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**Mid-term Review of Uni4Coop Program Cambodia  
(Agriculture and Economy Sector)**



*Agriculture Cooperative committee members in Kampong Soeng, Preah Sdach district, Prey Veng*

**Evaluation conducted by:**

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## **Executive Summary<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

The entity “Uni4Coop” was created by a collaboration of four Belgian University NGOs in order to strengthen synergies and mutual engagement in a common program funded by the Belgian Development Cooperation. In Cambodia, two of these NGOs, Louvain Cooperation (LC) and Eclasio (previously called ADG) are implementing the Uni4Coop program. This program in Cambodia is tackling two sectors: Health and Agriculture/Rural Economy and is being implemented over a 5-year period (2017 to 2021). While Eclasio engaged only in the agriculture and economic sector, LC is involved in both sectors.

This Uni4Coop program is being implemented in partnership with a number of local federations, NGOs and institutions. These are Facilitation Association of Economy for Cooperatives (FAEC), Federation of Cambodian Farmer Organizations for Development (FCFD), Cambodian Institute for Research and Rural Development (CIRD), Irrigation Service Center (ISC), Mlup Baitong (MB) and the Royal University of Agriculture, ECOLAND Research Center (RUA-ECOLAND). Initially another NGO, Minority Organization for Development and Economy (MODE) had been a partner but this role was taken over by MB mid-way through 2018.

Within the framework of the five-year program, two evaluations are planned: this current Mid-Term Review (MTR) and a Final Evaluation in 2021. However this MTR has been commissioned to review only the Agriculture/Rural Economy sector.

An important contextual element is the start of the preparatory work of the next five-year program (2022-2026), which is due to combine LC and Eclasio actions under one single Specific Objective in the agricultural and economic sector. Conclusions retrieved from this Mid-Term Review will be used in the design of the scope and planning of the future Uni4Coop program in Cambodia in common between LC and Eclasio.

### **Objectives of the Mid-term Review (MTR)**

There were four objectives to this MTR:

- Review the achievements of the global partnership strategy of LC and Eclasio in Cambodia as described in the Uni4Coop Program Document
- Appreciate the quality and performance of the partnership relations that exist between Eclasio, LC and their 5 local partners' structures in the execution of the program
- Appreciate the institutional capacities (understood in the sense of appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the institution, not directly related to the program) of the partners agreeing to participate in the exercise
- Propose recommendations and suggestions for improvement in the short-term (last two years of the 2017-2021 Program) and in the medium term (Preparation of the second phase of the 2022-2026 strategic framework) regarding partnership relationships.

### **Scope and methodology**

Because of the strong will to undertake an evaluation on common grounds between the partners and perceived difficulties with partnerships in general in Cambodia, this MTR was designed to focus on partnership relationships as well as on the assessment of progress to date. Key questions for the MTR were therefore accumulated under four Leading Questions (LQs):

- LQ1: To what extent have the partnerships developed by LC and Eclasio helped to create added values and to strengthen the institutional capacities of each partner?
- LQ2: What is the understanding of each partner of what is a partnership approach?
- LQ3: What are LC and Eclasio's approaches in the field of agro-ecology and the support of rural economy development in Cambodia?
- LQ4: In what ways has the program been implemented efficiently and what progress can be noted in regards to effectiveness (possible achievement of objectives), possible impact and potential for the results to be sustainable?

Of the seven (out of eleven) key provinces where activities were implemented, three of these were visited during the evaluation field work. Respondents included all partners and stakeholders as well as a sample of key target groups. The main target groups were Agriculture Cooperatives (ACs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of which 9 ACs and 10 SHGs were interviewed.

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<sup>1</sup> The full report is available on request at [info@eclasio.org](mailto:info@eclasio.org)

## **General findings**

The TOR for this MTR was designed from a perspective that there were issues related to the overall partnership which needed to be explored. This partly stemmed from Eclasio's perceptions that the program partners did not meet Eclasio's desire for legitimacy. Another underlying issue was the question of division of program design into two Specific Objectives (SOs) whereas both SOs respond to the same Theory of Change designed for the Agriculture and Rural Economy aspect of the Uni4Coop program.

These issues have now been explored and the conclusion of the consultant is that overall the partnership is working well. Although Eclasio and LC largely implement two separation programs, there is good collaboration and sharing of lessons learnt and joint participation in workshops and other events to disseminate results from action research and other learning. But more opportunities for deeper reflection between partners of each NGO would further strengthen collaboration and sharing.

