

EVALUATING SUSTAINABILITY IN TIMES OF THE 2030 AGENDA

Summary

In September 2015 the member states of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). In the Agenda the international community commits to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs combine economic development with social justice and ecological balance.

The Federal Republic of Germany has also pledged to implement the 2030 Agenda. This creates fresh challenges for German development cooperation. In the future it must demonstrate what contribution it makes to the goals and principles of the 2030 Agenda. This will involve focusing on the sustainability of the results generated by individual development cooperation projects. But what does that mean for the practice of evaluation? A paradigm shift, or merely a reconfiguration and some selective adjustments?

To answer this question the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) conducted a meta-evaluation to determine whether the practice of evaluation today appropriately reflects the sustainability of German development cooperation as the 2030 Agenda understands it. This involved analysing a representative sample of 513 evaluation reports on projects of the KfW Development Bank (KfW) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). The meta-evaluation is the first systematic and comprehensive study of evaluation in German development cooperation at the level of projects..

Its findings permit two key conclusions.

- Today, the evaluation of sustainability already covers many aspects of the 2030 Agenda, though on the whole falls short. Although the goals of interventions and context stability are already taken into account according to the dimensions of social, economic and environmental sustainability, there has

been no systematic discussion of the interactions and interrelationships between single dimensions or goals.

- In practice, the assessment of sustainability is highly inconsistent and unsystematic. A large number of different criteria are used for evaluations. Each report uses its own list of criteria, which severely limits the comparability of the evaluations and the projects to which they refer.

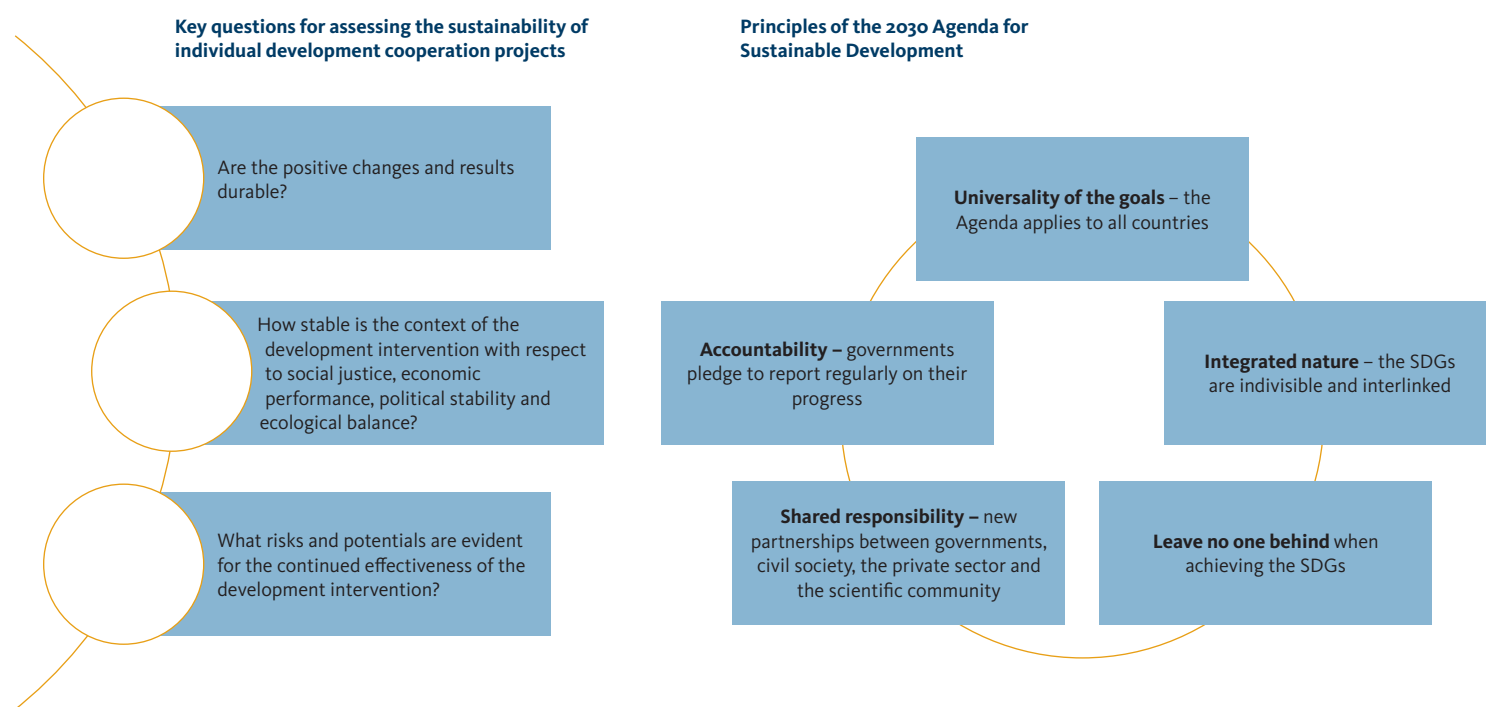
With that in mind, this policy brief recommends a conceptual reorientation of the evaluation of sustainability. The revised conceptual understanding should be applied in all evaluations of German development cooperation on a standardised and systematic basis. To guarantee a consistent response to the 2030 Agenda in evaluation, this policy brief further recommends developing key questions to operationalise assessment of the principles of the 2030 Agenda. Reporting on these key questions could be integrated into the existing evaluation criteria and finally presented in a separate summary.

