

# Taking stock

## Meta-evaluation assesses ITTO's project work

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**Community spirit:** Promoting community forest management has been a strength of ITTO (forest nursery in Ghana, PD 49/98 Rev.1 (F)).

Photo: P. Masupa/ITTO

ITTO has financed over 1000 projects since its establishment. These projects have made a significant contribution to ITTO's objectives both in member countries and internationally. Recently, a stock-taking of progress made through these projects was carried out via a meta-evaluation focusing on 140 projects which had themselves been subject to ex-post evaluation. It revealed strengths and weaknesses in project effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, impacts, and sustainability. It has also generated valuable lessons and good practices to guide the Organization's future project work.

Evaluation is an important instrument for ITTO's accountability and learning. It has generally been practiced in a satisfactory manner but its potential is not fully utilized. Ex-post evaluation has often been perceived more as a formal requirement than a management tool for continual improvement. There are major possibilities to enhance the contribution of evaluations by targeting project selection more strategically, strengthening the systemic links of ex-post evaluation in the project cycle, enhancing dissemination of lessons learned, broadening the pool of expertise, and exploiting various possibilities to improve impacts, sustainability and cost-efficiency.

### Methodology

To collect necessary evidence the meta-evaluation team analyzed and rated 92 ex-post evaluated projects. One hundred quality indicators were developed and assessed based on a review of about 500 documents including project documents, progress and monitoring reports, and ex-post evaluation reports. In addition, surveys were carried out among executing agencies, country focal points, evaluators, the ITTO Secretariat staff and selected

stakeholders using structured questionnaires. Both the quality of projects and the quality of evaluation and monitoring work were evaluated during the exercise.

The evaluated projects were carried out in 23 countries (there are an additional 13 producing member countries that have implemented or are implementing ITTO projects, but none of their projects has been subject to ex-post evaluation). Only a few of these projects were submitted to ITTO by consuming member countries. Since none of the projects implemented by the ITTO Secretariat (nearly 100 in total) have been subject to ex-post evaluation, these were not included in the meta-evaluation. Due to these caveats and the fact that ex-post evaluations have been carried out only for larger projects, the sample used does not reflect the total portfolio of the Organization's projects.

### Quality of ex-post evaluation

The quality of ex-post evaluations has generally been satisfactory but there is variation between evaluators and, to a lesser extent, between ITTO's three technical divisions. As a whole, unsatisfactory evaluations are few. While the outputs of ITTO projects can be generally identified without difficulty, the evaluation of impacts and sustainability is typically constrained by lack of baseline information and quantifiable indicators of measurement. Due to these factors, compounded by limited time and resources available and sometimes over-ambitious terms-of-reference, the quality of the ex-post evaluation process of ITTO projects is often inherently imperfect.

The quality of project design is critical for successful implementation and has an impact on the performance of evaluation. The logical framework matrix included in almost all project documents is a useful tool for good

design but it also has its weaknesses, which continues to represent a problem for many project formulators. Absence of baseline information is a particular problem in field projects involving communities and smallholders, or which are targeted at restoration and rehabilitation of degraded forests. For this reason, pre-project (baseline) and post-project situations are often described only qualitatively. Another related issue is that contributions to ITTO objectives are usually covered by only identifying the existence of the (intended) linkage but qualitative or quantitative analysis of the significance of such contributions is lacking.

Above all, the evaluation quality depends on evaluators. A large majority of them carried out their work satisfactorily and a few proved to be excellent. Only a few evaluators were rated as moderately unsatisfactory and only one case was considered a failure. A significant improvement has taken place in the last 10 years in reporting, judgment and assessment of the key success determinants but there is still scope for improvement and the analysis revealed a number of ways to achieve this.

