

GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATION IN AUSTRIA'S OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Introduction

The present paper sets out to formulate the fundamental rules governing the evaluation of Austrian ODA. It seeks to establish consistent quality standards and unequivocal definitions of fields of competence and responsibility within a decentralised, work-sharing system. The guidelines have been kept as concise as possible in order not to impede the evaluation process through bureaucratic elaboration. At the same time, such guidelines can be of benefit only if they are rigorously applied in a practical context.

1. The concept and objectives of evaluation

Evaluation denotes the assessment of a project or a programme (or of an instrument of implementation or an institution) with the greatest possible degree of thoroughness and objectivity. The assessment will critically examine the planning, implementation and results in the light of criteria pertaining to development policy goals and the particular area concerned. This comprehensive evaluation process will generally conclude the project or programme cycle, following upon the preparatory and implementation stages. However, the evaluation may also take place before the implementation phase (*ex ante*) or at an important intermediate stage (*interim*), for instance if the project or programme is extended or enlarged. Evaluation is a standard component of project and programme cycle management, so that the general rule applies: "No project or programme without evaluation". The form which the evaluation takes (self-evaluation, internal or external evaluation) and its extent should obviously be gauged to the nature of the project or programme.

Monitoring denotes the continuous or periodic observation and analysis of the progress of a project or programme in terms of the scheduled utilisation of the available resources, the realisation of the planned activities, and the attainment of the defined objectives and results. A project or programme is monitored by means of the requisite information systems, reporting procedures and periodic reviews and this provides much of the groundwork for effective evaluation.

A key factor in the efficiency of the evaluation process – and this holds true for development cooperation as a whole – is the degree to which the needs, attitudes, aims and capacity for independent action of the cooperation partner (partner government or organisation) are taken into account. Because the optimised utilisation of scarce resources, responsible management and the fostering of a systematic culture of learning and evaluating are in the interests of both partners, the evaluation process should seek to be as **cooperative and participative** as possible. The partner government's responsibility within the development process entails its ability to assume an independent role in regulating, monitoring and evaluating the utilisation of its own and external (donor) resources in accordance with the principles of transparency and good governance.

There are three distinct objectives to evaluation. These address corresponding groups of players both in Austria and the recipient country and within the international community (of donor nations):

- 1) **Learning from experience:** operational management and participants
- 2) **Assuming responsibility:** towards parliament and the public
- 3) **Deepening understanding:** operational management, participants, experts, the public

Evaluation is intended to promote **communication and understanding** between all the concerned groups, although the depth and degree of involvement will vary from group to group. It should also pave the way for the various regulatory and management levels to conduct an intensive exchange of views going beyond the scope of everyday attitudes and experience.

Development sets out to bring about innovative, qualitative changes within a given social context – changes which may often produce unforeseeable effects. Setbacks and failures are thus systemic, inevitable features of ODA endeavours. Evaluation analyses such setbacks and failures as a means of encouraging a dynamic learning-by-doing process and hence of effecting the corresponding improvements in current and future projects, programmes and instruments. In this way, evaluation can provide the **groundwork for decision-making** at both management and political levels.

Evaluation enhances **transparency** outwardly and internally but also vertically. Moreover, it clarifies the structures of **responsibility** for the utilisation of the available resources, for the results and for the effects of interventions. This responsibility involves answerability not only to the client (being, finally, parliament and the public), but also to the partner organisations and the target group in the recipient country.

Evaluation also serves as a means to enlarge **knowledge and understanding** of the potential scope but also the limitations of ODA. It thus helps to promote information and communication relating to ODA.

Evaluation takes the form of a **process**, combining external expertise and assessment with the considered views of the stakeholders and the target group, to generate a new perception and a commitment on continued cooperation. Evaluation enhances the dialogue and co-operation between partner organisations and stakeholders.

One key criterion in the choice of the form and methods which evaluation should take is provided by a clear **definition and delineation** of the areas of inquiry, the subject and purpose of the evaluation, and the parties involved. In practice, evaluation cannot lend equal weight to every quality aspect, and it is necessary to establish priorities. This also accounts for the wide diversity of evaluation activities provided for within a single annual programme of the Evaluation Unit.

2. Quality criteria and cross-cutting issues in development cooperation

The following quality criteria provide an assessment basis at every major decision-making stage in the project/programme cycle (proposal – application, contract – report, progress analysis – evaluation). The subjects of the assessment are the planning, the realisation and implementation, and then the results and follow-up effects. One key quality factor in a project or programme but also in the evaluation itself is a gender-sensitive approach to each of the criteria.