The current practice of assessing sustainability is falling short

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) laid the conceptual foundation for assessing the success of individual projects in the guideline it issued in 2006 (BMZ, 2006). This guideline follows the DAC Principles for Evaluation of Development Assistance relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability, published by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD-DAC Criteria).

According to the aforementioned BMZ guideline, sustainability is to be assessed in relation to three key aspects: 1) the continuation of positive changes and results over time, 2) the stability of the context in terms of social justice, economic performance, political

Figure 1. Comparison of the key questions on sustainability and the principles of the 2030 Agenda



Source: authors' own graphic.

Notes: The graphic shows the key questions for assessing sustainability pursuant to the BMZ guidelines (2006), and the principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

stability and ecological balance, and 3) possible risks and potentials for lasting effectiveness.

In addition to these three key aspects, there are, however, a few more questions among the other four evaluation criteria, which can already be related to the modern understanding of sustainability after the 2030 Agenda. For example, according to the BMZ paper, the overarching development impacts are also to be considered differentiated according to the dimensions of sustainability. However, neither the interplay of dimensions nor the integrative character of the SDGs are yet part of the 2006 guideline.

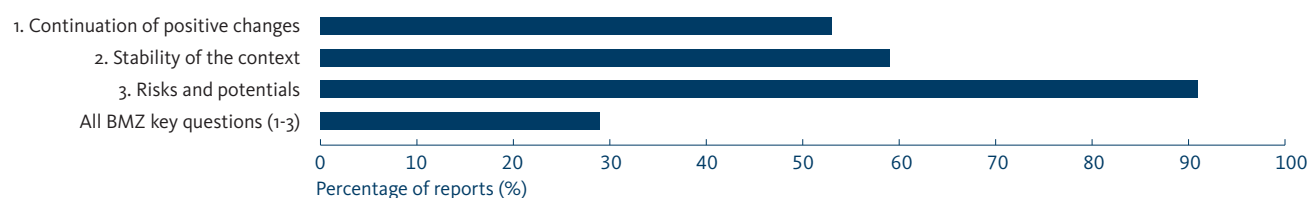
Since the 2030 Agenda was adopted, these key questions now need to be considered in light of the following principles for sustainable development: i) universality of the goals; ii) integrated nature of the SDGs; iii) leave no one behind; iv) shared responsibility; v) accountability (see Figure 1).

In the context of this meta-evaluation, the previous evaluation practice of the implementing organisations was compared with the goals and principles of the 2030 Agenda, and for the purpose of this policy brief, the analysis was supplemented by a further comparison of the practice and the requirements of 2030 Agenda with the requirements of the BMZ of 2006. Due to the conceptual entanglement of the DAC criteria, the meta-evaluation did not only deal with the sustainability criterion, but also with the other four DAC criteria.

