

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

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Table of contents

Executive Summary	i
List of abbreviations	v
2 Background and Theory of Change	5
2.1 Background	5
2.2 Reconstructed Theory of Change	5
3 Findings regarding the enabling environment	9
3.1 Aspects of Belgian evaluation culture development cooperation	9
3.2 Organisational independence and mandate of SEO	10
3.3 Adequacy of other inputs	11
4 Findings regarding SEO's work processes	15
4.1 SEO policy and planning of evaluations	15
4.2 Preparation and implementation of evaluations	18
4.3 SEO networking and partnerships	20
4.4 Certification	21
4.5 Balance between activities	24
5 Findings regarding credibility	25
5.1 Perceived quality of reports	26
5.2 Communication	27
5.3 Management response system	28
6 Findings regarding utility and use	31
6.1 Accountability: information to Parliament and the public	32
6.2 Perceived usefulness of evaluations	33
6.3 Actual use of evaluations	33
6.4 Contribution to evaluation capacity building and evaluation culture	34
6.5 Factors affecting use and utility	34
7 Conclusions and recommendations	37
7.1 Conclusions	37
7.2 Recommendations	39
Annex 1 Technical Specifications	43
Annex 2 Methodology	45
Annex 3 Overview SEO evaluations, 2010-2021	49
Annex 4 Survey Data	53
Annex 5 Bibliography	59

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.

List of abbreviations

ACODEV	Federation of the French NGO community of development cooperation
BIO	Belgian Investment Company for Developing Countries
BTC	Belgian Technical Cooperation
CoI	Conflict of Interest
CSC	Common Strategic Framework
DFI	Development Finance Institution
DGD	Directorate General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid
EES	European Evaluation Society
Enabel	Belgian Development Agency
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
EUHES	Evaluation network of the EU Member States
EvalNet	Evaluation network of the OECD DAC
Fiabel	Federation of Institutional Actors Belgium
FPS	Federal Public Service
gvt	government
IA	Institutional actors or development actors
MOPAN	Multilateral Organization Performance Assessment Network
NGA	Non-governmental actors
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGO-federatie	Federation of the Flemish NGO community of development cooperation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee
RD	Royal Decree
SEO	Special Evaluation Office of the Belgian Development Cooperation
ToC	Theory of Change

1. 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, the SEO launched a call for proposals to recruit a team of external consultants to accompany and facilitate the peer review process (see Technical Specifications (TS or Terms of Reference (ToR), Annex 1). SEO contracted Ecorys to accompany and facilitate the peer review from October 2021 to February 2022. In addition, there was 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.

Objectives

The Technical Specifications for the peer review of the SEO state that the main objective 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.

Scope

The last peer review of the Belgian evaluation function dates from 2010. The Technical Specifications indicate that the temporal scope of this peer review covers the period from 2010 to present, corresponding to the last peer review. Given the institutional and strategic changes during this period, including the merger of two evaluation units, the new Federal Law and reorientation of the Belgian Development Cooperation, new evaluation policy/strategy, new mandate and appointment of a new Special Evaluator in 2016, the main focus has been on the period 2016-2021.

The scope is limited to the activities of the SEO as specified in the Technical Specifications in line with the Royal Decree on the establishment of the SEO. This means that the links and collaborations with the evaluation units of development actors (Enabel, the Belgian Investment Company for Developing Countries (BIO), non-governmental actors (NGA), institutional actors (IA)) will be examined, but the activities of these evaluation departments – the so-called internal evaluations are not included in the scope of this peer review. The certification processes are part and parcel of the scope of this peer review.

Roles and responsibilities

The responsibilities of the Ecorys peer review team were to accompany and facilitate the peer review process, including the facilitation of the reconstruction of the Theory of Change, the formulation of the key peer review questions and review matrix with indicators and methods for data collection and validation, data collection and analysis, production of reports and interaction with the Peer Review Panel. The panel consisting of four peers (see above) provided independent guidance and quality assurance of the peer review process by reading and commenting on the various reports and by participating in the panel meetings. The peers also participated in the Peer Exchange in Brussels in February 2022 when focus groups with different stakeholders have been organised to validate the findings and formulate recommendations on the way forward. While SEO has contracted the Ecorys team and has identified the peer review panel members, steps have been taken to ensure the independence of the peer process both through the independent, external review team and the peer review panel. This set-up ensures a transparent, open and independent process.

Methodological approach

The methodical approach has been developed in the inception report. The main elements are described here, and details can be found in Annex 2. In line with the ToR, a theory-based approach for the peer review process has been adopted. Via the peer review panel three other Theories of Change (ToCs) for evaluation functions of development cooperation became available, which formed useful inputs for the preparation of an interactive ToC workshop with the SEO staff on 12 and 13 October. The ToC that served as the basis for the review questions and choice of data collection methods is presented in Chapter 2.

In addition to a theory-based approach, a utilisation-focused approach is adopted, which is specifically appropriate for a peer review process focused on learning. The aim is based on the principle that an evaluation should be judged on its usefulness to its intended users. Therefore, 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.

The Technical Specifications indicate that the peer review process should be based on the OECD-DAC-EvalNet Peer Review Toolkit ('Evaluation systems and use: a working tool for peer reviews and assessments', 2006). This tool offers eight main categories of review issues, and this has been the basis for the SEO self-evaluation, which was done as part of the peer review process and proved to be a valuable input.

In 2020, a joint peer review of four evaluation functions of Finland, Ireland and Switzerland (SECO and SDC) was done.¹ This joint peer review used the 2016 United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), Revised Guidelines for Professional Peer Reviews as point of departure and identified four key review issues (see second column of Table 0.1 below). No examples were found of a peer review of an evaluation function based on a theory-based approach. Therefore, for this peer review process, various inputs – peer review guidelines and criteria and the reconstructed ToC – have been combined for a logical structure of the peer review questions.

Table 0.1 Peer review issues and questions

DAC EvalNet peer review toolkit	UNEG	Link to reconstructed ToC	Peer review questions
Evaluation policy: role, responsibilities and objectives	Enabling environment	Inputs	What are the main factors determining the enabling environment for the SEO evaluation function?
Resources and staff		Inputs	
Partnership and capacity-building		Activities	
Planning, coordination and harmonisation	Independence: organizational, behavioural, avoiding Col, protection from outside influence	Activities	How do the SEO work processes and methods ensure independence and affect the quality of outputs?
Impartiality, transparency and independence		Inputs-Activities assumptions	
Quality	Credibility	Outputs and activities-outputs assumptions	What are the main factors determining the credibility of the SEO?
Dissemination, feedback, knowledge management and learning	Use and utility	Outcomes and related assumptions	To what extent does SEO contribute to accountability and learning and are evaluations used for decision-making?
Evaluation use		Intermediary impact	

¹ Patrick Grasso, Peer Review of Four Evaluation Functions, November 2020.

The four peer review questions have been elaborated in detail in a review matrix that is presented in Annex 2.

The review has adopted a two-level analysis:

1. **Overall strategic analysis.** This level has covered all elements of the reconstructed SEO ToC in relation to the review matrix and the key criteria and has dealt with SEO relations with all relevant stakeholders including their perceptions of the functioning of the SEO;
2. **In-depth analysis of six selected evaluation processes.** Six evaluations have been selected for more in-depth analysis (see Annex 2 for selection criteria and the selected evaluations).

