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## Evaluation of Danish development assistance – experiences and new approaches

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Danida is in the process of rethinking its results and learning culture. Evaluations will play an important role in this as a source for capturing results to aid interventions on outcome and impact level. The main focus will be on strengthening the evaluability of Danish aid programmes through systematic use of theory of change to describe the contribution stories or the intervention logics, causalities, and expected results and verify these through an improved evidence base created by the programme's M&E systems. In addition, real-time evaluations will be piloted to improve the timeliness and feedback of evaluation information to aid implementation. The new approaches will, over time, enable Danida to even better document results and strengthen evidence for better future programming. The evaluation department will be working closely with operational units in bringing about these changes.

**Keywords:** Danida evaluation; theory of change; outcome and impact results; real-time evaluation

### 1. The context and its implications for Danida evaluations

Denmark has a long history of providing substantial development assistance of high quality (OECD 2011b). In the current environment of fiscal austerity and increasing strains on public funds, there are growing demands for development results from politicians and the public. In addition, the expectations as to what development aid can deliver in terms of results are very high. In addition to poverty reduction, they include democracy and human rights, combatting climate change, security, and stability at home and abroad, and more recently economic growth and employment, also in the donor countries. Aid agencies have themselves played a significant role in raising such expectations through policies and strategies.

These expectations and demands add to the already complex environment in which assistance is delivered and impacts have to be assessed, measured, and verified. It is long recognised that aid works in combination with other development drivers, such as trade, the private sector, the government's own resources, and that success to a large extent depend on the political economy and the political processes in a given country. Financial assistance also seldom comes alone – it comes with policy advice and capacity development that may be of equal importance to the success of the intervention.

The Paris, Accra, and Busan Declarations on aid effectiveness (OECD 2005/2008, 2011a), to which Denmark strongly adheres, call for a strong partnership between the donors and the recipients of aid. Aid is ideally delivered through government budgets using budget and sector budget support modalities, local partners of all sorts, or in the

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case of fragile states through multi-donor arrangements or multilateral agencies. This presents new challenges for evaluators – but at the same time, new opportunities for involving and capacitating partners in evaluations, and it fosters recipient country’s ownership and commitment to measure results of development processes.

For evaluators, it implies that evaluations are increasingly more complex and must be able to deliver results at different levels. High-end results will seldom be the outcome of a single intervention: for example, a democratisation process will most likely be the result of many different and mutually supporting processes and interventions covering different instruments and many different partners. Results at that level need to be complemented with results at lower levels, providing the building blocks of evidence that can actually verify how the higher level outcome and impact came about. For development practitioners, it continues to be of great value to have more knowledge and evidence of what works and what does not work and understand causal linkages at all levels. Evaluators must respond to both types of demands.

In the light of the above, the debate over attribution and contribution is of limited relevance for a bilateral donor like Denmark. Today, we are mainly talking about contributions, realising the complexity of the world in which development aid operates and the difficulties associated with isolating the impact of one intervention from the other processes that impact on the very complex issues we are trying to address through development assistance. However, as evaluators, we will still continue to look for attributions, where they may appear, also as an input to understanding causalities at lower levels.

In this situation, the best development practitioners can do to respond to the demands for development results is base programming on theories of change that provides plausible links between the input that is provided and the outcome and impact sought for, and that these theories of change are tested on a regular basis during implementation to ensure that assumptions are dealt with and risks mitigated.

Going forward, the main focus for Danida evaluations will be to assess and to verify the contribution logic – explaining the causality between the inputs and the impacts (the contribution pathways) – and the overall results that Denmark has contributed to achieving (the contribution story). In addition, evaluations should increasingly also address learning aspects through a strong focus on ‘how did it work?’, ‘would it work elsewhere and/or on a larger scale?’, ‘who did it work for’ and ‘could it work better?’

Hence, evaluation of development aid, including its impacts, in the Danish context is understood as follows<sup>1</sup>:

- evaluation of the positive and negative immediate long-term effects resulting from an intervention on final beneficiaries and/or global development challenges;
- assessing the direct and indirect causal contributions of an intervention to such effects; and
- explaining how this effect came about so that lessons can be learned.

This definition tallies with the OECD–DAC definition of evaluation with its focus on the long-term impact produced by an intervention and it stresses the learning aspect of evaluations in addition to accountability.

