

# ExPost

Overview

Evaluation

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## Evaluation of the FISONG mechanism

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**Translation**

Cadenza Academic Translations

This evaluation was led by an internal AFD committee,  
in cooperation with Coordination SUD.

The full report of the evaluation can be downloaded in  
French at: <https://www.afd.fr/fr/ressources/rapport-complet-de-levaluation-de-linstrument-fisong>

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(left to right and top to bottom)

Club de visionnage-débat autour de la série TV d'éducation Wara, Espace Jeune de la ville de Saint-Louis (Quartier de Ndiolofène, Saint-Louis, Sénégal), © Pape Diam Diop, november 2020.

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Tournage de la série TV d'éducation Wara, Centre culturel Le Château (Saint-Louis, Sénégal), © Djibril Dans, november 2019 (pour les deux photos du bas).

# Summary

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# 1. Scope, objectives, and methodology of the evaluation

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## 1.1 The FISONG mechanism

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### 1.1.1 – Understanding what makes the FISONG work

#### A mechanism for supporting innovation

As a specific mechanism for financing and supporting innovation-focused projects, the FISONG (Facilité d'innovation sectorielle pour les organisations non gouvernementales, or Sectoral Innovation Facility for Non-Governmental Organizations) is a tool that AFD (Agence Française de Développement, or French Development Agency) has had at its disposal since 2008. A laboratory for testing new ways of doing things, the FISONG focuses on supporting new innovative technical processes and new organizational structures (partnerships, organizations, etc.). Projects are supported via a learning-based approach, with significant follow-up/evaluation/experience capitalization activities for implemented projects, and there is an expectation that any actions supported will have a multiplier effect.

The FISONG mechanism also promotes partnership and dialogue between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and AFD. Because it is a tool for improving the coordination of public policies, the FISONG helps to find solutions in situations where public contracting authorities' (PCAs) capacity to respond is deemed insufficient.

#### Taking issues of gender equality into account in FISONG projects

There is also an emphasis on taking gender equality into account in FISONG projects. All FISONG calls for projects (CFPs) therefore must incorporate a consideration of gender issues.

Furthermore, since 2016, the F3E<sup>[1]</sup> multi-actor network has supported the consideration of the gender dimension in approved FISONG projects. This generally includes:

1. Collective training sessions and awareness-raising among NGOs about how to include a gender dimension in their projects.
2. Individual discussions with each of the selected NGOs to help them create a concrete action plan, or, in certain cases, to provide them with more extensive support.

### 1.1.2 – The mechanism's logic of intervention

The FISONG mechanism operates based on annual thematic CFPs (two CFPs per year). The themes are decided through consultation between AFD's Technical Divisions and NGOs, with the goal of selecting important themes where there is the opportunity to make a significant difference.

During its first ten years, FISONG CFPs covered a diverse array of themes (from the prevention of malnutrition to professional training, and from citizen participation among groups excluded from public life to the use of ICTs [information and communication technologies] to improve health outcomes for mothers and children).

The table below provides more information about how the mechanism works.

The mechanism has several unique features:

- The FISONG not only makes financial support available to NGOs so that they can implement innovative projects, but it also positions the Agency as a provider of support and technical assistance, of training on the capitalization of projects.
- It is the only mechanism that allows NGOs to work jointly with AFD's Civil Society Organizations Division (CSO)<sup>[2]</sup> and Operations Department (OD).
- Finally, the mechanism is open to foreign NGOs, which enriches the Agency's list of partners (since the launch of the mechanism in 2008, 26% of the NGOs supported have been based abroad).

[1] Fund for the Promotion of Cross-Cutting Studies, Preliminary Studies, and Evaluation.

[2] This division is tied to the Partnerships Department (PD) within the Strategy, Partnerships, and Communications Department (SPC).

Table 1 – Device operation

<b>Financing method</b>	The FISONG mechanism is based around the publication of two thematic CFPs per year, with two to five projects selected from each CFP, on average.
<b>Eligible organizations</b>	The mechanism is open to French and foreign NGOs.
<b>Cofinancing rate</b>	90 % maximum.
<b>Priority locations</b>	All developing countries (DCs) are eligible, though some CFPs target specific regions.
<b>Available funding</b>	Annual budget of 5 M EUR (with two themes per year, so 2.5 M EUR per theme).
<b>Source of funding</b>	Budget initiative 209 “Solidarity with Developing Countries” of the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires Etrangères, MEAE).

## 1.2 The scope, objectives, and method of the evaluation

After the FISONG had been operating for ten years, AFD decided to undertake a second evaluation of the mechanism. This follows a first evaluation carried out in 2011. This first evaluation had several objectives, including making recommendations for how the mechanism should be modified between 2012 and 2018.

### 1.2.1 – The purposes of the present evaluation

This evaluation serves three primary purposes:

1. To follow up on the first evaluation in 2011 by examining the changes made between 2012 and 2018, and analyzing the impact they had on the mechanism’s operations and outcomes.
2. To create a complete evaluative judgment based on various evaluation criteria:
  - Efficiency of the FISONG’s implementation procedures and modalities (consultation,

project selection and follow-up, guidance, experience capitalization, etc.).

- Effectiveness in terms of (i) capturing NGO innovations and promoting their capitalization capacity, (ii) creating synergies between AFD and NGOs, and (iii) strengthening partnerships with NGOs in situations where PCAs are absent or insufficient.
- Relevance of the FISONG’s scope and objectives, as well as the FISONG’s compatibility with other internal AFD financing mechanisms and with financing from official development assistance (ODA) policies and non-governmental cooperation.

3. To make realistic operational recommendations that are concise and actor-specific, in order to shape the future of the FISONG and to propose avenues for improving and optimizing the FISONG implementation procedures that were tested in 2018.

- This evaluation report is structured around these three thematic axes, which are highlighted in Figure 1.

Table 2 – Scope of the evaluation, in detail

Axes	Sub-themes	Identified issues
<b>1. Revised FISONG implementation modalities</b> <i>(efficiency)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governance (HR and coordination), mechanism operations and resources</li> <li>• Consultation with NGOs and selection of themes for calls for projects</li> <li>• Selection and follow-up criteria and procedures for supported projects</li> <li>• Budgets for calls for proposals and projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A need for more flexibility/simplification and an evaluation to integrate the vision of NGO partners into future improvements</li> <li>• A reorganization of the mechanism's governance structure is underway, which involves rethinking each different role at every stage</li> </ul>
<b>2. Changes in the focus on innovation within the FISONG</b> <i>(effective innovation)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying and supporting innovative initiatives</li> <li>• The spinning-off and scaling-up of innovative experiments</li> <li>• Follow-up and capitalization of innovative practices for the dissemination of best practices</li> <li>• Cross-pollination of the AFD portfolio beyond the FISONG mechanism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are still different ideas about innovation within the FISONG</li> <li>• Understanding if the mechanism as it is today can really encourage, capture, and support innovation</li> <li>• Determining how innovation is subsequently capitalized and exploited (both internally and externally)</li> </ul>
<b>3. The advantages of the FISONG mechanism and the added value created</b> <i>(relevance and consistency)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From partnership relationships between NGOs, to internal synergies within AFD and external synergies with international civil society</li> <li>• Other AFD financing tools for NGOs</li> <li>• Other mechanisms for financing non-governmental projects and for official development assistance policies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rethinking/questioning basic principles and processes in the light of AFD strategy</li> <li>• Ensuring effective complementarity and continuity between FISONG-supported experiments and other AFD financing tools</li> </ul>

Source: Pluricité.

### 1.2.2 – The work done as part of the evaluation

The evaluation, which was entrusted to the Pluricité group, took place between September 2019 and October 2020, in three major stages:

The evaluation relied on 40 interviews conducted with stakeholders involved in the implementation of the mechanism within AFD, representatives from beneficiary NGOs, and partners. Several thematic CFPs were chosen as case studies:

1. Using ICTs to improve maternal and infant health (2014)

2. Social and economic support for the restructuring of precarious neighborhoods (2016)
3. Citizen participation among groups excluded from and/or discriminated against in public life (2017)
4. Integrated flood risk management (2018)
5. Literacy of young people and women in the Sahel (2018)

The evaluation also involved a survey of a panel of NGOs—including those that have and have not received financing from the mechanism—, which made it possible to collect comments from 55 organizations.

It should be noted that the analyses presented in this overview are mostly focused on the 2011–2018 period.

