

[Video](#) on the **Origins and Scope** of the Meta Evaluation

[Video](#) on the **Key Findings** of the Meta Evaluation

A. Objective and Scope of the Meta Evaluation

The purpose of the meta evaluation was to identify recurrent findings, conclusions and recommendations of recent evaluations of own projects and to propose mechanisms as to how the organisation can effectively draw lessons from evaluations and translate them into improved practice. All relevant evaluations, reviews, and other reports and material produced in the period 2009 to 2011 were considered in the analysis and the focus was on dealing with evaluations of projects implemented by former Helvetas and Intercooperation.

In the years 2009, 2010 and 2011 over 60 evaluations were conducted of Helvetas and Intercooperation projects and programmes (from a total of about 300 ongoing projects). In a nutshell,

- two thirds of the evaluations collected came from former **Helvetas**
- the evaluations were categorised into the five **working areas** of the new organisation HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, where:
 - **Rural Economy (REC)** is the working area where most evaluations were conducted (36%),
 - followed by **Governance and Peace (GOP)** and **Water and Infrastructure (WIN)** where 16% of the evaluations were conducted
 - making up 13% of all evaluations **strategic controlling missions** (and two after departure visits) are the next most frequently conducted evaluations
 - with 11 %, the **Environment and Climate Change (ECC)** working area is next,
 - followed by **Skills Development and Education (SDE)** with 5% and **Knowledge and Learning** with 3%

A representative sample of evaluations was analysed in more detail. The aim was to ensure that the sample covers around 40% of the evaluations collected. To make it representative, a sample was drawn based on the following criteria:

- **geographic**, i.e. ensuring at least one project per region
- **working area**, i.e. covering at least one project per working area of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation
- similar number of **former Intercooperation and Helvetas** projects and programmes
- **evaluation type / moment the evaluation** took place, e.g. mid term review, end of phase, impact assessment, Board of Directors controlling mission etc.

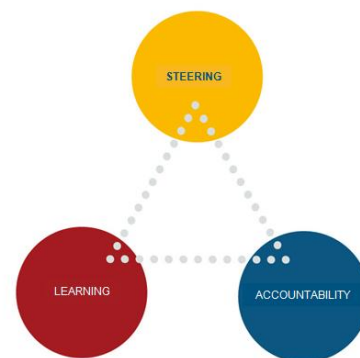
The **key questions** that the meta evaluation covered were:

1. What are the key recurrent **thematic** findings, conclusions and recommendations that have come out of evaluations of Helvetas and Intercooperation projects over the past **three** years?
2. Considering **procedural and methodological** aspects, what are the existing learning and follow up mechanisms and how should they be enhanced to improve organisational learning?

Thematic findings in this context refer to findings from the different working areas and are structured around the OECD DAC criteria sustainability, relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and gender aspects in project/programme implementation - whenever these criteria were covered by the evaluations. Procedural and methodological aspects covered issues around the timing, design and implementation of evaluations.

B. Methodology and Expected Outputs

The meta evaluation was situated between the **learning and steering** points of the evaluation triangle (image on the right), because it had these two aims. The meta evaluation was a first reflection exercise on recurrent findings of previously conducted evaluations. The exercise itself was an important "learning output" in terms of organisational learning as a number of staff members was engaged in the reflection process.



Several **methodologies** were used for this meta evaluation:

- **Desk research** (including an online **survey** to also get impressions from the field)
- **Semi structured interviews** to complement and validate the preliminary findings from the desk research
- **Facilitated reflection moments** to analyse findings collectively from the desk study and general interviews, in order to complement the findings with unwritten lessons learnt

Also, the meta evaluation provided the space for individual and collective thematic reflection around past evaluations, as well as for testing new methods for learning from evaluation processes. For example, the use of visual methods (e.g. digital storytelling, video statements, video documentation) in evaluations was also tested, as such methods can enhance joint reflection processes during and after the evaluation. The new intranet (Pamoja) was used to encourage remote participation in the meta evaluation, inform interested colleagues around the world on key milestones in the evaluation and act as a repository for key outputs related to the exercise.

