengthening of FOs features as a key intervention in almost all cases and resulted in improved organisational performance e.g. in terms of technical & agronomic competence, business management, financial management, service delivery, positioning in value chain, upscaling and value addition in the chain, and so on. In this respect, it is worth noting that quite some countries especially so in Latin America and Africa specifically mention the usefulness and relevance of SCOPEInsight methodology to assess capacity needs and gaps, to plan for capacity strengthening support and to follow-up on changes in organisational performance of FOs over time. Apart from supporting FO's, all country programmes also engage in support to sector associations (Fr: *interprofession*), apex organisations and similar (mostly commodity-based) alliances or associations of private sector actors in the respective value chains⁵. Reports show that these associations can be specifically influential especially in creating enabling policy environments at higher institutional (e.g. national) levels. Reportedly there is evidence in many countries of the effective contribution of Rikolto to the (improved) functioning of such associations. These are then – rightfully so – considered to be very important achievements of the programme.

Other outcomes that are considered to be particularly relevant are reported with in strengthening critical capacities in contract management, negotiation or arbitration (especially for FOs and associations engaged in export of cocoa, coffee, sesame, etc. but also in domestic trading). Reports also point at Rikolto's support to FO's engaged in innovative approaches that hold potential for replication and upscaling, for example: the integrated management of resilient and sustainable landscapes with the MASLAGO platform in Nicaragua, to mention one interesting case.

Another interesting dimension that was named in a few reports was leadership in FO's, both in support of those actually holding a leadership position, but interestingly so – like in Peru's 'School of Leaders' – also of (potential) future managers and leaders. Finally, it goes without saying that there is quite some variation in 'organisational maturity' and scope of operations of the numerous FOs supported by the programme. Categorising and consolidating all the related programme interventions and achievements in an organisational life-time framework might yield interesting insights on the importance and contribution of different capacity strengthening initiatives to changes in performance of FOs over time. However, such assessment was beyond the scope of this exercise.

3.1.2. Diversification of production and farm resilience including against climate change

Some lessons learnt (extracts from the reports)

- Technical advice and co-financing to apply more sustainable production models such as SAF and GAP contribute to increasing the volume that farmers market, as well as increasing farm income.
- Building up the credibility of Rikolto and partners through experiences in implementing innovative methods ... helps in achieving food and nutrition security, more sustainable farm production and improved income of farmers.
- The SRP standard that we promote, helps rice farmers to adopt more sustainable farming practices. The measurement system via phone helps farmers to measure their scores at the end of the season and motivates them to adopt more sustainable cultivation practices.

⁵ To ensure readability in the rest of this document – the term *sector association* is used to refer to all these different kinds of network organisations

- Rikolto has empowered farmers with knowledge of sustainable cocoa production and postharvest handling to produce quality agricultural commodity, which was, in turn, attracting the non-cocoa farmer members to join the FOs.

This is yet another broad domain where Rikolto has built a good track record with many different types of reportedly successful interventions and a rich and wide palette of outcomes at farm level. In all countries and chains, encouraging results were reported of introduction and promotion of innovative methods and/or quality or certification schemes. Frequently quoted ones are

- Quality Management System (QMS) in rice (e.g. Tanzania)
- Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) for different commodities in many countries
- Sustainable Agro-Forestry (SAF) in cocoa and coffee (e.g. Latam countries)
- Agro-ecology in coffee, cocoa and vegetables (e.g. in Ecuador)
- Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) for safe vegetables (e.g. Vietnam)
- Sustainable Rice Production (SRP) for rice (e.g. West Africa countries, Vietnam, Tanzania)
- Payment for Eco-System (PES) in coffee and cinnamon (e.g. Indonesia, Latam countries)
- UTZ certified in coffee and cocoa (e.g. Indonesia)

In many cases, demonstration lots and/or farmer-field-school-like initiatives were used to introduce and promote improved farming practices. Many of the partners worked on improving access of farmers to inputs. The programme's contribution to improved access to certified seeds & seedlings, organic fertiliser / compost or bio-pesticides was indeed a recurrent feature in many reports.

