

# STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF PARTNER COUNTRIES IN EVALUATING DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

## *A framework for analysis*

### Summary

Development cooperation is one of the few policy fields where evaluation is deeply institutionalised as an important component in the policy cycle. Independence, utility and credibility are overarching principles that guide both evaluation criteria as well as processes. Still, a challenge exists in how to adequately strengthen the role of partner countries in the evaluation of development cooperation. At the same time, the delicate legitimacy of development cooperation within donor countries has to be taken into account.

Accordingly, the principle of mutual accountability should be strengthened in the evaluation process as a guiding principle for taking into account the interests of both actors within donor countries, who finance and often implement the development measures, as well as actors within partner countries, who also implement policies and experience the impact of the cooperation. However, augmenting the role of partner countries in the evaluation process is not only based on normative reasons. By giving more weight to local expertise as well as preferences and perspectives in partner countries, evaluations could also improve in terms of quality.

While in general the call to strengthen the role of partner countries is a laudable one, putting it into practice is much more difficult, and not only because of potential resistance by those who are losing influence or being held more accountable. Reforms also need to consider different

aspects of the evaluation processes, as well as the different roles and capacities of the parties involved.

I therefore suggest a framework for analysis, consisting of four interdependent dimensions which should be carefully considered: *a partner dimension, a process dimension, an intensity dimension and a capacity dimension*. Using such a framework allows to develop tailor-made reforms for different types of evaluations as well as organisations instead of proclaiming one overarching normative blueprint.

### Evaluation in Development Cooperation

Bilateral and multilateral development cooperation can count on advanced evaluation systems which fulfil the core functions of evaluation: namely generating relevant practical knowledge, enabling learning as well as strengthening accountability and transparency. This is not new. Even decades ago, players in development cooperation were already beginning to institutionalise the evaluation process in their organisations. They invested in evaluation capacities and in developing common principles, standards, criteria and procedures of evaluation. The motivation to strengthen the evaluation function in development cooperation was strongly driven by demands from donor societies to build evidence-based legitimacy for the extra-territorial spending of taxpayers' resources.

Moreover, international networks among evaluation entities established in the policy fields have promoted mutual learning, safeguarding the independence of evaluation entities and creating

common rules. Probably the most prominent example of such a cooperation are the six evaluation criteria of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), against which evaluation subjects are evaluated.<sup>1</sup> These criteria are not only firmly established in development cooperation but have also spread to other policy fields and across OECD boundaries, making them a global reference point.

### The missing link: Strengthening the role of partner countries in Development Cooperation

Despite a steady increase in interactions with different actors from the Global South during the last few decades, evaluation systems of bilateral providers of development cooperation in particular are still mainly inward-looking. Early attempts to highlight the important role of partner country actors by the OECD-DAC evaluation network (EvalNet) date back to the 1980s. However, it was only in the early 2000s that principles such as “mutual accountability” and “alignment” to partner systems seemed to put actors in partner countries on an equal standing. These principles were core elements of the 2005 Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which was agreed upon between providers and recipients of foreign aid. Since the agenda called upon providers and recipients of development cooperation to strengthen ownership, partner orientation and mutual accountability in all phases of the policy cycle of development cooperation, it also included evaluation.

However, progress has been slow and fragmented. There are some positive and prominent examples of including actors from partner countries, such as several major evaluations of budget support and – more recently – the Covid-19 Global Evaluation Coalition.<sup>2</sup> However, the overall process towards more collaborative and jointly-owned evaluation processes has often stagnated over the past decade. Especially at bilateral level, increasingly polarised domestic debates about the effectiveness and legitimacy of development cooperation have created strong incentives for continuing an inward-looking focus of evaluation.

This inward-looking focus, however, threatens the legitimacy of development evaluation from a partner perspective. In an increasingly multipolar world, demands from more self-confident actors in the Global South to emancipate development cooperation

are increasing, and also include evaluation. The basis of such claims is legitimate and clear: those who experience the impact of development cooperation should profit from the functions of evaluation in the same way as those who provide most of its financial resources. Moreover, from a global perspective that puts creating global public goods at the centre of development cooperation, unbalanced evaluation processes are likewise problematic.