Danida’s approach to selection of evaluation methodology will be content-led, taking as a starting point the questions that need answering rather than trying to apply a specific methodology. Within this overall approach, we will use available evaluation designs and methods, be they qualitative or quantitative, which can best evaluate the outcomes and

impacts of an intervention. We do recognise the importance of experimental methods, but we also realise that presently Danish aid interventions can only rarely be subject to such methods as baselines and systematic monitoring of data are often lacking. But where it is possible, it will be done as was the case with an evaluation of the impact of farmer fields' schools in Bangladesh (Orbicon A/S 2011).

## **2. The situation today: where are we?**

The policy and mandate of Danida evaluations are outlined in the Danida Evaluation Guidelines (Danida International Development Cooperation 2012). The purpose of evaluation is twofold: First, evaluation is one of the several instruments holding the Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Danida accountable for the choices and actions taken to meet the objectives of Danish development cooperation; and second, but of equal importance, evaluations should facilitate learning about development cooperation and assess whether context-specific lessons are applicable on a broader scale. In general, the evaluation practice adheres to principles of openness, strong ethics on integrity and honesty, code of conduct on independence, impartiality and credibility, mutual accountability with partners, coordination and alignment, and ensuring quality in accordance with OECD–DAC Quality Standards (OECD 1991, 2010).

The Danida Evaluation Department is an integrated, but independent, part of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Evaluation Department refers directly to the Minister for Trade and Development through the State Secretary for Development. With regular intervals, there is a public discussion about the independence and impartiality of the Evaluation Department. Until now, it has been felt that the existing structure gives the right balance between distance from operations on the one hand and sufficient proximity to ensure uptake and learning from evaluations on the other. Annually, the staff consisting of four professionals and support personnel manages 6–8 major evaluations and several minor evaluation studies and systematic reviews, which are available on our website ([http://um.dk/en/danida-en/results/eval/eval\\_reports/evaluations/](http://um.dk/en/danida-en/results/eval/eval_reports/evaluations/)). In addition, the Evaluation Department contributes with insights and evidence as part of the peer review of aid programmes under preparation.

Evaluation of the entire portfolio of Danish development aid is under the mandate of the Evaluation Department. In most years, around 8–10 per cent of the annual Danish bilateral development aid budget is evaluated. The intention is over a span of years to cover the entire portfolio. In 2014 – in recognition of the interlinkages of aid and other instruments – evaluations going beyond the traditional aid instruments have been initiated also covering defence funds as part of the evaluation of the Danish Peace and Stabilisation Fund and climate change funds as part of the evaluation of the Danish climate change funding to developing countries.

With regards to development assistance channelled through multilateral organisations, the policy is to support the development of evaluation capacity in the various organisations. However, support through multilateral organisations may be evaluated as part of evaluations of policies or cross-cutting issues, for example, Danish support for global programmes and cross-cutting issues like sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The annual evaluation programme is prepared by the Evaluation Department in close consultation with Danida management and operations (country departments, bi- and multilateral representations). It is also consulted publicly as well as being discussed by the Council for Development Policy – an external body advising the Minister – before it is endorsed by the Minister. In the Evaluation Department, we attach great importance to

being demand responsive. We want to be able to answer questions raised by operations and the public about what works as this is seen as an important part of evaluations being useful and ensuring learning from evaluation results.

Evaluations are conducted by external consultants identified through international competitive bidding. The role of the Evaluation Department is to prepare the evaluations, including develop the Terms of Reference for the evaluation, ensure that the methodologies are adequate for the questions that needs answering, steer the process and ensure its quality, including that the evaluators have full and free access to all the information they need, perform quality assurance of the final report, host the Evaluation Reference Group with external experts, and communicate results of the independent evaluation.

### *2.1. Evaluability of Danida aid programmes*

Danida has an elaborate and standardised process for design and preparation of new programmes and projects. The process is well described in the Aid Management Guidelines website (<http://amg.um.dk/>), and throughout the design and preparation phase are the build-in quality control mechanisms in the form of peer review and appraisal. During the implementation phase, reviews are conducted to assess the implementation, and if necessary suggest changes to ensure that progress is achieved.

For the past 10 years – as a response to the aid effectiveness agenda – there has been a strong focus on alignment, harmonisation, and ownership of the partners. The consequence has been a very strong focus on partners' own capacity to develop results frameworks and monitor developments and a strong reliance on partners to deliver on the results agenda (Wood et al. 2011). First and foremost, Danida has become a manager of processes and a dialogue partner for development partners. In hindsight, the harmonisation and alignment processes have led to an over reliance on partners' capacity to design intervention logics coupled with effective monitoring and results frameworks.