C. Recurrent Thematic Findings

Recurrent thematic findings were identified both within each working area as well as across working areas. The amount and type of findings within each working area varied considerably largely due to the number of evaluation reports available and considered in the sample.

Regarding recurrent thematic findings across working areas, the following findings were identified:

- All evaluation reports from the sample stated that the projects were **relevant**.
- regarding **effectiveness**, it was difficult to make a concluding statement about all evaluations from the sample, as the evaluations were done at different moments of a project. In the case of mid term reviews obviously not all objectives were achieved yet and the assessment of effectiveness was covered in different ways in the mid term reviews, e.g. one mid term review mentioned mid term milestones and included a detailed review of progress against outputs. Another one included a summary of outcome monitoring indicators, targets and achievements as an attachment. There was a similar variety regarding the assessment of effectiveness in the end of phase evaluations. Impact assessments and after departure visits did not focus on effectiveness.
- concerning **efficiency**, it was also very difficult to identify recurrent findings. Most evaluation reports did not focus on examining whether the least costly resources were used in order to achieve the desired results as this generally requires comparing alternative approaches to achieving the same outputs. However, efficiency was considered in the overall project management section and the evaluation reports in general stated that activities were cost efficient and objectives were achieved more or less on time.
- **Sustainability** and **gender** were mentioned in all evaluation reports and in many cases similar challenges were highlighted.

The table below summarises the aggregated findings ordered along the OECD DAC criteria.

Criteria	Aggregated Findings	Comments
Relevance	+++	Positive in all reports
Effectiveness	++	- considered to different degrees in MTR, EoP, IA, etc. - good practice : midterm milestones, summary of outcome monitoring indicators / targets / achievements + narrative
Efficiency	?	- not considered in detail, e.g. no comparison with alternative approaches
Sustainability	++	- institutional, economic and social sustainability are often mentioned as a challenge in reports (but we are working on this, i.e. are aware); performing well in terms of ecological sustainability
Gender	+	challenge in project implementation (note: also in evaluation design / process)

+++ very positive assessment

++ mixed performance

+ need for more attention / consideration / improvement

In this context, the key **recurring thematic challenges** highlighted in evaluation reports from different working areas and confirmed in interviews and joint reflection moments were related to:

1. Scaling up or working at scale – We face difficulties around working at scale or scaling up successful pilot projects. All projects were deemed as relevant. If we manage to become better at scaling up and having a systemic impact then our work would be even more relevant.

2. Sustainability: **institutional** for example linking different levels of intervention, working with existing structures, empowering partners, dealing with staff turnover, etc.; **economic** because projects remain dependant on donor support, cost internalisation in value chain projects is difficult, etc.; and **social equity** such as how to induce changes in perception / behaviour that are sustainable beyond the end of a project intervention that comes with incentives, space, knowhow, etc. However, not one evaluation report pointed to challenges regarding ecological sustainability which can be seen as an indication that our projects are doing well in this respect.

3. Partners – We need more clarity regarding our partnership approach. For example, who should we work with, how can partners be involved in the design, monitoring and evaluation of our projects/programmes? How can we be more transparent about our choice of partners, especially when this involves building their capacities, coaching, etc. How do we build and maintain a relationship based on trust and respect (accepting that we may have different agendas). Should we work more with the private sector and if yes how do we best go about this?

4. Gender and social equity – The meta evaluation revealed that often difficulties arise when mainstreaming transversal issues due to constraints in terms of competencies, time, budget, etc. at the project level. The same goes for the evaluations themselves, i.e. evaluators do not examine these issues closely in evaluations. Evaluation reports show that many projects are aware of gender and social equity issues but that more attention needs to be given to this issue.

5. Knowledge Management – Some evaluation reports mention that the innovative solutions that a project found were not documented, capitalised on or shared for the benefit of others. We also face specific challenges regarding the integration of scientific research / innovation / knowledge in a timely manner into project interventions and own innovation. Often there is not so much collaboration between projects within a country nor regionally or on inter-continental level. The question of whether more regional approaches would be beneficial was raised too.