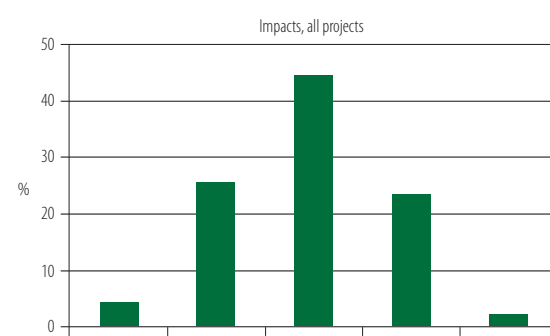
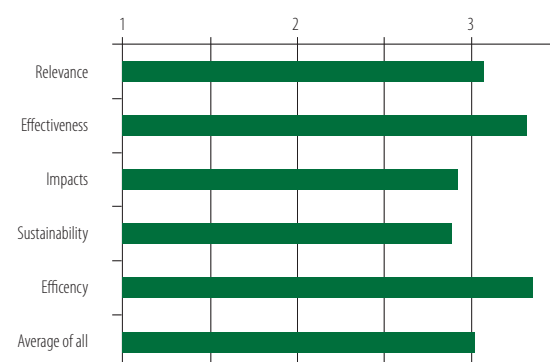
### Project quality

It is well known that forestry projects need to address a uniquely complex set of issues. Field projects are often implemented in challenging environments that are largely outside the control of those who fund, implement and benefit from the intervention. Environmental degradation of forest resources, extreme poverty, deficient infrastructure, market access limitations, weak governance, and social conflicts are prevalent in many situations. Field projects can also be affected by external factors such as weather risks. ITTO's projects are fully country-driven and they focus on putting the Organization's policies into action, which adds to their value. However, implementation is subject to changes in the political and institutional environment, which has sometimes been challenging.

In spite of these constraints, the average project quality has been satisfactory (Figure 1). However, averages hide variation between projects, regions and ITTO technical divisions. Effectiveness, efficiency and relevance have received higher quality ratings than impacts and sustainability. Regionally, the sampled projects in Africa have had the highest overall quality ratings in the sample, followed by Asia and Latin America. The international-level projects have suffered from a somewhat lower quality in relevance, effectiveness and sustainability, in spite of their relatively good impacts and efficiency.

As regards relevance in the national or local context, strengths in the project design included alignment with beneficiary/target group needs, implementation arrangements, policy compatibility, economic impact, participation, provision of local opportunities, and partner interest alignment. Somewhat weaker areas have been realism and internal logic in project design but there is

**Figure 1. Average project quality and variation of project impacts**



Key: 1 = unsatisfactory, 2 = moderately unsatisfactory, 3 = moderately satisfactory, 4 = satisfactory, 5 = excellent

significant scope for improvement also with regard to participation and innovation.

A large majority of the sampled ex-post evaluated projects were rated as satisfactory in terms of effectiveness and several even as excellent, which indicates that the specific objectives were generally well achieved.

### Impacts

Impacts were assessed in projects that have been (a) closely targeted at specific substantive, often technically oriented themes to deliver verifiable impacts; and (b) focused on problems in which simultaneous interventions in more than one impact area were necessary; such problems are typical in the producing member countries. In general, the projects have had satisfactory impacts in strengthening of capacity and institutions as well as information and knowledge but lower ratings were found in gender, building up of social capital and empowerment, and economic impact.

The main intended target groups of ITTO projects have been forest administrations, the private sector and forest communities. Training and research institutes as well as NGOs have been targeted to a considerably lesser extent. Successful identification of beneficiary needs has contributed to impacts, particularly in strengthening of social capital and generation of economic benefits. Weaknesses in gender aspects need to be addressed in future projects.

Thematically, the principal impact area has been sustainable forest management (SFM) which is the “core business” of ITTO. Main activities have been forest restoration and rehabilitation, reforestation and plantations, demonstration of new practices, forest inventory, and management planning. Another key impact area has been development of community forest management and enterprise. Other support areas include further processing and industry development, reduced impact logging (RIL), information systems, governance, non-timber forest products, certification and timber tracking, market information and marketing promotion. The balance of project work was not, however, considered fully compatible with ITTO’s strategic objectives due to less emphasis on industry development and market promotion.

Among the cross-cutting themes, human resource development has been the focal impact area addressed by most projects. R&D has also been well covered, but there have been fewer projects with impacts in innovation, technology transfer, and little specifically targeted at investment promotion.