Table 3 – Proposed methodology at a glance

Phase 1. Structuring the evaluation approach	Phase 2. Information-gathering and initial analyses	Phase 3. Finalizing conclusions and making recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Documentary analysis:</b> internal AFD documentation, context documents, and initial analyses from the FISONG project database</li> <li>• <b>Background interviews</b> with internal teams and Coordination SUD</li> <li>• <b>Selecting a sample of FISONG themes</b> and projects for in-depth case studies</li> </ul> <p>&gt; <i>Creation of an intervention procedure, the evaluation reference document, and methodological tools</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Examine 5 case studies</b> from across the mechanism (in-depth documentary analysis, interviews, writing of reports)</li> <li>• <b>Further interviews</b> with mechanism stakeholders (departments and supporting offices within the AFD, Coordination SUD, F3E, etc.)</li> <li>• Conduct a <b>flash survey</b> of around fifty NGOs that have or have not received FISONG financing</li> <li>• Further documentary analysis</li> <li>• 1-day <b>seminar with mechanism stakeholders</b> (AFD and NGOs)</li> </ul> <p>&gt; <i>Drafting of initial observations and preliminary conclusions</i></p>	<p>&gt; <i>Creation of a list of recommendations and scenarios for modifying the mechanism</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Report to the technical group</b> of the evaluation (lessons learned and recommendations)</li> </ul> <p>&gt; <i>Creation of the final evaluation report and evaluation overview</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Delivery of the evaluation</b></li> </ul>
Scoping note	Provisional evaluation report	Final report with an overview in English and in French
September – October 2019	October 2019 – March 2020	March – October 2020
<p><b>An evaluation to assess the added value of the FISONG in the landscape of NGO financing mechanisms and to identify ways to improve it</b></p>		

## 2. A look back at ten years of experimentation and support for innovation

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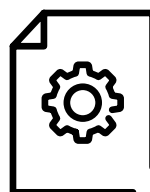
### 2.1 The FISONG mechanism in numbers

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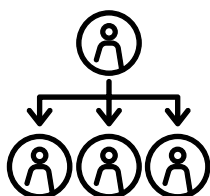
**28**

FISONG themes



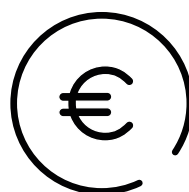
**83**

Projects supported



**53**

Beneficiary CSOs



**55,5<sub>M</sub>**

of total financing Including

**1,7<sub>M</sub>**

for project capitalization

*Source: resource documents from the mechanism - AFD.*

You can find all of the capitalization files and documents about past FISONG projects [here](#).

**After ten years of operations, this evaluation allowed us to capture in figures the impact of the FISONG mechanism across three axes:**

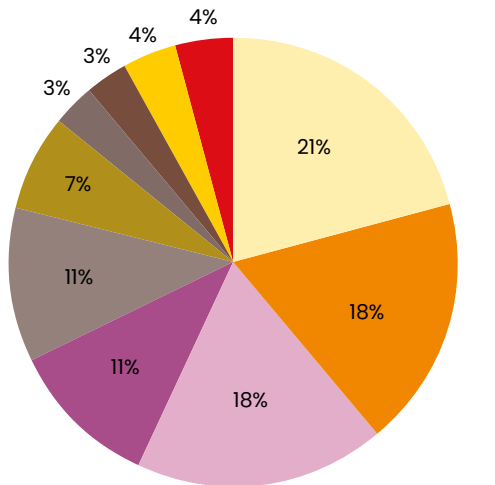
- 1. Importance of the themes of FISONG calls for projects**
- 2. Geographical coverage**
- 3. Profiles of the NGOs selected for FISONG financing**

#### **2.1.1 – Project themes: The classic trio of rural development/education/health at the core of FISONG calls for projects**

Rural development, education, and health are recurring themes that have been central since the launch of the FISONG mechanism. They represent more than half of calls for projects and of implemented project sectors.



Graph 1 – Thematic fields considered by FISONG calls for projects 2008–2018



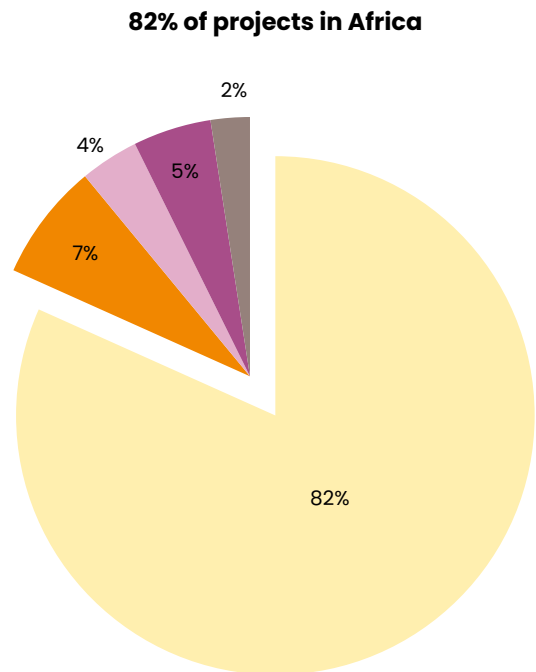
- Health and social protection
- Agriculture, rural development and biodiversity
- Education, vocational training and employment
- Water and sanitation
- Urban development, planning, housing
- Energy
- Digital
- Governance
- "Country" focal point
- "Post-crisis" focal point

Source: AFD – FISONG comprehensive evaluation, data processed by Pluricité.

### 2.1.2 – Geography of the projects selected: 82% of projects are implemented in Africa

Beyond a few exceptions, most selected projects target Priority Poor Countries (PPC) receiving Official Development Assistance (ODA) from France. The list of PPCs is maintained by the Interministerial Committee for International Cooperation and Development (Comité Interministériel de la Coopération Internationale et du Développement, CICID). 67 of 82 FISONG projects (or 82%) have been implemented in Africa.

Graph 2 – Geographical distribution of the projects selected



- 67 in Africa
- 6 in Asia and the Pacific
- 3 in the Near and Middle East
- 4 in the Caribbean
- 2 Multi-regions

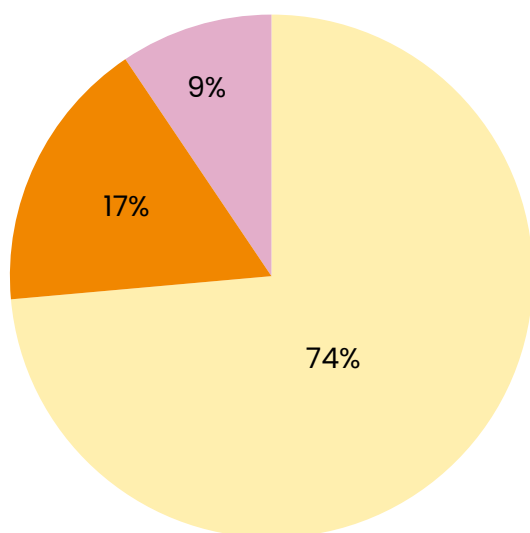
Source: AFD – FISONG comprehensive evaluation, data processed by Pluricité.

### 2.1.3 – Profile of the NGOs supported: 74% of NGOs supported are French, but the mechanism is open to NGOs from both the North and the South

The FISONG mechanism is open to foreign NGOs, and 14 of them received financing between 2008 and 2018 (including 9 European NGOs and 5 African NGOs). Together, they make up 26% of the NGOs that received financing during the period under study. French NGOs—the mechanism’s primary beneficiaries—received 85% of the total FISONG budget between 2008 and 2018.

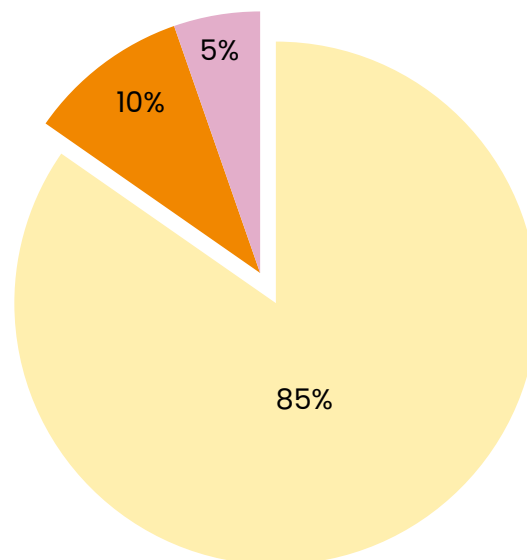
Graph 3 – A & B - Origins of the FISONG's partner NGOs

### 74% from French NGOs



- 39 French NGOs
- 9 European NGOs (excluding France)
- 5 Southern (African) NGOs

