Mid-Term Evaluation (MTE) of the Felm Development Cooperation Programme 2022-2025

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Felm is an agency of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) for its international work. The Felm Development Cooperation Programme 2022-2025 forms a large part of the Felm international work. The Programme aims to contribute to 'improved resilience and inclusion of people from marginalized groups' through three outcomes:

1. Resilience to climate change and disasters strengthened in vulnerable communities (Outcome 1)

2. Access to inclusive quality education improved especially among children and youth from marginalized groups (Outcome 2)

3. Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PwD) being integrated into government policies and practices with active involvement of PwDs and their organizations (Outcome 3)

The Programme comprises of 32 projects implemented by 23 local partner organizations in nine countries: Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Mauritania, Senegal, and Colombia. Three (3) partner organisations are churches, six (6) are faith-based organizations and 14 are other civil society organizations. The number of projects by country ranges from two to six per country[1]. The volume of a project ranges from EUR 0.2 million to EUR 2,06 million. Out of 32 projects 19 projects were designed for this Programme period and 13 projects are continuation from the previous Programme (2018-2021) or before.

The four-year Programme budget is EUR 28,3 million, from which the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland provides EUR 24,5 million (87 %) and EUR 3,8 million (13 %) is provided from Felm's own funding sources.

Table 1 *Programme Budget 2022-2025 by budget category*

Category	EUR	%
Projects	18 979 000	67
Advisory support	4 159 650	15
Planning, monitoring and Evaluation	1 052 970	4
Development Communications and Advocacy	480 000	2
Administration	2 741 291	10
Unallocated funds	875 000	3
	28 287 911	100

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[1] In Ethiopia and Nepal, Felm supports six (6) projects in both countries, in Colombia and Cambodia there are four (4) projects and Mauritania, Myanmar, Senegal, Tanzania and Zimbabwe have two projects each.

Out of the total allocation to projects implemented by partners 10,5 million (59 %) is allocated to 16 projects falling under Outcome 1 'Resilience to Climate Change and Disasters'. A total amount of EUR 3,1 million (17%) is allocated to six (6) projects under Outcome 2 'Inclusive Quality Education' and EUR 4,3 million (24 %) is allocated to nine (9) projects for the Outcome 3 focusing on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Majority of the staff inputs to the Programme are part-time as Felm staff work and contributes to Felm's other programmes as well. According to the Human Resources Plans 2022-2023 attached to the Programme budget, the advisory services consist of part-time inputs of by 29 to 30 persons per calendar year totaling on average 16.45 person years per calendar year. Currently, one thematic adviser is dedicated to Resilience outcome which consists of 16 projects and 59 % of the total programme budget while three thematic advisers are allocated to education outcome, which is the consists of six projects and 17% of the budget.

Purpose and methodology of the Mid Term Evaluation

The Mid Term Evaluation (MTE) focuses on relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability of the Programme. It aims to gain evidence on the progress and achievements of the Programme so far and identify and analyse areas that are working particularly well as well as areas where improvements are needed. The MTE covers the first two implementation years 2022 – 2023 and the specific objectives of the MTE are the following:

- Assess the program's Theory of Change (ToC), as well as the progress and achievements vis-a-vis the Programme objectives so far;

- Assess the implementation and progress of the Programme's cross-cutting objectives.

The MTE will provide recommendations on how to steer the Programme during the last two years of its implementation and provide information to support the design of Felm's future development cooperation programming.

The MTE applied both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Document review consisted of Programme level documentation and documents of 11 projects[2] selected in collaboration with Felm. Primary data was collected in interviews and through an online survey with a 70 % response rate. A total number of 44 persons were interviewed, including Felm staff (24) and representatives of project implementers (11). A case study was conducted in Myanmar to assess sustainability considerations. A major source of data was the 2023 monitoring data of programme indicators collected and compiled by Felm. For the data analysis, triangulation was applied by data source and evaluator. The monitoring systems and key findings were discussed and presented to Felm prior submitting the final report.

No major challenges were faced in the MTE process but it is noted that collection of field data was quite limited in scope, and lack of access to beneficiaries highlights the evaluation as looking at the Programme as a tool for implementation.

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[2] A sample of 11 projects representing all Outcome areas was selected in collaboration with Felm, to get an overview on how the Programme has been operationalised at country level.

The following presents the key findings and responses to the main evaluation questions and issues arising, as well as recommendations for the remaining period of the current Programme and for the development of the new Programme.