Also in programmes for which Danida is responsible for implementation, there is room for improvement. Programme reporting is primarily focused on inputs and outputs. A desk review (Nygaard 2014) of the M&E frameworks of four Danida programmes internally considered to have strong M&E frameworks – two Business sector programmes and two Human Rights and Good Governance programmes – showed that even though the M&E frameworks were developed, and there were in some cases outcome and impact indicators at the programme level, very little reporting took place beyond input and output levels. Furthermore, the data collected were neither useful for learning nor management purposes as it was collected primarily with a view to documentation of programme input and output. The study also suggested that the M&E frameworks – although elaborate – did not rest on a shared understanding with the implementing partners of the intervention logic, assumptions, and risks.

The issues around M&E results frameworks and systematic data collection in particular at higher levels of outcome and impact have led to a situation where lack of data often impede evaluations from drawing conclusions as to the outcome and impact of the interventions. Evaluations have often started by reconstructing a theory of change on the basis of which the Danish contribution to a development goal is then assessed. The lack of evidence has in some instances been a contributing factor to quite low quality of the evaluations providing limited insights into the outcomes, let alone impact, of the interventions, hence limiting learning as evaluations tend to be generic in their findings. However, low quality of evaluations is also linked to other factors, including the very

complex interventions that are been evaluated demanding highly skilled and multidisciplinary evaluation teams that are difficult to come by (Andersen, [forthcoming](#)).

The need to strengthen programme preparation through the elaboration of results frameworks based on the intervention logic and strengthen monitoring with a view to improving programme implementation on a continuous basis is now widely recognised in Danida. Significant steps have been taken to remedy the situation through revision of guidelines for design and programming of country programmes and projects. This process is still underway and it will be described in greater detail below. It is important to stress that the renewed focus on results framework does not come at the expense of alignment and harmonisation. Danish assistance will continue to be aligned and results frameworks are ideally adopted from partners or are developed jointly. This also explains why there has never been an attempt to aggregate development results for Danida as an institution. Results are first and foremost seen as produced in partnerships –contributing to overall goals in countries globally.

## 2.2. *Learning from evaluations*

Uptake from evaluations is primarily ensured by a very participatory approach to conducting evaluations. In particular, there is strong focus on engaging the Danida Technical Advisory Services and the Policy Department as they are seen as prime bearers and disseminators of new knowledge in their capacity for providing advice to departments and embassies implementing assistance. In addition, embassies and departments engaged in development assistance are drawn into the evaluation processes where they are either engaged or have some interest or knowledge in order to ensure that learning takes place as part of the evaluation process itself. An example of this is the newly finalised evaluation of the Peace and Stabilisation Fund (mixed pool of funds from development and defence). As staff from Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence was about to start preparation of the next phase of programmes under the Fund, the evaluation team conducted a mid-evaluation workshop in two steps. Step one involved a presentation and discussion of the preliminary results of the evaluation, and step two involved a theory of change workshop where the programming of the next phase was initiated taking into account the preliminary findings (Coffey International, 2014). In this way, the results and learning were fed directly into the next phase. Another approach we have tested in the past year is to include a follow-up phase in the evaluation. This has been done in an evaluation of civil society, where the implementation of selected recommendations is looked into a year after the finalisation of the evaluation (INTRAC (International NGO Training and Research Centre), Tana, and Indevelop 2013).

All evaluations require a management response. After completion of the evaluation, the responsible departments/embassies produce a response where they are required to address the conclusion and the recommendations. For each recommendation, a response as to follow-up is required. The evaluation and the management response are then discussed in the internal Danida Programme Committee, and the final summary is distributed to all units engaged with the development assistance. Final evaluation reports are posted externally on the MFA website as well as internally on the Intranet of the MFA, and summaries are sent to all units involved with development assistance. Evaluations, Danish summaries, and management responses are also made public on the web and sent to stakeholders in Denmark (including the Parliament) and abroad.

The Evaluation Department has recently conducted a small survey with internal and external users and potential users of evaluations to get an understanding of how

evaluations are perceived and to get feedback with regards to the usability of evaluations (Danida 2014). Evaluations are generally seen as great tools for learning and very trustworthy. There is a strong interest in using results from evaluations provided they are relevant for the work people are doing, providing answers to pressing issues. Furthermore, there is a strong wish for more evaluations of higher quality and for promoting learning through evaluation results that can then again be used to improve new programme design.