### 85% of the FISONG budget to French NGOs



- French NGOs
- European NGOs (except France)
- Southern (African) NGOs

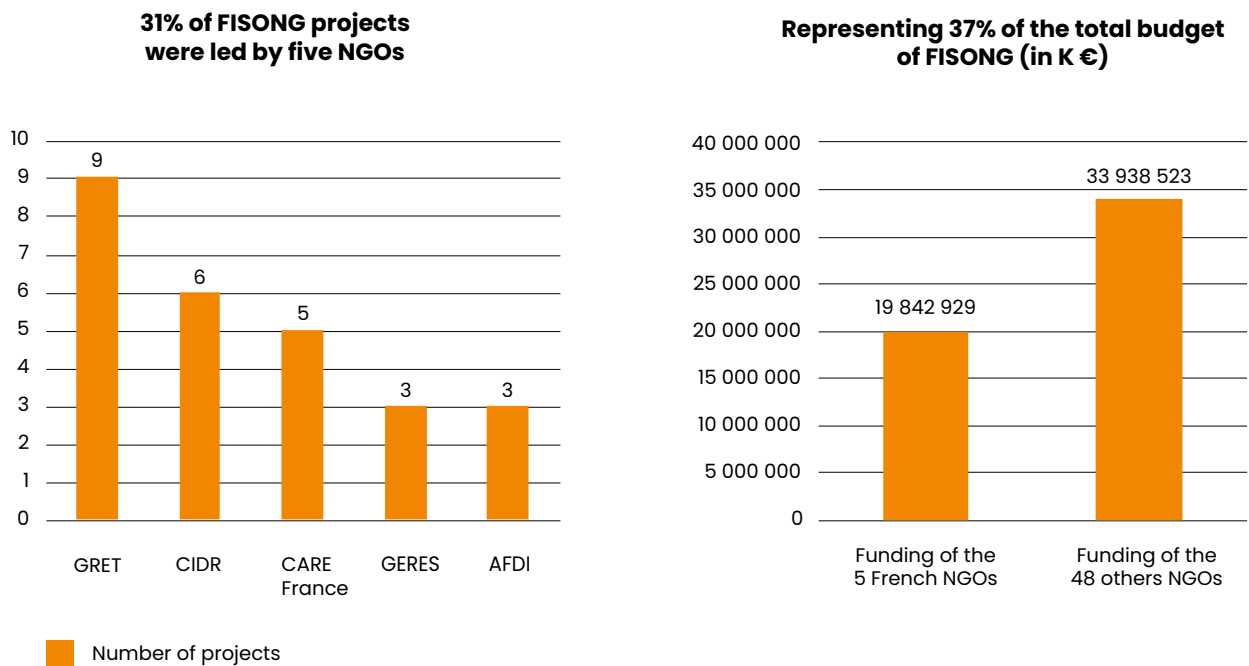
Source: AFD – FISONG comprehensive evaluation, data processed by Pluricité

#### 2.1.4 – Recurring partner NGOs: 5 NGOs have received 37% of all FISONG financing since 2008

Among all of the NGOs that have received FISONG financing, 5 stand out for having repeatedly received financing: the GRET (Professionals for Fair Development, formerly the Groupe de recherche et d'échange technologique, or Research and Technological Exchange Group) received direct financing 9 times, as well as 3 times as a partner on other

projects; the CIDR (Centre international de développement et de recherche, or International Center for Development and Research) received direct financing 6 times; CARE France 5 times; the GERES (Groupe énergies renouvelables, environnement et solidarités, or Group for the Environment, Renewable Energy, and Solidarity) 3 times; and the AFDI (Agriculteurs Français et Développement International, or French Farmers and International Development) 3 times. 26 of the 83 FISONG projects implemented between 2008 and 2018 were thus overseen by these 5 partners NGOs.

Graph 4 – A & B - Projects implemented and direct financing received by 5 French NGOs



Source: AFD data, FISONG comprehensive evaluation, data processed by Pluricité

### 3. Main lessons from the evaluation

#### 3.1 A mechanism that reflects the objectives of AFD and that brings added value to the ODA landscape

##### 3.1.1 – A mechanism that mirrors the strategic priorities of AFD and of ODA

One particularity of the FISONG is that it is based on two components that now feature among AFD’s strategic priorities: partnerships with civil society and innovation.

- Strengthening partnerships with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) is a top priority for the French government. In the context of the increase of ODA to 0.55% of gross national income by 2022 (compared to 0.43% in 2017), France set itself the goal at the CICID meeting of February 8, 2018, to double the funding channeled to CSOs (currently 4.48%

of ODA). The aim is to move France closer to the average among the countries of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which is 11.6%.

In 2013, AFD created the Cross-Cutting Intervention Framework (CIF) for CSOs,<sup>[3]</sup> which specifies the Agency’s aims, goals, and activities. This strategic framework was revised in 2017 with the adoption of the current partnership strategy, “Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations 2018–2023.”<sup>[4]</sup> This strategy focuses on helping CSOs to contribute toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and to make development efforts more fair, equitable, and sustainable. In pursuit of this goal, AFD supports the increased production and capitalization of knowledge and best practices, as well as the strengthening of partnership dynamics between different development actors.

[3] AFD (2013), “Cadre d’intervention transversal avec les OSC 2013–2016” : <https://www.coordinationsud.org/wp-content/uploads/CIT-OSC-2013-2016-de-IAFD.pdf>

[4] AFD (2018), “L’AFD partenaire des OSC 2018–2023” : <https://www.afd.fr/sites/afd/files/2018-06-04-17-28/Strat%C3%A9gie-OSC-VF-version-finale.pdf>

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## Box 1

This new strategy has three operational objectives and eight specific objectives, set out in the logical framework of AFD's 2018–2023 strategy, which are as follows:

1. To support CSOs' sustainable contributions to the SDGs and to driving economic, social, and ecological transformations that will benefit vulnerable populations, while also improving the coordination between their actions, the interventions financed by AFD (and supported by the MEAE), and those of other development actors.
2. To boost the national and international influence of French CSOs and their active contribution to citizen mobilization, including within France.
3. To diversify the collaborations between AFD and CSOs and to enrich their respective development practices. To do better and more, AFD needs to be even more partnership-based and innovative, by strengthening its frameworks for dialogue with CSOs and supporting their research and innovation efforts to promote development and the sharing of best practices.

FISONG is especially committed to the specific objective C3 "The added value and innovation of CSOs are promoted."

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- In AFD's latest Strategic Orientation Plan (SOP) for 2018–2022, innovation is one of the cross-cutting focuses that underlie the Agency's activities.

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### Excerpt from AFD's Strategic Orientation Plan for 2018–2022

*Alongside these geographical and thematic dimensions, the AFD Group action matrix will also draw upon a cross-cutting third dimension—innovation and research—that will continue to improve current projects, while inventing the sustainable-development models and pathways of the future. (...)*

*AFD Group will place innovation at the center of its practice. It will seek new financial, technical, and organizational tools, to better to meet the needs of its clients and the challenges of the six transitions, whether in public-policy assistance or project implementation. It will reorganize its workplace to foster knowledge-sharing and exploit collective intelligence while also creating spaces and cultures dedicated to innovation. In order to reshape its practices, it will join networks that support and promote such innovation, especially in partner countries with AFD operations.*

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- In order to tackle this overall objective, the AFD Group recently adopted a "Research, Innovation, and Knowledge"<sup>[5]</sup> strategy, and it has launched an internal restructuring of its activities related to innovation. This has included the creation of a dedicated Innovation Team (INN) within the Innovation, Research, and Knowledge Department (IRK). It appears that the objectives of the FISONG are fully aligned with AFD's innovation approach, which notably calls on the Agency to become a "catalyst" for innovation and a "platform for sharing innovation."

### 3.1.2 – FISONG projects that reflect AFD's sectoral priorities

Generally speaking, the various FISONG themes have been consistent with AFD's sectoral priorities. Where such themes have been defined, they clearly echo the Sectoral Intervention Frameworks (SIFs).

In this instance, there is general agreement that the FISONG mechanism serves a useful purpose, with FISONG project teams sharing the feeling that the mechanism offers them a road map that they can follow collectively.

It should be noted that some FISONG projects occupy unique positions, and they could be used to help AFD develop new thematic axes. Among the FISONG projects included in the case studies used for this evaluation, two fall into this latter category: "Citizen participation

[5] AFD (2019), "Stratégie Recherche, Innovation et Savoirs 2019-2022": <https://www.afd.fr/fr/strategie-recherche-innovation-et-savoirs-2019-2022>

among groups excluded from and/or discriminated against in public life” and “FISONG IFRM – Integrated flood risk management.”

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*“The FISONG mechanism allows us to work on themes that are rarely included in AFD’s usual projects with states. For example, we can target the theme of human rights. This allows us to work on this issue and develop innovative approaches.”* (Taken from an interview with a FISONG project team manager at AFD)

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### **3.1.3 – A mechanism that has won approval from CSOs and that brings added value for AFD**

While there are some changes that could broaden the scope of the mechanism, there is consensus on one point: the mechanism is both relevant and a provider of real added value for both CSO practices and the operational departments of AFD. The high number of Technical Divisions (TD) that have become involved in the triennial planning process and the mobilization of CSOs at each stage of the process are both indicators not only of the mechanism’s attractiveness, but also of the interest taken in it by all involved.

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*“FISONG projects are the kind of projects we cherish at AFD. It’s clear to see, as we have no trouble getting teams interested, because they see how useful the projects are.”* (Taken from the evaluation seminar – January 2020, AFD/OD [Operations Department] intervention)

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### **3.1.4 – An attractive mechanism**

#### **... that can help strengthen AFD/CSO partnerships**

Both in its foundations and in its implementation methodology (consultation on selection of themes, co-construction of projects, etc.), the mechanism aims to improve dialogue and partnerships between AFD and CSOs. This is one of the advantages that was frequently cited in almost all interviews held as part of this evaluation.

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*“The FISONG is more than just a financing mechanism—it’s a partnership tool. This is one of its core goals, and we should remember that.”* (Taken from the evaluation seminar – January 2020, AFD intervention)

*“The FISONG provides real added value to partnerships with CSOs within AFD. These partnerships grow stronger, consolidating other existing partnerships too.”* (Taken from the evaluation seminar – January 2020, CSO intervention)

*“In general, we work on infrastructure without always being able to take into account issues of partnerships and participation.”* (Taken from an interview with an AFD FISONG project team manager)

*“This project was our first experience with the FISONG mechanism [...] It’s a very new way of working. A real opportunity to experiment with new ideas and to strengthen our partnership [with AFD].”* (Taken from an interview with a CSO project initiator)

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#### **... that is also a lever for financing and developing innovation**

The financing opportunities provided by the FISONG mechanism (offering significant sums from the perspective of CSOs, with more flexible cofinancing requirements than most other mechanisms, and with “innovation” as a key objective) appear to be the mechanism’s main “added value” in the eyes of CSOs.