Main data collection and analysis methods have been:

- **Document review** (see Annex 5 for Bibliography);
- **Workshop** with SEO staff to reconstruct and validate the ToC;
- In total, 34 **interviews** with representatives of the following groups:
 - SEO: 6 interviews;
 - Federal Public Service (FPS), Directorate General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD) and policy cell: 5 interviews;
 - Enabel and BIO: 6 interviews;
 - Other development actors (NGO umbrella organisations, institutional actors, NGOs): 8 interviews;
 - Consultants: 9 interviews.

The interviews – either individuals or groups of one and the same organisation- were conducted in line with the review matrix. Some interviews focused primarily on overall strategic issues, while others were specifically related to one or more selected evaluations or dealt with the overall and strategic level at the same time;

- **Survey:** The review team approached 243 persons, representatives of all different stakeholder groups, with the request to fill out the survey, including government representatives (FPS, policy cell DGD and embassies), Enabel, BIO, non-governmental actors (both federations and umbrella organisations as well as individual NGOs), institutional actors (including VLIR, ARES, and Fiabel), consultancy/research institutes, and the Parliament. Staff members of organisations have further distributed the survey in their organisations or among member organisations. In total, 103 respondents started the first question of which 87 reached the end. This gives a response rate of 42% from those approached. This means that the response rate is satisfactory. However, a relatively high number of survey questions remained unanswered. An important explanation is that respondents might only know the SEO from one specific activity – either an evaluation in which they were involved or a certification process- and, therefore, do not have an opinion on other activities. The relatively high response rate may also have included respondents that have not been closely involved with SEO at all and, therefore, refrained from answers to some more specific questions. Annex 4 presents the survey results per question.
- **Peer review panel meetings** with the peer review team and SEO at crucial moments of the peer review process as indicated above;
- **Four focus group discussions with key groups of stakeholders** – SEO staff, Governmental actors, two key development actors Enabel and BIO, and non-governmental and institutional actors- to validate the peer review findings and discuss the way forward. This has formed the basis for the formulation of conclusions and recommendations.

Challenges

A main challenge has been how to develop a theory-based approach for this peer review, for which the process has been described above. An additional challenge was how to use the reconstructed ToC together with the OECD-DAC EvalNet and the UNEG guidelines for peer reviews for formulating the main peer review questions (see Table 0.1 above). This theory-based approach to a peer review of evaluation functions was presented and discussed in an EvalNet meeting on 18 November 2021.

Another challenge is what yardsticks to use in this peer review. As set out above, there are very few examples of rigorous peer reviews of evaluation functions.² A risk of a peer review process is that it may protect established opinions and is not open to genuinely new ideas. While this peer review process aims to be innovative, the risk is that it may lead to stricter norms than usually applied in peer reviews of evaluation functions, where the focus often is on the more formal elements of the evaluation function and less on use and utility. The peer review team did discuss this with the peer review panel and common standards were agreed upon. Furthermore, in the OECD-DAC EvalNet session mentioned above, it was agreed that new approaches and tools for the assessment of the evaluation function in international cooperation are needed. This peer review may contribute to this innovation, but EvalNet and its members have to take it forward.

² In 2015 and 2020, OECD-DAC published peer reviews of the Belgian Development Cooperation, in which one chapter deals with the evaluation function. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/oecd-development-co-operation-peer-reviews-belgium-2015-9789264239906-en.htm> and https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/oecd-development-co-operation-peer-reviews-belgium-2020_026f1aad-en. A previous peer review of the SEO was done in 2010.

2 Background and Theory of Change

2.1 Background

The Special Evaluation Office (SEO) is mandated to evaluate the Belgian Development Cooperation. The SEO in its present form was established by the Royal Decree of 17 February 2003, with an externally recruited 'Special Evaluator' that can serve during two periods of maximum six years. The set-up of the SEO was in line with international practice, while some scandals in Belgian Development Cooperation further stimulated the set-up at the time. A new 2010 Royal Decree for the SEO was published in 2010 when the internal evaluation unit of DGD was merged with SEO. This Royal Decree was amended in 2014, based on the revised Belgian Law on Development Cooperation, in which a distinction is made between internal evaluations, which are the responsibility of the development actors and external or strategic evaluations by the SEO. This led to an amended 2014 Royal Decree, which states that the SEO is responsible for certification of the M&E systems of development actors, which is further explained below. After termination of the two terms of the previous Special Evaluator, the current Special Evaluator took office end 2016. In line with the requirements, this peer review is planned towards the end of this term of the Special Evaluator.

2.2 Reconstructed Theory of Change

The request for a ToC as the basis for the methodological approach, can be considered as rather innovative approach for a peer review of the evaluation function. At present, there is no ToC guiding the SEO work, although in the context of the previous peer review in 2010 an attempt was made to reconstruct an objectives tree. As indicated in Chapter 1 the ToC - presented in Figure 2.1- has been developed in an interactive workshop with the SEO staff. The various elements are elaborated below.

Contextual factors

The contextual factors affecting the evaluation function are split into two groups: on the one hand Belgian contextual factors and international factors on the other. The Belgian factors are especially related to the legal and political context. The basis for the legal framework is set in the 2013 Federal Law for Development Cooperation, which replaced the 1999 Federal Law on International Cooperation (see above).

The legal framework for Belgian Development Cooperation also consists of other specific laws and Royal Decrees regarding specific institutions such as BTC later renamed Enabel, and the already mentioned Royal Decrees for the external evaluation function. The Royal Decree for the evaluation function is considered as an input in the results chain of the ToC as it specifies the mandate of the SEO. The other aspects of the legal framework such as the policy objectives, the transversal themes, the number and choice of partner countries and the autonomy of development actors are considered as a contextual factor that affects the work of the SEO.

In general, the institutional architecture of Belgian Development Cooperation affects the evaluation function. Belgian development actors are very heterogenous and vary from Enabel, which is a very large organisation responsible for implementation of the governmental bilateral development cooperation, to NGOs that vary in scale from professional organisations to one-person set-ups. The evolving political context and changing political priorities also affect the evaluation function. Finally, the evaluation culture within the FPS also affects SEO. However, the evaluation culture is not only a contextual factor as the SEO through its work also affects the evaluation culture. While it is not a formal objective of SEO to enhance the FPS evaluation culture, it is part of the findings presented in the following chapters.

Evolving international context factors are also listed in the ToC, including the revised OECD-DAC evaluation criteria, but also the Covid-19 situation and the evolving global development agenda. Regarding the global development agenda, it is important to mention that the principles of the aid effectiveness agenda as embedded in the 2005 Paris Declaration and the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action, are not prominent anymore. These principles put much emphasis on partner country ownership, alignment and harmonisation and led to an increasing number of joint evaluations at the time. At present, there are fewer joint evaluations although international evaluation partnerships still exist.

Inputs

The inputs of the SEO are rather straightforward and consist of four elements (see section 3.3 for details).

1. *Staff and training*

The SEO is led by an externally recruited Special Evaluator, who has a mandate for six years that can be renewed once. The other SEO staff is mainly recruited through a pool of candidates having passed a general SELOR examination, providing a ranking that must be respected by SEO. This means that SEO cannot interview candidates, which means that SEO cannot select its own staff. Other staff members come from the FPS, among which a few from the DGD.

2. *Budget*

There is a budget for implementation of evaluations including hiring of consultants and communication and dissemination activities, plus an additional grants budget.

