

IOB BELEIDSDOORLICHTING:

Policy evaluation: The Dutch food security policy 2012-2016

Introduction

This study focused on the central question: *What is the contribution of the Dutch food security policy to the food security situation in the 15 Dutch partner countries between 2012 and 2015?*

The methods employed for the policy evaluation were diverse and tackled series of sub-questions. Analysis of the policy focused on the funding instruments and their synergies, consideration of how the expenditure had been targeted through different sub-components of the policy and how expenditure related to the number of direct and indirect beneficiaries. An inventory was made of all activities funded from the food security budget between 2012 and 2016, grouped into 11 'impact pathways' of similar interventions.

The study then focused on four of the target countries, namely: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Uganda. For each of these countries a qualitative evaluation of the Dutch food security programme and its appropriateness or the country context was made. Further, a detailed quantitative impact study was made in each of these countries for one selected project. Two smaller studies focused on intra-household dynamics in rural households and at co-existence of under and over-nutrition in Uganda. Plans for long-term (>20 year) longitudinal studies on earlier food-security-related projects had to be abandoned due to the lack of a realistic counterfactual.

Following the impact pathways, a detailed review was made of all available evaluations of Dutch food security activities (covering some 50 project evaluations in all), complemented by evidence from the broader literature. Finally, interviews were conducted with a variety of stakeholders in the four case study countries and at the two ministries.

Validity and reliability

The policy review was conducted by the Directorate IOB with feedback sessions with a large reference group comprising ministry staff (Foreign Affairs, Economic Affairs, Finance) and two external advisors. It provides an excellent and highly informative overview of how the food security policy was implemented. Projects funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economic Affairs comprise an extremely large and diverse portfolio addressing many different aspects of food security. There are several funding instruments: central (from the Ministry), delegated (through embassies); bilateral, multilateral; through national governments, NGOs and the private sector. Decisions on which projects to fund were largely taken at country level which has advantages in ensuring local relevance perhaps at the expense of programme coherence.

Four Dutch research groups with relevant expertise and good track records were contracted to execute the detailed quantitative studies. The coordinated approach taken to conduct the evaluations was to use quasi-experimental designs, generally accepted to be the second-best option for such studies, if randomised controlled trials are not appropriate. These studies were well planned and conducted thoroughly. Nevertheless, the results of the impact studies were less conclusive than envisaged.

With the benefit of hindsight we can conclude that the period of evaluation (only two years between the baseline and endline) was too short to expect clear impacts. Unforeseen events (e.g. a disease epidemic in cassava in Rwanda) disrupted project execution. Assumptions made concerning the impact pathways of some projects turned out not to be valid.

The IOB team is to be complimented for their diligence and thoroughness in trawling through a huge body of information and in their oversight and guidance of the country studies. The IOB researchers were very conscientious in execution of the study and open to advice. During feedback from the reference group on project drafts, the Ministry's policy staff showed a tendency to evaluate decisions made to fund various projects in the light of current policies rather than the policies that prevailed at the time the decisions were made to fund the projects. This is perhaps inevitable but a point for consideration in future studies.

The contextualisation of the Dutch Food Security Programme within the broader literature concerning impacts of projects through detailed evaluation of secondary information provides an excellent backdrop and interpretation to the report. The structuring of the report around 11 identified impact pathways helps in drawing important conclusions and recommendations from an enormous body of evidence.

Effectiveness and Usefulness of the Review

The review has important implications for future policy regarding Food Security and how Dutch development assistance can contribute the key relevant aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals, namely: reduced hunger and malnutrition, and sustainable food systems. Key findings are highlighted in the review summary and I draw attention to a few of them here to indicate the importance of the report for future Dutch policy.

An important conclusion is that while integrated value chain projects have been successful in stimulating private sector involvement in agriculture they have limited impacts on poorer households. By contrast, public investment in infrastructure, in agricultural extension and in social safety nets have more impacts on income of the rural poor. Greater attention is needed to develop a vision and plan of action for a large proportion of rural households that need to transition to new livelihoods as they cannot make a living from agriculture. As such policy needs to embrace sustainable food systems, without losing focus on key areas where Dutch expertise has a specific role to play such as climate smart and nutrition sensitive agriculture.

The report highlights the difficulty in measuring the less tangible but desired benefits of project interventions on environmental sustainability. Further it is difficult to assign impacts to specific interventions. A structured plan for monitoring and evaluation of the whole portfolio of projects is required rather than retro-fitting impact evaluations.

Funding for food security must be targeted to interventions with food security as their specific goal, and not become subservient to other policies such as aid and trade. Stronger coordination between programmes funded centrally and embassy managed projects is needed to enhance synergies.

Finally, it was a privilege to serve as advisor on this study, I am proud to be associated with the final report and trust the findings will be given the importance they are due.

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Ken E. Giller

Professor of Plant Production Systems, Wageningen University

Member and independent external advisor of the reference group