Regarding Eclasio's concerns about legitimacy and representation, it is the opinion of the consultant that NGOs (although without the elected mandate from target groups to represent them) are equally committed to meeting the needs of the target groups they represent. Naturally they can only do so with external funding support; but currently, this is also the situation of representative associations. The need of Eclasio to have representative partners is a restriction considering how few there are in Cambodia; but partnership with LC offers an avenue to work with other less "legitimate" organizations as LC does not operate under such restrictions.

On the issue of two SOs, there are historical reasons why this division came about (based on the historical experience and connections of Eclasio and LC from previous projects implemented in Cambodia). Actually implementing the Agriculture & Rural Economy aspects of the Theory of Change under two SOs gave the opportunity for both NGOs to work to their individual strengths and interests; neither one of the NGOs could have implemented the entire program without changing their current mode of operation – either they would have had to expand their human resources in order to closely monitor many partners or they would have had to devolve more to the partners (become more of a donor than a real partner). Based on the current strategic thinking for the next phase it is unlikely that one SO could be developed; it would seem more advantageous to again develop the program under two SOs (*refer to section IV.3.2 for more detailed discussion on partnership issues for new program phase*).

In relation to the actual implementation to date, indications are that the results and objectives can be achieved by the end of the program. For SO1, there has been more progress to date than SO2. This is not unexpected as the change of partner during the second year was a disrupting event for the activities under SO2. But that is now moving forward after the new partner, Mlup Baitong, came on board. While there are a few issues listed under recommendations for program implementation, possibly the most important is the suggestion not to form any more SHGs; if the program changes to formation of production groups (PGs) focused on agro-ecology (AE), they are more likely to be sustainable. Such groups can help the geographical concentration of farmers transitioning to AE where they can more easily receive the intensive support they need in the early stages (both from each other and from service providers).

## **Conclusions to evaluation questions**

### **LQ1 – added value and institutional strengthening**

All partners of this program were clear that the Uni4Coop program closely matched their own vision and mission. This is not surprising as both Eclasio and LC selected partners with that match in mind. Implementation has provided "give and take", with partners contributing to the partnership and in turn benefiting from this participation, with opportunities for learning and sharing of knowledge. The partnership has benefited from the diverse experience of each of the partners, with the key added value of each of the partners being the skilled human resources they provided to enable the planned actions to be carried out. In turn the partners expanded on their knowledge and skills through the joint meetings and workshops of various networks. One network which all partners mentioned in particular as being particularly useful in terms of new knowledge, and also new contacts, was the ALISEA network, focusing on agro-ecology. For research, an important contribution of the Uni4Coop program has been facilitating opportunities for research institutions like RUA-ECOLAND (and students from Belgian universities) to conduct their research among target groups of local partners.

The institutional capacity of the partner NGOs and research institution is quite strong. CIRD and MB are both well established NGOs with stable funding from a variety of sources and have been operational for many years. There is little doubt that they will continue to implement projects according to their mandate. RUA-ECOLAND is a research institution under the auspices of the Royal University of Agriculture and has support from many sources of finance for its research activities. As long as they continue to source support for their research, there is no reason not to expect that they will continue their work after the end of this Uni4Coop program.



But the implementing NGOs (especially Eclasio) are more concerned about the institutional capacity of the federations (FAEC and FCFD). While their structures and governance are appropriate and they have clear goals for service provision to members, both federations still depend on external financing support. This is a concern for Eclasio as they worry that federation dependence on external (donor) funds could distract federations from their main mandate (meeting their member needs). The consultant would argue that most donors who support these federations have similar mandate to Eclasio (assisting federations to meet member needs). Although to date they have managed to attract such support, reducing dependence on external financial assistance to cover basic operational costs should continue to be an aim of both federations. For this reason, assisting federations to develop a fee structure for service provision has been a strong focus of Eclasio throughout this program. The process of developing fee-structure models has enhanced FAEC's understanding of how to meet member needs for these services as well as providing them with an opportunity to benefit from fees from these services. This has been an important contribution to FAEC capacity. But implementation of the fee structure is still very new and only limited fees have been collected so far; this will require further monitoring over the remaining years of this Uni4Coop program.

### **LQ2 – understanding of partnership approach**

It has been mentioned above that there is very close convergence between the goals of all partners involved in this program. But it would be stretching the imagination to say that this leads to one common goal between them all. Each partner retains their individual goals above that of any one program they are implementing. Each program contributes towards that goal rather than becoming the objective in itself. This is not a problem; rather it is good that partners retain their independence but can still work together towards short term goals that are relevant to their long term vision and mission.