Few reports made mention of a strategic approach towards building *resilience* of (smallholder) farms even though this may have been an implicit goal of many the programme interventions. As far as environmental resilience is concerned, building blocks towards this goal are found in the environmental *sustainability scores*. There is internal discussion going on about the relevance of this scoring model at its present level (commodity-country) as well as about the compatibility of 2017 and 2019 scores. Nevertheless, the 2019 scoring gives an indication of the perception of stakeholders of the extent to which good practices have been introduced and adopted. The table below shows the scores for almost all commodity-country combinations presented in the reports. The purpose is not to assess individual cases or (reasons for) differences between cases but rather to get an overall impression of how stakeholders perceive environmental soundness of present practices. Two areas stand out as more challenging than others namely soil conservation and climate change. As far as the latter is concerned, there might be also a challenge in the awareness and knowledge about appropriate context-specific practices to address the climate change challenge. The quick (and admittedly academically not very robust) scan showed a rather positive perception of practices in resource management, a fairly poor performance on biodiversity and a mixed picture for the other three dimensions. The narratives in the reports are not sufficiently elaborated to draw strategically relevant and robust conclusions on these scores.

Table – Environmental sustainability scores from the 2019 survey for 25 commodity-country combinations

	Soil Conservation	Water management	Resource management	Climate change	Biodiversity	Landscape management	On a scale of 1-3	
1	+	+	++	-	--	--	--	Score < 1
2	--	+	++	--	-	0	-	1 < Score < 1.5
3	+	++	++	-	0	+	0	Score = (near) 1.5
4	++	++	++	+	+	--	+	1,5 < score < 2
5	--	--	0	--	-	0	++	Score >2
6	-	--	+	-	+	--		
7	+	++	0	+	--	--		
8	--	++	++	--	-	+		
9	-	-	+	--	-	+		
10	--	+	++	--	+	--		
11	--	-	-	--	-	+		
12	--	--	-	--	+	+		
13	--	--	-	--	-	-		
14	--	++	++	--	0	++		
15	--	++	++	--	-	+		
16	-	+	++	-	-	+		
17	++	++	+	+	--	--		
18	--	-	++	--	+	++		
19	++	-	+	-	-	--		
20	--	0	++	--	0	-		
21	--	-	++	--	+	++		
22	+	+	0	0	-	+		
23	-	-	0	--	++	+		
24	-	-	0	-	-	0		
25	-	-	+	-	+	+		

3.1.3. Balancing international vs. local markets

The information and insights provided in the different reports does not really allow to assess whether, in what way or to what extent programme stakeholders (e.g. FO's or apex organisations) have been addressing the balance between local and international markets. It appears that this is an programmatic aspect that was not explicitly highlighted or addressed in programme interventions for commodities like coffee, cocoa or sesame. The reports provide plenty of factual information on how the programme has helped FO's and/or sector associations in engaging more effectively in international marketing e.g. linkages to international companies and brands, support or capacitation in contract management and negotiation, quality management and control, certification, and so on. At the same time, there are also examples of (programme-related achievements by) partners dealing in non-food commodities at local markets and/or promoting local sales such as for coffee in RDC, Latin America as well as in the two Asian programme countries. However, the reports do not specifically indicate whether balancing of international and local markets is considered to be a specific programme objective and/or how this aspect has been addressed in programmatic terms.

3.2. Market inclusion

3.2.1. Include smallholder farmers as supplier to international brands, cities, etc

Some lessons learnt (extracted from reports)

- Companies are more willing to enter a long-term contractual relationship with farmers after the programme assures them that it will facilitate access of farmers to high quality declared seeds preferred in the market.
- It remains a challenge to motivate companies to build inclusive long-term business relationships with producer organizations. It is very important to analyse in depth the interests of companies to establish business models that include FOs in sourcing.
- Linking private companies to social impact investors increases the enthusiasm of these companies to engage fairly with farmers.
- When all players have access to reliable and regular information in the market, it facilitates trade, strengthens relations between the players and builds trust with private partners and financial institutions.

