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DEVELOPING OECD DAC GUIDANCE ON EVALUATING IN SETTINGS OF VIOLENT CONFLICT AND FRAGILITY

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Keywords: peacebuilding evaluation, development evaluation, OECD DAC, foreign aid, fragility, aid effectiveness

Introduction

Recognising the need for improved learning and accountability in settings of violent conflict and state fragility, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD's) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) launched an initiative to develop evaluation guidance in 2004/2005. Two of the DAC's specialised networks, working on evaluation and on conflict, joined forces to take this work forward. Draft guidance was published in 2007 and used for evaluations in different conflict settings. Drawing on these practical experiences, the guidance was further developed and finalised in 2012. It aims to strengthen evaluation practice and support the community of donors, country partners and implementing organisations to improve the results of peacebuilding support. This article looks at the process of developing the guidance and explores some of the lessons emerging from that experience. It highlights the collaborative nature of the process, which presented both challenges and strengths, as well as the value of an extended pilot phase.

The Need for Better Evaluation in Conflict Settings

The impetus for developing guidance came from donors in the Conflict Prevention and Development Co-operation (CPDC) network, a sub-committee of the DAC made up of policy experts working on conflict in the context of development cooperation. This group identified a number of weaknesses around learning and accountability in the diverse fields of development cooperation related to peace and conflict. There was widespread agreement that, despite new clarity on the links between conflict and poverty reduction and guidance on how donors could support peace, the analysis of implementation and results remained weak and there was little systematic learning from experience. While early work of the DAC CPDC recognised that 'effective systems monitoring and evaluation can help ensure positive results', the actual implementation of evaluative analysis seemed to be lagging.

Results in countries affected by violence and state fragility were also considered disappointing. Particularly as spending was scaled up in the post-2001 period, results were seen as not commensurate with the overall investment of international and national stakeholders. In 2004, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation commissioned the Joint Utstein Peacebuilding study (Smith 2004). The report looked at 336 peacebuilding projects and found that a major strategic deficit existed between the articulation of policy and efforts to translate this policy into practice. For example, more than half of the projects identified did not show any link to a broader strategy for the country in which they were implemented. The report highlighted the dearth of rigorous evaluations in the fields of peace and conflict prevention.

Shortly after the release of the Utstein study, the CPDC, which had also been working on evaluation, approached the DAC's Network on Development Evaluation (EVALNET) for support with tackling evaluation challenges, and collaboration between the two communities began. The group had identified a number of evaluation challenges — notably around selecting suitable indicators, dealing with attribution, understanding complexity and linking smaller projects with broader peacebuilding processes. Coupled with these concerns, various practical and methodological challenges make evaluating these types of programmes difficult. Data are scarce, objectives frequently ill-defined and the logic underpinning interventions often murky — to name just a few of the barriers to evaluation in conflict settings.¹ A first meeting was held in Oslo in 2005, where it was decided to develop DAC guidance.

This collaborative initiative hoped to tackle some of the methodological issues facing evaluators, who were increasingly called to assess the effectiveness and results of conflict-related interventions. It was also an attempt to address the broader strategic gap identified in conflict prevention and peacebuilding (Smith 2004; OECD & CDA 2007). It was hoped that better understanding and use of evaluation would provide much-needed hard evidence about the role of development cooperation in transforming conflict and enabling development in settings of state fragility.

A Collaborative Approach to Improving Practice

The cross-community dimension of this work has been a unique strength, and perhaps also the largest challenge, of the process of developing the guidance. The guidance is the result of several years of collaboration between the peacebuilding and evaluation communities, primarily within the two DAC networks EVALNET

and CPDC. The guidance targeted diverse stakeholders: supporting improved evaluation knowledge among those working on conflict and peacebuilding, and helping evaluators better understand the particularities of working in these fields.

Early on in the process it became clear that there was a need for greater clarity of concepts as evaluators asked members of the CPDC, 'What is it that you want to evaluate?' Over the course of several workshops in 2005–2008 representatives of development agencies and foreign ministries, outside experts and developing country partners met to discuss challenges and work towards a consensus on what kinds of interventions would be covered by the guidance. This involved developing a concept of what constituted peacebuilding and conflict prevention and, therefore, what kinds of activities would use the proposed evaluation approach. Much of the confusion reflected the fact that these were relatively new, fast-evolving fields of research, policy and practice, and definitions had not yet been established.