3. *Mandate*

The mandate of the SEO is laid down in the Royal Decree as set out above in section 2.1

4. *Access to data, office space and support services of the FPS*

In the TOC workshop, SEO staff mentioned the various support services of the FPS such as office space and access to data.

Activities

The activities can also be clustered into four groups:

1. *SEO strategic evaluations*

This group includes all activities related to the planning, preparation, implementation and follow-up of SEO's own strategic evaluations. The SEO website provides an overview of all evaluation reports, recommendations, and management responses, in addition to ongoing evaluations. In Annex 3, an overview of SEO's evaluations is presented. Communication -oral and written- could be considered as a separate group of activities but has been included here.³

2. *Certification*

As stated above (see section 2.1), this is a new group of activities based on the 2013 Federal Law for Development Cooperation and the implications for the SEO as specified in the revised 2014 Royal Decree.

3. *External quality assurance and capacity building*

The SEO is also engaged in quality assurance of internal evaluations by development actors, e.g. in the evaluation steering committee of BIO and evaluation reference groups of Enabel. In addition, SEO supports evaluation capacity building activities such as evaluation capacity building seminars organised by IOB Antwerp, funded by SEO, but also lectures by the Special Evaluator.

4. *Joint evaluations and engagement in national and international platforms*

The SEO is participating in various national and international networks and platforms (see section 4.2 for details). Since 2015, there have been no joint evaluations but SEO participated in reference group meetings of EU evaluations.

³ In 2021, a special communication staff member is revising SEO's communication products including the website, short policy notes, dissemination events etc.

Outputs

Three groups of outputs have been distinguished in relation to the four groups of activities:

1. Core outputs related to the SEO strategic evaluations

This group includes many evaluation reports – both general reports such as the SEO evaluation policy and planning, the SEO's annual report to Parliament as well as specific SEO evaluation reports – as well as events and dialogue with DGD, the FPS and Belgian development actors.

2. Capacity building outputs

Two groups of activities – certification and specific capacity building activities – contribute to this output.

3. Networking outputs

There is a variety of outputs including joint evaluation reports, contribution to MOPAN and contribution to the revised OECD-DAC evaluation criteria under this heading.

Outcomes

In line with international evaluation literature and the ToCs of other evaluation functions, the outcomes have been grouped under two headings: accountability on the one hand and learning on the other. The SEO is responsible for the follow-up process, including the preparation, publication and follow-up of Management Responses, but the SEO is not responsible for decision-making based on evaluations. This is reflected in the intermediary impact.

Intermediary and overall impact

The decision-making by DGD, government and development actors based on SEO evaluations is facilitated by SEO but is beyond its direct responsibility. Therefore, it is mentioned as an intermediary impact. Evaluations aim to contribute to evidence-based improved policies.

At the impact level, SEO is expected to contribute to increased effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the Belgian Development Cooperation.

Underlying assumptions

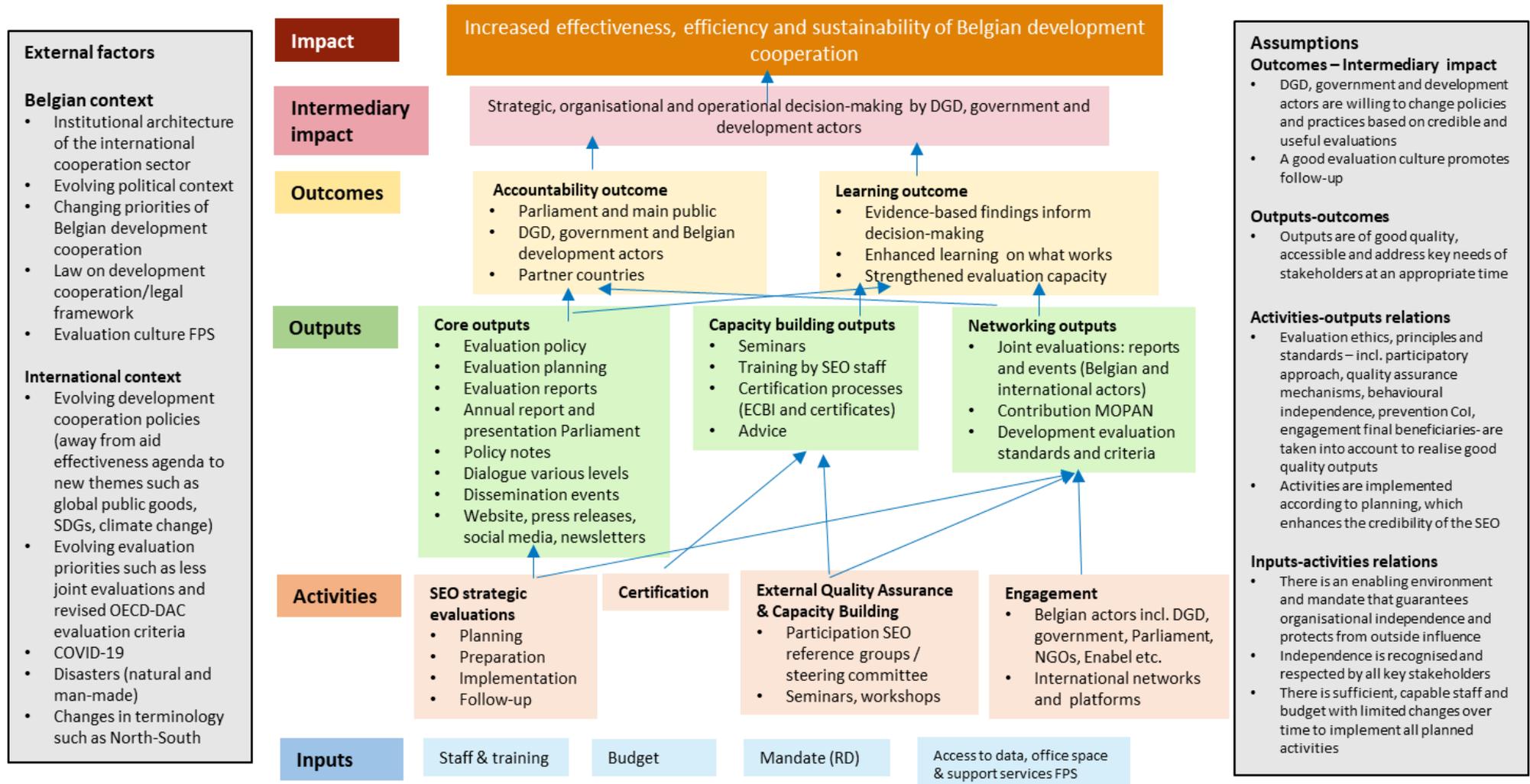
The underlying assumptions are related to the causal relations in the results chain. The assumptions are important for the formulation of the peer review questions and are related to the key criteria for assessing the evaluation function: enabling environment, independence, credibility, utility and use:

- The assumptions regarding the relation between inputs and activities are especially related to the enabling environment including organisational independence, the autonomy of the SEO, and whether the means -staff and budget – allow to implement the planned activities;
- The assumptions regarding the activity-outcomes relations are related to behavioural independence, avoiding Conflicts of Interest and other elements of the work processes that are expected to enhance the credibility;
- Assumptions regarding the relation between outputs and outcomes are mainly related to credibility. The underlying assumption is that if outputs are of good quality, accessible and address key needs of stakeholders at an appropriate time, the credibility is high and the likelihood of use of the evaluation results increases;
- Finally, as intermediary impact and overall impact are beyond the direct influence of the SEO but deal with the actual uptake of evaluations in decision-making, this assumes that decision-makers are actually interested in evidence-based policies and strategies, which requires a good evaluation culture.