Market inclusion of smallholder farmers is a key objective of the Rikolto's programme. In the reports there is ample evidence from all countries of programme achievements in this respect.

Linking farmers to buyers with inclusive and sustainable business models is the recurrent concept that is repeatedly mentioned in reports as a key programme outcome.

Consolidating experiences in different country-commodity cases, one can safely conclude that – as it is worded in the Nicaragua MTR report for cocoa:

Advice on design and implementation of inclusive and sustainable business models between marketing companies and FOs as a strategy has proven to be relevant.

This conclusion applies equally for cash crops in domestic and international markets as for food crops in local (and less common) export markets. For rice, for instance, the accent often was on developing and implementing business models for procurement of local rice with commercialisation by / through FOs in local markets including – especially so in West-Africa – institutional buyers. There are plenty of other examples of similar – often localised - achievements such as in linking local horticulture producers to city markets and urban consumers in Arusha Tanzania, linking cocoa producers and their cooperative in West Sulawesi Indonesia to influential buyers like MARS or Kalla Cocoa, or PPKT in Indonesia marketing specialty coffee and selling this as single origins.

While it can be concluded from the many different narratives in the reports that there is no one-size-fits-all design for a successful business case, one can nevertheless from the various reports distinguish a few features that (context-specific and thus not necessarily in all cases) contribute to the success of a business model (success in this context to be interpreted as the benefits generated for smallholder suppliers) such as:

- Certification or related quality assurance schemes⁶ for domestic as well as international markets is a common feature in many business models used by FOs and related actors in the programme,
- Establishing direct linkages between coops or FOs and international buyers or domestic wholesalers reducing the number of intermediaries in the chain,
- Conquering market niches e.g. organic vegetables in city markets or speciality coffees for domestic and/or export market,

⁶ referring to SRP, PGS, GAP, UTZ, QMS, and so on – see also in 2.1.1

- Labelling and other forms of product differentiation to distinguish locally produced quality produce from low-cost unsustainable produce,
- FOs or apex associations conducting market research in collaboration with - preferably local - researchers / academia
- Improved market information systems (ICT) that is easily accessible for smallholders,
- And obviously various forms of capacity strengthening of FOs and associations (see 2.1.1.)

3.2.2. Inclusive food environment e.g. youth and women

Some lessons learnt (extracted from reports)

- Focus on GAP for export or on high-end domestic markets, not only benefit fewer farmers but also leave out lower income consumers. This is a business model that is not inclusive.
- Rikolto's strategy of identifying the needs of young people and women has led to the formulation of specific capacity-building actions and facilitates the integration of young people and women into the value chain.

In the strategic reflections in 2019, all teams specifically emphasised the need for increased engagement of women and youth in different segments of the food systems. This is evidenced by the more or less unanimously stated urge of programme teams to design and implement **inclusive** and sustainable business models. In the MTR mention is made of a variety of interventions and related achievements for strengthening inclusion of youth and women in commodity chains and related activities such training in aspects (ranging from cultivation to marketing), promotion of (micro-) entrepreneurship in agri-business, leadership training, support to women or young farmers groups, support to group-based business units e.g. in food processing, increased participation in institutional procurement schemes, to name a few commonly cited interventions. In many cases there is also specific mention of efforts and achievements to give women and youth a stronger voice in decision-making in FOs and in other governance settings.

Most teams reported progress and concrete achievements in this respect but often it was still modest. Teams agree that more needs to be done to improve inclusion of women and youth, in governance and decision-making of FOs as well as to strengthen their role and participation in value chain dynamics. This observation reiterates the earlier suggestion⁷ that it is necessary to engage in further reflection and learning (internal and external) on programme strategies to promote inclusiveness. Various entry points should be explored for women and youth to become more active economic agents in sustainable food systems and to empower them in matters of governance, management and operations of FOs, associations, multi-stakeholder platforms and other settings. As a start: lessons learnt from this programme could be explored more systematically looking at good practices and challenges encountered in addressing inclusion of women and youth in the actual food systems and value chains. From there, contextualised inclusion strategies can be developed – at commodity level and for specific business cases.