Some key strengths of the partnership include:

- Experienced partners with diverse skills who require only limited guidance (which enables LC and Eclasio to operate with relatively low overhead costs – as partnering with “going concerns” means structures already exist so new program management structure needs to be setup)
- Inclusion of federations such as FAEC and FCFD have enabled the program to reach out to a wide number of ACs due to the broad (and increasing) network of these federations
- The design of the program ensures a lot of networking opportunities
- As University NGOs, Eclasio and LC need to be able to contribute to learning and sharing (between north and south). The partnership with RUA-ECOLAND provides such an opportunity and it has been utilized through the action research conducted (and remaining plans)

But two areas of weakness that need to be considered are:

- Lack of close coordination between the partners of both objectives. There has been limited reflection on activities between the two sets of partners; mostly reflection has been confined to partners within each of the objectives. Both Eclasio and LC recognize this and plan to work more closely in the coming year. As geographical proximity may assist this, they plan to rent joint office space and perhaps share some human resources. But as Eclasio currently shares an office with CIRD, they need to consider which is most practical – to be closer to LC or closer to CIRD (which also gives close access to FAEC/FCFD as they often frequent CIRD office).
- The total budget is very small when spread over many partners, and many years. Of the Eclasio component, the wide geographical spread comes from one of the strengths (large number of members of FAEC and FCFD). But the implementation of SA by LC could have benefited from a more restricted geographical focus – more farmers in closer proximity rather than spread over many communes.

### **LQ3 – approaches to AE and rural economy**

Most respondents felt that it is only a matter of terminology whether they refer to Agro-Ecology (AE – the term used by Eclasio) or Sustainable Agriculture (SA – the term used by LC). The techniques being promoted by Eclasio and LC do not differ significantly as to date both focus on sustainable production techniques. However, AE is intended to create wider social and economic dynamism but this will take a bit longer to evolve.

But while the technical inputs promoted by Eclasio and LC may be similar, a difference in approach to implementation is the level of technical support given to farmers who are transitioning to AE/SA. The target farmers of Eclasio benefit from their membership of ACs (although a few non-AC members also practice); and in addition to the technical support from AC specialist trainers, Eclasio also assigns specific technical staff to support these farmers. LC largely selects farmers from SHGs and the technical support is provided by their local NGO partner. Initially this was MODE but internal management issues hindered their ability to provide quality support so implementation of SA slowed down. MB is now on board and FAEC has recruited additional technical staff. But the selected farmers are spread over a large geographical area (not confined to any one or more SHGs) so technical support may not be as intensive as it needs to be during the early years of transition.

It is not sufficient to have a few good examples among many farmers who are still farming with unsustainable agriculture practices. It would be more sustainable to form production groups (PGs) of farmers in close geographical proximity who could support each other; this would also ease the provision of technical support.

For supporting rural economy, the AE/SA interventions discussed above are one approach to improving household income. But for other interventions, Eclasio and LC have taken different approaches during this Uni4Coop program. Eclasio focuses on AC capacity as a tool for improving the economic situation of their members; LC supports the formation of SHGs to amalgamate capital for small business initiatives and they also support IGA grants to individual entrepreneurs to promote good examples to others.

From the findings of this MTR, the conclusion of the consultant is that strengthening ACs has greater potential for positive impact on rural economy than establishing SHGs. ACs have legal status, established governance structures, and support from government and other institutional donor programs. On the other hand, the SHGs currently being formed do not have a long term vision for building up finance to improve their economic situation; most of them see their group as a short-term saving mechanism (and they propose to liquidate the fund every year and start again). MB plans to work more with them on this issue, putting stronger emphasis on the “self-help” aspect rather than on saving only. But from the history of SHGs in Cambodia, it is unlikely that they will continue after the end of the program without MB support. The consultant would suggest not forming more SHGs; rather as mentioned above in relation to AE/SA, form production groups instead. Such production groups having a strong agriculture focus (rather than saving) could more easily transition later to AC than could SHGs.

#### **LQ4 – status of program implementation**

Although the main intention of Eclasio and LC was for this MTR to focus on partnership, it would have been remiss of the consultant not to include a review of the program implementation. A partnership for partnership sake is of little value; the quality of a partnership is best revealed through the benefits it produces for partner target groups.

