RAINFOREST ALLIANCE PROJECT PORTFOLIO REVIEW

Understanding the logic, programmatic coherence and effectiveness of RA-led projects and programs (2008-2018)

**Deadline for proposals: 15 September 2019**
Contact: hgilhuis@ra.org
Keywords: learning evaluation, desk review of 2008-2018 projects portfolio; qualitative methods;
Completion date: March 2020
Budget: max EUR 40.000 (US$ 45.000)

**JUSTIFICATION**

Although the Rainforest Alliance is best known for its sustainability certification program, the organization pursues a range of strategies to improve farmer livelihoods, conserve biodiversity and mitigate climate change around the globe. Building on the work of pre-merger UTZ and RA, the current RA strategy postulates 4 interlocking interventions (see figure). These interventions evolved from the experience of pre-merger UTZ and pre-merger RA and are envisioned to be mutually reinforcing.

This review of the pre-merger RA projects portfolio will systematize the accumulated experience with projects and programs implemented by RA and draw learnings as to their logic and overall programmatic coherence.

The findings of this review should help inform future decision-making and adaptive management on RA’s programmatic scope of work, which now reaches beyond certification into transforming sectors, markets and landscapes.

Over the past 10 years, RA and its donors have invested substantive amounts in over 100 projects and programs. While these programs and projects have their own regular progress reporting and sometimes also have been evaluated upon closeout, RA knows little about the composition of its project portfolio as a whole, factors that have influenced success and the longevity of project outcomes once projects have been completed. Whereas assessing the effectiveness of past projects is beyond the scope of what this review can achieve, this review is informed by our desire to understand and improve the overall effectiveness of RA’s interventions.

**LEARNING QUESTIONS**

This portfolio review is designed as a learning study to explore and analyse primarily the information contained in RA’s projects monitoring and reporting database, complemented by interviews with RA staff and stakeholders. It aims to answer the following questions:
1. What does the programs & projects portfolio look like? (characterization, typology with criteria to be developed)
2. What strategies and theories of change have underpinned RA’s projects and programs?
3. What has RA learned so far and what can RA learn in hindsight from reviewing its experience with the projects and programs, with regard to a) the relative effectiveness of different (types of) interventions, b) synergies between different RA interventions c) conditions for success and d) durability and scalability of outcomes?

SCOPE

The scope of the portfolio review is a significant part of RA’s work that has been implemented through (grant-based) programs and projects over the past 10 years (2008-2018). It does certainly not cover all of RA’s work. Notably, it does not include the certification program or the “tailored services” workstreams, but it will look at how “projects” have intersected with other RA intervention strategies.

The organizational set up of the programs and projects implemented by RA varies. This review will focus on projects and programs led by RA. This means that projects / programs where RA played only a subsidiary role are out of scope. Programs led by RA where the implementation has been (partially) outsourced are within scope. Ongoing projects are out of scope because they have not yet concluded and because we want to minimize the additional workload for RA staff engaged in implementing those projects.

Past impact evaluations by (pre-merger) RA and UTZ have researched the outcomes and impacts of the respective certification programs. RA has also evaluated a number of projects and programs when this was foreseen in funding agreements. These project evaluations will be included in this review. Excluded from this review is the Sector Partnerships Program funded by the Dutch Government, which is currently under external evaluation.

DESIGN AND METHODS

We suggest a set up in 3 phases and to use mainly qualitative methods. The main purpose is learning (and not an impact assessment). The design we have in mind would start with (1) a broad characterization of the portfolio as a whole followed by (2) an in-depth analysis of a selected number of cases based on mainly desk review and if necessary additional interviews, and (3) a sense making stage where the evaluator(s) and RA staff jointly reflect on the findings and discuss key insights and learnings.

Important to note that no additional field-data collection is expected. We understand that a desk review based on written records and staff interviews puts limits to the possibility of evaluators to independently assess or corroborate the (reported) effectiveness of projects. We invite candidates to factor in these limitations into the design and propose ways in which these can be mitigated.

1. **Step 1: Exploration and characterization of the portfolio**

The evaluation will start with creating an overview and characterization / typology of RA’s project portfolio, using available overviews and summaries made available by RA. All projects (approx. 100) should be included in this first cursory review.

---

1 We define a “project” as a set of activities bound by a specific goal, timeline and resources, whereas a “program” is a set of interrelated projects bound by an overarching goal (hence “programmatic”). The distinction between “projects” and “programs” is largely a matter of size, scale, duration and complexity.
Based on this overview a sampling framework will be agreed for a purposeful sample of cases for in-depth desk review. A tentative cut-off date for projects is 2008-2018, but we may agree on a different cut-off date if the initial exploration suggests otherwise.

Deliverables:
- a) Inception report with broad characterization of the program & projects portfolio and a sampling framework for case selection.
- b) A dataset (for immediate and future reference) with all projects and programs screened according to a set of previously agreed descriptors / criteria.