6. Project management – In general evaluation reports indicated that the projects were managed in an effective and efficient manner, but they mentioned there was room for improvement in some issues, e.g. dealing with the tension field of process oriented and results-based project management, human resource management (e.g. finding and keeping qualified local staff; handing over processes, etc.), data and information management, dealing with implications of working with the most marginalised and poorest people (i.e. choice of partners, specific information needs and resources, budget, recruitment and capacity building)

An additional point to follow up on was raised at the reflection moments: the importance of **highlighting positive findings in evaluation reports**. Evaluators perceive their jobs as pointing out problems even though they surely observe positive aspects during the evaluation. It is also the nature of evaluation reports to highlight challenges and problematic issues and this is what is captured in evaluation reports (“learning from mistakes” paradigm). Consequently, in the meta evaluation many challenges were highlighted as well – even though special care was given to try to also identify positive elements within the selected evaluation reports. There was an agreement that we should make an effort in the future to have positive findings included in evaluation reports, e.g. this could be done through case studies (i.e. ensure in terms of reference that this is included in the evaluation report even if the evaluation is an external one). There was a general consensus that it is important to learn more from evaluations and we should **continue doing meta evaluations**.

In a nutshell, the key findings within each working area were:

1. Rural Economy: Many - but not all – REC evaluations were guided by the OECD DAC evaluation criteria. Several impact assessments were done in this working area and obviously the impact assessments followed a slightly different evaluation approach, focusing more on impact and attribution than other OECD DAC criteria. Three recurring issues specific to this working area were:

- difficulties in achieving institutional and economic sustainability
- it is a challenge to make the “making markets work for the poor” approach truly pro poor.
- that knowledge management, e.g. experience capitalisation, making innovative solutions more visible, working through networks, etc. is very important and should be done more consciously and systematically.

2. Governance and Peace: Most evaluations around GOP were guided by the OECD DAC evaluation criteria. Some recurring challenges specific to this working area were:

- how to enhance **vertical integration**, i.e. linking local level experiences with upper level decision and policy making in relevant areas of intervention (and channels)
- how to implement a truly **participatory approach**, especially in contexts where there is no structured public involvement in local decision making or where the civil society is poorly organised or disillusioned with its government; working with other actors with expertise
- **monitoring systems:** following a rigorous and evidence based monitoring system in changing and challenging contexts (including monitoring of human rights / legal aid services)

- effectively fostering **accountability** (and feedback) mechanisms between actors along of different levels (micro-macro linkages), when there is no clear vision on decentralised planning / governance

3. Water and Infrastructure: Most evaluations around WIN were not systematically guided by the OECD DAC evaluation criteria. The small sample covered by the meta evaluation raised the following questions:

- Should we support **more infrastructure projects**, i.e. road projects with a labour intensive approach?
- It is important and relevant to work with **partners**, build their capacities and support them in working in networked ways. However, in terms of **results measurement** we face difficulties in measuring how successful we are in creating the conditions for partners to continue applying their knowledge, collaborative approach with other stakeholders, etc.
- Supporting **behavioural change** is a long term goal which requires time and is difficult to measure, i.e. it is particularly difficult to measure the results of sanitation activities
- **Feasibility studies:** to what extent can they be used once the project implementation starts (e.g. as a baseline for monitoring or even decision making tool for local authorities)
- how can we work more and better with the **private sector**?

4. Environment and Climate Change: The evaluations around ECC were not systematically guided by the OECD DAC evaluation criteria. Due to the limited number of evaluations conducted in this working area and the different nature of the projects examined, it was very difficult to identify recurring findings specific to this working area.

5. Skills Development and Education: The evaluations around SDE were not systematically guided by the OECD DAC evaluation criteria. Due to the limited number of evaluations conducted in this working area and the different nature of the two projects examined in the sample, it was not possible to identify recurring findings with certainty. Some issues raised were:

- how important it is in vocational skills development to offer officially **recognised certificates**, e.g. by the Ministry of Education
- working with **private sector partners** is very important also for vocational skills training, especially when micro credits are involved
- including **women and marginalised groups** remains a challenge to be addressed in vocational skills development projects, especially in agricultural vocational training

The thematic findings within each working area were available on Pamoja for comments from all staff members. Several comments were made and included in this evaluation report. In terms of recommendations and follow up, the respective teams should discuss this for their context as the findings within each working area were very specific to the respective working area.