A comparison of the key questions for assessing the sustainability criterion with the principles of the 2030 Agenda shows that there are certainly conceptual overlaps. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the current concept for assessing sustainability falls short by a significant margin.

It is true that the conceptual understanding of assessing project performance includes a holistic assessment of a development

Figure 2. Percentage of reports (%) applying the BMZ's mandatory key questions (2006)



Source: authors' own graphic.

Notes: The graphic shows the percentage of evaluation reports that address specific key questions and all key questions contained in the BMZ guideline on assessing sustainability (2006). N=513.

project's context which embraces the dimensions of social justice, economic performance, political stability and ecological balance. However, the 2030 Agenda principle of the integrated nature of the SDGs requires the dimensions of sustainability to be assessed at the level of those development goals. Interactions between the SDGs should also be included.

Furthermore, the principle 'leave no one behind' calls for the results of a development project to be assessed particularly with respect to disadvantaged groups. And in the future, evaluations must also focus on cooperation between state, civil society and private actors in the implementation of a project – in accordance with the principle of 'shared responsibility'. Neither principle is covered by the current conceptual understanding of the evaluation of the five DAC criteria.

Current practice of evaluation unsystematic and poorly comparable

In today's evaluations, the BMZ guideline for assessing sustainability is being applied unsatisfactorily. Since assessments are based only partially on the key questions prescribed, the evaluation findings are neither objectively verifiable nor mutually comparable. This lack of a systematic approach means that learning from evaluations is possible only to a very limited extent. Consequently, this practice is not compatible with the 2030 Agenda principle of accountability.

A glance at how the individual aspects are dealt with reveals that only around one third of the evaluation reports analysed cover all the key questions prescribed by the BMZ (see Figure 2). Even the aspect of the continuation of positive changes over time – the

core of the sustainability criterion – is addressed only by about half of all reports. Around 60 per cent address the stability of the context when assessing sustainability. The assessment of the evaluation criteria relevance, impact and sustainability showed that contrary to the spirit of the 2030 Agenda, however, barely any light is shed on interactions between the dimensions. Some 90 per cent of the reports address possible risks and potentials. The items covered here are usually the existing financial, human and institutional capacities, and partner ownership.

Conceptual reorientation of the evaluation of sustainability needed

The inadequate conceptual understanding underlying the assessment of sustainability today, and its unsystematic application in evaluations, are standing in the way of a transparent and comprehensive capture of the contributions made by German development cooperation to the 2030 Agenda.

To satisfy the principle of accountability it is necessary to revise the current practice of evaluation. The meta-evaluation conducted by DEval recommends that evaluation be oriented towards the principles and development goals of the 2030 Agenda. Key questions should then be developed for each of the principles. It will then also be necessary to clarify how these questions can be harmonised with the current key questions on the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria. In addition, the 17 SDGs and their interactions should in future be treated under the evaluation criteria relevance and impact.

One conceivable option would be to integrate the key questions on the 2030 Agenda principles into the existing architecture of

the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria. This would ensure that the internationally established OECD-DAC criteria would remain the sole basis for assessing performance. In addition, however, the results of the evaluation with regard to the contributions of the projects to the implementation of 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the SDGs should also be highlighted separately. This proposal would not only preserve the systematics of the DAC criteria and their evaluation, but also ensure an explicit treatment of the principles and objectives of 2030 Agenda.

In any case, the commitment in dealing with sustainability of development cooperation projects in accordance with the Agenda principles should be made mandatory. Furthermore, uniform evaluation standards will also set incentives for the planning and implementation of projects. Binding and systematic performance assessment will therefore also make a contribution towards the design of future measures. However, not all the

evaluation requirements of the 2030 Agenda can be met solely at the level of project evaluations, but must increasingly also play a role in the evaluation of country programmes and strategies.

Conclusions and outlook

In the future, working with the 2030 Agenda and the sustainability of development cooperation projects in evaluations will be a global task. In Germany, operationalising the changes proposed here will require agreements between the various actors that make up the development cooperation system. At the same time – not least given the universality of the 2030 Agenda – these reform efforts should be placed on the agenda and discussed in relevant international forums.

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The German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) 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.