From the outset, the two communities debated whether or not evaluation approaches for conflict prevention and peacebuilding were really 'different' from other types of complex evaluation. Many of the challenges identified as 'unique' by peacebuilding experts (such as missing baseline data or difficulties attributing society-level impacts to individual projects) were very familiar to evaluators — many of whom argued that the CPDC should simply use existing tools. In the end, it was generally accepted that there were enough particularities to warrant a specialised approach. This decision reflected what would become a core position of the International Network on Conflict and Fragility (INCAF — the successor to the CPDC), namely, that fragile states require a specialised approach (OECD DAC & NORAD 2011). On the part of peacebuilding practitioners, some viewed evaluation as limiting — unable to capture the complexity and

value of their work. And yet they hoped it would provide stronger evidence that what they were doing mattered. The process of developing the guidance was thus not just about drafting a document, but about building bridges with shared understanding to enable both parts of the collaboration to contribute to and benefit from the work.

There was also much debate on how to distinguish between working 'in' and working 'on' conflict, that is, between conflict sensitivity and effectively transforming conflict. In the context of development cooperation this raised the question of how activities with primarily humanitarian or development objectives would be treated, and whether or not they should be judged using DAC evaluation criteria — efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, relevance and impact — as these relate specifically to broader peace objectives. Clarity emerged on this question during the testing phase, described below.

Shortly after the draft guidance was published, a process began in the DAC to bring together work on conflict prevention and fragile states. CPDC was merged with the Fragile States Group to become the DAC INCAF. This reflected the growing consensus in development circles that statebuilding and peacebuilding processes must be dealt with concurrently. As understandings of good practice in these fields continued to emerge and policy guidance was better established, concern over definitions faded. In the meantime, the group developing operational evaluation guidance reached a consensus to use a working definition and four broad descriptive categories of activities: socio-economic development, good governance, the reform of security and justice institutions, and truth and reconciliation. In the 2012 guidance, even these groupings were dropped in favour of a more practical approach that encouraged use of guidance based on the context and purpose of the evaluation and its specific evaluation questions. This evolution reflects in part

that the evaluation community took a greater role during the application phase, while some of the peacebuilding practitioners, who were primarily concerned with definitional issues, disengaged. While an evaluation guidance could have no doubt been more quickly and easily produced by simply commissioning the work from an expert consultant, the consultative process was critical in producing a final product that was not only of high quality, but also valued and owned by its intended audience. By the end of the process there seemed to be a much wider common ground between the two communities: peacebuilding experts were more open to the potential benefits of rigorous evaluation and evaluators more willing to acknowledge that there were some particularities to evaluating in these fields.

Testing of the Guidance

The OECD published the draft *Guidance on Evaluating Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities* in 2008 and launched a two-year application phase to try out the approach in real conflict settings. The testing phase aimed to produce policy insights as well as feedback on the guidance, looking in particular at the applicability of the guidance to different types of evaluations, levels (country, programme, project and policy/strategic) and use by different actors and in different conflict contexts. To avoid producing evaluations purely for the sake of testing the guidance, pilots were not centrally managed and the emphasis was on commissioning evaluations based on the demands of donors and country partners. Stakeholders were encouraged to use the draft and feedback on their experiences via an online survey. Uptake was widespread, the draft guidance being used by programme managers, embassy staff, training institutions, evaluation managers, and researchers.

It was employed for major joint evaluations in Sudan (Bennett et al. 2010),

Sri Lanka (Chapman et al. 2009) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Brusset et al. 2011). These multi-donor assessments looked at over a decade of support to peacebuilding and statebuilding processes. Norway's evaluation department used the draft to assess the Norwegian contribution to peace in Haiti (Norad Evaluation Department 2009) and Sri Lanka (Norad Evaluation Department 2011). The Swedish military commissioned an evaluation of its Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan. At the same time, the European Commission began a review of its peacebuilding portfolio. Germany looked at the impact of aid in Afghanistan (Böhnke et al. 2010) and evaluated its civil peace service programme (Paffenholz et al. 2011). A variety of implementing NGOs used the guidance to evaluate individual projects.

