



SEMINAR PROCEEDINGS

Adaptive and flexible Development Aid - the role of Evaluations. May 10 2019, Danida's Evaluation Department

Danida's Evaluation Department hosted a seminar on May 10th, 2019 with focus on the potential of moving towards a more adaptive and flexible aid, including the interplay between adaptive implementation of aid and evaluative input, in line with the four ongoing Danida "Real Time" pilot evaluations. The morning session had broad presentations and debate, and the afternoon session consisted of a working group with a specific focus on the status of and experiences from the four pilot Real-Time Evaluations at this point in their implementation. This note sets out key issues and considerations from each part of the seminar, concluding with a brief "bird's eye" perspective on common issues brought forward. The seminar is linked to an ongoing stock-taking exercise, reviewing the RTE processes, signs of value added, enabling and hindering factors etc., but should also be seen as an input to the broader debate on whether and how to promote flexibility in development aid within Danida.

Key points and issues from presentations and debate:

Dr. Donna Podems, University of Johannesburg and Otherwise Research & Evaluation, presented an approach to - and experience with - what Michael Quinn Patton has labelled "Developmental Evaluation", building on real-time engagement with programmes to support implementers in addressing uncertainty and emergence in relation to development aid. Mr. Chris Perry, principal consultant at ITAD,

responsible for leading the

Governance portfolio, addressed the issue of "New trends in adaptive and flexible programme implementation", drawing on both current international trends and practical experiences. A few key points from the presentations and the debate are presented below:

The context of aid

Aid is increasingly provided within changing contexts, e.g. in fragile and conflict prone regions, and within humanitarian crises. This calls for a more flexible approach to delivery of aid programmes, not least in order to be able to engage with partners, understand their institutional realities etc., as important factors for development aid performance.

International experiences

Internationally, there is an increasing body of studies, experiences and knowledge regarding adaptive development aid and the implications hereof. The concept "Doing Development Differently" is part of this broad trend and already a range of approaches for practical implementation are available.

No standard approach:

An adaptive and flexible approach implies that no "standard way" of working is likely to emerge. Rather, common key principles were highlighted, focusing on identifying problems and tailor solutions in light of the particular context, allowing room for experimentation, adaptation and potential failure; building on local ownership and stakeholder engagement, and ensuring that response loops and learning structures are in place that can underpin adjustments and change.

Development evaluation

Development Evaluation (DE) can be one way of implementing evaluation with the aim to inform and support adaptive development (and adaptive management) in complex dynamic environments. DE can be implemented in "pure" forms, in situations where there is a high degree of openness concerning possible approaches, way of working etc., but DE elements or "DE thinking" may be relevant in many contexts characterized by uncertainty or emergence.

Development Evaluation typically requires close interaction between evaluators and programme staff and stakeholders, with the implication that evaluative knowledge becomes part of the intervention. This is one of the key potential benefits of DE, but also comes with questions regarding changes in the traditional role of the external evaluator. Traditional accountability evaluation perspectives, outcome and impact assessment can be combined with and based on information from a DE process, but the key of DE is per definition focused on development and learning.

A key message for both DE and adaptive approaches to programme planning and implementation concerns the readiness, ability and space to work in a flexible manner. It was highlighted that unless the organization in question is committed to providing a sufficient scope for adaptation and change, there is little reason to implement partial attempts. If a programme does not have space for manoeuvring, it is unlikely to be able to use DE input or be responsive to change. By implication, the role of both donors and partners must be considered carefully in order to assess the chances of success for more adaptive approaches.

Costs and risks:

It was highlighted that clearly there are risks, costs and obstacles associated with working with flexible and adaptive approaches to both implementation and evaluation of development aid. But when dealing with uncertainty, emergence and change, the opportunity cost of *not* working adaptively should be kept in mind.

Preliminary findings from the pilot RTE workshop

The workshop focused on the four ongoing Pilot Real-Time Evaluations (Kenya, Mali, Myanmar and Danida Market Development Partnerships), as practical Danida-related experiences working with evaluations in support of adaptive aid. The workshop explored the early experiences and results. The session focused on the perspectives of the RTE teams, bringing to the table a range of considerations of potential added value as well as experience with enabling and hindering factors.

