

Baseline study of DEval and its environment

Summary

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Introduction

The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) began its work in summer 2012. One of the first projects to be undertaken was the "Baseline study of DEval and its environment".

The project covers two mutually complementary areas of enquiry:

- The first part is a survey of the situation from which DEval started and establishes a baseline for the objectives the institute has set itself.
- The second part is based on a previous study of the evaluation system used in German development cooperation. Conducted in 2007/2008 at the request of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), this "system review" was intended to determine the status of German development cooperation evaluation and, on this basis, make recommendations for action to further advance evaluation practice (Borrmann and Stockmann, 2009). This part of the study includes a monitoring exercise to review implementation of these recommendations and integrates further findings on evaluation practices in German development cooperation.

Whereas the data on DEval's baseline situation are primarily of interest to the institute itself, the target audience for the second area of enquiry is more diverse. To do justice to the interests of these target groups and to reflect the scope of the results, two reports have been compiled (on the second part of the study cf. DEval, 2015).

This report addresses the first area: the baseline situation of DEval and its environment.

DEval's baseline

One of the main recommendations in the course of the "system review" was to "establish an independent evaluation agency which advises and supports the BMZ on system development and the development cooperation organisations in the development of instrument and in improving quality. Such an agency should conduct evaluations independently with a high level of competence and credibility, particularly with regard to effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of development cooperation" (Borrmann and Stockmann, 2009a: 5¹). With the founding of DEval, the BMZ has fulfilled this system-changing recommendation.

The baseline study of DEval was carried out with the aim of establishing a benchmark for assessing the impact of its work going forward. The baseline study has generated values for DEval's individual objectives. They enable changes and impacts derivable from the institute's efforts to be measured and described over time. On the one hand, the results flow into DEval's strategic alignment while, on the other, they are a prerequisite for an impact assessment of the institute's work.

Moreover, DEval is using the baseline study to assess internal and external perceptions of the institute. This offers important feedback for use in strategic alignment and public relations.

The starting point for designing the survey was to consider DEval's "performance areas" and the associated objectives. As outlined in the institute's articles of association, it was decided in a consultative process which impacts DEval wanted to make and in which "performance areas". When

¹ author's translation

the baseline project began, DEval was already operational in two areas: "strategic evaluations" and "methodology research". Within these areas the institute aims to achieve the following ten impacts: ²

1. *DEval evaluation findings flow into the strategic planning and management of BMZ.*
2. *German development cooperation organisations use DEval's evaluations findings to design their projects and programmes and make decisions on implementation.*
3. *DEval is involved in collaborations with national and international players in the evaluation field.*
4. *DEval's evaluation findings are consulted by the Committee on Economic Cooperation and Development (AwZ) and inform parliamentary debates, thus helping parliamentarians to perform their role of scrutinising the work of the German government.*
5. *Participants in the public debate on the effectiveness of German development cooperation refer to DEval's evaluation findings.*
6. *The accountability of public funds allocated to German development cooperation is improved.*
7. *DEval's evaluation expertise is called upon in conceptual and strategic decision-making processes in German development cooperation.*
8. *DEval collaborates with national and international actors as a partner for publications and other formats of exchange.*
9. *Designs and methods developed or refined by DEval are used in evaluations by national and international development cooperation actors and taken up in the research debate.*
10. *Transparency is enhanced in German development cooperation.*

These are the desired impacts that should contribute to DEval's overriding goal: enhancing the developmental effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of German development cooperation.

The timeframes envisaged for achieving individual impacts vary. For instance, DEval expects to see its evaluation results being fed into the BMZ's planning and management processes in the short term, whereas enhanced transparency in German development cooperation is a long-term objective. The question of whether these objectives will be achieved depends not simply on DEval but also on other stakeholders. In such cases DEval's own contribution to achieving the respective objectives will be measured.

Methodology

The baseline or the period of reference includes the years from 2009 to 2012, i.e. the period of four years leading up to the commencement of DEval's work. A number of surveys were conducted to establish the status quo of the various objectives in this period. In addition to an analysis of existing data and documentation on various fields where DEval will make an impact, the data collection phase particularly involved an in-depth examination of the strategic evaluations already undertaken by the BMZ during the reference period. To this end, interviews were conducted on these evaluations with the relevant divisions within the BMZ.