In February 2011 Norway hosted a workshop to review these experiences.² This event demonstrated that, while many challenges remain, quality evaluation can provide useful insights to improve donor support to peacebuilding and statebuilding processes.³

The body of evidence and policy lessons were widely shared, including at INCAF meetings, to encourage further discussion and debate.⁴ Country findings were taken up by donors, implementing partners and recipient governments, and commissioning agencies followed up on specific evaluation findings internally. For example, Canada issued a management response to the multi-donor evaluation in Southern Sudan (OECD 2012). Norway's evaluation of peacebuilding in Sri Lanka was launched with a public debate in Oslo and covered by the Sri Lankan press (Goodhand et al. Forthcoming). The application phase was also critical in building ownership of the final product and supporting development of an active, engaged community of practice working on evaluating peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions. This was seen at the Oslo workshop, which brought

together diverse practitioners and policy experts in a constructive, collegial atmosphere.

Throughout the application phase, concerns about the balance between ownership and independence were debated, particularly around involving national and local stateholders — a core tenant of development evaluation. In Sudan the steering committee was co-chaired by the Ministry of Finance of the Government of Southern Sudan and the Evaluation Department of the Netherlands Foreign Ministry. The Congo evaluation involved local communities in conflict analysis. Such experiences usefully demonstrated that participation of partners is feasible, even in the difficult circumstances of violent conflict. But such involvement was problematic elsewhere and sometimes led to accusations of bias. Here the differing views of the peacebuilding and evaluation communities could be seen. For example, when the joint evaluation in Sri Lanka was finalised, peacebuilding experts emphasised its usefulness for in-country discussions, while some evaluators were concerned about the perceived credibility of the evaluation.

At the end of the application phase, it was clear that the guidance had made a number of useful contributions to the field, namely, by bringing greater clarity to key concepts, introducing the use of theories of change as a core pillar for evaluating peace support, describing the use of conflict analysis (in both programming and evaluation), and adapting evaluation criteria to the context of peacebuilding. Users pointed out, however, that the links between these different pieces were not clear. There was also a sense that expectations were too high, in terms of what an individual evaluation could cover and for evaluation producing definitive evidence on 'what works' across incredibly diverse conflict contexts.

These lessons were incorporated into a revised guidance. The final guidance was

less prescriptive, reflecting maturation in the field over time. The document more clearly acknowledges the difficult realities faced by evaluators and at the same time points to the untapped potential of existing research methods. Importantly, it underlines the possibility of maintaining evaluation quality even in conflict settings.

Moving the Agenda Forward

The final guidance was officially launched on 27 November 2012 at a reception hosted by Norway at the OECD in Paris. It provides step-by-step guidance to evaluation and basic principles on good programme design and management.

The guidance should contribute to more and better evaluation and support a more evaluative approach to peacebuilding and statebuilding support — one that encourages critical reflection, strategic thinking and collective learning, and does not hesitate to question untested assumptions about the links between aid, conflict, statebuilding and development. Evaluation is not a substitute for good analysis, solid programme design and strategic management, but should be part of ongoing peacebuilding work, including implementation of the 'New Deal' and agreement on peacebuilding and statebuilding goals with the g7+ fragile states group.

By no means does the guidance solve all of the myriad problems faced when evaluating in settings of conflict and fragility. Data are still often missing and problems of low evaluability and the disconnect between strategic objectives and actual aid allocations seem to remain. Further experience would be useful specifically on using theories of change to evaluate conflict-wide strategies and in thematic (cross-country) evaluations.

The guidance should therefore be seen not as an end itself, but as an input to further experimentation and learning. To support this ongoing development, the DAC

Evaluation Network partnered with Search for Common Ground's Learning Portal for Design, Monitoring & Evaluation for Peacebuilding to create an online discussion (<http://www.dmeforpeace.org>). Readers are encouraged to participate and to share their own work and experiences.

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Endnotes

¹ Challenges have been discussed extensively elsewhere, for example: Smith 2004; OECD & CDA 2007.

² Workshop proceedings: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/dcdndep/workshoponevaluatingconflictpreventionandpeacebuildingwhathavewelearned.htm>

³ OECD DAC and NORAD (2011) summarise lessons from this phase.

⁴ See Kennedy-Chouane 2011.

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