From Obligation to Appreciation – Selected Highlights from the Evaluation

Why was the meta-evaluation done?

Independent and objective assessment of the project or programme – evaluation – is an important part of Finland's development policy and cooperation. **Evaluations are conducted in order to learn from successes and setbacks, and the lessons learned are used for further enhancing the quality of development policy and cooperation.** Decentralised evaluations assess the projects and programmes of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) and are commissioned by the units, departments or embassies responsible for the project or programme in question. Centralised – comprehensive, policy level – evaluations are managed by the MFA's Development Evaluation Unit (EVA-11) which also commissions metaevaluations regularly. **Metaevaluations assess the quality of other evaluations and aggregate findings from them to form an overall picture of the quality of development cooperation.**

Metaevaluation consisted of three components and assessed

1. Quality of the evaluation reports and ToRs;

2. Overall quality of the development cooperation together with synthesised lessons learnt and recommendations provided by the assessed evaluation reports;

3. Use and usefulness of the evaluation reports.

In this summary, the Development Evaluation Unit highlights interesting findings and conclusions reached by the Evaluation Team.

Good quality ToR is a driver for a good quality evaluation report

About two-thirds of the ToRs are of satisfactory quality. The ToRs are strongest in displaying OECD DAC evaluation criteria followed by evaluation purpose and objectives and evaluation questions. The largest rooms for improvement are in the sections on methodology and cross-cutting objectives. The ToRs lay the foundation for the implementation of evaluations and **there was a strong link between the quality of the ToR and the evaluation report**.

Quality of evaluation reports is satisfactory or below, yet results are reliable

About half of the reports are of satisfactory quality, the rest with a need for improvement and few are inadequate. Strong parts are introduction chapters and context analysis. Then again methodological rigour, provision of high-quality, evidence-based findings, appropriate capturing of OECD DAC criteria (particularly coherence, sustainability, and efficiency) need improvements. Yet, **overall evaluation reports are somewhat reliable**. Many evaluation results are grounded on adequate context analyses and comprehensive data collection, while developed recommendations and conclusions seem to be plausible.

METHODOLOGY ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶ CONCLUSIONS ▶▶▶▶ RECOMMENDATIONS
3 components

Replication of 2017 meta-evaluation

Component 1:
80 Methodological quality assessments
- Standardised assessment
- Aggregation to aspects and overall report quality
- Statistical analysis

〰〰〰 **MINIMUM REPORT QUALITY THRESHOLD** 〰〰〰

Component 2:
Content assessment of 72 evaluation reports
- Transferring evaluators' assessments on OECD DAC criteria and CCOs
- Standardised aggregation and statistical analysis
- Qualitative synthesis of evaluators' lessons and recommendations

New features of recent meta-evaluation

Component 3:
Use and usefulness assessment
- 119 survey responses and 26 interviews (MFA staff and intervention implementers)
- Descriptive analysis, qualitative content analysis, triangulation

Component 1:
Dynamic methodological quality assessment
- Acknowledging increased evaluation standards in an additional report quality score

Comparison:
(recent vs. previous meta-evaluation)
- Comparison of replicated quality scores.
- Comparison of dynamic quality score with replicated quality score

"Methodological quality of decentralised evaluation reports"

"Quality of Finnish development cooperation"

"Usefulness of decentralised evaluations"

R1
On quality, use and usefulness of evaluation reports

R2
To improve quality of Finnish development cooperation

R3
For future meta-evaluations

Methodology of the metaevaluation at glance

Evaluation guidelines are in place but not applied

The vast majority of reports are constrained in the areas of methodological rigour, provision of high-quality, evidence-based findings, appropriate capturing of OECD DAC criteria and adequate consideration of cross-cutting objectives (CCOs) and human rights based approach (HRBA), although the MFA has in place guidelines to support planning and implementation of evaluations. There is thus an evaluation capacity gap and the **MFA does often not enforce compliance with its guidelines**.

Quality of the development cooperation is strongest on relevance, efficiency and effectiveness...

The overall quality assessment of development cooperation disclosed that almost all interventions assessed are of high or moderate relevance. Roughly two-thirds of the interventions are at least moderately effective and efficient.