We also observed that the mechanism had a double effect, which differed based on how much weight each CSO placed on innovation.

For CSOs who do not already have their own innovation strategy, the FISONG was seen as a way to develop and reposition their stance on this issue.

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*“The FISONG mechanism was appealing to our organization because it allowed us to get involved in countries in the South while also adopting a strategic position on innovation.” (Taken from an interview with a CSO project initiator)*

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When CSOs already have their own innovation strategy, the FISONG mechanism is seen as a highly appreciated “accelerator” for their ambitions. Many of the CSOs that receive FISONG financing already have innovation written “in their DNA.” They see the mechanism as a way to access dedicated resources. They also feel that the FISONG mechanism helps them to enrich their strategies when they do not have the resources to realize their ambitions.

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*“Our NGO was founded 40 years ago with a focus on innovation. Our entire organization is centered around driving innovation. The FISONG is a simpler and more flexible structure than the PD<sup>[6]</sup> or those of other donors. We often have trouble financing our innovation initiatives, which require a lot of resources and materials. The hard/soft ratio is often quite demanding. But in order to innovate and to test your innovations, to track their progress and scale them up, you need resources. You often need to think about cofinancing arrangements... but that takes time. The FISONG provides a framework that truly facilitates innovation development.” (Taken from an interview with a CSO project initiator)*

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### 3.2 A mechanism that drives innovation

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**The goal of the FISONG is to identify, seek out, and promote innovation among CSOs. Furthermore, it aims to facilitate the integration of innovations at the local level, by scaling them up or replicating them in other contexts.**

[6] This refers to the “CSO Initiatives” mechanism managed by PD/SCO: <https://www.afd.fr/fr/les-financements-des-projets-des-ong>

### **A broad definition of the concept of innovation makes the mechanism more attractive**

The concept of innovation at the heart of the FISONG is clearly defined and systematically included in all of the mechanism’s framework documents. It is defined as follows:

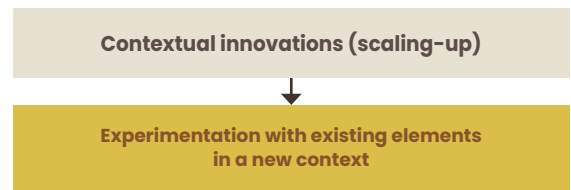
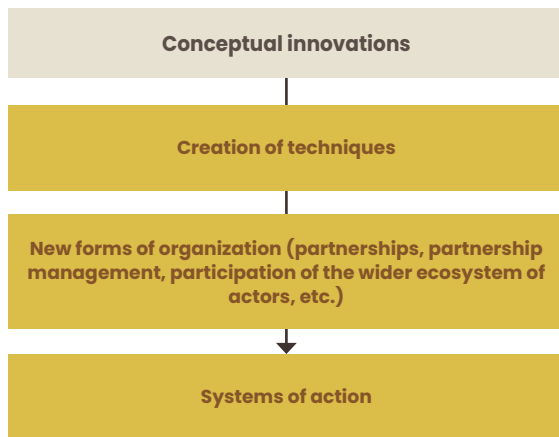
By “innovation,” AFD means seeking out new operating methods that provide real added value in technical, methodological, and organizational processes and/or partnerships developed that are likely to create new dynamics and act as a driving force in a specific development sector.

These innovative processes may take the form of experiments scaling up pre-existing localized innovations, or of the identification, design, and/or development of small-scale innovations that may lead to wider reflections on sectoral policies, or even influence these policies [...]

This definition, which is fairly broad, has nevertheless evolved since 2011, in response to one of the recommendations of the evaluation, which called for clarification and proposed a typology of innovation. This change led to the classification of innovations into two general categories: (i) conceptual innovations (technical, organizational, and institutional), and (ii) contextual innovations (that experiment with existing elements, but in new contexts). Both of these are further broken down into sub-categories.

### **... but a definition of innovation that continues to be controversial within AFD (see recommendation no. 6)**

Among the FISONG project teams at AFD, this “broad” definition of the concept of innovation is shared and promoted by FISONG representatives across the range of committed facilities. The evaluation, however, identified a certain “tropism” that led to the almost systematic support for projects involving technical or technological innovations (either contextual or not). From the CSOs’ point of view, the “broad” definition of the concept of innovation is (and should remain) one of the mechanism’s fundamental principles. Partner CSOs were unanimous in their assertion that it was this “broad” definition of innovation that made the mechanism special.



*“There is a benefit to keeping a broad definition of innovation, to not standardizing it just because we’d rather have something clear-cut—that might wind up becoming too restrictive. It’s part of what makes the FISONG special!”* (Taken from a discussion in an AFD/CSO participatory workshop – AFD/CSO evaluation seminar)

There have also been recurring debates about the value of “process”<sup>[7]</sup> innovation (organizational, institutional, and methodological), compared to technical innovation. This shows a need to continue to “convince” and to reassert the mechanism’s fundamental principles, especially in a context where some project team managers base their understanding of innovation on this dichotomy between “technical” and other kinds of innovation.

**A relatively unprecedented mechanism that promotes the development of innovations within CSOs**

Because it is able to offer significant financing and because of the nature of the projects it supports, the FISONG mechanism also facilitates the emergence of innovative projects in an environment where few other bodies offer support for innovation. The FISONG is almost unique in the French and European development assistance landscape. Where similar financing mechanisms exist, they are often limited to

technical innovations and do not always make it possible to test process innovations (organizational, institutional, or methodological). These mechanisms are also highly competitive, and they provide very few financing opportunities. The FISONG is thus seen as a real “catalyst” that allows an organization to experiment, to innovate, and to get out of its comfort zone, including for AFD’s regular partner CSOs.

**As part of this evaluation, 55 French CSOs were surveyed to find out more about why they chose the FISONG. Above all, organizations chose the FISONG because they wanted to make innovation a more important part of their structures. It presents an opportunity that resonates with CSOs that want to focus more on innovation but that lack the means to do so.**

*“The FISONG is one of the few windows through which NGOs can express their right to innovate and to take initiative!” “The FISONG will help us take our strategy further [...] toward greater innovation, pushing us to grow.”*

*“[The added value of the FISONG] is the capacity for innovation it offers CSOs, and the risk-taking associated with that.”*

**Taken from the CSO survey**

Supporting innovation: a popular technical assistance approach. During the implementation phase of a FISONG project, the project team managers from AFD’s Technical Divisions display their flexibility by adapting to the limitations that NGOs face on the ground. This kind of attention and support is one of the mechanism’s strong suits. This approach to technical assistance is universally appreciated, offering an adapted framework for orienting project planning, in line with the mechanism’s objectives. For their part, the CSOs were unanimous in reporting that the project team managers actively listened

[7] AFD (2013), “Étude sur la facilité d’innovation sectorielle pour les ONG (FISONG),” Evaluation and Capitalization Series, no. 48 – Retrospective, p. 52.

and made themselves available “as much as possible,” but they also wanted more support during the implementation phase. This issue was widely highlighted by CSOs in the evaluation (see recommendation no. 10).

### **3.2.1 – Room to further expand the mechanism’s scope**

#### **A framework for understanding innovation that could be adapted (see recommendations no. 6 and 10)**

There are already some tools in place for guiding project analysis and for defining innovation during the pre-selection phase. Nevertheless, the evaluation identified some ways in which innovation could be characterized and defined more specifically, in particular by building a more detailed reference document for defining innovation, with input from sectoral experts and local actors. The goal would be to better orient project selection and information-gathering, and to promote follow-up and evaluation during the implementation phase.

#### **“Unlocking” the selection process (see recommendation no. 4)**

The mechanism could further expand if certain biases in the selection process were reconsidered.

- FISONG calls for projects are distributed fairly widely, but they remain focused on French CSOs, preventing the mechanism from becoming more international, or from moving beyond a circle of familiar partners.
- The same could be said of the administrative requirements in the pre-selection phase, which limit the mechanism's ability to partner with CSOs from the South, even though the innovation ambitions of these organizations deserve attention (see § 3.4).

#### **Procedural innovation**

There are some voices within AFD and among CSOs calling for the FISONG’s processes and procedures themselves to be opened up to “innovation.” Because it is innovative in its ambitions, the mechanism should also aim for (and take on) an ad hoc character. This can be done in two ways, which were mentioned in almost all of the discussions held as part of this evaluation:

- Adapting the project follow-up process during the implementation phase, with a focus on rethinking the system and the existing resource tools in terms of reporting/follow-up, as they are often inadequate (since part of the innovation process is a constant questioning of how things are done) (see recommendation no. 9).