Scope of the ToC

In principle, the ToC covers the entire period under review 2010-2021. There is, however, one change resulting from the 2013 Federal Law on Development Cooperation and the 2014 Royal Decree on the SEO, which is the certification. This group of activities and related outputs did not exist before 2014. All the other activities and elements in the results chain, contextual factors and underlying assumptions are valid for the entire period under review.

Figure 2.1 Reconstructed Theory of Change SEO



3 Findings regarding the enabling environment

In this chapter, findings are presented regarding review question 1 - What are the main factors determining the enabling environment for the SEO evaluation function? - in line with the indicators presented in the review matrix. These findings are situated in the overall Belgian evaluation context for development cooperation, which affects the functioning of the SEO as became clear during interviews.

Main findings enabling environment:

- The evaluation function is clearly separated from the line management responsible for planning and managing development assistance, which means that the formal international standard of organizational independence is met;
- Given the set-up of Belgian Development Cooperation, there is some outside influence on the SEO evaluation function related to the mandate and the certification task for which SEO became responsible in 2014;
- Staff constraints – substantial variation in the number of staff, relatively high turnover, and relatively limited evaluation expertise – have affected the functioning of the SEO and led to underutilization of budgets.

3.1 Aspects of Belgian evaluation culture development cooperation

The institutional set-up of the Belgian Development Cooperation is quite complex. The FPS, with its directorate DGD, is responsible for policies and funding. The Belgian development actors are responsible for implementation and have quite some autonomy. Enabel is responsible for implementation of the governmental cooperation, BIO is the Development Finance Institution (DFI), while there are many other non-governmental development including NGOs, universities, etc. often organised in intermediate umbrella organisations. This institutional set-up is included as Belgian context factor in the ToC.

During the interviews, it became clear that some aspects of the legal and institutional set-up of Belgian Development Cooperation specifically affect the evaluation culture within the Belgian Development Cooperation and thus the work of the SEO. Belgian development actors are responsible for their own M&E. In theory, there are strict evaluation requirements as the regulation stipulates that: “Each organisation has to conduct independent evaluations to monitor, to learn from or to report on its interventions. It allocates at least 1% of its own cost for this purpose. The final evaluation has to assess the achievement of all outcomes at the end of the intervention”. In practice, this leads to a heavy evaluation burden as mentioned in many interviews. Enabel indicates that they aim to merge development interventions in broader programmes or regional portfolios to reduce the number of evaluations. It should be noted that these portfolios still consist of multiple interventions in different sectors, and the transition towards more overarching Enabel evaluations is still ongoing. However, most NGA's face this heavy evaluation burden at the level of specific interventions. This leads to high demand for evaluators, as the evaluation market is described in interviews as predominantly *belgo-belge*, which means that Belgian demand meets Belgian supply. In addition, interviewees state that – given the limited budgets – the mid-term and end-term evaluations are often not very in-depth. An analysis of the quality of internal evaluations is beyond the scope of this peer review. Another relevant issue mentioned in interviews is that the evaluation burden leads to evaluation fatigue as there are many ongoing evaluation and consultation processes. This context affects the functioning of the SEO.

3.2 Organisational independence and mandate of SEO

Organisational independence

The SEO is indeed an external evaluation office under the administrative authority of the President of the Management Committee of the FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. This status should ensure – according to the self-evaluation – its independence in the choice, implementation and dissemination of its evaluations, while giving the unit access to a large amount of useful data through its internal position at the FPS. In practice, the evaluation function is clearly separated from the line management responsible for planning and managing development assistance, which means that the formal standard of organizational independence is met. The independent position of the SEO was considered to be good (52% of survey respondents) or excellent (16% of survey respondents), which indicates that the majority of stakeholders recognise this independent position, although the perception on the protection from outside influence is less positive than for the organisational independence (see Annex 4, Table A4.2 and Figures A4.2 and A4.3). No significant differences in perception per stakeholder group are visible.

Mandate

In chapter 2 reference has been made to the mandate of the SEO as laid down in the Royal Decrees of 2010 and the 2014 amendment. The 2013 Federal Law on development cooperation contains one chapter on evaluation, where it is stated that a coherent results-based management system will be developed. In this context, a distinction is made between internal and external evaluations. The Belgian development actors are responsible for their own results-based management, which includes monitoring and internal evaluations of the interventions they implement. The Law also states that the M&E-systems of development actors should be harmonised and certified. In addition, the Law refers to external evaluations, which are the responsibility of the SEO.

The 2010 Royal Decree stated that the SEO has the mandate to evaluate all DAC-related activities of the Belgian international cooperation. The autonomy of the SEO and its position independent of the DGD, is highlighted within the FPS. In addition, there are articles on the recruitment and mandate of the Special Evaluator, the budget, evaluation programming, annual reporting to the Parliament and the need for evaluation of the evaluation function towards the end of the term of the Special Evaluator. In 2014, the following main changes were stated in an amendment to the 2010 Royal Decree:

- Mandate refers to Belgian Development Cooperation rather than international cooperation and all DAC-related activities;
- Explicit reference to 'external evaluation';
- New article regarding responsibilities for certification of M&E systems of Belgian development actors, based on the 2013 Federal Law for Development Cooperation, stating in article 33 that these actors are responsible for internal evaluation and follow-up of interventions. The King would set the rules regarding harmonization and certification of these evaluation systems. In the 2014 amendment to the Royal Decree in Article 2.1 it is stated that a) the SEO would provide technical assistance to the DGD regarding the ex-ante assessment of monitoring and evaluation systems; b) certify these M&E systems; and c) evaluate ex-post the quality of the harmonised evaluation systems.

Observations regarding mandate and protection from outside influence

Although the organisational independence is widely recognised, the following observations have been made by survey respondents and in interviews on issues that affect the independence to some extent:

- The SEO mandate was apparently narrowed in 2014 from international cooperation to development cooperation, which might mean that activities related to DAC-expenditures on migration for example are excluded from the mandate. This seems to be a grey zone in the mandate. In addition, areas of foreign

affairs/ diplomacy and trade (related to the interests of the Belgian private sector) that are related to development cooperation, and which are important to assess coherence, are also outside the scope;⁴

- The mandate of SEO was expanded, when SEO became responsible for the certification of M&E systems of Belgian development actors. This is a substantial additional task, for which the SEO was not prepared (see Chapter 4);
- The FPS, including DGD, decide on the profile of the Special Evaluator and are involved in the selection process, decide on other SEO staff, and decide on the SEO budgets;
- The Inspector of Finance has to check all budgets for specific evaluations, and assesses whether evaluations are in line with the law and regulations of the Federal government. This gives substantial authority of the Inspector of Finance regarding the planning and implementation of SEO evaluations.

This means that the SEO is not fully protected from outside influence although basic mechanisms are in place. Interviewees have made other critical remarks regarding independence, but these are mainly related to behavioural independence and are discussed in Chapter 4.

3.3 Adequacy of other inputs

Budget

SEO has two different budgets: one for implementation of evaluation and certification activities by external experts and another budget for grants, which is used for joint evaluations (including MOPAN) and capacity building, which are presented in respectively Table 3.1. and Table 3.2.