... yet sustainability, coherence and impact are limited

Nearly two-thirds of the interventions assessed reveal limited or low sustainability, and nearly half of the interventions limited or low coherence and impact. This is comparable to the earlier meta evaluation. However, data availability on impact and coherence poses a limitation on sample representativeness of results.

Policy priorities, cross-cutting objectives or management are not well reflected

CCOs and HRBA are neither assessed by the evaluators nor – if assessed – generally mainstreamed in Finnish development cooperation. **Gender equality is bet-**ter mainstreamed than other CCOs** and HRBA but there is widespread neglect of non-discrimination, climate sustainability and HRBA. Thus, **Finnish Development Policy priorities are not yet fully reflected in Finnish bi-, multi- and multi-bilateral interventions**.

Most interventions still lack a functioning monitoring and evaluation system. Moreover, planning, sustainability, coherence management, financial aspects and capacity development remain areas for improvement. In line with the previous meta-evaluation, the MFA is still confronted with major issues impacting interventions' quality and evaluability.

Most evaluations are found useful

A large majority of the evaluations are satisfactory or very useful. Timing of the evaluations, as well as timeliness of formal and informal results delivery have been good. The same holds true for the relevance of recommendations, the extent of recommendations being realistic, the learnings from the evaluation, and the implementation of recommendations.

... but dissemination and learning are still a challenge

The MFA staff frequently pointed to the usefulness of decentralised evaluations for their own work but mentioned challenges to spread gained knowledge among colleagues. **Insights from decentralised evaluations are not systematically exploited for organisational learning.** In contrast, in the absence of a functional institutional knowledge management system inside MFA, they remain at an individual level or, even worse, get lost due to staff rotation. There is thus room to enhance the usage beyond individuals and to avoid spending money on evaluations of little usefulness.

CONCLUSIONS

COMPONENT 2
Summative analysis of the quality of interventions
(EQ5, EQ6, EQ7, EQ8 & EQ9)

C4: OECD DAC criteria sustainability and coherence leave room for improvement.

C5: Finland's Development Policy on CCOs is not fully reflected in its interventions.

C6: Evaluators' recommendations points to continuing areas for improvement for MFA.

COMPONENT 1
Methodological QA of evaluation reports and ToRs
(EQ2, EQ3 & EQ4)

C1: Enforcement gap inside MFA result in weak evaluation reports.

C2: Evaluation capacity inside MFA is still constrained.

C3: MFA is at risk to fall behind attained quality level.

COMPONENT 3
Use and usefulness assessment of the evaluations
(EQ10, EQ11 & EQ12)

C7: Evaluation reports are often used, but room to enhance usage remains.

C8: Usefulness of evaluation reports is often limited to the individual level.

C9: Exploiting MFA's sphere of influence would enhance the usefulness of its evaluations.

LIMITATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve quality of Finnish development cooperation

R2.1 Pay stronger attention to sustainability, coherence, and impact, as well as to CCOs and HRBA.

R2.2 Translate lessons learnt and recommendations provided by evaluators into action.

On quality, use and usefulness of evaluation reports

R1.1 Enforce compliance with guidelines inside MFA for better ToRs.

R1.2 Establish a quality assurance process inside MFA to enforce evaluators' compliance with manual, guidelines, and ToR outside MFA.

R1.3 Improve knowledge management inside MFA to foster organisational learning and enhance usefulness of evaluations.

R1.4 Continue further evaluation capacity development for all stakeholders inside and outside MFA on focused topics.

R1.5 Use facilitating factors identified in this meta-evaluation like appropriate ToRs, follow-up of management response as an entry point to enhance use and usefulness of evaluations.

For future meta-evaluations

R3.1 Set-up an inventory of interventions and evaluations to assess sample representativeness and save resources for future meta-evaluations.

R3.2 Introduce digitised feedback sheets on evaluations for MFA staff, intervention implementers, and evaluators to gain continuous insights on use and usefulness and enhance data quality.

R3.3 Ensure sufficient resourcing of future meta-evaluations & replicating the methodology to gain the best evidence for future learning and systematic review.

Conclusions and recommendations at glance

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

For the full evaluation report, see MFA's website.