Compliance with the fundamental principles of Austria's development cooperation policy – i.e. poverty reduction, promotion of democracy and human rights, gender equality, respect for the cultural and natural environment – and with the corresponding strategic goals and programmes (cf. objectives of intervention and strategies of Austrian ODA):

- To what extent does a given programme or project comply with the above fundamental principles?
- To what extent has the intervention been gauged to the relevant sector policy and country programme? Have special strategies and instruments relating to Austria's ODA been taken into account?
- To what extent have the objectives and instruments relating to the cross-cutting issues been taken into account?
- To what extent are compliance and coordination with other policy requirements of the international donor community ensured?

The **relevance** or commensurateness of the intervention in terms of the pertaining local and national needs and priorities (comparison of results with immediate and longer-term objectives):

- How important is the intervention for the target group and subgroups (e.g. women) and to what extent does it address their needs and interests?
- To what extent does the intervention comply with the development policy and planning of the recipient country and/or the partner government?

Participation and shared **responsibility**:

- To what degree do strategy and decision-making empower the parties involved (target group, beneficiaries, persons affected)?

- To what extent does the intervention provide for local project/programme management and/or building the corresponding local capacities and institutions?

The **impact** or consequences of the intervention in terms of the overall situation of the target group / persons affected:

- The positive and negative consequences, intended and unforeseen consequences
- The technical, economic, social, cultural, political and ecological impact – broken down by gender or by other relevant social categories like ethnicity.

The **sustainability** or long-term effectiveness of the intervention and its consequences:

- How long will the activities, results and effects be sustained after the donor intervention has come to an end?
- To what extent does the intervention take account of those factors which experience has shown to be of key importance in sustainability?
- How sustainable is the local (partner) institution receiving support?

The **effectiveness** of the project or programme in terms of its defined objectives (comparison result : aim):

- To what extent will the intervention's objectives (probably) be met?
- To what extent does the intervention reach the target group?

Generally speaking, in any consideration of the target group it is important to break it down by gender and to collect and provide the relevant data.

The **efficiency** of resource utilisation (comparison resources : results):

- Are the resources involved commensurate with the results achieved? What is the actual cost-benefit ratio?
- How economically are the various resources being utilised?
- Are there alternative approaches which would involve lower costs / fewer resources but achieve the same results?

3. Quality requirements in evaluation

The greatest possible degree of **objectivity and impartiality** is necessary at every stage of the evaluation process. A clear distinction needs to be made between, on the one hand, ascertaining the facts using the most expedient method available, and on the other hand carrying out assessments. A judicious appraisal will take into account differences in perceptions and will seek to achieve a careful balance in describing weaknesses and strengths. Conclusions and results must be presented in conjunction with the supporting arguments and evidence. One factor in **credibility** is the evaluators' **independence** with regard to all of the persons operationally involved, and their professional competence in terms of the subject at hand and the purpose of the evaluation.

The **Terms of Reference** (ToR) must be clearly defined: description of the initial status based on the project documentation, objectives of the evaluation, key questions, methodical approach, the qualifications of the evaluation team, and the format of the report (cf. Standard ToR and Format of the Evaluation Report).

The **quality** of the evaluation depends largely on the following factors: the standard of programming, the contents of the project contracts and the project documentation in the preceding stages of the management cycle; the extent to which the documentation defines the targets, results, assumptions and indicators and monitors and protocols these on a regular basis; the extent to which **basic data** (broken down on a gender basis) on the initial status and the social background conditions are available and are collected and/or updated throughout the project cycle.

The evaluation should be conducted in as **transparent and participative** a manner as possible. This requires notification of the evaluation in good time, making the ToR known and holding consultations on them, allowing the greatest possible scope for participation, and discussing the results with everybody involved. In priority and cooperation countries, the decision on the evaluation of projects and programmes carried out jointly with the government should be made in conjunction with government representatives. The formulation of the ToR, the selection and contracting of experts and the decision on how to deal with the evaluation results should be carried out in consultation with the partner country.

For all evaluations, it is important to contract the services of **locally recruited experts** and/or institutions and to enable them to participate in the evaluation on a truly equal footing. The reason for this is in part because locally recruited experts can contribute a different perception and approach but also because their involvement helps to build local capacities.