Table 3.1 Budget for the implementation of SEO evaluations and certification, and grants budget 2011-2021

Year	SEO evaluations and certification processes				Grants			
	Budget (,000€)	Commitm. (,000 €)	Expenses (,000€)	Exp. as % of budget	Budget (,000€)	Commitm. (,000 €)	Expenses (,000€)	Exp. as % of budget
2011	1.500	798	852	57	570	192	342	60
2012	1.600	1.379	715	45	260	97	73	28
2013	1.420	842	1.170	82	0	0	24	NA
2014	1.420	517	756	53	210	0	0	0
2015	1.438	728	676	47	135	50	50	37
2016	1.350	592	503	37	200	0	0	0
2017	1.350	1.251	604	48	445	445	110	25
2018	1.200	426	918	76	150	120	225	150
2019	1.200	590	712	59	150	120	230	153
2020	996	544	383	38	370	198	243	66
2021	750	596	486 *		546	396	NA	NA

Source: SEO self-evaluation plus additional information provided on 21-12-2021. *

The columns regarding expenditures as % of budget should be interpreted with care. The expenses referring to one specific year might refer to a budget committed the previous year or even before. For example, the impact evaluations were committed in 2017 but the expenditures are spread over five years.

⁴ The evaluation of exit strategies looked into aspects of communication and public diplomacy.

The costs for certification are part of the budget for SEO evaluations and certification processes. From 2017 to 2021 the total costs for certification were € 551.655,- (including € 46.000 for the transversal analysis at the end), which is 18% of the budget over these years.

Based on these budget tables, the following observations can be made:

- The columns regarding the budget utilisation in Table 3.1 must be interpreted with care, as contextual factors affect the utilisation rate to an important extent. For example, for the series of NGO impact evaluations a multi-year commitment was made in 2018. From December 2018 to October 2020, Belgium had a caretaker government, which complicated government budget procedures and the possibility to start new projects, which also affected SEO.
- The budget for evaluations and certification has been halved from 2011 to 2021; while in 2022 the evaluation budget is € 940.000, showing fluctuations over time.
- There has been serious underutilisation of the budget for evaluations and certification with only two years – 2013 and 2018 – when more than 75% of the budget was spent. Expenditures were particularly low in 2020, possibly caused by Covid-19. This may explain the decrease of budget in 2021.
- The grants budget appears to show huge fluctuations, but this can to an important extent be explained by multi-year commitments (e.g. usually 3-year commitments for MOPAN), which also affected expenditures.
- The fluctuations in utilisation can also be explained by the number and type of evaluations. Impact evaluations are more expensive than most thematic evaluations.

Staff

One general explanation provided by the SEO for the underutilisation of budgets are the staff constraints, i.e. the fluctuating number of staff members and at times high turnover. In 2010 the DGD internal evaluation department was merged with the SEO, which led to an increase of staff at the time. The average number of staff in full-time equivalents varied between five (2015, 2016 and 2019) and eight (2010, 2011, 2013 and end 2021). At present, the composition of staff is as follows: one Special Evaluator, four evaluation officers, one evaluation coordinator, one communications officer and one administrative assistant. However, the average number of staff per year do not reflect important fluctuations that took place within one year. For example, in 2020 from January to August there were five staff members, which decreased to four in September and then increased to five again in January 2021. SEO accepted a budget reduction for 2021 as it knew it would not be able to fully use a larger budget with only four staff members by the end of 2020.

The staff recruitment modalities are linked to those foreseen for the FPS Foreign Affairs, except for the Special Evaluator. For all other positions specific expertise in the field of public policy evaluation is not required. Some staff had some evaluation expertise when they started, but that is not the case for most positions. Training can be planned for existing staff. For example, staff can attend the International Program for Development Evaluation Training (IPDET) workshops. In practice, training is mainly done "on the job" (learning by doing). It is more difficult for the staff to follow an academic training leading to a certificate.

Comparison of SEO resources with other evaluation functions

Most other evaluation offices are in a similar position, when it comes to recruitment from the own administration and staff having limited evaluation expertise. Some evaluation functions do also not have specific requirements for the head of office, as is the case for Belgium. The FPS, and in particular DGD where most staff with development expertise is working, faces staff constraints in general, which also affects SEO. The resources of SEO have been compared with other evaluation functions as presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Staff and costs SEO compared with four other evaluation offices

Country / office	Staff (FTE)*	Budget (€)*
SEO Belgium	5 - 8	1.200.000- 2.000.000
Finland	5 full-time staff 8 consultants	1.500.000
Ireland	6.75	230.000
Switzerland - SDC	5.4 + 2.5	660.000
Switzerland - SECO	1.3	220.000

Source: Peer Review of Four Evaluation Functions, 2020, p.11 and SEO self-evaluation.

*Figures are not directly comparable across the units given the different administrative systems.

The SEO budget appears to have been relatively high in relation to the number of staff. All these evaluation offices contract consultants to implement the evaluations. Finland has adopted a unique model as a consultant company implements all stages of the evaluation process, from TORs to final reports, through an Evaluation Management Services (EMS) contractor, based on a concept note drafted by the Finnish evaluation office. The advantage of such a model is that it increases the capacity to implement evaluations, while the disadvantage is that it makes an evaluation office less visible when consultants are not only responsible for implementation but for all content-related work.

4 Findings regarding SEO's work processes

In this chapter, findings regarding review question 2 – How do the SEO work processes and methods ensure independence and affect the quality of outputs? – are presented in line with the indicators in the review matrix. This includes all stages of the work processes from policy to preparation, recruitment of consultants, quality assurance, implementation, finalisation and publication of reports. The chapter deals also with the various types of SEO activities as defined in the ToC. The focus is on SEO evaluations, but separate sections deal with certification and networking activities.

Main findings SEO's work processes:

- SEO adheres to international norms and standards in all its work around its own evaluations, joint evaluations, certification and networking activities. The SEO evaluations are conducted in an independent and impartial way;
- Stakeholders highly appreciate the participatory approach and the open dialogue with SEO;
- Some stakeholders, including development actors and consultants, point at a natural tension between a participatory approach on the one hand and the independent position of SEO especially vis-à-vis government on the other. They perceive that SEO should sometimes be more outspoken;
- The overview of evaluations shows a wide variety of themes, instruments and channels of support, including a series of innovative impact evaluations. Nevertheless, the criteria for selection of evaluation topics can be made more transparent and complementarity with internal evaluations deserves more attention;
- Quality assurance of evaluations is perceived to be good in general but is in some cases negatively affected by SEO staff constraints;
- SEO decided to focus certification of the evaluation systems of development actors on evaluation capacity building, which is appreciated by stakeholders. There is evidence of a contribution to evaluation capacity building and better organized evaluation processes;
- However, there is no conclusive evidence whether certification has led to better internal evaluations. The links to monitoring and results-based management have been given limited attention;
- Certification has imposed a heavy burden on SEO staff and on development actors;
- Networking activities focus mainly on joint evaluations and capacity building and can be rather time-consuming as well. Not all networking activities can be considered as SEO core activities;
- The balance between various SEO activities shows room for improvement with more focus on SEO core activities.

