

FROM EVALUATING MANAGEMENT TO MANAGING EVALUATION: A DEVELOPMENT NGO'S PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

The new Spanish Master Plan for Development Cooperation 2005-2008 indicates that assessing development cooperation is an especially needed tool to improve the quality and effectiveness of aid. Contributing to this improvement in aid is not automatic, but rather, as indicated in the background document within this forum, it will depend to a great extent on how evaluation is focused and how results are used.

The Master Plan 2005-2008 recognises that development NGOs have increasingly important roles in Spanish development cooperation policy, broadening the range of sectors they intervene in, and planning and implementing more long-term actions. This fact has noticeably contributed to the volume of resources and projects channelled from decentralised development cooperation agencies. Additionally, the budgetary framework described in the Master Plan establishes that subventions for development NGOs will increase thus enabling them to continue managing a significant portion of Spanish development aid.

As such, a significant part of the contribution this evaluation can have on improving the quality of Spanish aid will depend on the focus and use development NGOs and other development cooperation actors give their evaluations. The aim of this presentation is to focus on questions related to the evaluation of Spanish development cooperation, but from the practical perspective of a technician who has to make evaluating management compatible with managing evaluation and managing the intervention to be evaluated.

¹ Part of the contents and opinions of this presentation stem from a group discussion on development financing organised by the Spanish development NGO Coordinator (CONGDE) in which the author participated while revising the Master Plan in 2004. However, this presentation does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Spanish Red Cross or CONGDE.

Inflexibility of Evaluation Approaches

The new law governing development NGO subventions² and the Master Plan 2005-2008 give evaluation an important role in the development NGO intervention system in Spanish development cooperation policy. With this objective in mind, intermediate evaluations have to be carried out for all agreements while final evaluations are required for all projects receiving more than 350,000 Euros.

This is a quantitative step forward towards spreading a culture of evaluation among development NGOs, but there is still one question pending: **Is this an advance in qualitative terms or is there a risk of turning evaluations into one more bureaucratic hurdle?**

In order to avoid disappointing expectations surrounding the role of evaluation, the latter should be understood not as a phase within the project cycle, but rather as a **continuous activity affecting the entire project cycle**, as established by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECI) in its methodology for managing Spanish development cooperation products. It specifically indicates:

The **planning** phase for interventions has to be strengthened in order to improve the prior evaluation of concrete needs and problems which have to be addressed (identification) as well as how to measure whether the proposed objectives and results are achieved (formulation). Without correctly identifying the situation to be addressed, it will be impossible to assess the degree to which the intervention has contributed to improving that pre-existing situation.

If we begin by correctly identifying the problem and the instruments to measure the impact, then when **implementing** the intervention, the monitoring system has to allow for the **continuous evaluation** of said intervention. This way, periodic evaluations, such as those proposed by AECI, would be reserved for:

- Interventions in which important deviations are detected in terms of the achievement of forecast results and objectives; and
- Interventions in which evaluation is needed due to the inclusion of innovative elements in their design, the added value interventions may offer, and their implementation in specific geographical areas or sectors.

The system seems to favour **external evaluations**, but in order to meet the objective of improving the quality and effectiveness of development cooperation (as expressed in the Master Plan), **the most appropriate evaluation model would be mixed**. According to this model, the presence of external and independent evaluators would guarantee credibility while, at the same time, the presence of development NGO and AECI personnel would facilitate the learning and participatory nature the Master Plan intends for evaluations. The most appropriate situation would be to allow AECI and the development NGOs to decide in each individual case if an internal, external, or mixed evaluation is needed.

² ORDER AEC/1303/2005, dated 27 April, 2005, by which the requirements for granting subventions to development NGOs are established for interventions in international development cooperation, *BOE*, 12 May, 2005, <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2005/05/12/pdfs/A16139-16145.pdf>. And the requirements for subventions from the open and permanent tender process for development cooperation and aid projects, <http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2005/05/12/pdfs/A16145-16148.pdf>

Establishing that **intermediate evaluations are mandatory** in the case of agreements with development NGOs only leads to unnecessary rigidity/ inflexibility of the system. In some cases, the results stemming from the continued analysis as outlined above may make this intermediate evaluation unnecessary since the intervention is proving to be having the desired effects. In other cases, an evaluation after the intervention has been finalised may be more appropriate to evaluate the intervention as a whole or to serve as a reference for future actions. Another possibility is for AECI to carry out sectoral evaluations which will make an intermediate evaluation of every agreement in the sector redundant. In essence, both AECI and the development NGO should be able to decide the applicable evaluation model for each specific case.

Similarly, it seems excessive that evaluations be mandatory for all projects receiving grants over 350,000 Euros. There may be projects which simply do not require evaluation or whose past demonstrated success renders evaluation unnecessary.

