

Evaluations – for whom and for what purpose?

Background

Most public and private organizations nowadays subscribe to the importance of regularly evaluating their activities. Evaluations are seen as a tool for assessing the merits or value of an activity. The knowledge gained from evaluations is then supposed to be fed back into the organization and its learning loops. The outcome of the process is an improved production of goods and services. International development cooperation is no exception from this pattern. For many years, donor agencies have had an active approach to evaluation. Sida has an elaborate evaluation policy to guide the agency and its various departments in their evaluation related work. Sida also has a central evaluation office (UTV), independent of operational Sida, which not only conducts its own evaluations, but is also expected to advise and assist the departments on matters of evaluation theory and methodology.

Evaluations are done for several reasons, and to serve different interests. For the purpose of *learning*, evaluations are supposed to produce knowledge primarily for the use of those directly concerned with the activities reviewed, to make the development efforts more relevant, effective and efficient. With a view to *accountability* or *control*, evaluation is an instrument for documenting the use and result of Swedish development assistance. These considerations are central elements of Sida's evaluation policy. Determining the primary objectives of a planned evaluation has important implications for its design, execution and use.

The study

One of the thematic areas recurrently dealt with by Sida-UTV is organizational change and learning in Sida. The study presented here forms part of that theme. It maps the nature of the evaluation process and explores in depth the prevailing usefulness of evaluations

for Sida and its collaborating partners. The full study consists of two separate reports, the first entitled *Using the Evaluation Tool. A survey of conventional wisdom and common practice at Sida* (Sida Studies in Evaluation 97/1), the second *Are Evaluations Useful? Cases from Swedish development cooperation* (Sida Studies in Evaluation 99/1). The study was carried out by a team of consultants, led by Jerker Carlsson of Andante Consultants AB, Sweden, with participatory inputs in both reports from Sida-UTV staff (see title boxes).

The first report, published in mid-1997, analyses the evaluation process within Sida focusing on how an evaluation is initiated, planned and carried out. It also gives an idea of how the Sida programme officer assesses the quality and usefulness of evaluations managed by him/her, but only briefly touches on the involvement of other stakeholders. The study is based on a sample of 30 evaluations. The data was collected through in-depth interviews with Sida programme officers and a survey that was sent out to Sida staff members.

In the second report, completed in spring of 1999, the focus of the study was shifted to the field and various stakeholders' perceptions of the evaluation process, as well as their assessment of the usefulness of evaluations. This part is based on a sample of 9 cases out of the previous 30 evaluations, selected with the criterion that there had been some form of attempt to involve stakeholders. The purpose of this was to enable an assessment of the quality of stakeholder representation in evaluations that by design tried to involve stakeholders, thus facilitating a discussion about the possibilities of incorporating the concepts of "partnership" and "ownership in practical evaluation design. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with local stakeholders, selected from the "Persons met" lists in the respective evaluations, in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Botswana and Namibia.

This issue of *Sida Evaluations Newsletter* focuses on the actual process and use of evaluations in Swedish development cooperation, as they are planned and commissioned by Sida's operative departments. Featured is a presentation of a two-phased study, "Using the Evaluation Tool", initiated in late 1996 by Sida's Department for Evaluation and Internal

Audit (UTV), the purpose of which has been to map and critically analyse the evaluation process in Sida and to explore Sida's and its collaborating partners' use of evaluations.

At the end of this issue is a presentation of another recent study, also commissioned by UTV, which attempts to assess *ex-post* the impact of a major evaluation.

Although the two separately conducted parts of the study differ somewhat in approach, focus and method, the study findings can be presented under four major questions which permeate both studies: (1) How and why are evaluations initiated? (2) How is the evaluation process managed, from the setting of a purpose, the decision to evaluate and the commissioning of a study? (3) How are the results from this process used? (4) Do evaluations meet acceptable standards of quality? Question (1), (2) and (4) are primarily discussed in the first report, while question (3) is largely the subject matter of the second report.

Findings

1 *How and why are evaluations initiated?*

Why does Sida carry out evaluations? Sida's evaluation policy clearly answers this question – in theory. Investigating the real reasons, the study presents a somewhat different picture. Sida is a decentralized organization with extensive room for programme officers to influence decision making, including that of initiating evaluations. Study responses from programme officers suggest that the initiative to evaluate a project often rests on rather shallow grounds, the most common reason given being that this has been stipulated in the project agreement. This being as it should be, what is often lacking is a carefully prepared and explicit evaluation purpose, understood and agreed by all major stakeholders. The study indicates that an unclear purpose reduces the usefulness of an evaluation.

In cases where learning was a stated purpose, it was invariably unclear as to who should learn, why they should learn and how they should learn. The study stresses that in order for evaluations to be useful there must be clear ideas not only on “why” and “for whom”, but also on priority issues that should be treated and how evaluation results are expected to be used. This is a central prerequisite for good use. Inclusion of an evaluation in a project agreement is no guarantee of it being used.

