



Evaluation brief

Joint evaluation of collaboration among the United Nations Rome-based Agencies (RBAs)

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) are the three Rome-based agencies (RBAs) of the United Nations. Since 2008, there have been calls for increased collaboration to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the RBA contribution to food security and nutrition.

The RBAs have responded with a number of strategic statements and most recently in 2018 they signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU). To date there has been no evaluation of how well RBA collaboration (RBAC) has worked at global, regional and country levels. Consequently, the evaluation offices of the three agencies jointly commissioned an evaluation of the relevance, results, factors enabling or hindering effectiveness and value-added of RBA collaboration from November 2016 to the present. An independent evaluation team was hired to conduct the evaluation on behalf of the three evaluation offices. Data were collected between October 2020 and May 2021. The joint summary evaluation report was presented to the governing bodies of IFAD and WFP between October and December 2021, while it will be discussed at the meeting of the FAO Programme Committee in May 2022.

Purpose of the evaluation

The evaluation explored RBAC at country, regional and global level, though with a focus on the country level. It set out to answer four questions:

- How relevant is the RBAC contribution to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?
- What are the positive, negative, intended and unintended results of RBAC to date?
- What factors have enabled or hindered the effectiveness of RBAC?
- What is the added value of RBAC on different aspects and levels?

Methodology

Evidence was gathered through 12 country studies, eight 'deep-dive' studies on selected themes, an extensive document review and an online survey of RBA staff. Country case studies were carried out remotely because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

RBAC: A little context

Since 2018, the main drivers of RBAC have been reshaped significantly by the reform of the United Nations development system (UNDS). The most significant consequences have been at country level, where the role of United Nations Resident Co-ordinator has been strengthened. Each RBA country programme now has to be clearly tied to a United Nations Sustainable Development Co-operation Framework (UNSDCF), preceded by a reinforced United Nations Common Country Analysis (CCA).

Other United Nations reforms, aimed at enhancing operational efficiency, are being pursued with the support of the Business Innovations Group. They include the Business Operations Strategy, which focuses on common services that are implemented jointly or delivered by one United Nations entity on behalf of another.

The RBAs (particularly FAO and WFP, which co-lead the global Food Security Cluster) play important roles in United Nations humanitarian work. They are committed to the collaborative intent of the New Way of Working and are actively exploring the opportunities and approaches implicit in the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.

The objective of RBAC has always been to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the agencies' contribution to food and nutrition security, by making a stronger contribution to the 2030 Agenda and, in particular, the achievement of SDG 2 (zero hunger). The RBAs have committed to working together to ensure more efficient and effective field operations, stronger policy development at national and international level, more effective participation and advocacy in international fora, the creation of globally recognized frameworks and tools, better resource mobilization and overall performance, and increased capacity to operate in multidisciplinary contexts.

Most joint activities occur at country level, with 42 percent of those identified by the evaluation involving at least one non-RBA organization, most commonly the United Nations Children’s Fund. Although collaboration is common, it is only a small part of each RBA’s portfolio.

The RBAs share a commitment to food security and an evolving interest in sustainable food systems, in addition to a headquarters location, but are very different institutions.

Evaluation findings

Relevance

RBAC is largely relevant to the agreements guiding the strategic direction of UNDS and highly relevant to the overall direction of the latest phase of United Nations reform. It is most relevant at country and regional level. The Secretary-General’s efficiency agenda renders the joint delivery of country-level corporate services less relevant.

It is relevant to the strategic objectives and goals of the three entities. The RBAC agreements state the comparative strengths of the RBAs, but do not adequately specify the fundamental differences between them and what those mean for collaboration.

RBAC is not aimed at specific global targets but is a framework for facilitating and encouraging collaboration at all levels. While this may be appropriate, the lack of ambition has implications for the agencies’ ability to make a joint, meaningful contribution to the 2030 Agenda.

Results

RBA efforts to step up coordination have had mixed results. In many countries, they work effectively together where there is a clear advantage in doing so; in others, there is little to no evidence of it. Coordination tends to be easier in thematic and advocacy work than in formal operational settings. The formal structure and processes for collaboration have done little to strengthen coordination.

Overall, the RBAs have made limited progress on reducing overlap, competition and the duplication of work. Nutrition is a fine example of where efforts to end duplication have been successful, however. Confusion over mandates and competition for funding between FAO and WFP persist, often alongside good technical collaboration. RBAC has enhanced the sharing of knowledge, lessons and good practices at all levels.

RBA commitment to gender equality and women’s empowerment is clear, though varying in practice. Collaboration on gender is well established at headquarters level. Protection principles are incorporated into the broader frameworks of humanitarian action. Commitment to environmental safeguards and sustainability is clear, but evidence of practical mainstreaming is mixed.