3.2.3. Access, affordability and acceptability for the consumer

Some lessons learnt (extracts from report)

- Rikolto addresses directly food safety issues that are very much in line with the top ongoing effort of the government and other stakeholders.

⁷ in the consultant's 2019 strategy reflection note

- Enabling conditions for promotion of safe food with urban consumers are the market demand, urbanization process, engagement of private sector as well as commitment of the government to the food security and food safety for their citizens.
- Working on food safety for local markets requires a lot of awareness creation to consumers, value chain actors and regulatory bodies.
- Taking up the particular and strategic topic of food waste for awareness-raising has differentiated Rikolto from other actors in the country. It became a good entry point to reach out with FSC to communities, food industry and government alike.

The MTR report of Belgium and of a few Southern countries provide evidence that in recent years the organisation is venturing into new areas of the sustainable food system, other than Rikolto's more *traditional* production- and value chain-oriented interventions (see earlier sections) While a large portion of programme outcomes presented in MTR reports confirm that in Southern programme countries, sustainable income for farmers indeed remained a key objective and stronghold in the programme, the reports also hint at a change in the organisational perspective with more attention being paid to – what in the newly update organisational mission is called - *access to nutritious and affordable food for everyone*.

This was most outspoken in Belgium where the programme has been focusing on sustainable food consumption throughout the DGD programme cycle. The results in Belgium are impressive with ample and robust evidence of a growing support base for sustainable consumption among multiple actors including local and regional governments, retailers, consumers, and other stakeholders in the food systems. A growing number of schools has been mobilised and is engaging in the development of safe and sustainable food policies. School food labs experiment with local actions around sustainable food at schools. In four cities, School Food Councils bring together multiple actors from private, public and educational sectors to implement joint action and realise upscaling of sustainable food policies for schools. Similar dynamics set off at the level of the Flemish Government with a view to develop and introduce a sectoral policy in this respect.

Less evidence was presented in reports by Southern country teams. The fact that evidence of higher-level outcomes in these countries is still limited could also be explained by the more recent nature of FSC sub-programme or other interventions that specifically aim at sustainable food consumption. The evidence that was reported so far is more at the level of interventions and outputs. Examples related to initiatives such as Kiosk in Arusha, Quito's Agrifood Pact, Da Nang's FSC strategy or Solo's Standard Operating Procedure for food sharing.

In addition, a number of reports mention interventions and outcomes in relation to food safety and food waste affecting acceptability of food such as with PGS for safe vegetables in Vietnam, campaigning around food waste in Bandung Indonesia, food safety campaign in cities in Tanzania, as well as related quality control and/or certification schemes in production and marketing. It is very difficult to aggregate and interpret outcomes of these initiatives in a meaningful way at programme level.

Another perspective is to look at the extent to which the programme contributed to increased income (and thus purchasing power of people) and whether farming households are now able (and willing) to spend extra money to diversify the family diet and/or to buy more sustainable (but possibly more expensive) food products. There is ample evidence in many reports of increased income from farming thanks to the programme-related interventions but little or no information

was found on the impact of this on the composition, quality and volume of foods consumed by farming households.

Similarly, little or no information was provided in the reports that relates to affordability of food for non-farming households. Here some more in-depth exploration or research would be needed to establish how different interventions that influenced nature and volume of food supplies to consumer markets, impacted on the consumer prices of food products.

3.3. Enabling environment

3.3.1. Policy influencing

To start: the findings presented in the MTR reports confirm that

1. Policy influencing is a key component of the programme with many different interventions and relevant outcomes being reported by all countries.
2. Policy work by Rikolto and partners in different countries and clusters effectively covers a wide variety of aspects and areas of the food systems from pre-production to consumption.
3. A strong point of Rikolto and its partners is the ability to engage with multiple stakeholders and influence / engage with various public sector actors in support of sustainable food production and consumption.

Some other lessons learnt (extracts from the reports)

- For some issues (e.g. PGS Vietnam) advocacy at the national level is not the best strategy, as long as one has not reached concrete results with policy influencing at the provincial level.
- Advocacy is a very long dynamic process that will have to be pursued relentlessly with a constant updating of arguments according to the themes targeting decision-makers who have the power to influence decision-making.