2 *How is the evaluation process managed?*

The evaluation process is largely managed by Sida and the programme desk officer. Recruitment of an evaluation team takes place in Stockholm, sometimes in consultation with the partner organization and/or the Swedish embassy in the partner country. All evaluations are assigned to external consultants. By choosing a particular evaluator, the study points out, you also choose a particular perspective, based on that person's values and assumptions, which affects the evaluation, and sometimes even the drift of the conclusions.

The study finds that evaluators are largely identified with the assistance of colleagues, rather than selected on the basis of competitive bidding, and most are well known to Sida from earlier assignments and evalua-

tions. This practice often leads to an informal interaction between the evaluator and the client that can, the study claims, easily have the effect of disturbing an already unbalanced relationship between the donor and various local stakeholders.

In discussing Sida's management of the evaluation process, the study is particularly critical when it comes to the distribution of the evaluation report. The final report is distributed to a limited, largely Sida-based group of stakeholders. It is a sad fact, the report holds, that in the collaborating country, few stakeholders have access to the results they played a part in producing.

3. *How are evaluation results used?*

Findings in the first study report indicate that recommendations are most often accepted by programme officers. In 75 per cent of the cases analysed, the recommendations had also, according to the programme officers, led to concrete results. When asking the same question to other stakeholders a different and a more complex picture on utilization emerged.

Many stakeholders, implementors included, are not even in a position to use the evaluation findings and recommendations, for the simple reason that they never see them. According to the study, the draft report is normally circulated only to the same, fairly small group of Sida-based people that were consulted in connection with the initiative to start the evaluation. In about 50 per cent of the cases (15 out of 30 evaluations) the draft was sent to the main cooperation partner in the partner country, such as a subject ministry or a parastatal, for comment. People working directly with implementation very seldom have access to evaluation recommendations and findings. The further away you are from the centre (in terms of decision making), the less information you get on evaluation findings and recommendations.

The evaluations analysed were used in the various ways and for the various purposes detailed and discussed in the second report. In general, the analysis confirms current knowledge on various types of evaluation use. Thus, evaluations are often expected to lead to direct operational or *instrumental use*, in the sense that recommendations are expected to be directly transferred into improved activities and operations. However, instrumental use turns out to be much less common than other types of use, such as *ritual use*, *no use* and *conceptual use*. The latter implies that stakeholders get new ideas and insights from an evaluation that may lead them to think (strategically) about alternative ways of doing things. Evaluations are often used, the evaluators find, as a means for stakeholders to conduct their dialogue. Stakeholders rarely see an evaluation as contributing to any new knowledge.

“An evaluation is useful when stakeholders find something in the evaluation which they can put to use according to their own interest and needs.” The study claims that, even with this modest definition of usefulness, evaluations are useful only to a limited group of stakeholders at the centre. For a majority of stakeholders the evaluation process could just as well have been left undone. The main factor behind this strong statement, the report holds, is Sida's dominance over the whole evaluation process. This limits the possibilities of estab-

Are Evaluations Useful?

– Cases from Swedish development cooperation

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lishing any felt ownership of the evaluation on the side of the cooperating partners, and thus of securing any constructive use.

4. Are evaluation reports of acceptable quality?

Interviewing programme officers in the first study, the evaluators found that most of them were quite positive to the outcome of the evaluation process, in the reviewed cases, believing that the evaluators had arrived at reliable conclusions and that the project had been given fair and adequate treatment. At the same time, they found the reports relatively weak on new ideas and practical usefulness. This programme officer opinion of quality highly contrasts with the study team's own assessment of the same evaluations. Based on a standardized set of quality criteria, quality was found to be significantly less than desired. In particular, the evaluations were found to be methodologically weak. Basic quality criteria such as reliability and validity could rarely be met.

Evaluation quality, however, is often much more than the report itself, the study notes. The report is only a manifestation of a multifaceted process, which may contain a number of experiences for active participants in the process. Looking into the process affords new insights as to what quality is all about. One of the most significant findings in the second sub-study was that so many stakeholders, most frequently project staff and beneficiaries, were excluded from the evalua-

tion process. They had no say in it, and they were never in a position to make use of the evaluation findings. Apart from the ethical aspects on not informing or hearing people affected, the study discusses a number of reasons why improved stakeholder involvement may be expected to lead to enhanced evaluation quality, not least in terms of better accuracy and facilitating a learning process.

Main conclusion and recommendations

The overall conclusion of the study is that the typical Sida evaluation is mainly a concern of Sida itself. The other stakeholders, particularly those in the collaborating country, rarely have any use of the evaluation. They have very little say concerning what is going to be evaluated, the questions to be asked and the selection of evaluators. This adversely affects the quality of the evaluation process as a whole, and particularly on the use of the evaluation findings and recommendations. Sida's evaluation practices do not reflect a true application of its overall policy, the cornerstones of which are partnership and local ownership of the projects and programmes supported.