### 3. The way forward

In the spring of 2014, Danida's top management with the backing of the responsible Minister and the external appropriation committee took genuine steps to support a renewed focus on development results and the use of evidence. A results focus is of course not a new thing for Danida, but for quite a long period, this focus has been diluted by other priorities including a very strong priority attached to policy and strategy development, and a strong impetus to improve administrative efficiency through an all-encompassing LEAN process.

The Quality Assurance Department, the Technical Advisory Services, and the Evaluation Department have been tasked with developing and implementing a reinforced results culture in Danida.

A host of initiatives is being developed including:

- stronger management focus and commitment to a stronger results and evidence culture, also involving staff incentives;
- stronger focus on quality at entry – applying theories of change coupled with results frameworks and a M&E system that allows for learning as we go along, and accountability,
- strengthen monitoring through designation of results officers at representations and in departments,
- competence development, e-bites, and e-learning,
- development of real-time evaluation tools to follow implementation of Danida Country Programmes – to be tested on a pilot basis
- new initiatives to engage at partner country level to develop capacity for M&E
- new initiatives to promote uptake and learning from evaluations

The Evaluation Department is keenly interested in all aspects of this agenda as it will increase the relevance of evaluations, and it has the potential to lead to better development assistance. The Department will primarily engage in the following aspects with a direct link to improving the basis for evaluation and hence for collecting evidence and results:

#### 3.1. *Quality at entry – systematic use of Theories of Change*

With a view to improving the quality of aid, the Evaluation Department will over the coming years attach increased importance to promoting the evaluability of development interventions right from the initial programming. This is seen as essential in the quest to enhance learning from evaluations.

The Theory of Change approach to designing development interventions offers opportunities for strengthening the evaluability of programmes with its focus on a clear, evidence-based intervention logic that can be tested in an evaluation. The related results

matrix allows planning and documentation of relevant development results and indicators that can guide the implementation of the programme to be used in evaluations.

The Evaluation Department will contribute to the systematic use of Theories of Change approaches to programming. The decision to restructure a substantial part of the Danish bilateral development assistance into 19 country programmes calls for policies and programmes that have a strong focus on the evaluation framework that would ensure learning and evidence uptake as programmes are being implemented, as well as rigorous summative evaluations by the end of the programme to document results to the public and provide learning for coming programmes.

### 3.2. Piloting the use of real-time evaluations

In addition to the Theory of Change Approach to enhancing evaluability, the Evaluation Department will on a pilot basis initiate real-time evaluations. We see this as an evaluation process which already in the programming phase defines an independent, external evaluation process with a firm evaluation matrix. The early definition of the evaluation matrix allows for better planning of collection of baseline and impact data within the aid programme concerned. The real-time evaluation follows the programme and regularly makes evaluation findings, preferably at the outcome and towards the end of the programme also impact level, available to the benefit of the on-going implementation thereby providing a better basis for programme adjustment. Such findings may be the result of various evaluation methods, including more rigorous methods and studies preferably in cooperation with institutions in partner countries.

The real-time evaluation differs from programme monitoring and developmental evaluations in its primary focus on the outcome and impact levels and its independence from the programme management (see Figure 1).

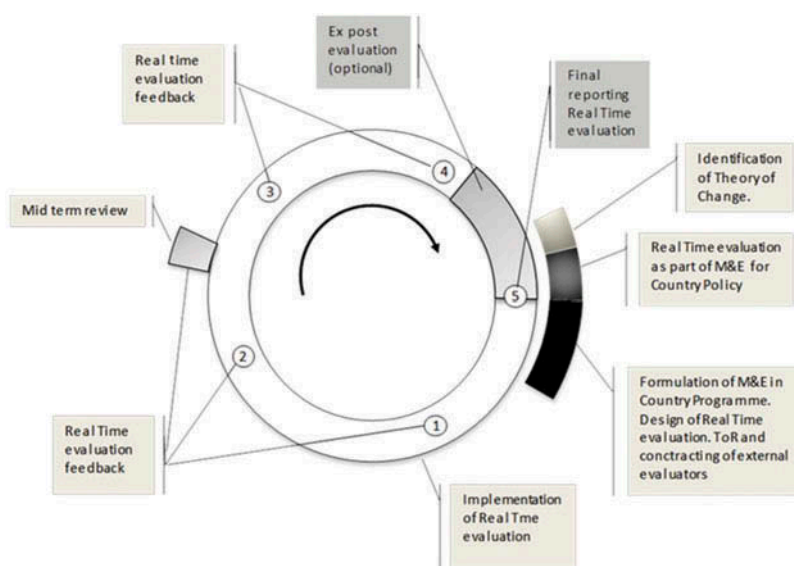


Figure 1. Real-time evaluation process for a 5-year programme.



