



# SUSTAINABILITY IN GERMAN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

*Meta-evaluation*

*Executive Summary*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## **Background, purpose and object of the evaluation**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasises the global significance of the sustainability principle. Sustainability is thus now defined in relation to key principles of sustainable development. Universality, shared responsibility and accountability, synergy between social, economic and environmental development, and inclusiveness, form the principles of the modern understanding of sustainable development.

Germany has committed to the principles of the 2030 Agenda and pledged to implement them in its development cooperation. Within the German development cooperation system, the notion of sustainability has for some time been an integral part of the development debate. A basic distinction is drawn here between ‘sustainable development’ and ‘the continuation of development results over time’. To what extent these two aspects are reflected in or correspond to the modern understanding of sustainability after the 2030 Agenda still remains an open question. So far, neither the conceptual understanding of sustainability nor the way it is dealt with in practice in German development cooperation has been subjected to systematic analysis. The current development agenda now provides the occasion for a comprehensive study of sustainability, which has been the guiding principle of German development cooperation for many years.

The purpose of the present meta-evaluation is to undertake a first comprehensive and systematic survey of the practice of evaluating sustainability in German development cooperation. This empirical study of existing practice is designed to reconstruct the understanding of sustainability in German development cooperation, which has to date been somewhat difficult to pin down, and then compare this with the modern understanding of sustainability based on the principles of the 2030 Agenda. In other words, the purpose of the meta-evaluation is to support the design of evaluation practices that conform to the 2030 Agenda.

The object of the meta-evaluation is how practitioners actually assess sustainability in German development cooperation projects, as reflected in the evaluation reports of Germany’s two major official implementing organisations – the KfW

Development Bank (KfW), and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. Both implementing organisations assess the sustainability of projects using the international evaluation criteria of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Based on a guideline published by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in 2006, the continuation of development results over time forms the core of the evaluation criterion ‘sustainability’. Furthermore, when the meta-evaluation began the team proceeded on the assumption that the notion of results – in conjunction with the other evaluation criteria (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and impact) – also implies sustainable development.

## **Methodology**

This study is a thematic meta-evaluation. In this case the traditional meta-evaluation design involving a purely qualitative assessment was extended to include a systematic examination of ‘sustainability’ when used as a criterion to assess development cooperation. The database for the meta-evaluation comprised a representative random sample of 513 evaluation reports on German Technical and Financial Cooperation projects. As part of an integrated research design, the findings of the meta-evaluation were also fed into the accompanying evaluation synthesis, which examines the factors affecting sustainability.

## **Key findings, conclusions and recommendations concerning the assessment of sustainability in German development cooperation**

The findings of the present meta-evaluation confirm the prior assumption that the evaluation criteria imply not only the continuation of development results over time, but also sustainable development. Hence these findings demonstrate empirically for the first time that in the evaluation of German development cooperation, sustainability is already being understood in a comprehensive sense, and evaluated and assessed accordingly. At the same time a significant discrepancy exists in relation to the aspirations of the 2030 Agenda. Key principles of the 2030 Agenda, such as synergy between the dimensions of sustainability, are not yet a systematic element of assessment practice. The findings thus

refute the possible assumption that the DAC evaluation criteria are based exclusively on a narrow understanding of sustainability that would be confined to the continuation of results. Nevertheless, they do point to significant discrepancies in relation to the modern understanding of sustainability inherent in the 2030 Agenda.

The findings also demonstrate that in practice, sustainability is currently being assessed unsystematically and inconsistently due to the absence of a conceptual framework for a comprehensive understanding of sustainability. The key questions proposed in the BMZ guideline in 2006 are also not being applied systematically. Overall, it is evident that the DAC criteria as they stand do permit the evaluation of sustainability understood in a comprehensive sense, but by no means prescribe this on a systematic and binding basis. This lack of a systematic approach means that the value of aggregating the sustainability score across different projects is limited by the inherent lack of comparability between the scores for the individual projects, which is not conducive to learning from evaluations. At present, a rigorous comparison of the sustainability of projects is only possible at considerable expense and with considerable effort – such as the effort made in preparing the present expanded meta-evaluation and the accompanying evaluation synthesis.

In the future, working with the 2030 Agenda and the sustainability of development cooperation projects in evaluations will be a global task. With respect to German development cooperation, this meta-evaluation has identified a specific need for action. The conclusions call for a reform of existing evaluation practices. Alongside the idea of harmonisation and coordination contained in the Paris Declaration and the Accra Agenda for Action, the universal nature of the 2030 Agenda also calls for sharing and coordination at the international level. The recommendations below are designed to support the ongoing reform process at the level of German development cooperation, and enrich the debates at the international level. First of all the authors present their key recommendations for further developing the practice of evaluation. These are then followed by basic recommendations for further developing the evaluation system.

### Recommendations on further developing evaluation practice

The evaluation team recommends that in the future the BMZ and the implementing organisations should evaluate the sustainability of projects based on the principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, within the framework of an additional assessment criterion.

As well as including sustainability as conceptualised in the 2030 Agenda as an additional criterion, the BMZ should sharpen the conceptual focus of the DAC criteria and make the BMZ guidelines for applying the DAC criteria more binding.

As part of the reform of evaluation criteria for assessing the performance of development cooperation projects, the evaluation team recommends that the BMZ retain the existing OECD-DAC criterion of sustainability – understood as implying the continuation of results – and align its key questions with this element.