Therefore, it is worth highlighting some key success to date:

- Completion of studies and action research has provided tools for the implementing NGOs to disseminate practical learning from the program to a wide range of stakeholders (both in Belgium, Cambodia and the region)
- Following training and business planning, ACs are now more business orientated than before (and even the members/farmers think of their farming more in business terms)
- Building up a pool of farmer to farmer trainers (service providers in the case of LC partners and for Eclasio partners, specialists in various agriculture techniques, management, finances and business planning) provides options for ACs and their members to access support that is practically-orientated to their needs (and their level of understanding)
- The success of ISC in mobilizing financial contributions from farmers in Takeo for the small-scale irrigation services shows the high relevance of this component to the farmers
- SCM (Scoring Criteria Method) in use by FAEC to assess capacity of ACs is highly appreciated by all ACs as they can understand more clearly the areas they need to improve on; the target for the program is for at least 20 ACs to reach a target of 80 points (80% of the available score) and even between 2017 and 2018 (the latest SCM conducted), the number has already increased from 6 ACs to 14 ACs

In general the activities under SO1 are on target to achieve the results; SO2 is behind on a few targets due to the loss of time changing partner from MODE to MB but they should be able to catch up on these over the next few years. The main challenge under SO1 is enabling ACs to acquire external financing. This is proving challenging as banks/MFIs do not yet have confidence in ACs to loan without collateral and many ACs do not have collateral to offer as guarantee. But banks/MFIs are naturally risk-averse institutions and ACs may be best suited as clients of Venture Capital institutions. Unfortunately these are limited in Cambodia (or SEA in general); but Eclasio and LC may be able to use connections in Belgium (or other European countries) to explore options there for such venture capital investment.

It is planned to do an external evaluation at the end of the program which should examine the achievements of the program in more detail. But, in preparation for that, the program needs to re-think the data required to measure the SOs – as final evaluations focus on impact which will largely be measured by the indicators for each SO. There needs to be clarification of what is to be measured – e.g. under both SOs, there are indicators comparing program achievement with “average of similar groups” but it is not clear where this comparative data will be sourced. Measuring increased income from AE under SO1 also seems to intend to rely on a relatively small sample.

## Summary of Recommendations

The following is a brief summary of the main recommendation of the consultant, divided into two groups: partnership and program. These recommendations are of course the opinions of the consultant and it is up to Eclasio/LC to decide which recommendations they (or their partners) wish to take on board. The underlying reasons behind these recommendations are explained in more detail in Section V.2 of the main report.

### Partnership

- 1.1 To ensure full ownership of the next phase of the program, it is critical to identify the relevant partners early in the process so they can be fully involved in the development of the program proposal
- 1.2 In developing the next phase of the program, reduce geographical focus of the SA inputs to ensure greater impact from funding
- 1.3 Organize more reflection meetings for different groups (e.g. management, field staff) of partners (LC and Eclasio combined)
- 1.4 Develop a capacity assessment tool that is relevant to AC Federations (FAEC and FCFD) – CBA used for NGOs does not cover the required capacities (and includes some irrelevant ones)
- 1.5 Support FAEC to create knowledge website to collect and share all documents produced under Uni4Coop – a wider Khmer audience may access studies and research posted on such a site compared to the number who may access ECLOSIO or LC websites.
- 1.6 In order to prepare data for end of program evaluation, Eclasio and LC need to confirm the sources of comparative data for indicators at objective level
- 1.7 In designing the next phase, key project inputs (or group formation) should be planned for the first half of the program (with appropriate budget allocation)
- 1.8 Annual budget planning should be speeded up (finalized by end December of current year) so that partners are clear on amounts before the start of the next year
- 1.9 Contracts with partners should stipulate rate of release of funds (linked to plans). Transfers should then be made without further need to request; and Eclasio and LC should accept finance reports without copying invoices (this would respect partner independence and demonstrate trust)

### Program

- 2.1 LC/MB should consider not forming any more SHGs; instead focus on production groups (PGs) of farmers in close proximity to each other to transition to SA
- 2.2 Eclasio to assist FAEC/FCFD to increase the number of specialists (with more emphasis on women and youth) to provide services to AC members; LC/MB to select and train additional service providers/model farmers to support SA
- 2.3 Assist FAEC and FCFD to develop system for specialists/service providers to record details of services provided so that information can be reported as per indicator
- 2.4 Suggest that if MB has the time and resources, it would be good to follow up on the 16 farmers reported by MODE as still practicing SA – it would indicate whether families may continue to practice SA even if project staff no longer visit or support them
- 2.5 Support additional research by ECOLAND on socio-economic factors influencing the adoption (or non-adoption) of AE/SA
- 2.6 Eclasio to use its connections in Europe to explore other possible sources of venture capital (as limited options in Cambodia or SEA)
- 2.7 Eclasio should commission a study on the supply chain of main types of fertilizers to understand better where ACs could enter this supply chain in order to ensure that Cambodian farmers are paying the lowest price possible compared to farmers in neighboring countries

## Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the consultant takes this opportunity to thank all those who gave up their valuable time to take part in this MTR exercise. Special thanks to the community members who participated freely and were very open in sharing their views on the program. The consultant hopes that donors will appreciate the considerable achievements of the program and will continue to support the Uni4Coop partnership and their target communities to ensure continued improvement to their livelihoods.

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