### A framework for analysis

While the potential normative and instrumental gains from strengthening partner countries in development evaluation are clear, enacting reforms in practice is far from easy. A complex evaluation process, the existence of different types of partner actors with different roles to play in the evaluation process as well as different levels of capacity must be considered in order to avoid failure and frustration. Moreover, given the different types of evaluations and a varied set of organisations involved in development cooperation, applying one single blueprint for strengthening the role of partner countries in evaluation should be avoided. Instead, a framework for analysis consisting of four interdependent dimensions should be considered by both providers and recipients: a partner dimension, a process dimension, an intensity dimension and a capacity dimension.

Using such a framework would enable sufficiently realistic and differentiated reforms for different types of evaluations, interventions and organisations. It would also make it possible to identify challenges and conditions but also potentials and objectives for achieving the principle of mutual accountability in evaluation.

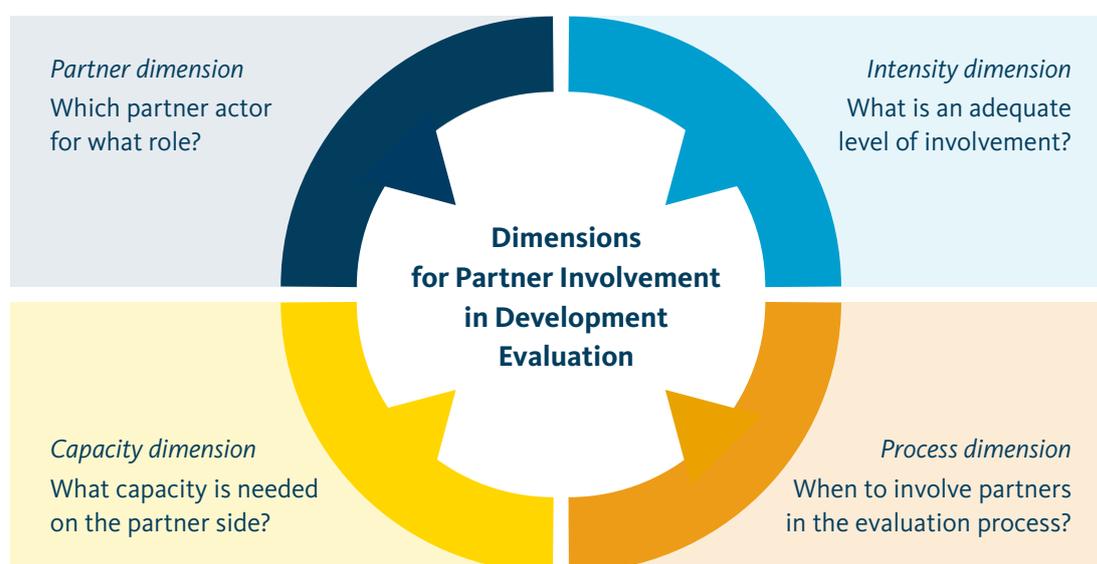
1) *The Partner dimension* – It is of utmost importance to differentiate between potential “partner actors” because different categories of partner actors have different roles and responsibilities in the evaluation processes. Are partners a) potential beneficiaries of development interventions, b) policymakers from partner governments and their subsidiary agencies, c) civil society organisations and advocacy groups or d) evaluation entities within partner countries?

For instance, strengthening the role of policymakers in partner governments could imply amplifying their voice regarding the

<sup>1</sup> These criteria are relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability and coherence. See: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm>

<sup>2</sup> On the Covid-19 Global Evaluation Coalition, see: <https://www.covid19-evaluation-coalition.org/>

**Figure 1** Dimensions for Partner Involvement in Development Evaluation



Source: DEval, own visualisation

formulation of evaluation questions and consultative feedback at different stages of an evaluation. It could also imply their responsibilities as addressees of recommendations, providers of information and guarantees of the independence of evaluations. In contrast, strengthening beneficiaries in the evaluation process could require tailor-made participatory and consultative elements during the evaluation. Such reforms would strengthen the universal evaluation principles of utility and credibility. If local evaluation units are considered as the relevant “partner actor”, it must be assured that evaluators share the same core principles and standards, can agree on an appropriate evaluation design and have at least similar capacities in terms of skills, resources and independence.