Sida should actively attend to this lack of coherence in ways that will enhance the quality, use and learning impact of evaluations. The report discusses a set of measures that can facilitate a change in this direction. Recommendations to Sida include *inter alia* the development of a consistent strategy on participatory evaluation methods, and utilization being made the point of departure for Sida's guidelines (manual) on evaluation work. Sida should be pro-active in involving representatives of the partner country in the process of initiating and managing evaluations. ■

Learning from an evaluation: an ex-post study of stakeholder responses

Background

In 1994 Sida commissioned a major, first-ever evaluation of Swedish government support to development cooperation through Swedish non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The dual purpose was to get feedback on the effects of this type of aid and to support the ongoing capacity development amongst the NGOs towards enhanced effectiveness. The evaluation (entitled *Development by Proxy – An evaluation of the development impact of government support through Swedish NGOs*) was carried out by an international team of consultants led by Roger Riddell, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, using a relatively high degree of consultation with a selection of the NGOs at all stages of the process, from evaluation design to the dissemination of results. A main finding of the team was that most NGOs were good at achieving project level targets, but when judged against a set of criteria for long-term development (pov-

erty alleviation, innovation and replicability, learning and capacity building, sustainability etc) results were less encouraging.

The study – findings and conclusions

What has been the impact of this, the so called Proxy Evaluation on different stakeholders in the Swedish 'NGO system' (i.e. the Ministry for Foreign Affairs,

Managing the NGO Partnership – An assessment of stakeholder responses to an evaluation of development assistance through Swedish NGOs

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Sida, a few hundred NGOs at different levels and their local counterparts), and what are the reasons or determinants for any such impact? These are the main questions addressed in a study commissioned by Sida-UTV in mid-1998, almost four years after the dissemination of the Proxy Evaluation report.

The overall purpose of the study, entitled *Managing the NGO Partnership – An assessment of stakeholder responses to an evaluation of development assistance through Swedish NGOs* (Sida Studies in Evaluation 99/4) was to promote and guide the learning process towards improved accountability, effectiveness and impact of Swedish NGO development assistance funded by Sida, an additional purpose being to identify any lessons learned for Sida in conducting evaluations. The study was carried out in the second half of 1998 by a team of consultants led by Claes Lindahl, Management Perspectives International (MPI), Stockholm. It builds on a mail survey of a sample of fifty Swedish NGOs, documentary research, and interviews with a range of actors (including some at field level).

The study finds that within the group of thirteen major NGOs with which Sida has long-term agreements and funding arrangements, there is clear awareness of the Proxy Evaluation. Several of these so called framework NGOs, many of them umbrella organizations, report that they have also used the evaluation findings actively as inputs in internal discussions and ongoing broader debates on development issues, such as sustainability and the application of management tools. Such *conceptual use* has contributed to overall strategic thinking and possibly also to a change in policies.

However, among the non-framework NGOs, constituting the vast majority of NGOs and receiving Sida funds via the framework organizations, the degree of awareness of the Proxy Evaluation is far less. The survey indicates that a majority of them have never even heard of the evaluation, and those that do know something about it have no perception of any impact from it on their work. The study finds this raises doubts as to how well Sida's "decentralized system" for managing the NGO support functions.

The impact on the Swedish government's management of NGO support is, the report says, considerable. The Ministry, seeing the Proxy Evaluation as providing facts and knowledge in an area earlier largely based on beliefs, changed its instructions to Sida concerning sup-

port to NGOs towards stronger goal-orientation. Sida claims that the Proxy was instrumental in constructively opening up the relationship and cooperation between the NGOs and Sida. It also affected the joint work on formulating new Sida guidelines for NGO support.

The study discusses some of the key determinants of evaluation impact. The consultation and dissemination process, together with the professionally high credentials of the evaluation team, clearly contributed to the awareness and impact found among central actors. However, a perceived lack of validity and relevance to NGO concerns may have reduced impact; in the study it is argued that the Proxy Evaluation contains unverified generalizations. Further, according to the study, the malfunctioning of the 'NGO system', with framework and non-framework organizations, seems to have seriously hampered any impact beyond the central actors.

A major lesson from the Proxy Evaluation, the study says, is that the evaluation process is at least as important as the evaluation itself. A consultative and participatory process – consultations with stakeholders and actors during the planning of the evaluation study, interaction with them during the actual study and especially the dissemination of results – stimulates discussions and allows the evaluation to function as a forum for interaction, even when specific findings and recommendations are not fully shared. This is essential in order to create a condition for change and impact. The Proxy Evaluation, the study claims, was an important step in a long-term process of increasing interaction, cross-organizational learning and cooperation between the Swedish NGOs and Sida.

One of the main recommendations by the evaluators is that Sida review its "decentralized management system" for support to NGOs, in terms of how and to what extent lessons learned, methodological development, etc. trickle down to the majority of Swedish NGOs. This study should include, it is suggested, an assessment of the (cost-)effectiveness of the official development assistance through Swedish NGOs, based on the specific and varying features and merits of the different types of NGOs. This is to a large extent still unknown, the report holds – in spite of the Proxy Evaluation. Another recommendation is that Sida put more effort into assessing the validity and reliability of evaluations. ■



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