D. Recurrent Methodological Findings

Recurring methodological findings were identified by disaggregating evaluation reports into different evaluation types (i.e. mid term reviews, end of phase evaluations, strategic controlling, impact assessments and after departure visits) and by searching for general methodological findings common to all evaluation types. Also, challenges highlighted in a number of evaluation reports concerning the **evaluation design**, how evaluations were **conducted** and **presented / used** were aggregated.

The table below summarises key observations regarding the use of OECD DAC evaluation criteria, evaluation methodology and what was included and shared in the evaluation package of the sample.

Criteria	End of Phase	Mid Term Review	Impact Assessment	Strategic Controlling	After Departure Visits
Systematic use of OECD DAC criteria to structure report?	No	No	No	No	No
Key documents attached? E.g. terms of reference (ToR), logframe	1/3 incl. ToR <1/3 include logframe	all inc. ToR ½ include logframe	1/5 Incl. ToR 1/5 Incl. logframe / indicators	1/6 incl. ToR 0 include country strategy	No
Methodology	desk research, interviews, surveys, focus groups, visits	desk research interviews, surveys, focus groups, field visits	specific; demanding (resource intensive)	field mission and interviews	interviews, workshops
External / Internal / Mixed	Most external	all external	all external	Board of Directors	internal (HO)

In this context, the key **recurring challenges** highlighted in evaluation reports from different working areas and confirmed through interviews and joint reflection moments were related to:

1. Evaluation Design – Most evaluation reports were not structured around the OECD DAC criteria and only very few evaluations were guided by an impact hypothesis (although this should be general practice). Many important background documents (e.g. TOR, logframe) were not attached to the evaluation report. A key issue to pay more attention to is to provide the right level of detail and guidance regarding evaluations.

2. Availability of Data for Evaluations – Most evaluation reports referred to challenges around the availability of quantitative data from monitoring, i.e. often not enough data was available to draw certain conclusions because the data collection (baseline) was not integrated into the early design. Sometimes a monitoring system was only set up or re-visited during or after an evaluation. The lack of data is a problem for evaluators because it limits them in drawing conclusions e.g. on effectiveness/efficiency (sufficient / relevant / timely data needed).

3. Participation and Learning Effectively from Evaluations – The recurrent question here was who should learn from evaluations and how. This question was referred to a lot in the online survey, during the selected interviews and during the joint reflection moment. The evaluation reports indicated that the choice of an evaluation design is important and predetermines to a large extent how participatory the evaluation will be. There seems to be a perceived tension between designing evaluations to maximise learning and upward accountability. Also, currently limited learning and dissemination of findings takes place.

4. Presentation and Use of Results – There seems to be room for improvement in this respect. In some cases the use of too many acronyms made reading and understanding evaluation reports very difficult, i.e. limited accessibility of such reports by people from other working areas. Also, there were as many different tables of content / structures of evaluation reports as there were evaluation

reports. From most reports it was not clear to what extent the evaluation findings were shared or followed up on, e.g. none of the reports included information on this or a management response.

The selected interviewees confirmed the results presented above. During the **reflection moments** on June 6th and July 5th 2012, staff from advisory services and international programmes also validated the findings in terms of challenges. What was considered as particularly important was that we maximise our influence in the design of evaluations (and be clear about when and how we should learn from evaluations), work towards ensuring monitoring data is available in advance and that we create the conditions for learning from evaluations – including taking responsibility for sharing results.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Many interesting thematic and methodological findings came out of the meta evaluation which was conducted in a participatory manner. A lot of individual and joint reflection took place, especially during the face to face reflection moments in June and July 2012. The online evaluation space on Pamoja was also used. The participatory element to the meta evaluation was very important as it was critical in capturing experiences and lessons learnt with evaluations. Also, it hopefully created a base for more ownership of the recommendations that came out of the meta evaluation. Besides conducting a participatory evaluation and experimenting with new tools for this purpose (including videos which were appreciated), there were several expected outputs of the meta evaluation.