4.1 SEO policy and planning of evaluations

Evaluation policy

The SEO has an evaluation policy, published in 2014. In 2013, the SEO commissioned a meta-evaluation of the programmes of NGAs, which indicated that DGD did not have an evaluation policy for the non-governmental cooperation. In fact, no evaluation policy existed at the time for the overall Belgian Development Cooperation. Interviewees indicated that this led to the formulation of an evaluation policy by SEO, even though the evaluation recommended DGD to prepare an evaluation policy. The 2014 evaluation policy⁵ focuses exclusively on the role

⁵ DBE, Evaluatiebeleid. Lessen trekken uit ervaringen en rekenschap afleggen over behaalde resultaten. Mei 2014.

of SEO and does not deal with internal evaluations and/or the complementarity between internal and external evaluations.

According to the guidelines for evaluation functions, an evaluation policy should provide a clear explanation of the concept, the institutional framework and use of the evaluation function, while conforming to international standards. The 2014 evaluation policy meets most of these standards. The SEO self-evaluation indicates that this policy is currently under review because many changes occurred in the strategy and the political and institutional landscape since 2014. One of the changes mentioned is that the SEO does not only work in partner countries as indicated in the policy, but also works in Belgium to assess the contribution to global citizenship and solidarity.

Evaluation planning

The SEO aims to focus on policy and strategic evaluations as programmes/interventions' evaluations are carried out by the development actors themselves. At the request of SEO, every two years, DGD makes an inventory of evaluation needs through consultation of its departments at headquarters and the embassies. SEO addresses these needs to the extent possible in a draft evaluation programme for a three-year period, with more specific evaluation priorities for the first year of the planning. As the expressed needs are not always related to strategic issues, and are sometimes more operational, not all needs are included in the draft evaluation planning. SEO discusses the draft planning every year with 1) the DGD Strategic Committee, and 2) the Follow-up Committee in which all key development actors are represented. Based on the consultations SEO further elaborates the three-year indicative planning leaving room for flexible adaptation to accommodate possible requests for evaluations by the Council of Ministers, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Development Cooperation or the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the FPS Foreign Affairs. In Annex 3 an overview of all SEO evaluations from 2010 to 2021 is presented, indicating the type of evaluation. This shows a wide variety of different evaluation themes and types of evaluation. The overview also shows that the number of evaluations declined somewhat over the years from years with 4-5 published SEO publications to 2-3 evaluations in 2019, 2020 and 2021, and none in 2017).

SEO explicitly aims for a participatory approach of its evaluation planning through the consultation process. The participatory approach, which has been given more attention since 2016 according to interviewees, is very much appreciated. 74% of survey respondents indicate that they recognize SEO's participatory approach (see Annex 4, Table A4.3). However, in interviews and in the answers to open survey questions, some critical remarks on the planning process are being made. Stakeholders raise some concerns regarding the outcomes of the participatory process on the actual planning. Interviewees point at the lack of explicit criteria for the selection of evaluations. Some interviewees also perceive the final evaluation planning as a kind of 'black box' and assume that the government (DGD, policy cell) has quite some influence over the planning.

SEO states that in the preparation of the planning, various criteria are applied such as ODA-coverage, various types of aid, modalities, instruments, partner countries, sectors, themes etc. While the SEO aims for a representative coverage of the whole development cooperation programme, this proves to be difficult in practice. One of the explanatory factors is that the SEO does not carry out a financial analysis that provides a global overview of the budget lines to ensure sufficient coverage per budget line ('allocation de base'). The SEO sees such a global overview as an area for improvement, although calculations for crosscutting themes such as D4D are not easy to make.⁶ While the SEO evaluation planning documents present a justification for the choice of evaluation topics, selection criteria are not explicitly presented.

If SEO's evaluation planning would be directly influenced by government, while the criteria for planning are not clear, this could affect SEO's behavioural independence. SEO denies that such influence is exerted by

⁶ In addition, there is a financial analysis in the evaluations indicating the budget covered.

government. There are cases such as the evaluation of the Fund for Food Security, where Parliament asked for an evaluation as the Minister decided to stop funding to this instrument. The evaluation of this Fund fitted very well the role of an external, independent evaluation office. The evaluations of Digital for Development (D4D) and entrepreneurship, which were political priorities at the time, were maybe somewhat premature. However, these evaluations cannot be considered as clear examples of political influence on the evaluation processes. The review team did not find any evidence regarding non-independent behaviour of the SEO, but interviews made clear that there is a natural tension between a participatory approach on the one hand and completely independent decision-making on the other.

Finally, interviews point at clear areas for improvement, which touch upon the evaluation planning such as the timing of evaluations to adequately address evaluation needs, while also complementarity with internal evaluations is mentioned as an area for improvement (see below).

Complementarity of external (SEO) and internal evaluations

In theory, there is good complementarity between internal and external evaluations as SEO focuses on strategic and overarching evaluations. Quite some SEO evaluations focus on topics on which various development actors are working such as Enabel, BIO, NGOs and institutional actors, which result in multi-actor evaluations. In the case of core funding of multilateral organisations, the focus is on a specific channel that only SEO can evaluate.

In the survey, 70% of respondents indicate that they see SEO's evaluation as complementary to the evaluation of development actors (see Annex 4, Table A4.3). This is a rather remarkable high score given some critical comments made. The discussion on complementarity should be situated in the context of the heavy evaluation burden of Belgian Development Cooperation. The following comments have been made:

- Complementarity of evaluations of the governmental cooperation can be further improved i.e. the complementarity between SEO evaluations and Enabel's internal evaluations. In the past, the management contracts of BTC indicated that every year SEO should evaluate at least ten BTC interventions. Although, the ToRs varied from one year to another with sometimes a more sectoral or thematic focus, or a focus on specific countries or cross-cutting themes, in practice this set-up was problematic. It did not lead to sufficient overarching conclusions and lessons and follow-up was limited. Therefore, in line with the 2013 Federal Law on Development Cooperation more autonomy was given to Enabel for its own evaluations; Over the years, Enabel (previously BTC) aimed to professionalise its M&E system. Initially, mid-term reviews and end evaluations of individual programmes were planned and implemented, but over time programmes were bundled in so-called country portfolios. Enabel evaluates these portfolios in line with the latest management contract considering the certification by SEO. Enabel also started implementing thematic evaluations. SEO, on the other hand, is now formally responsible for evaluating the country strategies.⁷ The roles and responsibilities regarding planning, implementation and evaluation of partner country strategies are spelled out in detail in the management contract with Enabel. At present, SEO has started implementing the first evaluation of country strategies, based on the management contract aiming to address the complementarity between Enabel's internal evaluation of country portfolios and SEO's evaluations. There have been meetings to avoid overlap between the external and internal evaluations, and the timing has been adjusted. Nevertheless, stakeholders still perceive overlap and consider the timing as problematic.
- The 2020 OECD-DAC peer review pointed also at the "risk of confusion as to who is responsible for country and sector evaluations: Enabel is responsible for evaluating the country portfolios that it implements, but the Office of the Special Evaluator is the only entity with the mandate to evaluate all the delivery channels and development co-operation actors of Belgian co-operation that operate in one country. Formalising the division of roles between the Office of the Special Evaluator and Enabel would make it possible to enhance the complementarity between evaluations, reduce the risk of duplication and avoid breaking the continuum of

⁷ Koninklijk Besluit houdende goedkeuring van het eerste beheerscontract tussen de Federale Staat en de naamloze vennootschap van publiek recht met sociaal oogmerk Enabel, Belgisch Ontwikkelingsagentschap. 7 December 2017. Artikel 8, paragraaf 5.