Moreover, there was an online questionnaire survey containing questions about both areas of enquiry (DEval's baseline; and the implementation monitoring and evaluation practice survey) and targeting key actors in DEval's environment. Participants in the survey included development cooperation organisations already covered by the earlier "system review" and other German recipients of substantial BMZ funding (those receiving at least a million euros each in 2012 and 2013).

² The first six objectives and the tenth objective refer to the performance area of "strategic evaluation", objectives seven to nine to the performance area of "methodology research".

Of these 52 organisations, two thirds took part in the survey conducted in the period mid-April to early July 2014. A second online survey of internal and external perceptions of the new institute covered 23 persons from the 52 approached organisations as well as staff members from DEval itself. Finally, extended interviews, held over one to two days, were also conducted in the organisations that had participated in the "system review".

In addition, a meta-evaluation was made of evaluation reports from various development cooperation organisations in order to build a picture of the evaluation designs and methods being applied in German development cooperation. Further insights were gained by asking national and international experts in the development cooperation field for their assessments.

Results

The findings on DEval's baseline situation are of central importance to its M&E system and for considerations regarding the institute's strategic planning.

Objective 1: DEval evaluation findings flow into the BMZ's strategic planning and management. The reference unit consists of seven strategic evaluations that were conducted by the Evaluation Division at the BMZ in the reference period. It was found that in the relevant divisions note was taken of all the evaluations. They were both discussed and reflected upon. Although the leadership of the BMZ was at least informed on all seven evaluations, three of them led to discussion processes at that level. In five of the seven evaluations, the results were used to inform management decisions concerning instruments or programmes covered by the survey, and in some cases they even contributed to major adjustments. Whether and to what extent an evaluation is made use of and serves the management of programmes and processes was found to depend inter alia on whether a demand for the evaluation had existed and whether the responsible divisions had closely followed the evaluation process, in order to ensure that tailored information was provided for BMZ's use.

Objective 2: German development cooperation organisations use DEval's evaluations findings to design their projects and programmes and make decisions on implementation. With just one exception, all the evaluations of the ministry's Evaluation Division led to processes of reflection in the development cooperation organisations in the period examined. In four of these evaluations these organisations were involved in conceptual and instrumental changes. Where the organisations were not directly affected by an evaluation, they only gave the evaluations serious attention if they produced strategic-level findings along with information useful for implementation.

Objective 3: DEval is involved in collaborations with national and international actors in the evaluation field. In the reference period, the BMZ did enter into collaborations on evaluation issues at national and international levels. The ministry's Evaluation Division was responsible for implementing joint evaluations with other donors, although it did not take a lead role in the period examined. The division was also involved in various collaborations and international evaluation networks and provided guidance for German development cooperation organisations on evaluation matters. It was found that the sharing of responsibilities between the BMZ's Evaluation Division and DEval in matters of collaboration has yet to be clarified in a conclusive manner.

Objective 4: DEval's evaluation findings are consulted by the Committee on Economic Cooperation and Development (AwZ) and inform parliamentary debates, thus helping parliamentarians to perform their role of scrutinising the work of the German government. On the basis of the analysis made of available data and documentation, it was not possible to arrive at any conclusive findings in the reference period on this since not all the internal communications are made public. Although the AwZ was not available for questioning, interviews at the BMZ revealed that the AwZ did pay attention to BMZ evaluations in

at least three cases. Moreover, in at least two further cases a written briefing was given to the AwZ. Thus, the AwZ was informed in the case of at least five (out of seven) evaluations, which indicates that the committee at least took note of the results of strategic evaluations by the ministry's Evaluation Division.

Objective 5: In the public debate on the effectiveness of German development cooperation, reference is made to the findings of DEval's evaluations. No baseline was drawn for this objective, given that the excessive costs would have been out of proportion in relation to the benefits of such a survey.