A key output was the evaluation report (and complementary audio visual products). Second, thematic and methodological organisation-wide lessons and recommendations for organisational steering and learning were expected. These lessons and recommendations are summarised in the table with recommendations at the end of the summary. A third goal of the meta evaluation was to identify areas and questions for further research. The meta evaluation identified several such areas and ideas for follow up, e.g. conduct working area specific meta evaluations, improve data collection and monitoring, as well as participation, influence evaluations strategically, improving sustainability, reaching scale, transversal issues, etc. Finally, a clear demand was expressed for support from the head office in providing guidance on evaluations, e.g. provision of certain templates (terms of reference, evaluation report, etc.) and also for continuing joint reflection efforts around evaluations.

Although some evaluations may be more suitable for learning than others the general goal remains to make all evaluations more learning oriented. One way of doing this would be by adding an internal reflection moment before external evaluations. Another key finding was that we would like to learn more from positive experiences and that such experiences should appear in evaluation reports. It came out of the joint reflection that we can do this by taking a pro-active approach to the design of evaluations – even if evaluations are commissioned by a donor and conducted externally. Also, it was mentioned on several occasions that time, resources (financial, skills) and clarity in roles and responsibilities are a basis for learning from evaluations. Certain conditions need to be in place to make sure that the maximum is gained from evaluation exercises.

Further key issues raised are addressed in the recommendations in the table below. As a first concrete next step, there will be a management response to this meta evaluation. Also, a HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Monitoring and Evaluation group will be created to prioritise further the recommendations below and come up with concrete suggestions regarding the way forward, i.e. an **action plan**. The action plan will be shared and staff members invited to comment on it and eventually take action towards its implementation.

Type	Recommendation	Responsible / Lead
Thematic findings across working areas	Continue joint reflection on how to tackle key problematic issues highlighted: 1) how we can improve in terms of reaching scale (and increasing our relevance)? 2) do more in depth research on what exact problems we face in terms of institutional sustainability and what more can be done to improve our performance in this respect in terms of project implementation and more detailed assessment of this aspect in evaluation reports; 3) how can we ensure that partnership, gender and social equity, learning and innovation issues are considered in evaluations? 4) how can we ensure that we get those things out of evaluations that we want even though most evaluations are conducted externally, i.e. influence terms of reference, make them learning-oriented, make explicit what the (implicit) purpose of the evaluation is – using the evaluation triangle (learning, steering, accountability)?	All M&E group to make a suggestion on next steps to be circulated
	Ensure that OECD DAC criteria are used consistently and systematically	Country Programme Directors, Programme Coordinators, Advisors
	Improve our monitoring system(s) and be prepared before evaluation takes place (including qualitative and quantitative data which is collected and shared in a participatory way as appropriate)	Country Programme Directors, Project Managers
	Ensure gender and social equity is covered in evaluations: e.g. probe on what efforts have and are being made to train future women professionals and promote competency amongst those who exist and at the same time as support male staff who are gender-sensitive; look at different levels and stakeholders (organisation, our partners, and in our actual project activities) and carefully assess where progress has been made, where there are blockages and why; ensure evaluations (especially mid-term reviews) highlight positive examples of changes in perception / behaviour because this can itself have a positive impact towards making changes achieved by a project sustainable	Country Programme Directors, Programme Coordinators, Advisors
Thematic findings within each working area	Define follow up on thematic findings within each working area (based on the recommendations or questions raised in meta evaluation)	Working Area Team Leader
Process and Methodological findings within Evaluation Types	Ensure that in the future, evaluation reports also highlight positive issues and success stories , e.g. by including case studies in the evaluation reports and making this a requirement in TORs. This implies an increase in energy devoted to the production of appropriate outputs that can be used by evaluators.	Country Programme Directors, Programme Coordinators, Advisors
	Impact Assessments - create a space for peer assists (e.g. including the names of internal IA experts) as IAs are methodologically demanding and based on the flagship concept a number of IAs will be conducted	all