The Master Plan 2005-2008 stipulates in the chapter dealing with aid quality that the '**Spanish Development Cooperation Evaluation Methodology**' is mandatory. The objective is to try and standardise methods, but the AECI must understand it as a general frame of reference which it will have to be adapted to the specific needs of each intervention and the informational needs of the actors involved. This model consists of 5 criteria: efficacy, efficiency, pertinence, impact, and viability. Despite counting on substantial support within the international development cooperation sector, it is neither the only possible model nor does it best adapt to all contexts.

Promotion and Use of Evaluation Results

The Master Plan already recognises that '...a fundamental task associated to evaluation will consist of the effective use and application of the evaluation's conclusions and recommendations'. Therefore, there have to be efficient mechanisms in place to communicate results, ensure transparency, and coordinate the identification and evaluation processes in order to create a common ground shared by the different actors. These mechanisms could be coordinated by the General Directorate for the Planning and Evaluation of Development Cooperation Policies (DGPOLDE) and should allow for:

- The **mandatory publication of evaluations** on projects and agreements carried out with AECI funding by means of a system accessible to development NGOs and other development cooperation actors.
- **Meta-evaluations of results** (to extract common knowledge from the evaluations in order to enable replicating the lessons learned) **and meta-evaluations of processes** (to help improve the evaluation methodologies and processes used by development NGOs and AECI).
- A **database on evaluators available** for consultation by all actors and to assess the work carried out by the evaluators. This would contribute to improving the evaluation sector and facilitate the selection of evaluators by development NGOs and other actors.

Open Spaces for Evaluation and Learning

Evaluations are just another component in project management and hence it is important to bear in mind a not often mentioned issue: resources are limited.

Project managers and technicians have to handle numerous demands that consume the limited time available to monitor and manage projects. Exhausted from daily problems involved in hiring personnel, logistics, relationships with the communities, and the administrative and financial requirements from financiers, it is easy to imagine the evaluation becoming just another task which takes time away from managing intervention.

The subventions justification process, including AECI's, gives too much importance to justifying administrative and financial expenses. In order to avoid going into too much detail about something which is subject for a separate debate, the current norm regarding these justifications establishes requirements which, in some cases, are practically impossible to meet in recipient countries. And, in other countries, complying with these requirements entails the same number of human and financial resources as implementing the project itself.

Administrative and economic management has to be simplified so that development NGOs and AECI itself can dedicate more time and resources to planning, monitoring, evaluating, and learning.³

On the other hand, the Master Plan assumes as its own a results-based management approach, just as ECHO does in its 'Framework Partnership Agreement' in effect since January 2004. However, it is still common for both AECI and the European Union to question activities and budgets which correspond more to positions 'based on inputs' than on results. Decentralised development cooperation is even further away from assuming management truly based on results. There have even been cases in which the donor is more concerned with which specific input he is financing.

This double discourse is increasingly difficult to manage by those dedicated to managing development cooperation projects. Managers are expected to adopt new approaches based on what is fashionable in Paris, Rome or Marrakech but, in practice, many public administrations push them into becoming mere justifiers for budget allotments in the terms and amounts agreed to. Space can also be created here for evaluation and learning among development NGOs and Spanish development cooperation.

We should also look within ourselves and ask if our organisations can learn. Are we intelligent organisations? How can we ensure that learning occurs and that the lessons learned are applied to evaluations when the sector is characterised by such a high turnover rate? Although important advances have been made over the last few years regarding the spread of knowledge with respect to our work, there are still important challenges ahead which we must face in order to ensure that all the evaluations we want to carry out on Spanish development cooperation are truly going to be assimilated by the Spanish system.

³ The new requirements for subsidising development NGOs (Order dated 27 April, 2007), *BOE*, 12 May, 2005) establish mechanisms which, if put into practice correctly, could imply a reduction in the administrative burden international development cooperation projects have to contend with if the agency finances them. According to article 18, justification can also be done according to the other methods included in the Law on Subsidies (accounting and modules) or by means of audits carried out by local or international auditors (if recognised by the Spanish embassy of reference for the intervention), according to what has been established legally in the norms regulating AECI subsidies.

Foroaod – Spanish Development Aid

FRIDE organised the project “Spanish Development Aid - Mid-term Review and a Proposal for a Participative Consultation” between June 2006 and April 2007. This project aims to develop a consultation process about the current Spanish government’s development cooperation policy. We have created a forum for participation and debate, in order to assess the Spanish development cooperation reform agenda and to identify the main achievements and shortcomings in operationalising the initiatives based on the principle of “More Aid, Better Aid”. A set of recommendation guidelines were developed, through participative methods, with the objective of putting into practice the aspirations of the Spanish development cooperation policy.

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