Direct project impacts could be considerably enhanced through effective sharing of knowledge. Most project products, lessons learned and recommendations identified are applicable nationally and in more than 20% of the evaluated cases also regionally/internationally. In addition, many projects could be replicated in similar conditions beyond project sites and host countries. This emphasizes the role of ITTO projects as valuable global public goods.

## Sustainability

Sustainability has been either satisfactory or moderately satisfactory in most ITTO projects. While technical viability and environmental sustainability were generally rated satisfactory, institutional, economic and particularly social sustainability have been more problematic (Figure 2). Projects have usually a high degree of national policy compatibility which has contributed to sustainability. However, it needs to be emphasized that ITTO projects are all different and cannot contribute to all the sustainability pillars in the same way.

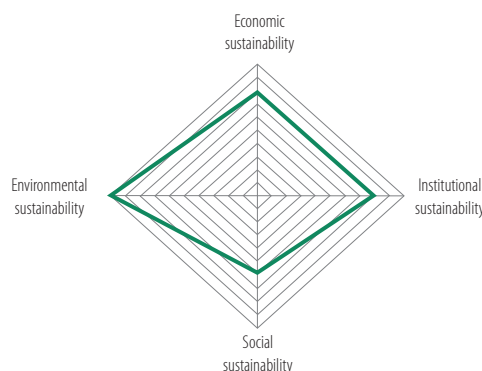
Economic and social sustainability appear to have a strong positive linkage demonstrating the potential for win-win interventions. Positive linkages between economic and environmental sustainability and between social and environmental sustainability were also identified although they appear to be weaker and there are cases with negative trade-offs as well.

Project documents define when the intervention shall be completed but often activities should be continued to have a sustained impact. More than half of all the sampled projects therefore led to design/implementation of a follow-up project or other post-project activities. This suggests that the interventions opened up a new opportunity for future support, or (perhaps more likely) that there was a need to continue to support the started activities to ensure sustainability. However, the lack of post-project financial support often endangers the valuable results in forest protection, community forestry, strengthening of governance, demonstration areas, and many other interventions. This emphasizes the importance of developing adequate exit strategies starting from the project design phase.

## Efficiency

The efficiency of ITTO projects has on average been satisfactory as a result of appropriate resource allocation, high cost-efficiency, effective

Figure 2. Quality of sustainability (all projects) by main pillar



Note: each axis of this chart goes from 2.0 (moderately unsatisfactory) at the center to 4.0 (satisfactory) at the outer vertices.

monitoring, and keeping expenditures within the budget limits. However, there is hardly any explicit information on the financial or economic rates of return of the productive activities promoted. This is directly linked with the regular lack of baseline information and inadequate data on benefits and costs representing a major lacuna to be addressed both in project design and evaluation.

Many project types funded by ITTO tend to suffer from inherent risks which should be duly considered in project design and implementation. External factors have had a significant negative influence on the implementation of 15% of the evaluated projects. Bureaucratic delays in fund transfer, changes in government policy and institutional responsibilities, and exceptional weather conditions have been quoted as typical examples. However, these have also sometimes been used as an excuse for the delays caused by executing agencies not being able to comply with the obligations of project agreements and implementation rules, or with the agreed work plans.

## Contribution to ITTO objectives

Multiple targets are common as most ITTO projects have contributed to the achievement of more than one ITTO objective. Sustainable development (including poverty reduction), improvement of national policies, SFM, and capacity building are typical examples of such multiple objectives. More than 60% of the projects have contributed to consultation for policy development, information sharing, R&D, and access to, and transfer of, technology. Projects which deal with forest land-use and tenure, reforestation, rehabilitation and plantations, industry, markets, and marketing tend to be more focused than in other areas.

On the other hand, while multiple objectives are a positive feature in their own right, they easily increase complexity of the project and can divert attention from the project’s strategic focus. In spite of apparent win-win opportunities between ITTO’s objectives, these trade-offs need careful consideration in future project design.