The **benefit** of an evaluation will depend not only on the active participation of all the main players and partners but also on the careful timing of the evaluation with regard of the project stages and the status of the decision-making process. To maximise standards of efficiency, it is also necessary to keep the outlay (of time and financial resources) within a reasonable ratio to the benefit (value added) of the evaluation and to the project's dimensions (around 3-5% of the total volume). Finally, the assessments and conclusions produced by the evaluators should be fine-tuned to elaborate recommendations which are practically applicable by those in charge.

In organisational terms, clear lines of responsibility for the follow-up are needed to ensure the **feed-back** to the political and operational decision-makers. It is accepted practice that, in the case of both internal and external evaluations, those whom the various recommendations concern should have the opportunity to voice their views on their implementation and should draw up a binding agreement with the coordination office and/or the country and sector desk. Special care must be taken here to allow for and encourage the responsibility and autonomy of the partner organisation.

Results of evaluations are generally made available to a specialist public but also to the general public.

4. Roles and responsibilities

Far from being an ad hoc procedure, evaluation requires longer-term **planning**. The selection of strategically important evaluations should reflect a balanced mix of key objectives, issues, intervention areas, implementing agencies, forms and instruments. The Evaluation Unit is responsible for carrying out the annual planning. After consultations conducted with the operational department and the coordination offices, designed to dovetail bilateral evaluation projects, an **Annual Plan** listing all the evaluations financed by the Evaluation Unit becomes binding once it is approved by the Department's management.

Evaluation can only work on the basis of **networking** and **cooperation** of all the parties involved in the project cycle. Apart from formulating binding principles, initiating and implementing evaluations in a practical context, and regulating the evaluation processes, the Evaluation Unit plays a coordinating role. This also involves it in participating in the international debate on evaluation-related issues and in integrating the binding standards which emerge from this debate in the project cycle of Austria's ODA.

Questions like **joint evaluations** with partner governments or organisations, or with other on-site donors, the most expedient juncture for evaluation (ex-ante, ex-post or interim evaluation), or the ideal mix of monitoring, controlling and evaluation, play an important role in this discussion.

With a view to promoting quality assurance, discussion will be held on **strategic and fundamental principles** of ODA at the instigation and with the participation of the Evaluation Unit. These discussions will cover not just an analysis of the current status of country, sector and cross-cutting programmes but also a consideration of the question of retaining or reselecting priority countries and regions, of cooperation with multilateral organisations, and a review of UN and DAC recommendations for the project cycle.

5. Organisational streamlining

The Evaluation Unit has compiled a (computerised) **manual** to assist in the organisational application of the principles laid out in the guidelines. The purpose of this manual, which will also contain the corresponding standard formats, is to make evaluation a readily manageable and effective tool available to ODA.

Wherever possible, the Evaluation Unit provides the **infrastructure and contacts** required for conducting evaluations. The Austrian Foundation for Development Research (ÖFSE) is compiling documentation which will include not only Austrian evaluation reports but also reports by other donors. The Unit will also draw attention to reports and other relevant information available on websites. An **annual event** on a central evaluation-related topic

will be held for personnel working in the field of bilateral development cooperation (Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implementing agencies). The Evaluation Working Group will decide on the topic and the dates.

Invitations to **presentations of evaluation reports** within the Ministry are regularly sent out to all desk officers and consultants.

LEVEL	TYPE	RESPONSIBILITY	BUDGET	APPROVAL	DISTRIBUTION
PROJECT	Internal evaluation with or without external experts	Implementing Organisation	Project	Project Agreement ToR/CV to VII/6	Finalised documentation in report
	External evaluation Type II	Coordinating Office and Desk	Project	Project Agreement ToR/CV to VII/6	Finalised documentation in report
	External evaluation Type I	VII/6	VII/6	Annual Programme VII.6 Head of Department	Coordinating Office Department Implementing Agency
PARTIAL PROGRAMME COUNTRY PROGRAMME	Internal evaluation (programme progress analysis)	Coordinating Office and Desk VII/6	Coordinating Office VII/6	Annual Programme VII.6 Head of Department	Evaluation report to: Partners, Department
	External evaluation Type I	VII/6	VII/6		
SECTOR POLICY TOPIC INSTRUMENT STRATEGY	External evaluation Type I	VII/6	VII/6	Annual Programme VII.6 Head of Department	Evaluation report to: Implementing Agency, Partners, Department
EVALUATION OF THE EVALUATION	Internal evaluation	VII/6	VII/6	Head of Department	Evaluation report to: Department and Cabinet of Minister
	External evaluation Type I	Head of Department	VII/6		
ANNUAL PLANNING ANNUAL REPORT	All external evaluations	VII/6	VII/6	Head of Department	Department Cabinet of Minister, Inspectorate General