Key findings

Felm has made significant efforts to develop a Project Document and related Theory of Change. The document is of good quality and provides a comprehensive overview of Felm's development work and contexts where Felm operates.

Does the Program Theory of Change (ToC) and its assumptions hold true?

The Theory of Change presents the main activities and outputs of the three outcome areas Community Resilience, Inclusive Quality Education, and Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Each of these outcome areas has its own result statement, directly linked with the impact 'Resilience and inclusion of marginalized groups improved in the Programme target areas'.
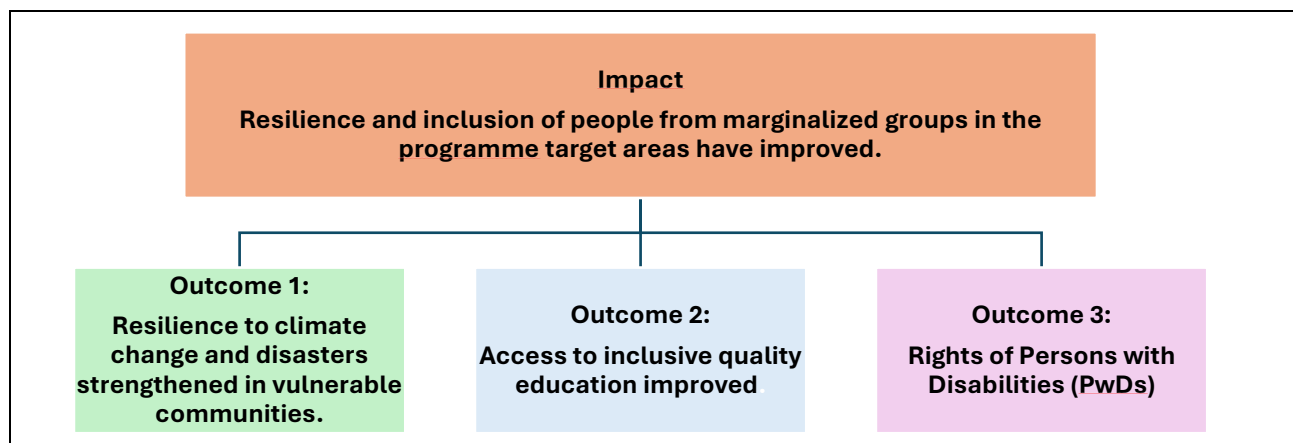
The Programme does not have an overall outcome which would describe its effects, and which would illustrate and validate its underlying hypotheses. In the absence of an outcome the outcome areas appear as individual interventions with limited complementary effects. Having one single outcome statement strengthens the internal coherence, clarity and focus of the Programme and ensures that all activities and outputs are geared towards the same outcome' (MFA 20183).

The Theory of Change presents some *assumptions* which are external factors influencing Programme implementation and achievement of its results. The identified assumptions relate to the space for civil society to advocate human rights and resilience, duty-bearers ownership and commitment to further the themes of the outcomes and the overall political environment.

The assumptions hold to e large extent. However, they are defined at generic level and some of the assumptions can be addressed and influenced by the Programme interventions. To make the Programme logic sound, there is a need to further define concrete assumptions both at Programme and project levels as they are an essential element of the project designs and they help to understand

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[3] Manual for Bilateral Programmes 2018 - Ministry for Foreign Affairs (um.fi)

the contexts where the projects operate. Moreover, if assumptions do not hold this can indicate the needs for adaptations in the implementation strategies. Response to COVID 19 pandemic is a good example of this. Regular follow-up of assumptions may also provide an indication to swift over to nexus approach. Follow-up and reporting on realisation of assumptions is important too.

Is the program adaptive enough regarding the changing operational environments and partners and key stakeholders' needs?

Flexibility is enabled by the MFA contingency funding which allows implementation of double nexus, moving from development to humanitarian aid when needed. These funds have been used for instance, to introduce new components to respond to the continuous drought of the target area. This modality is welcomed by Felm and partners, although the reallocation processes are regarded as time-consuming, considering the urgency of the needs. Other incidences of flexibility include the *budget reallocations* ("käyttötarkoituksen muutos"). During 2023-February 2024 reallocations were made with 29 project-related decisions. In addition, a total number of 14 partners have received additional funding for their projects.