Added value?

As all four RTEs are ongoing, with some only having recently started the in-country evaluative work, it is too early to draw firm conclusions regarding added value. All RTEs provided examples of how information from RTE could be or had been drawn upon, but also shared considerations regarding risks of overburdening programmes and partners and of how the enabling environment for use of evaluative input could be challenging (for instance in relation to timing, user “appetite”, political issues etc.).

Engagement and dialogue key

Engagement and dialogue with stakeholders came across as a key factor. The RTEs had varied experience in terms of the enabling and hindering factors encountered, but it was clear from all pilots that the stakeholder involvement was seen as “make or break”. In cases where timing or division of roles and responsibilities had been challenging, the RTE process was found to have been less effective initially, whereas stakeholder contact and engagement was found to be a key factor in facilitating that RTE input could be considered in programme work in a rapid and adaptive manner.

Roles and responsibilities:

The issue of roles and responsibilities was found to be multifaceted and linked to the internal organization and division of labour within Danida (for RTEs, key internal stakeholders and potential users include the Embassies, the Evaluation Department, Review Teams, to name a few), as well as to the role and organization of local partners, ministries, internal and external M&E teams etc. This may imply multi-pronged or even unclear lines of communication and engagement, which can lead to less effective engagement with stakeholders.

Follow-up for RTEs

The annual RTE reports contain findings and recommendations, as do other evaluation reports. However, for other evaluation reports, the overall responsibility for discussing recommendations and deciding on follow up rests with the Danida programme committee. This procedure is only expected to cover the final RTE reports, leaving the annual report with a different formal position with regards to follow up. The RTEs had different perspectives on the way in which the absence of a formal mandate could influence how users consider recommendations for potential follow up. It was stressed as an important issue for clarification and deliberation, as a common understanding of the role and status of RTEs are needed to foster the interest and buy-in throughout the implementation process.

M&E Division of labour

The division of labour between monitoring efforts and RTE work was discussed. As RTE runs alongside programmes, they can be argued to move closer to the role of monitoring, which again implies a need for specifying the division of roles and responsibilities. At the same time, resources for internal analysis and recommendations within the programmes are scarce. Together, this calls for considering the role and added value of adaptive evaluation, such as the RTEs. Certain types of potential benefits were seen as linked specifically to the “evaluative” role, while acknowledging that an evaluation does not always deliver these benefits.

The benefits include:

The external element: Even if RTEs (or DEs, for that matter) need to engage closely with stakeholders, an evaluation stays independent. This implies that an evaluation is better placed to bring “inconvenient truths” to the forefront, or highlight issues that would otherwise remain hidden (or surface slower), due to their possible consequences for certain stakeholders.

The bigger picture: In many cases, monitoring is focused on the specific programme activities. Especially for civil society or NGO partners, it was stressed that they cannot be expected to have the capacity for a broader monitoring scope. In contrast to this, part of the task of the RTEs is to consider the “bigger picture”, both in terms of changes in context (such as development of risks and assumptions linked to the Theory of Change of the programme) as well as the interplay between different areas of support. RTEs were also mentioned to be a possible instrument to transform data collection within monitoring effort to operational “knowledge” and results for the programme.

A strategic view: The combination of the “bigger picture” scope and the systematic approaches that evaluations are expected to apply, creates the space for RTEs to consider strategic issues in a manner that monitoring may have difficulties doing. While Embassies and partners may be well placed to add the analytical layer and supplementary information needed to build on monitoring information, freeing the resources to do this may in practice be challenging.

Pilot RTEs – but not pilot programmes

A cross-cutting reflection, mirroring points from the presentations, was that the four RTEs are pilot projects for “adaptive” evaluations, but that the programmes involved are not pilots for adaptive programming or implementation. This further emphasized the needs to consider both the need and the room for adaptive practices amongst stakeholders when deciding on evaluation approaches. Even though all aid programmes per definition are subject to change, some may be in a more fluent and dynamic context and therefore more subject to a developmental evaluation approach.

The presentations from the seminar can be found on the Evaluation Department homepage.