Objective 6: Accountability of public funds allocated to German development cooperation is improved. Accountability was determined by measuring the extent of financial and thematic coverage by evaluation. For each year of the reference period (from 2009 to 2012), the expenditure on the evaluated sectors, instruments and programmes were added up for the publication year of evaluation reports in order to determine how far the portfolio was covered by strategic evaluations. This sum was compared with the BMZ's expenditures on bilateral and non-governmental development cooperation as a whole. Thus calculated, the financial coverage came to 2.9 per cent for the survey period 2009 to 2012. However, the ministry's Evaluation Division did not carry out its own evaluations in 2012 due to the founding of DEval. Therefore, if the year 2012 in which DEval was founded is excluded, this value of financial coverage raises to 3.9 per cent. As for the resourcing of evaluation itself, a calculation was made of the share of the BMZ's budget allocations for bilateral and non-governmental development cooperation that was spent on monitoring and examining German development cooperation, which came to 0.04 per cent for the period 2009 to 2012. The figures should, however, only be understood as approximations as they take into account neither the joint evaluations at the international level in the period examined nor, more importantly, the political significance of the evaluated programmes. Sector and country programme evaluations were not conducted in the period examined.

Objective 7: DEval's evaluation expertise is requested in the context of decision-making processes concerning the design and strategy of German development cooperation. No baseline survey was conducted for this objective nor for the next *Objective 8: DEval collaborates as a partner for publications and other formats of exchange with national and international actors.* Given that methodology research was not a core task of the ministry's Evaluation Division, there are no appropriate reference points for these objectives.

Objective 9: Designs and methods developed or refined by DEval are used in evaluations by national and international development cooperation actors and taken up in the debate among researchers. The reference point for assessing methods so far applied was taken to be the methods used in strategic or cross-project evaluations by German development cooperation organisations in the reference period 2009 to 2012. The surveyed evaluation designs showed that the evaluations were largely implemented qualitatively. They were primarily based on document analyses and conducting interviews. It was found that the majority of evaluation reports are compiled with analytical clarity inasmuch as they make a clear separation between description, analysis, assessment and recommendations. On the other hand, it is seldom that the gathered data is linked explicitly to the evaluation questions and the derived results and recommendations. It also emerged that implementation of the evaluations rarely involved persons from the respective project regions. Another finding, from interviews with experts, was that there is a more critical attitude in Germany towards quantitative methods than in the international sphere. This difference does, however, appear to be diminishing recently. Although training is offered in Germany, international experts were found to be unaware of such opportunities. Respondents also pointed to the low presence of German development cooperation organisations at international conferences. When asked about organisations that have developed and disseminated

good practice and innovative approaches, they mainly mentioned CEval, DeGEval, GIZ and BMZ, along with international actors such as EES, AES, AfrEA and the World Bank. Sharing ideas on methodology takes place primarily via specialist networks (DeGEval AK Epol/methods, annual meetings of the evaluation units, VENRO's impact monitoring).

Objective 10: Transparency is enhanced in German development cooperation. The point of reference for this objective is the use of evaluation reports in German development cooperation. The analysis showed clearly that the majority of reports being published are summaries. Full-length reports are published only in exceptional cases. Some respondents justify this practice by their need to protect the interests of partners or their concerns about losing funding to organisations strongly dependent on donations. The BMZ generally receives the evaluation reports in the form of a summary.

With regard to assessing perceptions of DEval, it was found that internal and external perceptions are essentially positive and coincide to a large extent. Perception was described along a number of dimensions: DEval staff, way of working, philosophy and attitude. Staff members at DEval are perceived as professional and skilled. The degree to which staff are networked and the extent of their experience received a rather low rating from external observers. As for perceptions of the way the institute works, it is noteworthy that, on the one hand, respondents thought DEval was slow and complicated but, on the other, saw it as flexible, adaptable and dynamic. This result can be explained by the fact that the institute was only recently founded. Although some processes and workflow structures still have to be established, challenges are dealt with as flexibly as possible. The institute's philosophy is seen in a positive light by all respondents, who used adjectives such as creative, modern, quality conscious and progressive. DEval's attitude is considered to be honest, inclusive, benevolent and objective.

Use of findings

The findings show that it is possible and expedient to make adjustments to the content of DEval's objectives. Some objectives need to be formulated more succinctly or need a sharper thematic focus. The findings also indicate, especially with regard to long-term objectives, that DEval needs to discuss how far its objectives are integral to DEval's identity and vision (e.g. transparent publication of its reports) or how far the focus should be on actively influencing other actors.

One aspect of the basic alignment of DEval's portfolio is the question of training. This was raised in the interviews with the civil society organisations, where respondents clearly expressed a need for training to upgrade their evaluation capacity. DEval's statutes do, in fact, cite training as one of its official tasks. In developing its long-term plans, DEval will decide the extent to which it can address this need.