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Investment in preparatory support has usually resulted in improvement of project quality. Pre-projects have particularly contributed to project staff performance but the impact appears weaker in the other aspects of project quality. On the other hand, a previous project (often a previous phase of the same project) has usually significantly improved overall project performance.

### Lessons learned and good practices

Thematic summative evaluation was carried out for 13 thematic areas which are listed below. Valuable lessons and good practices were identified and a separate summary on each theme was included in the meta-evaluation report. These have been made available on the ITTO website to facilitate design, appraisal and implementation of future projects.

#### Thematic areas

1. Demonstration areas, permanent sample plots and model forests for sustainable forest management
2. Forest inventory, monitoring, mapping and zoning
3. Protected areas/biodiversity
4. Forest restoration, rehabilitation, reforestation and plantations
5. Community forest management and enterprise
6. Illegal logging, governance and forest certification
7. Criteria & Indicators for sustainable forest management
8. Forest information systems
9. Reduced impact logging
10. Further processing and industry efficiency
11. Non-Timber Forest Products
12. Markets, marketing and trade promotion
13. Project design and implementation

### Monitoring and evaluation function

Monitoring and evaluation are well-established practices in ITTO with clearly defined procedures and responsibilities. Areas which need to be addressed in the future include (i) choice of projects for evaluation, (ii) use of mid-term evaluation as a proactive management tool, (iii) guidance given to evaluators, (iv) expanding the pool of evaluators, (v) timing of evaluations, (vi) composition of evaluation teams, and (vii) engaging executing agencies in providing management responses to evaluation findings.

### Knowledge management

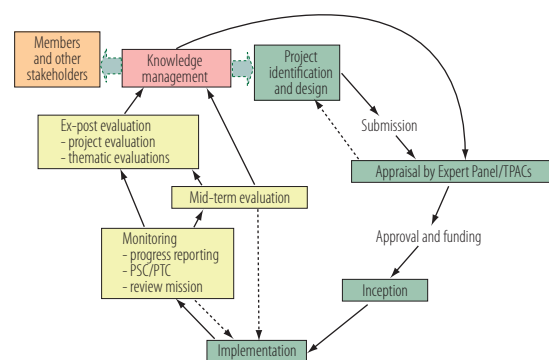
Effectiveness in learning from evaluation results depends on dissemination and other knowledge management. Few member countries have established mechanisms for sharing knowledge of ex-post evaluation reports. This is obviously a cause of concern, as most of the lessons learned are country specific potentially benefiting national stakeholders.

ITTO needs to strengthen the operational feedback loop from evaluation to project design and implementation

through various institutionalized ways for learning. The current dissemination mechanisms are all useful and highly appreciated by stakeholders but need strengthening. Dissemination strategies should be based on diverse needs of various target groups which should also include other stakeholders in all the member countries and beyond. It is critical to allocate sufficient resources to dissemination to capitalize the value of lessons learned from project work.

One of the purposes of ex-post evaluation is to improve the quality of project proposals submitted to the ITTO but the feedback loops have not been strong enough. There should be a requirement for project formulators to look into the lessons learned from previous projects. As a whole, there is a need to establish stronger systemic links between evaluation and the other elements of the project cycle (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Evaluation in the ITTO project cycle



### Recommendations

Based on its findings and conclusions, the meta-evaluation made a series of recommendations to strengthen the current monitoring and evaluation function in the ITTO project cycle. These included adjustments in the selection criteria for projects to be evaluated, timing of evaluations, use of mid-term evaluation, selection of consultants, provisions of project agreements, and knowledge management. The Organization should also periodically monitor and report on the performance of its project work through analytical summaries, and expand and strengthen its knowledge sharing mechanisms. The planning, monitoring and evaluation function also needs strengthening in ITTO.

To improve sustainability, executing agencies should plan for adequate exit strategies starting from the project design stage to ensure post-project financial support and firmly commit to implement project recommendations. In addition, country focal points should actively disseminate positive results and lessons learned from ITTO projects within the country to strengthen their impacts.

*The full report of the meta-evaluation is available on [www.itto.int](http://www.itto.int).*