Programme staff and partners have indeed been engaged in a multitude of multi-stakeholder initiatives, many of which have totally or partly been focusing on influencing the development and establishment of enabling policy environments for sustainable food consumption and production in rural as well as urban settings. Policy influencing took place at micro (local), meso (e.g. district or province) to macro (national) level and even to some extent at international level (in the clusters). In Latin American country reports, support to Multi-Actor Initiatives (MAIs) to influence strategies and policies in different sectors (coffee, cocoa, FSC) is mentioned as being the most important intervention with the most relevant achievements of the programme overall. In almost all countries Rikolto and/or partners were able to acquire a seat at the table of key MAIs and so contributed directly to national or regional / local policy development.

A few examples:

- Honduras - Rikolto and partners facilitated the dialogue at national level in the *Sustainable Coffee Platform* and played a role in methodological support to the planning and decision making process which led to the development and deployment of a national curriculum for coffee,
- Indonesia – contribution to the Cocoa Sustainability Platform that collaborated with Ministry of Agriculture to develop National Sustainable Curriculum for Cocoa,
- Tanzania – support to the Arusha Food Safety Platform establishing collaboration with the Tanzania Bureau of Standards leading to the creation of a national food safety standard,

- Peru -providing strategic advice to the National Coffee Board in the development of the National Coffee Plan 2019-2030
- Mali – supporting actors that developed a national strategy for Sesame Value Chain, Among many others.

But in some countries policy influencing also came with its challenges, such as in RDC where policy influencing in rice sector (through networking rather than via MAIs) was reasonably successful at micro level but less so at higher institutional levels, or in Vietnam where FSC related policy work was fruitful in Hanoi city but could not yet establish interest or influence at higher institutional levels.

3.3.2. Finance

In many countries like Indonesia, RDC, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal and Tanzania the programme has deployed activities to strengthen the financial position of FOs and farmers cooperatives mostly by supporting FOs in connecting to banks and financial institutes and/or obtaining credit lines with private companies or public finance institutes. The information provided in the reports was often not sufficient to assess to what extent these efforts have been successful. Nor was it possible to determine whether and to what extent Rikolto has indeed been able to improve financial sustainability and viability of the FOS they are working with. It is not clear to what extent the programme has encouraged and supported FOs to explore opportunities for local resource mobilisation when developing business models for their own organisation. See also section 3 on exit strategies.

From the few references on finance, one lesson from RDC: *access to credit at the right time is a critical condition for cooperatives to be able to collect the volumes of contracted agricultural products. It is difficult especially for young co-ops to access credit at the level of financial institutions, as they do not yet have a track record. In new projects, it is always necessary to provide a fund to support the marketing by cooperatives or to integrate a financial partner institution from the project's formulation stage.*

3.3.3. Partnerships

Some lessons learnt (extracted from reports)

- Participation in commodity platforms is key to contributing to the development of national standardised cultivation methods and curriculums for specific commodities.
- Without the strategic facilitating role played by Rikolto, other actors would work in silos and achieve less.
- The creation of strategic alliances with the academy sector facilitates application of methodologies at the field level, which can create innovations.

The (draft) strategic framework refers to partnerships (1) with local governments for FSC, (2) with others (for what we do not do, e.g. nutrition).

The first category (with local governments) is functionally clearly situated within the FSC cluster. This has been substantially documented in the case of Belgium (with city councils and Flemish governments). However, similar initiatives (food platforms and councils) have increasingly emerged in other locations, such as in the cities of Arusha, Quito, Da Nang, Tegucigalpa, Solo, or Depok. For example: the partnership with Da Nang city on FSC triggered the attention of the World Bank who consequently initiated a partnership with Rikolto, VNUA, CIAT and Asia Foundation to carry out diagnostic assessment of food systems and food safety hazards in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city. In

Quito city, the Quito Agrifood Pact platform with over 30 members was instrumental in developing an Agro-Food Charter for Quito Region.