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*“The FISONG should adapt to different projects. That’s one of the basic principles of innovation, of experimentation. We need to take risks and dare to be innovative in our methods if we want to change how things are done. This means trusting CSOs, and that trust is the backbone of the FISONG.” (AFD/CSO participatory workshop – taken from an evaluation seminar)*

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- The OD should focus more on the FISONG mechanism, making it a strategic tool and working to make more resources available (in geographical departments, local AFD agencies, and the TDs), with the goal of providing AFD project team managers in charge of monitoring FISONG projects with the resources they need to ensure that each project receives close follow-up support (see recommendation no. 11).

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### **3.3 Capitalizing, cultivating, and supporting the scaling-up of innovations: A challenge (still) to be met**

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#### **3.3.1 – Capitalizing in order to innovate – Greater integration of capitalization, which must be part of a comprehensive learning strategy at the level of the FISONG mechanism**

**Capitalization has gradually become more integrated within project life cycles, solidifying the learning process**

One of the recommendations from the 2011 evaluation was to guarantee and standardize the capitalization of FISONG projects. Today, there is a two-pronged system in place: an evaluation-capitalization dimension at the level of each project, led by the beneficiary NGOs, paired with a cross-cutting capitalization approach at the level of the facility. This dual approach makes it possible to draw comparative lessons from



different projects implemented on the same theme. However, these cross-cutting capitalization approaches remain fairly heterogeneous in their implementation methods.

A "continuous" capitalization model, similar to those developed for certain facilities, provides significant added value at all stages of the process. Relying on dedicated external expertise, it enables regular information-sharing with FISONG project managers, as well as a framework for continuous dialogue between AFD and NGOs (as well as among NGOs). These factors make it easier to experiment and to adjust project parameters, or even to reorient a project, if need be.

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**Box 2 – Close-up on the FISONG project IFRM (Integrated flood risk management) – A continuous follow-up/evaluation/capitalization system, built around a scientific committee**

The FISONG project IFRM is seen by all stakeholders as an example of a real dynamic of action-research at the FISONG level. External expertise was sought early in the process, with two primary aims:

- (i) to promote the implementation of a continuous follow-up/evaluation/capitalization system for projects, based on, among other things, a mechanism for qualifying and following up on projects' innovations.
- (ii) to challenge and put into perspective projects' results through a Scientific Committee, formed as soon as the implementation phase begins.

To achieve these goals, the FISONG project team engaged the services of a consulting firm to support the approach from the beginning to the end of the project. The FISONG project IFRM created a robust system that made it possible to qualify and follow up on any innovations developed.

This approach included the creation of specific follow-up tools—a reference document for defining innovation,

innovation sheets—, direct work with project initiators, the creation of a web platform for communication between project initiators, and the exploitation of projects' results (open to the wider public).

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These capitalization efforts have led to calls for such initiatives to be fully integrated into all FISONG calls for projects through the development of an internal AFD tool that would include ringfencing part of the budget for each FISONG project for capitalization works, the identification of an internal support structure for facilitating capitalization, and the sharing of lessons learned from conclusive capitalization approaches that have proven effective. It would be included within an integrated capitalization strategy at the Agency level around the FISONG mechanism. FISONG results would be measured based on capitalization and lessons learned, and on the identification of connections between FISONG projects and the Agency's intervention priorities (see recommendation no. 12).

**Toward a more systematic sharing of lessons learned from FISONG projects and the cross-pollination of the AFD portfolio (see recommendations no. 14 and 15)**

The FISONG mechanism has as one of its objectives the sharing and reinvestment of the lessons learned from projects, both within AFD ("portfolio cross-pollination") and externally, among other development actors. Capitalization efforts are directly related to this objective, and any new initiatives are expected to directly contribute toward it.

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*"FISONG projects also focus on capitalization to ensure that methods and results are disseminated among other development actors, create synergies between AFD and international solidarity organizations (ISO) on themes, sectors, and geographical areas of common interest, and improve coordination between public policies and non-governmental cooperation initiatives."*

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Today, it is clear that the mechanism has been a tool for developing solutions that can be replicated elsewhere or transposed into the intervention strategies of certain CSOs. The “cross-fertilization” dimension, however, is still not fully integrated into the mechanism’s overall process. Experimentation is only the first step in a broader process, and potential pathways for preparing for the post-FISONG period are not always guaranteed in this process.

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*“It seems like there is an intermediate phase missing between FISONG projects and projects enabling scaling-up. FISONG projects could also be longer, which would help to consolidate the innovations tested.”*

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While new practices are increasingly likely to spread internally, cross-fertilization between FISONG projects and AFD’s “traditional” portfolio of projects is not guaranteed. In fact, over the last ten years, not a single FISONG project has received sustained interest or support from the OD. When such interest or support exists, it is the CSOs that must work to scale up innovations, and these efforts are often financed by other donors or by the “CSO Initiatives” mechanism, although continuity is still not systematically ensured. Efforts to scale up innovations, therefore, clearly do not rely solely on AFD.

Nevertheless, a more systematic reflection on project follow-up strategies (scaling-up, adaptation to other contexts, or even abandonment) is possible, by bringing together the primary stakeholders (especially any relevant authorities) proactively, before projects reach their conclusion (see recommendation no. 15).

#### **Providing opportunities for continuity that would incentivize innovation**

CSOs constantly made one request (which is also acknowledged as an important issue among AFD FISONG project teams): that opportunities for continuity be found (and, more importantly, be created), in order to incentivize innovation. This transparency and medium- and long-term visibility would encourage CSOs to take risks and would drive engagement, increasing project submissions.

The FISONG is already popular, but certain types of CSOs are hesitant to undertake

projects if they do not see any prospects for continuity. CSOs made this reluctance clear during the evaluation seminar.

CSOs highlighted that they were not asking for a guarantee of continuity “at any cost,” but that they would appreciate the possibility of long-term project support, beyond the experimentation phase, through clearly identified and transparent measures (see recommendations no. 14 and 15).

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*“It would encourage more robust projects. CSOs would take the opportunity to innovate more and to invest as much time as necessary if they saw opportunities for continuity (not certain guarantees). It is almost impossible for small NGOs to take risks with their own funds. AFD has a real role to play in that kind of support!” (Taken from an interview with a CSO project initiator)*

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#### **Projects that present unequal scaling-up capacities**

The FISONG mechanism is in line with the objectives of the MEAE’s partnership strategy with French CSOs, highlighting the role of CSOs in “their potential for invention, experimentation, and innovation at the local level, which can then be scaled up with institutional partners.” Scaling up tested innovative solutions is an essential objective of the FISONG.

While it is true that, for some FISONG projects, the mechanism has helped to develop solutions that are later scaled up, overall, this remains a challenge. The “next step” is not always clear for CSOs. This is usually because:

1. There is little “post-project” planning included during the FISONG project cycle.
2. The mechanism’s experimentation period (3 years) is considered too short, given that innovation often happens in stages, some of which can take longer than others, from designing a solution for a given problem, to its dissemination/scaling-up (see § 3.4).
3. There are no dedicated resources for supporting and financing this scaling-up/spinning-off of projects, either within AFD or externally within the wider French ODA landscape.
4. It remains difficult to get public authorities on-board with adopting innovations developed at the end of the project cycle.

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### Box 3 – Examples of projects that have been scaled up

Some of the projects that received FISONG financing have continued after the end of the project cycle, in various ways (complete/partial continuation of experimentation; at the same scale/scaled up) and usually in the country where the experimentation took place.

The factors for success identified include: (i) the integration of the solutions developed within the intervention priorities of the relevant sectoral ministries—which requires good knowledge of these priorities, as well as the mobilization of any contacts within the administration; (ii) the mobilization of further financing from donors for the scaling-up phase; and (iii) the transposition of the solutions developed into the intervention strategies of CSOs in other regions and sectors of activity.

Close-up on the FISONG project “ICTs and maternal and infant health”: The AlloLaafia service, developed by the GRET as part of its MobiSan project (Burkina Faso), uses SMS-based information campaigns about family planning, pregnancy monitoring, and infant and early childhood nutrition. This service was expanded beyond the original project, notably through the development of a technical platform to host the service, as well as the creation of new content in local languages and new partnerships.

While two of the three services tested as part of the project came to an end when they ran out of funding (the Djantoli service and the PCIMA electronic service<sup>[8]</sup>), the CSO was able to continue with the AlloLaafia service. Another project, with Belgian support, is currently in talks to copy the AlloLaafia platform for use within the Burkinabè Ministry of Health, to send messages to community health workers in Burkina Faso.

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[8] Protocole national de prise en charge intégrée de la malnutrition aiguë (National Protocol for an Integrated Approach to Acute Malnutrition).

Not all CSOs face the same difficulties, and they are not all equally able to overcome them. More seasoned and experienced organizations may be able to rely on existing partners and to find the financing needed to scale up an innovation. Several possibilities have been identified for preparing and supporting the cross-pollination and scaling-up of FISONG-funded projects:

1. Supporting CSOs in the search for scaling-up opportunities (dialogue with local contracting authorities, networking, advocacy, etc.) throughout the project cycle, starting with the project design phase.
2. Helping CSOs find supplementary financing (from within AFD or from other donors during the scaling-up phase).