Factors affecting RBAC

Global, regional and country contexts support and constrain RBAC to varying degrees:

- Emergency response contexts provide a clear and conducive framework for cooperation within broader United Nations response structures.

- United Nations reform and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework overhaul the institutional environment for RBAC, but do not make it irrelevant.
- Countries' shift to middle-income status means the RBAs may collaborate on different types of work with better-resourced governments, beyond the conventional aid paradigm.
- Government attitudes range from strong support for collaboration to indifference.
- Donor support for RBAC does not necessarily match donor advocacy for it.
- RBA leadership is both supportive and sceptical of collaboration, with doubts in some cases about system-wide requirements and procedures.

Overall, RBAC is not a high priority in the RBA Governing Bodies or Management, while under-resourced coordination units often struggle with the time-consuming complexities of their task.

The evolving character and context of IFAD's operations are reshaping its contribution to the RBAs' shared objectives, but not diminishing its importance.

The significant differences between the RBAs do not always obstruct meaningful collaboration. The difference in organizational cultures and business models is far more significant and in stark contrast to the ability of technical colleagues to work together where they perceive clear benefit.

Administrative and programming processes and procedures are another significant obstacle to RBAC. The more tightly structured and managed a collaborative activity needs to be, the more time-consuming, costly and sometimes insoluble the administrative challenges become. A shared system for monitoring performance would be useful but very challenging to develop.

RBAC resourcing is also insufficient. At global level, donor funding does not match calls for RBAC strengthening. At country level, RBA offices cite a lack of funding from headquarters and the preference of some donor offices to work with single RBAs. Country offices occasionally compete for funding. IFAD's loan portfolio is well resourced, but directly controlled country-level funds are limited.

The added value of RBAC

The use of the knowledge from RBAC has, in some cases (such as aspects of the work of the Committee on World Food Security), led to more effective collaborative efforts. However, increasing utilization remains challenging, especially at country level where it can make the most difference. Although RBAC may have made a positive contribution to effectiveness and may add value over single-agency interventions, there is little quantitative evidence of this.

RBAC can lead to cost savings in corporate services as well as additional funds from certain donors, but the costs of collaboration can be significant. Despite expectations of lower cost burdens, the RBAs often find that joint work requires additional effort. Cost-benefit analysis data are limited, so estimates of the value added of RBAC are often subjective.

Conclusions

Collaboration between the RBAs is a daily reality. RBA staff routinely act where it is advantageous and where they see it makes sense. Although competition for resources persists, there is widespread recognition of complementarity. Part of the widely adopted pragmatic approach also involves collaboration with other United Nations entities.

Even so, there is widespread ambivalence about the concept. Beneath the official commitments to collaboration lies significant reluctance. Not all donors fund RBAC as strongly as they advocate it.

The formal systems and procedures to promote, co-ordinate and report on RBAC add little value and frustrate staff. RBAC planning gives insufficient direction to country offices. The fundamentally half-hearted way in which these formal arrangements are pursued is unlikely to enhance the RBAs' contribution to SDG 2. It would be more constructive to recognize and flexibly support the many pragmatic ways in which the RBAs do collaborate.

The achievement of the RBAs' shared objectives remains impaired by misunderstandings about the mandates of FAO and WFP. Confusion and, sometimes, resentment remain common among host governments and RBA personnel about WFP's supposed mandate creep into developmental work.

United Nations reforms to enhance operational efficiency make the RBAs' work on joint corporate services largely irrelevant. Various initiatives mean the RBAs do not need to pursue administrative coordination separately, except in very limited instances .

There is real potential for RBAC to enhance the world's progress on SDG 2, if the real commitment of agency staff to working together in the right circumstances is allowed to take the collaboration forward in a productive manner.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Update the MoU between the RBAs. Although the current five-year MoU was only signed three years ago, significant changes since then make an update necessary.

Recommendation 2. Restructure and reinforce the coordination architecture for RBAC within the framework of UNDS reform. This will ensure that at all levels, the coordination and evaluation of RBAC includes more proactive efforts to develop and disseminate lessons and knowledge about how to optimize collaboration among and beyond the RBAs, about the costs and benefits of RBAC and about technical experience that can be usefully shared.

Recommendation 3. Further embrace the new joint programming mechanisms at country level and ensure constructive, collaborative RBA engagement with these mechanisms.

Recommendation 4. Focus administrative collaboration efforts more on embracing the United Nations efficiency agenda and less on pursuing separate administrative coordination.

Recommendation 5. In considering the development of joint projects and programmes, assess the costs and benefits of the proposed collaboration and only proceed if the benefits outweigh the costs.

Recommendation 6. The Member States of the RBA Governing Bodies should reappraise and adequately resource their position on RBAC.

[Click here](#) to read the joint evaluation of collaboration among the RBAs in full.

Read the [Coordinated Response to the Joint evaluation of Collaboration Among the RBAs](#).