2) *The Intensity dimension* – Strengthening the role of partners in the development evaluation process can encompass a range of different levels, which should be clarified as early as possible to avoid any conflicts during the evaluation process. Here, one can roughly distinguish between consideration, information, consultation, participation and delegation. Consideration, as the weakest form, would consist of considering the preferences and perceptions of different partner actors while not engaging with them in a more substantive way. Delegation, at the other extreme end of the scale, would imply that the whole evaluation is

delegated to the partner country. Probably the most difficult decisions to be made regarding the intensity dimension are between consultation and the participation of different partners in the evaluation process. Whether different partners should be heard (consultation) or be integrated as joint decision-makers (participation) and to what extent should be a function of fulfilling the core principles of evaluation mentioned above. For instance, while it might increase the utility of an evaluation to give partner agencies the right to suggest evaluation questions (consultation), the final definition of those questions, however, should remain with the (mixed) evaluation team.

3) *The Process dimension* – Differentiating between different phases of the evaluation is referred to as the process dimension. A rough distinction between the planning, implementation and the usage of an evaluation can illustrate the importance of questions related to this dimension. A core question to be tackled here is whether the inclusion of actors from partner countries varies between the different phases of the evaluation. For instance, it might make sense to give policymakers in partner governments a greater say in defining the overarching evaluation questions and the design phase of an evaluation, while at the same time keeping them at arms’ length during the implementation phase. Similarly, it is worth considering that if policymakers in

partner governments have played a significant role in co-defining the evaluation questions then they might also be directly addressed by the recommendations, therefore giving them more responsibility for the use of the evaluation.

4) *The Capacity dimension* – Finally, strengthening partner actors in development cooperation is also related to their capacity for providing the necessary input to the evaluation process. Low levels of capacity at the local level should not be an excuse for adequately giving vulnerable groups and beneficiaries sufficiently voice in the evaluation process. Somehow differently, the inclusion of evaluation actors from partner countries should relate to their capacities in terms of skills, resources and independence for maintaining the integrity of the evaluation. At the same time, limited evaluation capacities in partner countries should be more systematically addressed by measures relating to evaluation capacity development (ECD). ECD as an instrument for strengthening public service accountability and learning in partner countries can therefore play a central role in strengthening the role of evaluation in partner countries. ECD not only strengthens individual, institutional and systemic capacities, but can also substantially contribute to the shared evaluation principles and standards needed to build up a universal evaluation culture bridging different regions and cultures.

### **Mutual accountability and the path towards a universalist evaluation regime**

Working with the outlined framework of analysis for strengthening the role of partner countries in the evaluation of development cooperation can help to develop context-specific solutions and differentiate between different types of evaluations. For instance, partner orientations for specific project, programme or country portfolio evaluations related to a specific country may be achieved

more easily than more “distant” strategic evaluations such as thematic or instrument evaluations that span multiple countries or even regions.

Importantly, the above-mentioned framework should be used in a culturally responsible way that does neither impose blueprints from abroad nor promote cultural relativism. I caution against cultural relativism, which often tends to build frontiers instead of bridges. Development evaluation has to attend to the legitimate needs and interests of those who are affected by it as well as those who provide the resources for it. This is the essence of mutual accountability and mutual learning.

In order to achieve this ambitious goal and successfully work together, evaluators should agree on the common functions of evaluation and universally shared principles and standards. I assume that on average within the global evaluation community there is more agreement regarding global functions and principles of evaluation than there is in the policy realm. In the latter we have been witnessing a worldwide trend towards more authoritarian forms of government, which threatens independent research and evaluation. Against such a challenging context, it is even more important that evaluation communities across regions invest in crafting universally applicable procedures and principles: not only for promoting evidence-based policymaking but also as a means for strengthening open societies, where public policies are subject to independent evaluation.



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The German Institute for Development Evaluation (D Eval) is mandated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to independently analyse and assess German development interventions. Evaluation reports contribute to the transparency of development results and provide policy-makers with evidence and lessons learned, based on which they can shape and improve their development policies.