Partnerships with others in areas that Rikolto itself would not be engaged in itself were not systematically mentioned or listed in the MTR reports, presumably also because achievements in these areas cannot be contributed to the programme. However, it is worth referring to one interesting type of functional partnership being partnership with knowledge institutes that are aimed at research and generation of evidence with a view to inform policy influencing e.g. in agenda setting or to feed into policy debates on specific issues. For instance, in the Ecuador report it was stated that partnership with universities and research institutes has proven to be key to filling knowledge gaps and producing evidence that has a direct application in the field. Similarly, the Rikolto programme in Vietnam collaborated with academics from University of Ghent and University of Louvain in supporting research activities to fill in knowledge gaps on PGS and market for safe vegetables.

4. Reflections on exit strategies

All reports elaborated upon exit strategies, be it that they did so from different perspectives (some linked to commodity reviews, others with an organisational perspective) and were presented in different formats. The external consultants have reviewed these strategies and presented their comments and recommendations in separate submissions.

Many of the exit strategies presented in the reports basically depict what additional actions need to be taken and adjustments need to be made to the programme approach and planning for the coming years in order to reach the envisaged end results of the programme. This by all means is a valid and necessary exercise but then: is it not normal practice to have intermediate reflections on achievements and challenges and adjust programme strategies accordingly? Nature and purpose of an exit strategy are different, even though admittedly, elements presented in the reports will be part and parcel of an exit strategy.

Borrowing from C-safe learning ⁸, an exit strategy ideally serves to develop and present scenario(s) of what needs to be done in the period before the programme ends to assure that eventually after the programme ends

1. the program impact will be sustained, expanded or improved,
2. relevant activities are continued in the same or modified format, and
3. the systems developed will continue to function effectively.

The Vietnam team may have developed the closest fit with this perspective in its exit strategy.

Taking the lessons learnt in the programme as a starting point, this team conceived an exit strategy by setting priorities, choosing focus and narrowing down the number of partners, with a view to target investment to where and with whom effectiveness and efficiency were seen (or are expected to be most realised) in the programme. Some LCs (like West Africa) reported that the country & regional teams acknowledged that the exit strategies as presented in the reports are still work in progress.

To conclude: it could be worth to carry out a brief exercise in each country to further reflect on exit strategies with the three stated goals (or measures of success) of such a strategy in mind and review the action plans presented in the MTR report accordingly (especially trimming down the long to-do-

⁸ Gardner A., Greenblott K. and Joubert E. (2005) Practical Guidance For Developing Exit Strategies in the Field. C-safe Regional learning Spaces Initiative

lists to more concise strategies featuring key conditions and actions for sustaining relevant activities, systems and impacts).

As far as content is concerned, following are a few selected observations on recurrent features encountered in the exit strategies (and the comments of the consultants) that in my view are particularly relevant:

- Crop diversification, value addition in the chains (through processing, pre-grading, storage, etc.) and adoption of standards and quality practices in farming (GAP & alike) are among the most sustainable achievements of the programme. The more challenging areas are thought to be in policy influencing, financial viability of FOs and sustained functioning of MAIs.
- Many teams point at the need to continue investing (even more intensively than now) in the development and establishment of inclusive and sustainable business models that connect farmers (through their organisations) to rewarding markets. Once established and effectively running, such businesses models are supposed to be self-generating. This concerns both international and domestic markets.
- Many see a priority in strengthening leadership in FOs and sector associations and thus for continued focus on capacity strengthening with emphasis on inclusive governance (empowering and capacitating women and youth / future leaders). Other key areas where FOs and associations need further strengthening are in development and implementation of policy influencing plans (including generation of evidence), business model development and various aspects of commercialisation, negotiation, contract management, and related capabilities.
- Not surprisingly, financial sustainability of FOs features as a recurrent issue in the exit strategies but relatively few of the teams have presented concrete steps or plans to explore scenarios for (local) resource mobilisation.
- Given the important role MAIs are playing in the programme in many respects, sustainability of MAIs is another important recurrent feature. Again financial resource mobilisation is an issue, but also at supporting MAIs on 'softer' aspects such as internal cohesion and trust, leadership, management of power dynamics as well as risk management in the face of volatile socio-economic and political settings in some of the countries.
- Some of the teams (rightfully so) indicate the importance and need to invest intensively in learning and documentation and dissemination of good and/or innovative practices (e.g. in SAF, QMS, SRP, landscape management, and so on). This will help to ensure that these practices are sustained, expanded (upscaling) and replicated also by external actors in the sector. Hence the need to invest in knowledge building and management – which is indeed the fourth pillar of the proposed strategic framework for Rikolto beyond 2021.
- Finally, elements of Rikolto's exit strategies will need to be adopted and internalised by the partners (FOs and sector associations) in their own organisational and programmatic strategies.