Real-time evaluations have the potential to ensure learning during implementation and contribute to strengthening adaptation of the programmes with a view to ensuring development results. The first real-time evaluation has been initiated in relation to the new Policy for Support to Civil Society. Real-time Evaluations are also planned with regards to the upcoming evaluation of Danish Climate Change Funding for Developing Countries as stated on Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark website and the upcoming Danida Country Programme for Kenya.

A Real-time Evaluation is not a substitute for ex post evaluations. On the contrary, Real-time Evaluations will lead to improved data collection and hence improve the possibility for conducting well-founded ex post evaluations.

This approach is still being developed and there are challenges that need to be addressed not least related to independence and impartiality of the evaluation process. How can the Real-time Evaluation team work closely with the implementers and at the same time, maintain an acceptable level of independence? In a world of scarce resources, it also remains to be seen whether this new and larger investment in monitoring and evaluation provide adequate value added in the search for higher aid quality.

### *3.3. Continued strong partnerships*

In line with commitments made in Paris, Accra and Busan, Danida will continue to work with partner countries to develop their capacity for evaluation work, and promote their ownership and lead in evaluations. This is primarily done through support for international organisations and networks that work to enhance evaluation capacity in partner countries such as International Initiative for Impact Evaluation which works with a string of countries to enhance the capacity of evaluators primarily in the area of impact evaluation and International Programme for Development Evaluation Training. The Evaluation Department will look into opportunities for systematically involving relevant partner country institutions and professionals in the evaluations, including real-time evaluations, with the dual objective of building capacity and ensuring uptake in the country in question.

### *3.4. Better uptake of evaluation results and better communication of results*

Our own small survey and studies of learning and uptake of evaluations from other countries (Grasso, Imas, and Fostvedt 2013) show that much of the learning takes place during the process of evaluation. Furthermore, these studies also provide evidence of the close link between relevance and usefulness of the evaluations on the one hand and the uptake of results and evidence by designers of programmes and decision-makers on the other hand. Providing evaluation inputs as programmes are being implemented increases the opportunity for learning from evaluations and ensures the uptake of evaluation work. Another important finding is that learning is facilitated by high-quality results and the relevance of the evaluation findings as well as targeted dissemination of these findings to relevant practitioners.

To promote relevance, usability and hence uptake from evaluations, further efforts will be made to ensure a dialogue with stakeholders and partners on identification of issues or areas for evaluation. Timeliness of the evaluations is important, and sometimes the evaluation input is urgent. Here issues for evaluation may be addressed in a timelier manner through focussed, smaller evaluation studies or systematic reviews that will draw

on already publicised evaluations and research. The Evaluation Department will make full use of these instruments to enhance usability of evaluations.

Results from evaluations will continue to be communicated publicly in Denmark and partner countries through publication of reports as well as summaries. Evaluation findings and conclusions may also be discussed at seminars and workshops where possible. Greater efforts will be made to present evaluation results to a wider audience through social media. The Evaluation Department in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Communication Department is presently looking into further ways to disseminate knowledge of results from development cooperation.

#### 4. Concluding thoughts

The new approaches to evaluation imply that the Evaluation Department will be working more closely with operational units. This will likely lead to discussions with regard to the independence and impartiality of the evaluation function. In the literature and the discussion about independence of evaluations, focus is on institutional aspects and the use of independent consultants. The new approaches do neither in any way impact on our mandate and reporting lines nor our use of consultants. However, we welcome the broader discussion underway in evaluation circles on issues related to independence of evaluations and how to strengthen this. In our view, the independence of an evaluation has more to do with the quality of evidence, soundness and transparency of the analyses and methodologies applied where an important criterion is whether they can be tested and verified, as well as the governance of the evaluation process.

A process has been set in motion, but there is still a long way to go before Danida staff will genuinely see monitoring and evaluation as an important and indispensable learning tool. And this will only happen with strong backing from top management and with the Evaluation Department showing good and concrete results as we work further with the new approaches.

#### Acknowledgement

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#### Note

1. This definition is greatly inspired by Stern et al. (2012).

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