With respect to the principles of the 2030 Agenda, the GIZ and KfW should investigate how in future evaluations they can identify and assess the unintended effects of a project and the interactions between the dimensions of sustainability.

The implementation and conceptual elaboration of the recommendations on evaluation practice should take place in Germany on the basis of a joint process led by the BMZ and involving the implementing organisations and DEval. The team recommends that this process, including a pilot phase, should be completed by the end of 2018, in order to guarantee from 2019 onwards that evaluation in German development cooperation is in conformity with the 2030 Agenda. At the same time the ongoing reform process within the German development cooperation system should be reviewed with regard to its international connectivity, and discussed in the appropriate forums.

### Recommendations on further developing the evaluation system

The evaluation team recommends that the BMZ develop an overarching evaluation strategy that in the course of time sets thematic priorities.

In the evaluation strategy the BMZ should define what requirements arise from the questions raised by the 2030 Agenda for the various evaluations – i.e. at the level of modules, programmes and country strategies.

### Key findings, conclusions and recommendations concerning the quality of evaluations in practice

The meta-evaluation analysed not only the assessment of sustainability in German development cooperation, but also evaluation quality. The findings of the quality analysis provide an indication of the robustness of the findings and conclusions of the evaluations concerning the sustainability of German development cooperation.

They demonstrate that the excellent quality of the findings and conclusions obtained by the GIZ and KfW from their module evaluations is appropriate for evaluations of that size. As well as describing the object of the evaluation, most of the reports include a logical description of the causal links to be analysed and the methodological approach. German development cooperation is characterised by a high degree of coverage by evaluations. The GIZ submits almost all modules to a systematic evaluation of results, while the KfW operates with a representative random sample.

However, it also emerged that the quality of evaluations at module level can be improved. Systematic methods of analysis and triangulation should be used to increase efforts to detect causal relationships. The same thing applies to the plausibility of findings and conclusions in the evaluation reports. It is also important to focus the available resources on the purpose of the evaluation. In decentralised evaluations, evaluators have so far set out not only to evaluate as such, but also to appraise. Furthermore, results and sustainability can be substantiated by selecting an appropriate point in time at which to conduct

the evaluation. Ex-post evaluations offer an opportunity to actually observe results and their sustainability after a certain interval following completion of the project. The decentralised evaluations conducted during the course of a project, on the other hand, substantiate sustainability purely on the basis of an assessment of future likelihood. Given the limited availability of data in the context of development cooperation, monitoring data are an important source. However, their potential for reliably substantiating results and sustainability is not yet being utilised to the full.

The findings of the meta-evaluation also revealed an interesting link between the quality of evaluations and the quantity of information produced. As the quality of evaluations rises, so too does the number of criteria applied to assess sustainability. More sophisticated evaluations place the assessment of sustainability on a broader footing, and are conducive to the generation of reliable findings. There is no direct link between the quality of evaluation and the assessment of an individual criterion or the overall assessment of the sustainability of a project.

Given the link between quality and the detail in which sustainability is dealt with in evaluations, plus the close link between substantiating results and substantiating sustainability, a number of recommendations arise in relation to the quality of evaluations and the underlying evaluation system. Here too the authors will first of all present recommendations for further developing evaluation practice. These are then followed by recommendations on further developing the evaluation system.

### Recommendations on further developing evaluation practice

Given the growing demands placed on evaluation as a tool for learning and accountability, the GIZ and KfW should develop measures to ensure that exhaustive use is made of further potential to increase the quality of evaluation, particularly with respect to substantiating results and sustainability.

Bearing in mind the low importance persistently ascribed to monitoring data in module evaluations, the implementing organisations should systematically examine what obstacles exist here and how these can be overcome. In this context they should examine whether project monitoring systems can be linked through their objectives systems to the system of goals and targets that make up the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To ensure transparency and incentivise clear reporting the GIZ and KfW should, while remaining mindful of the opportunities and risks, explore the possibility of publishing their evaluation reports in full – perhaps initially in a pilot phase – and informing the BMZ of the lessons they learn in the process.

To raise the quality of evaluation, the team recommends that GIZ institutionalise the role of quality assurance in the Evaluation Unit on a long-term basis. In the future, all module evaluations should be managed by the Unit.

To help raise evaluation quality, appraisal and evaluation should be separated at the GIZ.

Regarding the appropriate point in time at which to reliably substantiate results and sustainability, greater importance should once again be attached to ex post evaluations. When ex post evaluations are being conducted, both the GIZ and KfW should ensure that the importance of management is understood. This can involve for instance defining key focuses, or selecting an appropriate point in time for the evaluation.

### Recommendations on further developing the evaluation system

To promote joint learning and accountability, the team recommends that the BMZ harmonise the practice of evaluation by the GIZ and KfW on the basis of the joint procedural reform (*Gemeinsame Verfahrensreform*, GVR) and the Guidelines for bilateral Financial and Technical Cooperation. In this context the BMZ should issue firm instructions concerning the timing, scope and rating system in order to standardise the types of evaluation for module evaluations.

By defining uniform minimum standards the BMZ should support the exhaustive use of potential to raise evaluation quality in module evaluations.

The BMZ should require the implementing organisations to make their evaluation reports clear and easy to understand, so that they can be read on a stand-alone basis. Depending on the outcome of a corresponding review, the BMZ should require the implementing organisations to publish their evaluation reports in full.

The BMZ should ensure that, in addition to the quality assurance of the module evaluations performed by the evaluation units of the GIZ and KfW, an external, cross-organisational meta-evaluation of a random sample of evaluations should be performed on a regular basis.