evaluations". One of the options to be discussed regarding complementarity is how to reach better final beneficiaries, which can be done through impact evaluations;

- Benin is a partner country where quite some SEO evaluations have focused on (e.g. three of the six selected evaluations for this peer review). The explanation is that Benin is not only an important partner country, but many changes to development approaches have been piloted there. However, it is perceived that evaluations do not sufficiently make use of earlier obtained insights but have a tendency to start from scratch. For example, in Benin, the evaluations on sustainability in the agricultural sector, the evaluation of entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector and the evaluation of the Belgian Fund for Food Security did not really build on previous lessons learned. Sometimes this is related to changes in position of stakeholders.⁸

Focus on impact evaluations

Since 2012 SEO gives attention to rigorous impact evaluations. A start was made with an impact evaluation of four interventions of governmental cooperation (See Annex 3, table A3.1, October 2013, number 19), followed by an impact of non-governmental cooperation (See Annex 3, table A3.1, January 2016, number 14) and an impact evaluation of Belgian university cooperation (See Annex 3, table A3.1, July 2018, number 4). In 2017, a series of five joint NGO impact evaluations started with assistance from SEO (See Annex 3, table A3.2). In 2017, it was decided that the development actors would be made responsible for impact evaluations to reinforce ownership as recommended by previous impact evaluations. This would be complementary to SEO doing impact evaluations, although SEO did not start or plan any impact evaluation after 2017. SEO has been praised for this rather early attention for impact evaluations by various stakeholders. This does not mean that there are various challenges regarding the implementation of impact evaluations as indicated below (see section 4.2).

4.2 Preparation and implementation of evaluations

Preparation of evaluations

Once the annual evaluation planning is ready, a start is made with the preparation of evaluations. Stakeholders are consulted regarding the formulation of the ToR. The ToRs systematically refer to the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria and it is made clear that SEO adheres to international evaluation norms and standards. Once the ToR is finalised, a budget is made. The preparation of evaluations is perceived to be quite cumbersome by the SEO evaluation managers given the legal requirements.

The SEO ToRs are perceived to be good with some exceptions, such as for the evaluation of entrepreneurship in Benin. In that case too many topics – entrepreneurship, focus on agricultural sector, multi-actor focus and comprehensive approach by team Belgium - were combined in one ToR, which negatively affected the evaluation. Sometimes questions are raised whether evaluations should always address all evaluation criteria. In other cases, the scope is perceived as being too broad and not sufficiently in-depth. Some stakeholders suggested that it might be more efficient and lead to more innovation if the ToRs are left more open, leaving it to the consultants in the Technical Proposal to elaborate innovative approaches.

There is one serious issue of concern, which is already raised in the self-evaluation. SEO states: "the participation of beneficiaries in the evaluation process remains a real challenge. Final beneficiaries' voices are hardly heard in practice for different reasons. This is a site the SEO would like to work on in the future". This is a common issue for evaluation offices, and not limited to the SEO. This is confirmed in the survey, as only 36% of the survey respondents agrees that SEO evaluations focus sufficiently on the final beneficiaries, one third is

⁸ For instance, the evaluation on entrepreneurship in Benin intended to learn lessons from the implementation of agricultural projects (as discussed with the Embassy, Enabel, DGD) to prepare the new bilateral programme with an entrepreneurial emphasis, but the Cabinet decided to start from scratch in a new sector. However, the entrepreneurship evaluation did not refer to the sustainability evaluation that was done earlier.

neutral and one fifth is negative. The focus on outcomes and impact is found to be good. (See Annex 4, Table A4.3).

The selection of consultants is done by SEO, sometimes involving development actors as well in the process. There is due attention to avoiding Conflicts of Interest. Nevertheless, some are of the opinion that the evaluations are too *belgo-belge*, although there are some international companies, and the SEO is open to recruit more international companies. Another critical remark is that the involvement of consultants from partner countries was given very limited attention until recently and was mainly left to the consultancies submitting a proposal, although involvement of national consultants was given some attention in the ToRs. However, in the recent ToR on humanitarian aid (outside the scope of this evaluation) the involvement of local experts is explicitly mentioned, while it is also mentioned that this involvement will be part of the scoring.

Participatory approach

As already indicated above, almost three quarters of the survey respondents is positive about the participatory approach to SEO evaluations throughout the evaluation process (see Annex 4, Table A4.3). During implementation, stakeholders participate in Reference Groups that meet three or four times during the evaluation process. SEO asks DGD, the policy cell and development actors to participate in Reference Groups. The perception of these meetings and the dialogue is rather positive. Before 2016 external experts did participate from time to time in Reference Groups, but recently that has not been the case anymore. Inviting external experts to Reference Groups is common practice for some other evaluation offices.

Role of SEO evaluation manager vis-à-vis consultants; quality assurance

The SEO evaluation manager oversees the evaluation process, prepares the ToR, prepares the selection of consultants, invites stakeholders for the Reference Group, and finally is in charge of quality assurance.⁹ The consultants are responsible for the methodological design, data collection and analysis, preparation of reports and presenting the findings in a restitution meeting. On paper, this division of labour is clear. As indicated above, all stakeholders, including consultants appreciate the participatory approach and open dialogue.

In practice, the role of the evaluation manager is affected by the experience the SEO staff member has, and turnover of staff. Given the staff turnover, there have been evaluations with three SEO evaluation managers but this was only the case for the NGO impact evaluations. In such a case, the consultants become the face of the SEO evaluation rather than SEO. Most evaluations are led by one evaluation manager.

In the case of the five impact evaluations, SEO is not formally managing these evaluations, but provides advice. In this case SEO is not formally managing these evaluations but provides advice and funding. A Steering Committee with NGO-umbrella organisations is in charge of the overall process and SEO is participating in this Steering Committee. However, given the turnover of SEO staff, SEO has been relatively invisible in this process, which is also due to the set-up. A tender was launched for the design of the five impact evaluations and for providing quality assurance throughout the process, while the implementation of the five impact evaluations was separately tendered to various consultancy companies. In practice, this led to a heavy and costly process with duplication of roles, especially in the design phase where new designs were made according to the insights of the evaluators in charge. A difference in various schools of impact evaluations became visible, which complicated the process. In practice, various designs are applied parallel to each other. It is remarkable that apparently no in-depth discussions have taken place on these important methodological differences in opinion. The five impact evaluations are now being finalised and it is important to draw lessons on the process, methodology and results when going forward. An additional issue to be considered for SEO is whether they should not take the lead in

⁹ IEG of the WBG mentions the following roles for the evaluation manager: ensure that the objectives are clear, maintain ownership, negotiate expectations with stakeholders, monitor evaluation progress, be open to suggestions from evaluators, ensure evaluators have full access to information, meet with evaluators and stakeholders, approve the final report and organize restitutions.

impact evaluations rather than the development actors (which does not only apply to the non-governmental cooperation, but also to the governmental cooperation).

Consultants perceive SEO as relatively flexible and a good partner to work with. In its Quality Assurance SEO adheres to international evaluation standards and ethics. SEO does not have a standard template to provide comments on inception, interim and final reports. Often consultants consider these templates used by other evaluation offices as rather rigid. The lack of quality assurance templates has also some risks as the comments become very dependent on the expertise of the SEO staff involved. This risk became clear around some impact evaluations when different SEO staff members expressed different views on the methods used. There are different schools of impact evaluations. Some SEO staff members clearly adhere to one school -say the most rigorous one- while others accept also less rigorous approaches. While some consultants are of the opinion that SEO should opt only for one school, SEO is of the opinion that it is interesting to work with different schools and most stakeholders share this opinion. While this is an acceptable point of departure, SEO should avoid expressing mixed messages to consultants and stakeholders, which has sometimes been the case.