2. **Step 2: In-depth case studies (desk review + staff interviews)**

An in-depth review of selected project cases will rely primarily on available project documentation, such as project proposals, reports, mid-term reviews and evaluations. Complementary information can be gathered by interviewing (former) RA staff and/or project stakeholders.

Deliverables:
- 1. Interim Report (with executive summary)
- 2. Slide deck

The interim report will answer evaluation question 2, by critically describing and analysing the driving ideas and theories of change that have informed and underpinned RA projects in the past. To the extent that the project documentation allows, it will identify key achievements, dilemmas, limitations and lessons learnt. Finally, the report will propose key themes and questions to be discussed with RA staff in the next stage.

3. **Step 3: Reflection. How can RA’s accumulated experience inform current and future strategies and interventions?**

The last step is an interactive co-creation and will involve a selection of RA staff in a guided conversation to make sense and collectively extract insights from the portfolio review. The evaluators will facilitate this conversation and summarize (in writing) the main insights emerging.

Deliverables:
- a) Methodology for “reflection sessions” with RA staff
- b) Final report (with executive summary)
- c) Presentation (slide deck)

**PURPOSE: HOW WILL RESULTS BE USED?**

The insights derived from answering these questions will be used to inform RA’s current and future strategies, programs, projects and (learning) systems. The results do not only reside in the reports, but also in the process and the quality of the conversations with RA staff as the research unfolds, especially in the reflection conversations.

We expect this evaluation to be useful for RA staff involved in scoping, designing, procuring, managing and implementing strategies, programs and projects. This includes the Regions Teams, Institutional Relations, Global Programs, and staff involved in landscapes and communities projects.

Insights can be used to inform further development of RA’s innovative collaboration initiatives to accelerate and scale up landscape regeneration.
RA’s work on advocacy, themes and partnerships can benefit from insights on how synergies between different intervention strategies have been created (or missed) in the past. Regions, Tailored Supply Chain Services, Global Programs, and Institutional Relations can benefit from having an overview that helps to easily locate and revisit relevant experiences stored in RA’s projects portfolio. This knowledge can also inform RA’s proposal writing and acquisition policies.

For RA’s Landscapes & Communities work this evaluation can yield new insights as to the conditions for success in landscape and community projects, and how RA can enhance the “evaluability” of this type of interventions.

For the M&E cluster this evaluation will provide some pointers as to how RA can link project M&E, certification M&E and organization wide M&E and foster institutional learning across departments, sectors, geographies and disciplines.

Finally, this portfolio review may also shed a light on RA’s learning capacity. Each project is a learning opportunity, but tasks at hand often take precedence over reflecting and drawing lessons, let alone referencing lessons for future use. Unlike RA’s certification program, projects are one-off interventions, tailor made, situation- and context specific. This external review of the project portfolio will hopefully reveal critical patterns, remind us of what we have learned and generate insights to inform RA’s future strategies, programs and projects.

QUALIFICATIONS OF THE EVALUATION TEAM

This review will be commissioned to an external party, to gain a critical outsider’s perspective. This should provide RA with a renewed understanding (in retrospect) of important aspects of our past work, achievements and challenges.

- Proven track record with program / project evaluations, including portfolio reviews
- Good understanding of the work of Voluntary Standards Organizations
- Expertise with qualitative research methods
- Excellent conceptualization and analytical skills
- Excellent writing and reporting skills
- Good project management skills
- A desire to co-create results and constructively engage with RA documents and staff.

SELECTION CRITERIA AND PROCEDURE

A review team will select the preferred candidate. In addition to the track record and qualifications, we expect proposals to lay out how candidates approach our evaluation and learning questions, and to propose a conceptual framework and methods of analysis that is fit for purpose. We will assess proposals based on the overall quality and fit between qualifications, approach & conceptualization, work plan, and cost-efficiency.

BUDGET

Max EURO 40,000 (US$ 45,000). We expect proposals to provide a rationale for the proposed budget. Budgets should at least specify the number of working days and daily rate of each member of the evaluation team.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND ADVISORY GROUP

A Senior Expert Science & Impacts will manage this evaluation, supported by an internal advisory group of internal stakeholders. The advisory group advises on the ToR, selection, draft reports and plays an active role in the reflection stage.
PLANNING

- Request for proposals published 26 July 2019
- Deadline for submissions 15 September
- Proposal selected 22 September
- Inception report 15 November 2019
- Interim report 31 Feb 2020
- Final Report 31 March 2020

RA WILL PROVIDE

- An experienced evaluator manager to liaise with the external team throughout the assignment.
- An overview of the entire projects portfolio with key descriptors.
- Access to project documentation: proposals, reports, evaluations.
- Timely consolidated feedback to draft documents and ad hoc consultations
- Contacts with RA staff and stakeholders (for case studies)
- Logistics of the sense making workshop(s).

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

The evaluator(s) will sign an NDA. The report is for internal use only.