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### 3.4 FISONG implementation modalities that increase the capacity for innovation

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#### The FISONG: A tool for dialogue between AFD and CSOs

Promoting dialogue between CSOs and AFD is one of the objectives and founding principles of the FISONG (see § 3.1.4). To do this, the mechanism includes systems and spaces of exchange at the various stages of the process: from consultation on the selection of the themes of future FISONG CFPs, to the project implementation phase. Dialogue is especially open:

1. During the initial consultation phase (sharing the list of AFD’s priority themes, and the AFD/CSO consultation meeting), something that CSOs appreciate highly, since they see it as a real opportunity to co-construct future FISONG CFPs.
  - The triennial planning process: every three years, the AFD Technical Divisions (TD) organize a consultation exercise involving the Coordination SUD and its CSO members, with the goal of creating a list of priority themes for FISONG CFPs.
  - Consultation on establishing the terms of reference (ToR): after the consultation on the selection of themes, a second consultation is held annually between AFD, Coordination SUD, and CSOs to establish the ToR for the CFP. AFD sends a preliminary memo on the theme to Coordination SUD, which distributes it to its members, before inviting them to one or several consultation meetings.
2. During the information-gathering stage, while the project is being designed and revised, technical

assistance is provided by FISONG project team managers from the OD. This opportunity for dialogue is also highly appreciated by CSOs.

3. In some cases, dialogue may occur at various points in the implementation phase, in the context of follow-up/evaluation/capitalization initiatives that encourage dialogue between project initiators. CSOs also appreciate this opportunity when it is available.

**However, the methodological changes made in 2019, which arose from efforts to streamline the FISONG-KITE procedure, reduced the freedom that CSOs had previously had during this initial dialogue phase. The evaluation invites a reflection on possible changes to the triennial planning process in order to better meet CSOs' expectations and to increase consistency with the Agency's expectations of the mechanism. The triennial consultation process on priority themes was revised in 2018, after AFD expressed its desire for themes that were more consistent with the Agency's intervention priorities, thus making it easier to support and scale up projects.**

**Today, the consultation begins with a list of themes defined by AFD and shared with CSOs through Coordination SUD. Under this new system, CSOs have less freedom to propose projects (although they still have plenty of room to maneuver in applying the themes to specific issues and in subsequent dialogue with AFD).**

While the importance of dialogue between AFD, Coordination SUD, and CSOs is fully recognized today, the evaluation recommends rethinking its modalities (purpose, timeline, logistics), in order to continue to serve the objectives pursued by the mechanism (see recommendation no. 2).

**CSOs recognize the advantages of the information-gathering phase, but administrative processes could be further simplified**

**Rethinking the simplification and duration of contracting procedures (see recommendations no. 8 and 9)**

In 2018, AFD undertook a simplification of the FISONG's contracting procedures. This work streamlined administrative procedures

and significantly reduced the duration between the publication of the CFP and the signing of contracts between CSOs and AFD.

Although it was shortened by these procedural simplifications, the duration between the publication of the CFP and the signing of contracts was still seen by CSOs as too long (15 months on average). CSOs have to keep their partners mobilized and undertake preparatory work for the implementation of their actions, neither of which they receive financing for.

On the other hand, the evaluation revealed a generally very positive view of dialogue between CSOs and AFD during this phase, since it entailed real co-construction, helping to strengthen partnerships with AFD and to take projects further.

**A mechanism that could do more to show its openness to non-French CSOs (see recommendation no. 4)**

While the FISONG claims to be open to non-French CSOs, with no size conditions, the evaluation shows that the mechanism is generally easier to access for French CSOs, especially larger ones and those that have previously partnered with AFD, and harder to access for CSOs from the South, especially smaller ones.

Changes still need to be made in several areas in order to eliminate the following obstacles:

1. French language ability, which is necessary because ToR and project notes are written in French.
2. No option to submit application files digitally – everything must be submitted by post.
3. Difficulties meeting administrative eligibility criteria – requiring balance sheets and operating statements for the last three years, for example.
4. The fact that foreign CSOs do not often participate in the consultation meetings to determine the ToR, which give participating CSOs the opportunity to adapt to the AFD's demands.
5. Thresholds for calls for tenders (CFT), for involving local partners, for requesting the opening of a dedicated project account.
6. The mechanism encourages the formation of North-South consortia of CSOs, but it does not offer a clear definition of how they should be structured, which hinders their establishment.

### **A flexible intervention framework, but close follow-up support could be improved**

**The mechanism is flexible enough to allow projects to adapt to local realities, but some follow-up modalities should be rethought (see recommendation no. 9)**

CSOs hailed the flexibility displayed with regard to the reorientation of activities during the implementation phase, as well as the fungibility between project budget lines. The FISONG intervention framework is seen as more flexible than that of the “CSO Initiatives” mechanism. This flexibility not only fosters experimentation, which by its very nature requires a measure of flexibility, but it also highlights the capacity of the AFD teams in charge of follow-up to adjust their approaches.

Yet, while the FISONG offers some flexibility around modifying projects already in the implementation phase, the evaluation illustrates the need for some follow-up modalities to be rethought, in order to better match the specific nature and rhythm of innovations.

This adaptation could be made by involving local AFD agencies more systematically at various stages of the project cycle (in particular the information-gathering stage), especially on administrative issues and in relationships with local contracting authorities. This would differ from the current situation, where project follow-up is mostly overseen remotely by FISONG project managers. It would also clarify the respective roles of local agencies and FISONG project managers in follow-up, keeping dialogue open and active, while also maintaining a sectoral approach, supported by the TDs.

**Support periods were generally considered too short by CSOs, with not enough time to include a proper reflection phase on the spinning-off and scaling-up of projects (see recommendation no. 15)**

Finally, projects supported by the FISONG have a period of three years, which is generally seen as not enough time to complete a full prototyping phase and to work on scaling up any innovations developed. The CSOs surveyed called for AFD to consider extending the duration of projects, so that more work can be put into preparing the next steps for their innovations.

## 4. Driving change: Strategic recommendations

*There are several strategic and operational recommendations that should be considered in the wake of this evaluation. The recommendations marked with a red exclamation point are priorities.*

### 4.1 The FISONG's strategic position

#### **! 1. Repositioning the FISONG under the Agency's “innovation” strategy would increase accountability**

##### **Why?**

- This was one of the options identified for enabling the FISONG to realize its full potential, while also better integrating it within the Agency's cross-cutting development strategies (with more interest and resources made available to FISONG project team managers).
- There are opportunities to connect with the strategy of the INN Team (IRK Department), since the target objectives are similar, and the FISONG mechanism could become a supplementary tool for meeting the strategic objectives for innovation set by the Agency.

##### **How?**

- By creating more systematic links with the INN Team at key moments (triennial planning, ToR creation, capitalization and communication, etc.) and by paying attention to what the INN Team can bring to the FISONG process.
- By increasing accountability and learning at the mechanism level, beyond the sole requirement of follow-up at the project level. The evaluation shows that despite evaluation and capitalization processes, it remains difficult to measure the results obtained in terms of innovation and cross-pollination, even at just the facility level. Ultimately, there should perhaps be a learning exercise included at the end of each FISONG project, in order to take a step back to look at the lessons learned from the project and to reflect on what the OD could apply to its own action. To this end, the follow-up/evaluation/capitalization system could include a final

learning exercise of this kind (see recommendation no. 12).

## **2. Acknowledging the fact that the FISONG mechanism serves the Agency's development strategy and that it shows *de facto* preference for sectoral themes that are priorities for AFD**

### **Why?**

- The importance of dialogue with CSOs is generally described (AFD, CSO) as one of the foundations and fundamental principles of the FISONG. However, consultation with CSOs within the triennial planning process was revised in 2018 (KITE streamlining initiative). This key stage, when FISONG themes are defined, is now seen by CSOs as "limited," since the dialogue is based on a list of themes pre-selected by AFD (whereas CSOs were previously completely free to propose whatever they wanted).
- While dialogue continues during other stages—especially the construction of CFPs and the co-construction of projects during the information-gathering phase—, this shift in direction has been received poorly by the FISONG's primary partners—CSOs—, who are calling for this change to be revisited, or at least justified.

### **How?**

- By making AFD procedure more explicit, i.e., by selecting sectoral themes that resonate with AFD's strategic priorities in a way that makes project continuity and support post-FISONG possible. This would require (i) greater buy-in from project teams and departments/divisions of the OD and local AFD agencies, and (ii) cross-pollination/scaling-up of projects after the "FISONG" experimentation phase.
- Rethinking how different mechanisms aimed at CSOs fit together would create opportunities to support project continuity, helping to advance the goal of cross-pollination within the AFD portfolio.
- Still, the mechanism could take this opportunity to select themes proposed by CSOs, in order to keep this space for dialogue with CSOs open and to expose the Agency to new issues. This could involve considering a supplementary list of themes proposed by CSOs alongside the themes pre-selected by AFD.

## **3. Making it possible to modify the triennial plan in the three years after the planning process (changing, eliminating, or adding themes)**

### **Why?**

- To ensure that the mechanism remains relevant and adaptable in the face of sudden changes in a given context and/or new prospects for exploiting innovations within AFD interventions.

### **How?**

- By including an option for revision in the triennial planning procedure.

