

Peer review process of the Special Evaluation Office of the Belgian Development Cooperation

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Executive Summary

Background and introduction

The Special Evaluation Office (SEO) is mandated to evaluate the Belgian Development Cooperation. The Royal Decree regarding the SEO stipulates that the SEO must regularly carry out an independent assessment of its activities in accordance with the principles applicable for the Peer Review of evaluation functions developed by the development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD-DAC). Therefore, SEO contracted Ecorys to accompany and facilitate the peer review from October 2021 to February 2022. In addition, there is a peer review panel consisting of four peers / high-level evaluators from EvalNet member states (The Netherlands (IOB), Portugal (GAA - Camoes) and Germany (DEval), and one representative of the OECD/DAC EvalNet. The peer review panel has been responsible for the independent guidance and quality assurance of the peer review process.

The **main objective** for this peer review is to strengthen the SEO evaluation function so that the unit can better contribute to organisational decision-making, learning and accountability, to support results and effectiveness of interventions. This means that learning from the peer review is the key objective, next to accountability.

The peer review has adopted a **theory-based approach**. The basis was the reconstruction of a Theory of Change for SEO, which was done in an interactive workshop with SEO-staff at the start of the peer review process. In addition, a **utilisation-focused approach** has been adopted, which is specifically appropriate for a peer review process focused on learning. This means that the peer review has been planned and conducted in ways that enhance the likely utilisation of both the findings and of the process itself to inform decisions and improve performance.

As the 2006 OECD-DAC EvalNet toolkit for peer review of the evaluation functions is somewhat outdated, the main peer review questions were formulated on the basis of other toolkits and recent peer reviews, paying due attention to the main criteria of independence, credibility, use and utility. The **following four main peer review questions** have guided the process:

1. What are the main factors determining the enabling environment for the SEO evaluation function?
2. How do the SEO work processes and methods ensure independence and affect the quality of outputs?
3. What are the main factors determining the credibility of the SEO?
4. To what extent does SEO contribute to accountability and learning and are evaluations used for decision-making?

Main **data collection methods** were document review, 34 in-depth interviews and a survey for which 243 persons were approached leading to 103 respondents, which gives a satisfactory response rate of 42%, and a series of four focus group meetings with different stakeholders to validate findings and discuss the way forward. Due attention was given to **triangulation and validation of the findings**, including meetings with the peer review panel.

Conclusions

1. The organizational independence of SEO is assured as it is formally separated from the line management responsible for planning and management of Belgian Development Cooperation. Nevertheless, SEO is not fully protected from outside influence as government decides on the mandate, SEO's activities, budget and staff.

2. SEO has had some positive effect on the evaluation culture of Belgian Development Cooperation. This culture is still mainly focused on accountability given the many (internal) evaluation requirements for the development actors, which have led to a rather heavy evaluation burden and to evaluation fatigue. The challenge is to reorient the entire system towards learning in which SEO can play a more proactive role.
3. Compared to other development cooperation evaluation offices, and given its relatively limited and variable staff resources, SEO is active in too many areas. Not all activities can be considered as core functions of an independent evaluation office, in particular the certification processes and the responsibility for MOPAN.
4. SEO has developed a participatory and flexible system for the planning of its evaluations, which is very much appreciated by the stakeholders. SEO evaluations focused on a large variety of themes and included innovative impact evaluations. Challenges are related to timeliness, more transparency of selection criteria for evaluations and complementarity with internal evaluations.
5. SEO evaluations are conducted in an independent and impartial way, while paying due attention to a participatory approach.
6. Certification processes were a new task imposed on SEO in 2014, which led to a heavy burden on SEO staff and on development actors. AS SEO decided to focus certification on evaluation capacity-building of development actors, there are some positive outcomes in this area. Nevertheless, improving the quality of internal evaluations still requires further attention.
7. The credibility of SEO is positively appreciated, especially the quality of evaluations, the relevance of the evaluation topics and existence of good follow-up systems. Main challenges are the practicality and action-orientation of recommendations, accessible executive summaries, timeliness and actual follow-up beyond the formal requirements.
8. SEO evaluations serve accountability -especially to Parliament via the annual report- and learning purposes. The use of SEO evaluations for learning has been variable in line with international practice. There is considerable room for further improvement of systemic learning across the whole system.

Recommendations

For all actors with a role in evaluation of Belgian Development Cooperation:

- Develop and implement a systems approach for evaluation of Belgian Development Cooperation that aims for systemic learning from external and internal evaluations by all actors, paying due attention to the complementarity of external and internal evaluations, shifting from an accountability to learning perspective, and reducing the evaluation burden.

For government actors and SEO:

- Reconsider the activities of SEO allowing SEO to focus on its core tasks and reinforce the role of the policy cell and DGD regarding certification and MOPAN, coordination of follow-up of SEO evaluations and establishing a learning culture.

For SEO:

- SEO should play a more proactive role in improving the Belgian Development Cooperation evaluation culture by building further on its positive influence so far. SEO should position itself as independent key knowledge actor stimulating the debate and decision-making on internal and external evaluations.
- Given the staff constraints, SEO should focus on its core tasks of doing independent, good quality strategic evaluations, advising government and development actors on evaluation matters, providing more quality

assurance of internal evaluations and a limited number of networking and evaluation capacity-building activities.

- SEO should formulate transparent criteria for the planning of its evaluations, while maintaining the participatory approach and the variety of evaluation topics, improving the complementarity and addressing the issue of timeliness consistently.
- SEO has an important role to play in evaluation capacity-building both in Belgium and in partner countries, while a shift of focus is required paying more attention to contributing to joint initiatives such as the Global Evaluation Initiative and providing quality assurance advice.
- SEO evaluation processes can be further improved through less standard Terms of Reference, more involvement of external experts in reference groups, reinforced attention to internal SEO evaluation capacity-building, developing some guidelines (and templates?) for final report and summaries. Improved visibility of SEO in the evaluation processes, maintaining the participatory approach, revision of the Management Response system
- SEO should revise its outdated 2014 evaluation policy and can adopt a theory-based approach for doing this to further improve its results orientation.
- SEO could share the outcomes of this theory-based peer review in OECD-Development Assistance Committee EvalNet and contribute in this way to a revision of the toolkit for peer review of the evaluation function.

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In 1929, businessmen from what is now Erasmus University Rotterdam founded the Netherlands Economic Institute (NEI). Its goal was to bridge the opposing worlds of economic research and business – in 2000, this much respected Institute became Ecorys.

Throughout the years, Ecorys expanded across the globe, with offices in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Our staff originates from many different cultural backgrounds and areas of expertise because we believe in the power that different perspectives bring to our organisation and our clients.

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