The project implementers consider Felm as a flexible and responsive partner when adaptations are needed. Felm has provided support to adjust the plans to respond to the changes in implementation environments. All partners reported that communication with Felm has been smooth and that Felm has been flexible and responsive when needed.

What is the status of outcome and impact indicator progress against the program cycle targets?

The 2023 performance data collected by Felm shows that the Programme has already achieved and exceeded its impact indicator targets set for the end of 2025. Similarly, at the outcome levels, many targets have been achieved and exceeded.

The Programme is well on its way in strengthening *resilience to climate change and disasters* (Outcome 1). The projects have succeeded in supporting households to employ climate-resilient agricultural practices and gaining sustainable income. Projects have made progress is in contributing to household energy use and sources. The capacity of Felm's partners to address climate change has increased. Some partners have also taken steps on policy dialogue to influence national policies and disseminate experiences from the projects to wider audience. However, there is still a need to clarify what types of activities are adaptation measures, what activities are mitigation measures, and which activities are explicitly livelihood and/or income generating activities, although from resilience of vulnerable communities' point of view all these activities are relevant. This underlines the fact that measures directly contributing to climate change mitigation are relevant and feasible and are improving resilience of the communities.

With regards to the *promotion of inclusive and good quality education* (Outcome 2), the enrollment targets of children with disabilities and students in targeted schools where language of instruction is their first or home language have been, or are nearly achieved. The projects promote multilingual and mother tongue education in targeted schools and communities by training of teachers and sensitization of community leaders and care-givers. Promoting access to non-formal education and life skills training especially for women and persons with disabilities is well on track and more than 1000 students have benefitted from the interventions. It is reported that in 2023, 71 % of total

number of beneficiaries were female and that 12 % of beneficiaries were persons with disabilities.

Outcome 3 has achieved its target of *engaging persons with disabilities* in government processes. It is, however, noted that that target was set relatively low (9) compared to the number of projects contributing to it and the duration of the Programme implementation. It also remains unclear what kind of processes the persons or organization supported have been engaged with. Challenges in reporting on the indicator tracking the perceptions of person with disabilities on how they consider feeling respected by other people are reported. Although self-perception is an interesting measure, it is unclear how the contribution of the Felm could be verified.

With regards to the *crosscutting objectives*, the informants consider that the Programme has raised awareness of disability inclusion both within the implementing organisations and broader in the communities. The targets of engagement of persons with disabilities have been achieved to a large extent. However, there is limited information available on measures the projects have taken to remove the barriers for their participation and whether persons with diverse disabilities and support needs are addressed equally. The Programme has advanced well in promoting gender equity but similarly, the project descriptions and reports contain limited evidence on what strategies have been applied. Data is disaggregated by sex. The partners that contribute to climate resilience have all incorporated various measures to address climate change adaptation in their activities. Partners are also paying attention to low emission development for instance in training sessions under Outcome area 2.

How could the sustainability of the projects and partnerships be further supported during the last two years of the program?

Among the informants, there is strong trust that the commitment to the outcomes and results will sustain within the implementing oganisations, but there is less confidence on the organisation's capability to continue with the core activities and maintain the capacities developed. The informants pointed out that the key to sustainability is working closely with the local authorities and continuing the capacity building efforts to ensure that the communities and organisations are able to continue on their own. On the other hand, shaking economic and development trends in the country or globally are critical risks for sustainability.

The projects are required to prepare sustainability plans, but these plans do not include a cost analysis as part of sustainability, although financial limitations are the main concern for sustainability. Only a few projects plan for co-financing with other actors or local autorities or have a plan to start their own fundraising. A simplified format of sustainability analysis would be needed to define What needs to sustained? (inputs, outputs, outcomes, key activities)? What resources are needed to sustain them? How to obtain the resources? The partners also consider that enhancing sustainability requires further capacity development and training in project preparation, budgeting and financial management, fund raising, advocacy and organizational management.

Conclusions and issues for consideration

The outcome areas are relevant and they meet the needs of vulnerable communities and people. The three outcomes are linked to resilience, not only in the context of climate change, but also in helping systems, communities, and individuals to withstand and recover from various challenges. By looking at resilience as a broader concept, Felm can support communities to

become more capable of providing decent living for all, and particularly to the most marginalised. This can be achieved by strengthening the *cohesion of the outcome areas* and further *developing the programming as an overall approach to support resilience of communities*. Felm might need to consider whether reducing the number of projects and partners could enhance its impact of the actions. Compared to the amount of time and resources invested in the preparation of this document, there is a need to further discuss what value the Programme and programmatic approach overall has doe Felm itself, and moreover to its partners and donors and parishes who finance part of this cooperation.