	<p>and overseen by different staff members who previously may not have been exposed to IAs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - at the end of each IA explore the possibility of feeding the results into expert circles, e.g. having an article published in professional journals, etc. -explore how IAs could be better embedded in project cycle management and how qualitative aspects can be strengthened in IAs (e.g. why certain results were achieved or not and how end users perceived the results) 	
	<p>Strategic Controlling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -consider making strategic controlling reports more widely accessible internally, so that staff members have a clearer idea of the purpose of controlling missions, i.e. that learning and exchange are equally important as the institutional control, governance and accountability functions. This could be done by adding the reports to the intranet and/or by holding learning events in the field and at Head Office level to discuss the findings of the mission report. -explore the demand for a template for reporting on strategic controlling missions -introduce OECD DAC evaluation criteria systematically in strategic controlling, e.g. also to structure reports -if a strategic controlling mission takes place in a country where previously such a mission was undertaken, include the findings of the earlier mission(s) as an annex to the report. -consider introducing follow up mechanisms on strategic controlling missions, e.g. written management response. 	Management Board
	<p>After Departure Visits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -revisit the recommendations that came out of the after departure visits and include them in the organisational strategy regarding partnership. -revisit the guidelines on phasing out and update them according to the needs of the new organization. -consider whether and how such after departure visits could be continued within the new organization. 	M&E group to make a suggestion on next steps to be circulated
<p>Process and Methodological findings concerning all Evaluation Types</p>	<p>Ensure that we maximise our influence in determining the evaluation design, i.e. terms of reference: e.g. making explicit on what grounds the evaluation is conducted, composition of evaluation team, providing the right information to the team (monitoring data), ensure that opportunities to learn across projects are taken up (peer reviews) and clarify what should be done in terms of follow up.</p>	Country Programme Directors, Programme Coordinators, Advisors
	<p>Ensure that the impact hypothesis of a project is used as a reference for evaluations (as all projects should have an impact hypothesis)</p>	Country Programme Directors
	<p>Concerning the evaluation report, ensure that 1) OECD DAC criteria are used consistently and systematically also to structure</p>	Country Programme Directors, Programme

	<p>evaluation reports, 2) key documents are attached, e.g. terms of reference, logframe / outcome mapping document, management response, etc.; 3) it includes an executive summary with key findings and recommendations; 4) the report is complemented by short and specific target-audience-friendly findings (e.g. in form of video);</p>	<p>Coordinators, Advisors</p>
	<p>Put resources into improving and using our monitoring system, i.e. make it comprehensive and realistic in order to ensure that evaluators have the data they need to draw conclusions</p>	<p>Country Programme Directors</p>
	<p>Reflect on and determine guidance on learning more from evaluations during the evaluation process (choice of evaluation, methodologies) and after the evaluation (dissemination, learning within teams, across working areas); possibly elaborate minimal standards for learning and participation, e.g. include an internal learning moment, include peer reviews or exchange among staff within a country, etc.</p>	<p>M&E group to make a suggestion on next steps to be circulated all</p>
	<p>Reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of internal and external evaluations, the current situation where we have mostly only external evaluations and decide whether and how we would like to change this situation, e.g. advocate for an internal evaluation or learning event to precede and feed into all external evaluations, etc.</p>	<p>M&E group to make a suggestion on next steps to be circulated all</p>
	<p>Regarding follow up at the organisational level, we need to clarify who does what, i.e. who ensures that thematic learning from evaluations is fed into a working area strategy or the design of a new project or even evaluation (at country, regional and global levels)</p>	<p>M&E group to make a suggestion on next steps to be circulated</p>
	<p>Share findings from evaluations that may be interesting to other similar projects in an accessible way, e.g. experience capitalisation documents on the intranet, ensure that the lessons (positive and negative) are taken up in the elaboration of thematic working area strategies, experience with certain methodologies is shared, etc.</p>	<p>all</p>
	<p>Use existing spaces for knowledge sharing and learning more effectively, e.g. Mittagsclub, thematic meetings, existing online discussion groups, Pamoja, and come up with new creative ways for disseminating the learnings</p>	<p>all</p>