5. Feedback on the MTR processes

The following observations and suggested learning points are based on submissions of the consultants' team compiled by the international consultant.

Note: the MTR process did have different dynamics in different regions and with different country teams. Therefore, some observations cited in this review may not apply in all situations and with all teams.

5.1. General / process related observations

Some **strong points** in the process

- Advantages of self-assessment (as compared to external evaluation): more likely that it
 - Stimulates internal learning, and
 - Leads to relevant and easy-to-use solutions to observed challenges.
- beyond 2021 strategic reflections at country and regional level preceding the MTR (in theory) allowing teams to position the MTR in a longer-term strategic framework
- Programme team taking part in the data collection (SCOPEInsight, survey, etc) giving them first-hand insights in the real programme effects.
- Well-structured impact assessment toolkit which (once acquainted with) offered handy guidance during the review process
- (in principle) Modest role of local consultants but nevertheless teams made good use of their services to intermittently consult and review the process or tentative findings of the review. In some countries LCs provided wider / more in-depth support (upon request of Rikolto teams).
- Revisiting the ToC at the start of a review is a good way not only to guide reviewers and staff towards issues that are relevant and important from a learning perspective, but also to increase insights of the stakeholders in the underlying dynamics of change.
- In most cases LCs reported good communication and interactions with the PLA staff at country and regional levels.

Challenges in MTR process

- Not all country teams were adequately inducted in the MTR toolkit. At the start it took time for staff (and consultants) to understand and truly grasp the proposed methodologies, eventually it worked out well even though it wasn't always easy for teams to meet expectations.
- The process demanded a lot of time and effort of PLA and other staff who have heavy workloads with the regular programme work anyway. Quality of the analysis was affected as programme staff did or could not always allocate sufficient time and effort to the MTR process.
- Spreading the MTR process over a 6 months' period is unusual. Expecting a consultant to provide meaningful advisory services during 10 days over a period of 6 months was quite challenging for the consultants to maintain a consistent line of thinking in the support he/she provides. After gaps in support delivery for many weeks, LCs needed extra time to recap past steps and get back to speed (inefficiency).
- Key documents (like templates and guidelines for the review) have not been translated to the working languages of staff and partners (this was important given expected pro-active contribution of staff and partners in the exercise).
- Mixed commitment and motivation by senior management (at regional level). In regions where it was not strong, the whole process became much more troublesome and quality of outcomes was poorer.
- Recruitment of a PLA officer while the MTR process was ongoing (e.g. RDC)

Learning points on process

- Revisiting the 2019 strategic reflections to assess the match and the discrepancies with the findings of the MTR (capitalise on both exercises)

- The sequence strategic reflection (>2021) then MTR is interesting and valuable, but what was missing in the MTR was to revisit the outcomes of the strategic reflection against findings of the MTR.
- Maintain revisit pathways of pathways at the start of an MTR
- Clarify different but complementary roles and responsibilities of different staff (especially PLA and programme)
- Ensure that PLA-related work by programme staff is considered at equal terms as other work in planning, implementation and performance appraisal
- Ensure more ownership and responsibilities at regional management level. They must advocate for co-creation of MTR and de-isolate PLA staff
- Make sure all work documents that programme staff and partners must use are available in their working language
- Try to concentrate MTR process over a shorter period (say 3 months)
- A suggestion from the Belgian review: to consult partners and target groups / audiences at the start of the review on how they would like to review the collaboration and the results thereof.