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## **4.2 The mechanism's scope and target public**

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### **! 4. Reaffirming the mechanism's target CSO type and adapting procedures accordingly**

### **Why?**

- Until now, there has been no clear discussion on this mechanism's target public, although this was recommended in the 2011 evaluation. Today, there are two opposing views: (i) "adopting a kind of competitive elitism, giving preference to NGOs that are capable of carrying out an innovation process, which supposes that they will already have it in their skills base, strategies, and objectives"; (ii) "adopting openness to all (including small CSOs and those with fewer resources, CSOs from the South, international CSOs from the North)".
- Technically, the mechanism is "open to all," but it is most favorable (accessible) to a single kind of CSO: large, French organizations that are often historical partners of AFD.
- The framework (in terms of consultation methodology, language of publication of CFPs, eligibility and file submission criteria, selection, project execution procedures, etc.) limits the mechanism's accessibility for an entire category of CSOs (smaller organizations, non-French speaking, located in the South).

### **How?**

- Eligibility and pre-selection procedures should be revised in order to accommodate target CSOs.

If the mechanism were to be opened up to a wide range of target CSOs, procedures

concerning access to financing would need to be relaxed, especially during the pre-selection phase. Such changes would include allowing project proposals to be written in English and submitted electronically, as well as relaxing some eligibility criteria (balance sheets and operating statements for the last three years, list of private and public financing sources, etc.).

### **! 5. Encouraging partnerships between CSOs from the North and CSOs from the South**

#### **Why?**

- This is one of the mechanism's fundamental purposes and a development priority for the Agency, and much work remains to be done to re-balance project leadership between the North and the South.
- CSOs from the South tend to act as the "operational arm" of CSOs from the North, taking on the role of project initiator, even if that role assignment might not have been immediately clear during the project selection phase.
- As national CSOs with strong local ties and existing networks on the ground, their involvement is essential for project continuity and scaling-up.

#### **How?**

- By reaffirming one of the mechanism's objectives: strengthening partnerships between AFD and NGOs, who can act as conduits for aid in situations where PCAs are absent or insufficient, especially through partnerships between CSOs from the North and the South.
- By encouraging shared North-South project leadership in the ToR of CFPs, and by making the "partnership for innovation" criterion in the project selection rubric more specific. This could involve making the nature of such partnerships clearer (especially those involving CSOs from the South and those that receive support from research institutions) in order to make the project contributions of CSOs from the South more apparent.
- By rethinking the modalities of project support and follow-up, which must evolve and take into account the specific needs of CSOs from the South.
- By allowing for a certain degree of "risk-taking" in the project selection process and by reducing the number of documents required of CSOs from the South in the submission of their administrative file.

### **6. Reaffirming a broad definition of the concept of innovation within the mechanism, ensuring greater balance between the kinds of innovation supported**

#### **Why?**

- There is a consensus among AFD and CSOs that a broad definition of innovation should be maintained. But there is a continued need to reaffirm this openness, since some project teams seem to grant more financing to, and see more added value in, technical innovations.
- While there may be a consensus on the importance of process innovations, they are more difficult to replicate and entrench, and harder to promote among the relevant authorities and actors in the areas concerned. By trying to strike more of a balance (without tipping into an "only technical" mindset), it might be possible to support technical/technological innovations even more so than today, which could help to ensure the continuity and scaling-up of FISONG projects. Especially because it is rare for projects that involve technical innovations not to incorporate one or several process innovations too (new forms of organizations or systems of action).

#### **How?**

- By finding a hard/soft balance in the kinds of innovations supported, helping the mechanism to fulfill its dual purpose (supporting all kinds of innovation, but also supporting scaling-up/cross-pollination).
- By drawing on the capitalization initiatives that are part of FISONG projects, in order to raise awareness among OD project teams about the different meanings covered by the concept of innovation, by highlighting the effects of previously supported projects.

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## **4.3 Management/governance of the mechanism**

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### **7. Making room for geographical departments and local agencies in the mechanism's implementation on the ground**

#### **Why?**

- Better contextualization enables more informed project selection (theme managers do not always understand the context in the countries where proposed projects will be implemented).
- For closer follow-up support of projects.

- For better integration of innovations at the local level and of projects in partnership with local contracting authorities and/or public authorities.
- To promote the scaling-up/continuity of projects beyond the experimentation phase.

#### **How?**

- By launching an intra-AFD reflection in order to better distribute roles and to explore the most realistic way to operationalize this recommendation.

## 5. Driving change: Operational recommendations

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### 5.1 Streamlining and rethinking procedures

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#### **8. A need to align procedures with the mechanism's objectives and to streamline contracting procedures**

##### **Why?**

- Some initial work has already been done (KITE experiment), but there is still room to improve in adapting procedures to CSOs' limitations and scope of action (especially in terms of awarding contracts—minimum sum of CFT—, involving local partners, asking for a dedicated project account to be opened, etc.) and to allow for some heterogeneity among practices.
- The information-gathering phase is still long, even though it has been reduced. This remains a difficult phase for CSOs to finance.
- Dialogue between CSOs and the various AFD departments (administrative, compliance, legal, communications, etc.) could be facilitated, especially during the contracting phase. This would lighten the workload of project team managers in this regard, since they often serve as points of contact between CSOs and these various departments.

##### **How?**

- By changing the FISONG framework/procedures to more closely resemble the PD/CSO "CSO Initiatives" model, especially in terms of awarding contracts (minimum sum of CFT), involving local partners, and asking for a dedicated project account to be opened.
- By taking a cross-cutting approach to dialogue within the Agency between CSOs and the various departments (administrative, compliance, legal, etc.) based on the PD/CSO "CSO Initiatives" organizational model, with "administrative" support provided as financing agreements are written up.
- By positioning the FISONG representative within the OD as the point of contact for all OD departments.



**! 9. ... the same goes for follow-up during the implementation phase: “Innovating in methods” ensures that the mechanism will be flexible**

**Why?**

- The follow-up and evaluation tools used for FISONG projects are not well-suited to experimentation (traditional project follow-up tools do not take into account the aims and specificities of an experiment with a certain “room for error” typical of action-research approaches where the process is as important as the result).
- Furthermore, the existing tools are not standardized and/or are used inconsistently from one FISONG project to another.

**How?**

- By standardizing continuous follow-up/evaluation/capitalization systems (for example, the FISONG IFRM), which would make it possible to provide sufficient resources to study innovations and to create an ad hoc follow-up system for each project.
- By designing follow-up/evaluation/capitalization methodologies that are adapted to the innovation process: change-oriented approach, outcome harvesting, CIRAD Impress method, adaptive management, etc.).
- By ensuring that FISONG theme managers can get in touch with the FISONG contact at the OD with questions about different procedures and the required internal documents.

**10. Rethinking the pre-selection process in order to focus more on innovation and to ensure the relevance of the innovations supported**

**Why?**

- A project note format that does not make it possible to describe in detail the proposed innovation, along with the capacities and ambitions of the project initiators. The project note format does not place enough emphasis on innovation, is demanding of candidates, and requires administrative information that is of little use at this stage (list of members of the board of directors, organizational chart, annual meeting minutes, all accounting documents, list of private donors contributing at least 15% of the last annual budget, etc.).
- The selection committee does not seek enough input (the Agency’s geographical departments

are not always consulted) and does not always make it possible to contextualize innovations.

- Dialogue with CSOs takes place too late in the information-gathering phase.
- Recent examples of the use of external expertise in the preparatory phase before the launch of a FISONG theme (examples: “One Health”; “Citizen Participation in Water and Sanitation”) to help create a preliminary memo. The use of external expertise made it possible to produce knowledge that improved the contextualization of innovations and that enriched the CFP’s position.

**How?**

- By revising the project note format to allow candidates to better describe their proposed innovations and the expertise that will be mobilized to implement these innovations.
- By inviting as much participation as possible from AFD’s geographical departments and local agencies during the project selection phase (when this is necessary to contextualize the proposed innovation and to cross-reference it with the Agency’s regional strategies).
- By making space within the selection phase (if need be) for dialogue with some pre-selected CSOs to encourage them to take more risks (while ensuring that they have the means to meet their ambitions, especially for smaller organizations that have not previously partnered with AFD).
- By considering the opportunity (or at least the option) of standardizing the use of external thematic experts in order to produce knowledge and promote the selection of truly innovative projects.

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**5.2 AFD/CSO dialogue throughout the implementation of FISONG projects**

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**11. The technical assistance provided by the TDs to CSOs during the information-gathering phase should continue and be further developed during project implementation**

**Why?**

- Because this is one of the mechanism’s added values according to CSOs, who see a real improvement in the quality of their projects, and because it is part of an action-research process.

- Because, in terms of gender, the technical support provided by the F3E to FISONG project initiators is an important asset.
- Finally, because while this technical assistance is seen as important, it is still not easy to guarantee the extension of this support beyond the information-gathering phase. Project teams see FISONG projects as “side projects” that they are not expected to focus on.

#### **How?**

- By justifying the investment of TD project team managers in this technical assistance (which constitutes the “heart” of the mechanism) by giving them the means to continue to make this investment during the implementation phase.
- By considering the opportunity of generalizing the follow-up/evaluation/capitalization system of the FISONG IFRM. This would allow the mobilization of additional resources throughout the implementation phase (see recommendation no. 12). By rethinking the role of local AFD agencies in order to improve their follow-up and support during the implementation phase.