Significant efforts are made to collect and compile data on the performance indicators. However, although majority of outputs are delivered, through the current monitoring indicators it is difficult to draw conclusions on what changes the Programme has contributed to. Achieving the numerical targets by mid-term of the Programme cycle is a good result but can also indicate that the target values are set too low, or unclarity of indicators. Performance monitoring could be simplified and complemented with other means of monitoring.

Felm puts an emphasis on long-term partnerships and has supported projects of some partners for decades. These project-based partnerships may create dependency on both sides. It is apparent that giving up long term project-based partnerships is challenging particularly with church-based partners which have continued for years. Generally, continuation of any projects should be based on evaluative data which would justify the need and added value of the extension from one phase to another. This aims to ensure that cooperation keeps its focus on development and making impacts. The goal of development cooperation is to become un-necessary and its aim is to support the partners to continue independently.

The *Felm Fellowship* has been presented as a concept of partnership and network model designed to deepen interaction and shared learning, including strategic collaboration with peer partners also after the project funding. Future programming is an opportunity to introduce this mode of collaboration as means for phasing down long-term project-based partnerships for the partners who are interested in continuing collaboration in different form. It is important to differentiate between the sustainability of the project and sustainability of partnerships.

The respondents expressed diverse views on to what extent the Programme has contributed to the strengthening of Civil Society. Felm has selected NGOs specialised in the outcome themes as partners and the expertise of these partners (particularly the NGOs which are specialists in their area) could be more intensively used for learning purposes on enhancing the capacity for instance of the church partners whether this specialization may not exist. Engaging the partners in such capacity development actions and for instance in peer reviews and evaluations would also balance the partnership thinking as now majority of the learning interventions are Felm led.

Recommendations for the remaining of the current Programme period

There is only about two years remaining of the implementation of the current Programme period, thus significant changes are not feasible. However, based on the findings of the MTE, the following actions could help in enhancing the results orientation and sustainability:

1. **Collect qualitative data on outcomes across the projects**. Because majority of the targets of the key performance indicators have been achieved, collecting qualitative results and

more specific data on outcomes would strengthen the results reporting and would also contribute to the development of further programming. Project specific data or data across the projects could be collected using outcome harvesting of the most significant change methodology.

2. **Make the sustainability plan more operational**. The analysis should include also financial sustainability analysis, and assessment of financial resilience. A stakeholder mapping should be included to help defining partners who could take over the key activities when the project support comes to its end.

3. **Develop strategies for transforming and phasing out from project-based collaboration with long-term partnerships.** This does not necessarily mean discontinuing the projects fully but possibly phasing them down or focusing them on specific areas that still need development. Continuation of any project from one Programme phase to the next one should be well justified from the impact and sustainability perspective, and supported where possible, with evaluation findings. Felm Fellowship could be considered as means for strategic collaboration with peer partners after the project funding comes to its end.

Recommendations for the design of future development cooperation programming

Based on the analysis of the strengths, achievements and potential gaps and development needs identified by the MTE, the MTE suggested the design of the future programming to

4. Define the purpose 'outcome' for the Programme. Preferrable, the Programme should be built on one outcome statement which defines the intended change it aims to make.

5. Maintain the focus on climate resilient actions and education but look for synergies in the resilience framework in its broader sense. Consider whether Outcome 3 (related to disability rights) remains a priority in future programming or could be addressed as a cross-cutting theme of the Programme. Now this outcome results are vague. Continue reducing the number of projects.

6. Develop strategies and plans for transitioning long-term project-based partnerships to new kind of partnerships or 'fellowships'.

7. Include in the future Programme a clear element for strengthening civil society. Engage project implementers in the design and delivery of capacity building activities.

8. Simplify the monitoring framework and related reporting formats.

9. Complement the quantitative data with other methods such as outcome harvesting and verified and validated illustrations of good practices.

10. Ensure that the projects have identified relevant assumptions as they may also trigger over to nexus approach.

11. Develop a comprehensive evaluation plan which would include thematic reviews or evaluations. Ensure sufficient financing for evaluations.

12. Ensure that there are sufficient technical and thematic advisors either in the headquarters or regions to support the projects and promote the programmatic approach.