5.2. Methodological aspects

- For some consultants, the mix of relevance and impact in the methodology was confusing, others did not understand why it was necessary to separate effectiveness and relevance analysis as there were many repetitive processes that demanded unnecessary time and effort.
- Consultants and Rikolto staff alike had problems interpreting the guidelines for the MTR report template and struggled to develop an outline.
Learning point: to provide a clear outline from the beginning showing structure, sequence of chapters, type of expected evidence, and indication of volume
- Similarly, there was confusion about the nature and content of exit strategies. In principle, exit strategies had to be linked to commodity-based pathways of change. One country developed exit strategy at organisational / institutional level which in my humble opinion makes sense. Most country teams modelled exit strategies into workplans for the rest of the programme cycle (see also section 3 above).
Learning point: to provide guidance on the nature and content of exit strategies.
- The M&E framework can be improved: some indicators are insufficiently specific or measurable (e.g. from FSC: youth behaviour, integrated food policy, new sustainability initiatives at retailers). There are no or at best poor indicators to follow-up on certain process dynamics especially with respect to policy influencing.
Learning point: revisit monitoring of policy influencing processes and of changes in policy environments. "Unpack" indicators that are difficult to measure.
- The MTR confirmed the critical role played by multi-actor initiatives in many different settings and contexts. Dynamics and processes of MAIs typically are long-term and of complex - if not chaotic - nature. The M&E does not truly capture these dynamics very well
Learning point: revisit the monitoring approach and methods for functioning and outcomes of MAIs.
- Was contribution analysis needed in this mid-term review. Usually mid-terms have a lighter configuration than end-lines and are primarily focused on strategic assessments and reorientation of programme approaches, and not on accountability.

Learning point: assess ex-ante whether contributions analysis is needed in the MTR, and if so for whom and to serve what purpose? Explore if and how to develop a lighter but still functional design of contribution analysis in MTRs.

- Some LCs reported that teams faced problems in matching information and data from different sources. This obviously complicated the analysis.

Learning point: allow time and support staff with guidelines on how to assess consistency of / match between primary and secondary data

- A challenge concerning data access, was that analysis of the raw data from farmer survey was not done in country, but by the international office. This in a way limited the country teams' ability to conceptualise the evidence picking from these data for the MTR reporting purposes.

Learning point: embed data analysis primarily at regional level with guidance by global team

- Conceptualisation, understanding and/or operationalisation of concepts. Different teams (sometimes even in 1 region) appear to have different interpretations of regularly recurrent concepts such as business model, inclusiveness (of a business model), farm resilience, enabling (institutional) environment, public governance to name few.

Learning point: develop and share an organisational glossary with stakeholders in the reviews.

Annex 1 – a few selected extracts from the reports in programme design and management

Programme design

- Being facilitator, methodological adviser and funder for strengthening multi-stakeholder platforms are key features in Rikolto's contribution to the development of relevant national and regional policies and strategies.
- Private sector engagement can be powerful to have large impact but companies are more interested in branding products than in investing in sustainable products. Therefore, the programme must combine market interventions and policy influencing for safe food.
- Commitment of relevant technical government departments contributes largely in the results the programme achieved with farmers and in market facilitation with buyers.
- To make the best use of the apex farmers organisations, we need to engage them in their core business work, especially on public and private policy influencing through dialogue meeting and platforms instead of engaging them in the project service delivery.

Programme management and process

- Introduce innovation to reach impact is not a short-term investment.
- Prioritisation in the programme should be set taking into account government commitment, capacity of partners, and opportunities for synergies and complementary.
- Systemic data gathering for evidence-based decision making is acknowledged as a decisive factor for program management.
- Rikolto PLA should choose a limited number of not-too-ambitious indicators for the programme.
- Adoption [of good practices introduced by Rikolto] by actors in the value chain requires the commitment of communities/ target groups and the presence of local champions.
- Understanding of the sector and in-depth knowledge of the situation on the ground provides unique positions for Rikolto to engage in the initiatives to improve the industry.

Annex 2 – Team of Consultants

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