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### **5.3 Cross-cutting capitalization of FISONG projects**

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#### **! 12. Capitalization should be standardized, especially in terms of tools and resources**

##### **Why?**

- Practices vary greatly from one FISONG project to another, since there are no common points of reference (in project ambitions, budgets, procedures).
- Overall, project teams reported that they lacked the tools needed to guarantee high-quality capitalization, the kind that would further the mechanism’s objectives. A good starting point would be to define specific needs and, at the same time, to create a single capitalization procedure with the necessary resources.
- While some technical resources are available from the Agency’s Evaluation and Learning Department (EVA), which have been mobilized to support some capitalization efforts, FISONG project teams have described these resources as insufficient.
- Some recent efforts that have called for the adoption of follow-up/evaluation/capitalization systems (like that of the FISONG IFRM) should be capitalized on (and generalized). These systems provide further resources that

make it possible to invest more heavily in “capitalization” when internal resources are limited.

- Over the longer term, the opportunity to organize cross-cutting capitalization initiatives (by cluster, theme, or region) could be considered. This would promote the co-construction of innovations tested comparatively across multiple contexts, bringing together experiences and driving shared reflection on possible avenues for innovation in a given sector.

##### **How?**

- By standardizing continuous capitalization initiatives, which should be developed early in the process so that they are ready by the implementation phase. This would standardize the definition of needs from the very beginning of FISONG projects (during the information-gathering phase), and would establish concrete working methods that would help drive the initiative (notably through continuous dialogue between project initiators at the facility level – see recommendation no. 13).
- By positioning EVA more proactively as a technical resource for FISONG theme managers. Given limited means, thought should be given to who has priority access to this support. Such access could be divided into two tiers:

1. For all: the construction of a reference guide and a document library for the use of FISONG theme managers (ToR templates for recruiting external consultants for capitalization and designing a continuous system, etc.).

2. For certain FISONG projects identified during the triennial planning stage (one per year, chosen for their highly strategic character or because the TD in charge of supporting them is less “equipped” to lead the exercise, etc.). These would be projects that need extra support in navigating the ongoing process, in partnership with the external consultant. To support these efforts, a dedicated budget might be ringfenced in the overall budget for the FISONG projects in question (in addition to the “capitalization” dimension).

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## 5.4 Project initiator dialogue at the facility level

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### 13. Strengthening the continuous dialogue between CSO project initiators in order to encourage emulation and exchange among peers at the project level

#### Why?

- There remain relatively few opportunities to increase inter-CSO dialogue within most FISONG projects, although the mechanism does invite these exchanges.
- Efforts to integrate “gender” into FISONG projects are often one of the only times when this kind of dialogue is guaranteed (because it is organized collectively), but the need for it goes well beyond the single issue of “gender.”
- Some FISONG projects have seen this dialogue as a “starting point” for future dynamics, but such cases remain the exception, and dialogue often comes too late, during workshops around capitalization efforts at the end of the project.
- However, CSOs have recognized the need to discuss their approaches with peers and to incorporate their various project scopes, aims, and contexts within a joint approach in order to enrich all individual approaches.

#### How?

- By standardizing spaces for exchange (in person, at least at the beginning, midpoint, and at the end of the implementation phase) that go beyond the single issue of gender support (perhaps with a FISONG launch meeting before the “gender” workshop, as well as two other opportunities for dialogue planned as early as the ToR). Just as “evaluation” and “capitalization” need to be planned at the project level, these times for dialogue must be budgeted for by CSOs during the project design phase.

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## 5.5 Sharing best practices/lessons learned from FISONG projects

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### ! 14. Reaffirming and supporting the mechanism’s purpose, to produce and share knowledge

#### Why?

- There is no frame of reference for standard practices around sharing lessons learned from FISONG projects.

- Overall, FISONG results are not widely shared, even though the relay networks exist to do so (local and international thematic networks, partner networks of local AFD agencies on the ground, etc.), and they could serve as tools for sharing these lessons in the country of implementation and beyond.

#### How?

- Providing guidelines for sharing lessons learned from FISONG capitalizations both within AFD and externally.
- Drawing on multi-actor innovation networks (in France and in countries of intervention) and mobilizing local AFD agencies on the ground and their networks to communicate about FISONG projects.
- Using internal AFD communication resource tools for FISONG (AFD communication tools, platforms, etc.) to promote the spread of best practices within AFD.

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## 5.6 Encouraging the scaling-up of projects and guaranteeing opportunities for cross-pollination

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### ! 15. Rethinking the mechanism’s ability to consolidate and support the scaling-up of innovations

#### Why?

- The mechanism does not systematically provide a framework for reflection on scaling-up, nor the option for supporting the creation of an “exit” strategy after the experimentation phase. While this is one of the mechanism’s basic purposes, it is not systematically included or anticipated in the FISONG project cycle, even though CSOs have plenty to share about prospects/opportunities/ambitions at the project note stage.
- In fact, CSOs are often unable to get past the “prototyping” stage because the experimentation time is not always sufficient, and because future opportunities within AFD may not come about (especially within the OD, even though cross-pollination of the AFD portfolio is one of the mechanism’s desired outcomes), and more generally because there are few instruments supporting innovation and scaling-up in the institutional donor landscape.
- CSOs expect AFD to play a supporting role and to facilitate the continuity of their experiments (continued support, mobilization of Agency networks, etc.).

### How?

- By specifying future AFD prospects in the ToR for FISONG CFPs, when possible (and anticipating these prospects).
- By planning to challenge CSOs more directly on this issue during the information-gathering phase (with dedicated expertise in charge of a combined “follow-up/evaluation/capitalization” dimension), via:
  - The development of a theory of change for thinking about scaling-up. This strategic and conceptual tool could provide the framework needed for considering continuity opportunities (scaling-up of projects, starting from the launch and continuing throughout implementation). FISONG projects should take this strategy into account (for example, if one of the hypothetical situations involves the project being taken on by public authorities, then the project should involve those authorities throughout the implementation phase).
  - Also, FISONG projects might include a test of this theory of change in their follow-up/evaluation/capitalization system, strengthening it or revising it as the case may be (and facilitating its implementation). At the project midpoint and at least one year before the project ends, there should be a reflection session held with the entire project team, the local AFD agency, and the CSO to discuss this theory of change.
- By thinking about possible options to facilitate the scaling-up of certain projects (ad hoc committee to decide on whether to offer extended support to a project, creation of a support fund for the scaling-up of certain strategic “gems” for the Agency, etc.) and guiding CSOs toward other mechanisms. On this last point, a list of innovation financing mechanisms offered by other donors could be a key resource for supporting the scaling-up of FISONG projects.
- Rethinking planned project implementation durations: Is three years enough to guarantee the scaling-up of projects?



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# List of acronyms and abbreviations

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AFD	Agence française de développement (French Development Agency, or the Agency)
AFDI	Agriculteurs français et développement international (French Farmers and International Development)
CFP	Call for Proposals
CFT	Call for Tenders
CICID	Comité interministériel de la coopération internationale et du développement (French Interministerial Committee for International Cooperation and Development)
CIDR	Centre international de développement et de recherche (International Center for Development and Research)
CIF	Cross-Cutting Intervention Framework (AFD)
CIRAD	Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (Agricultural Research Center for International Development)
CSO	Civil Society Organization / Civil Society Organizations Division (AFD)
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
DC	Developing Country
EUR	Euro(s)
EVA	Evaluation and Knowledge Capitalization Department (AFD)
F3E	Fonds pour la promotion des études transversales, des études préalables et de l'évaluation (Fund for the Promotion of Cross-Cutting Studies, Preliminary Studies, and Evaluation)
FISONG	Facilité d'innovation sectorielle pour les ONG (Sectoral Innovation Facility for NGOs)
GERES	Groupe énergies renouvelables, environnement et solidarités (Group for the Environment, Renewable Energy, and Solidarity)
GRET	Professionals for Fair Development (formerly the Groupe de recherche et d'échange technologique, or Research and Technological Exchange Group)
HR	Human Resources
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
IFRM	Integrated Flood Risk Management (FISONG)
INN	Innovation Team (AFD)
IRK	Innovation, Research, and Knowledge Department (AFD)
ISO	International Solidarity Organization
M	Million(s)
MEAE	Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères (French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OD	Operations Department (AFD)
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCA	Public Contracting Authority
PD	Partnerships Department (AFD)
PCIMA	Protocole national de prise en charge intégrée de la malnutrition aiguë (National Protocol for an Integrated Approach to Acute Malnutrition)
PPC	Priority Poor Country
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations)
SIF	Sectoral Intervention Framework (AFD)
SOP	Strategic Orientation Plan (AFD)
SPC	Strategy, Partnerships, and Communications Department (AFD)
TD	Technical Division(s) (AFD)
ToR	Terms of Reference



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## **What is AFD?**

The Agence Française de Développement (AFD) Group is a public entity which finances, supports and expedites transitions toward a more just and sustainable world. As a French overseas aid platform for sustainable development and investment, we and our partners create shared solutions, with and for the people of the global South.

Active in more than 4,000 projects in the French overseas departments and some 115 countries, our teams strive to promote health, education and gender equality, and are working to protect our common resources – peace, education, health, biodiversity and a stable climate.

It's our way of honoring the commitment France and the French people have made to fulfill the Sustainable Development Goals.

Towards a world in common.

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