

JAG - Evaluation Session Speaking notes - 10 July 2017

Background

1. It is a pleasure for me to present you the key messages extracted from the 2017 Annual Evaluation Synthesis Report. This report is a summary of the evaluation findings over the past year. Its purpose is to synthesize lessons learnt, and provide recommendations.
2. In terms of scope, findings from all together 23 ITC projects have been considered. This includes:
 - Four ITC's programme and project evaluations, managed by the IEU
 - Six evaluations commissioned and managed by ITC funders,
 - As you see this year, we have also expanded the learning scope to cover insights from project managers, shared through 15 project completion reports.
3. Concerning the analytical approach, we have introduced performance ratings for each of the five evaluation criteria (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability) including one for the cross-cutting issue of gender equality and women's empowerment. This puts us in a position to consolidate ratings at the corporate level and make comparisons. We have also expanded the analysis, with a chapter specifically dedicated to learning on agriculture value chain (AVC) in trade development. Finally, following the analysis and learning themes, this report presents for the first time strategic recommendations to ITC management and project managers for future operations, based on the consolidated evaluation analysis.

Main messages

4. The overall trend in terms of ITC's project performance is pretty encouraging.

The organization is on track in terms of its core business and management approach.

Evaluation suggests that in some areas, it needs to go deeper.

- Looking at the rating of project performance in the ten ITC and external evaluations, an overall average score of 4.7 was achieved on a rating scale of 1-6.
- This means that in the overall, evaluations have considered that ITC projects have achieved either some strong results or a majority of positive results.

5. Let me detail this overall message around two main areas: project strategy and project services, where evaluation recognize progress and good practices and, at the same time, identifies opportunities for improvement.

Concerning project strategy, last year's Annual Synthesis Report already observed significant progress in applying a programme approach in each of the six focus areas of ITC, with programme level theories of change.

In our analysis, we have observed that the ratings, especially in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, are significantly higher for more recent projects than for older projects.

This strongly suggests that the programmatic approach is being progressively implemented into the design of new projects.

At the same time, evaluations perceive the need for continuing the efforts in implementing the programmatic approach into new and in existing projects in two main areas:

- a. In managing projects, it is important that managers proceed to a systematic verification and improvement of the quality and use of project level theories of change, not only at design stage, but as a living tool for project management.
- b. At the same time, as attested by successive Annual Evaluation synthesis reports since 2013, the issue of good project monitoring is still a collective challenge, even though excellent work has been done in some projects.

This is why this year's report recommends to constantly emphasize project monitoring and reporting as a major, budgeted and assigned task in project management.

6. In terms of ITC's project services to clients, evaluations clearly acknowledge that ITC has a clear and recognized comparative advantage in providing internationalization support services to SMEs, in particular in the area of bringing SMEs to market, and including the bottom of the pyramid for inclusiveness.

This represents an opportunity to be more responsive at the country level, where ITC can further improve its performance around three main axes:

- a. An increased focus on assessing and verifying the needs and the capacity of SMEs throughout the project cycle.

This was for example the case for enhancing gender strategies in AVCs. All projects should conduct gender-conscious needs assessment and allocating a budget for specific work to reach a critical mass of gender-sensitive results.

- b. Anchoring our work on strengthening TISIs capacity as implementing partners even more, as a precondition for sustainability.

TISIs play a decisive role as implementing partners. For example, concerning the specific case of an AVC, a TISI was instrumental in providing for a collective marketing system, which proved to be a solution to link smallholders farmers to agricultural value chains.

This ensured their bargaining power facing large players, and to translate small farmers products in profits for farmers.

Acknowledging the decisive role of our implementing partners, it is recommended to position a phased and realistic TISI capacity building plan in a three-year project implementation cycle.

The need to strengthening TISIs capacity is particularly valid in the context of LDCs where projects need to look for longer implementation periods and allocate measurable funds for follow up.

- c. The third message to further build on SME marketing is the need to maximize partnerships with private sector external parties, since these have the real power to increase business opportunities for SMEs and business linkages between supply and destination markets.

Acknowledging the decisive role of external parties, it is recommended to continue and intensify the effective collaboration with private sector partners to connect business transactions along the international value chains.

Evaluation function developments

7. Last year at the JAG, the Peer Review of the ITC's evaluation function report and ITC's Management Response were presented and discussed.

As requested during last year JAG, the developments concerning the ITC's evaluation function since then are summarized in this report, and the implementation status of the accepted recommendations is detailed in the annex.

As you can see, the Independent Evaluation Unit is on good track in implementing the recommendations:

8. In 2017, the Unit has completed the implementation of its three-tier evaluation system in ITC with all projects in ITC having submitted a form of evaluation:
- Independent evaluations conducted directly by the Unit
 - Self-evaluations for large programmes and projects, and
 - Project completion reports for all technical assistance projects.

Following these lines, the Unit has launched its first corporate level evaluation. It focuses on assessing ITC's performance in its participation in the "Delivery as One" UN system.

9. Within the three-tier evaluation system, another important feature is the publication of the ITC Evaluation Guidelines which aims is to serve as a reference for ITC staff and Aid-for-Trade evaluation practitioners when undertaking evaluation and tasks related to monitoring and reporting.

The objective of the Guidelines is to building common understanding on the methodology, process and quality standards of ITC evaluations, to ensure a level of coherence across different types of evaluation.

In association with the Guidelines, the Unit has designed an online course on evaluation which objective is to strengthen evaluation capacity and participation, to equip project staff with evaluation and monitoring skills.

10. In alignment with the Peer review recommendations, it is worth to mention that in 2016, the Unit conducted its first formal impact evaluation, as a pilot for testing and customizing ITC's impact assessment methods.

The impact evaluation for the NTF II Uganda project (2010-2013), taking into account the necessary time lapse for the expected impact to mature, revealed a solid example of long-term impact generated at SME, TISI and policy advocacy levels.

11. Let me conclude by highlighting that all our activities are being aimed at contributing to embedding evaluation within ITC and supporting an evaluative culture in the organization that facilitates accountability and learning.

We want to encourage and support evidence-seeking behaviour to support evidence-based decision-making.

12. I would like to finally emphasize that this would not be possible without ITC's Management's constant support and commitment to the development and the independence of the evaluation function in ITC.

13. I thank you very much for the attention and will be happy to answer your questions as well as any request for clarification.