4.3 SEO networking and partnerships

Partnerships

The SEO is participating in various national and international networks and platforms such as OECD-DAC-EvalNet, EUHES (network of evaluators of the EU Member States) and Flemish, Walloon and German language evaluators, and the European Evaluation Society (EES). In this context the SEO contributed to the formulation and translation of the revised OECD-DAC criteria, while also a meeting on this topic was organised for Belgian development actors.

Given the participative approach, specific attention has been paid since 2016 to active participation in Belgian platforms and networks, which is positively appreciated by stakeholders. In addition, learning events in Belgium are organised such as lectures by the Special Evaluator. As most of the time, the Special Evaluator has to represent the SEO, there are clear time constraints regarding the network activities.

Participation in Steering Committees BIO and NGO impact evaluations and in Enabel evaluation reference groups

SEO certified the evaluation system of BIO, which is conducting one thematic evaluation per year, while also BIO-activities are covered by SEO-evaluations, depending on the topic. As BIO has a special status, SEO is participating in the Steering Committee of the annual BIO-evaluations. Most of the time, the Special Evaluator participated in these meetings, but given the work load this responsibility is handed over to another staff member. In addition, SEO participates in Enabel evaluation reference groups.

In 2017, DGD and SEO provided a joint budget of € 1.1 million for five impact evaluations of NGOs. The *NGO-federaties* are managing these impact evaluations, while a Steering Committee in which SEO is participating is providing guidance. SEO's visibility in these evaluations is affected by the turnover of SEO staff as three different SEO-staff members have participated in the Steering Committee.

Joint international evaluations and MOPAN

SEO participates also in joint international evaluation, but recently there are less joint international evaluations. The latest joint international evaluation report on the SEO website dates from 2015 and concerns a joint evaluation of budget support to Burundi. Other joint evaluations date from 2014, 2011 and 2010 (see Annex 3, Table A3.2). SEO also indicated that they participate sometimes in reference groups of EU development

cooperation evaluations such as the evaluation of the EU Trust Fund. However, staff constraints hinder a more pro-active participation.

Finally, SEO contributes to the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) both financially as well as participation in meetings. Often funding departments of other donors participate in MOPAN meetings and not the evaluation offices. Therefore, given the staff constraints, it is the question whether this participation of SEO in MOPAN should be continued in the future.

Evaluation capacity-building in partner countries

SEO also funds an external institute for evaluation capacity-building in partner countries through funding of seminars and training for evaluators, with a focus on evaluation platforms and societies. This is done in line with the ideas of the aid effectiveness agenda in which ownership of partner countries play a key role. Other donors, however, see capacity-building in the area of monitoring and evaluation as part of their regular development cooperation and not as a task of the independent evaluation office. If these capacity-building efforts would be evaluated, there would be no independent evaluation function left to do so. Although other evaluation offices might be involved in some light forms of capacity-building through partnerships with and seminars for evaluation associations in partner countries, they do not see capacity-building as a key objective. Evaluation offices do have an interest in the availability of good evaluation knowledge and expertise in partner countries as experts can be included in evaluation teams and have added value. However, as indicated above so far the SEO paid limited attention to requirements to include evaluators of partner countries in proposals for SEO-evaluations, although that appears to be changing recently.

In addition to evaluation capacity-building in partner countries, SEO is also involved in evaluation capacity-building in Belgium through individual training and certification, which will be discussed below. In the discussion of the draft final report with the peer review panel, it was mentioned that it would be useful for SEO to reflect on SEO's role and responsibility regarding evaluation capacity-building and how to measure this. This issue will be further discussed below as it is questionable whether capacity-building should be considered as a core task of SEO.

4.4 Certification

Objectives

As discussed in chapter 2 and 3, certification is a new set of activities based on the 2013 Federal Law for Development Cooperation and further amended in the 2014 Royal Decree. The Discussion Note of the SEO on certification states that the objective is to strengthen evaluation systems of development actors and thereby to improve the quality of the available information on results of interventions and programmes¹⁰. According to this Discussion Note, the certification cycle would be renewed every five years in order to stimulate continuous improvement. This would mean that in 2022 a new cycle of certification processes would start even if this was not foreseen in the Federal Law.

While the initial idea behind the legislation was to screen development actors whether they were fit for purpose regarding M&E, SEO wanted the process to be more constructive and with a focus on learning, rather than a focus on accountability. This approach is explicitly adopted in the Framework Note on certification and in the

¹⁰ Discussion Note of the SEO on Certification of the M&E systems of the Belgium development actors. No date.
The document states the objectives more specifically: For DGD, certification should help improve development actors' M&E systems and dialogue with the DGD; For the SEO, certification aims to contribute to improved complementarity between internal and external evaluations; And for the development actors, certification should be regarded as a lever to strengthen follow-up and evaluations, and should lead to reflections on M&E capacities.

Certification Handbooks, labelling it as an instrument for dialogue, learning and improved decision-making¹¹. Therefore, the certification instrument is called the Evaluation Capacity Building (ECB) Initiative. Furthermore, SEO made the choice to focus mainly on evaluation processes and systems. The assumption behind these practices is that improving evaluation systems results in better quality reports that will be used. While linkages to monitoring are being made in practice, this is not an explicit part of certification.

Stakeholders indicate in interviews that the certification objectives – to improve evaluation systems for better evaluations – are clear. They mention that objectives are clearly communicated in the handbook and documents and throughout the assessment. In the survey, 78% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement that objectives of certification are clear and shared by stakeholders (see Annex 4, Table A4.4).

Set-up of certification process

It took a while to start the certification process after the 2014 decision in the Royal Decree. It was decided to start the process after the screening by Deloitte and after the appointment of the new Special Evaluator in September 2016. Only in 2017, a pilot phase started during which the approach and ToR were developed and in which eight organisations participated¹². This pilot phase was subject to significant delays. The full certification process started in 2018, and since 2017, 76 development actors have been certified.¹³ The ECB certificate confirms the quality of the (external) evaluation system, of the evaluation practice and the commitment to improvement of an organisation".¹⁴ The certification process is set up in five steps: 1) a self-evaluation and improvement plan by the organisation; 2) a request for the ECB certificate; 3) the preparation for a visit by the assessor; 4) the visit by the assessor; 5) awarding the ECB Certificate; and 6) follow-up including a transversal analysis and learning event by the SEO and institutional dialogue for the development partners¹⁵. SEO and external consultants developed handbooks as tools for the self-evaluation and the assessor. According to the set-up, the certification process would need to be repeated every five years.

Respectively 72% and 71% of the survey respondents that answered the question, indicate that the guidelines are clear and that the roles and responsibilities of various actors are clear (see Annex 4, Table A4.4). Interviewees were also particularly satisfied with the guidelines, which they perceived as useful, clear and transparent. They mention also that the handbook for self-evaluation is very useful tool and that they value the participatory approach of the process.

Currently, the SEO is finalising a transversal analysis of all certification assessments. This was started by an intern taking stock of the process so far. On that basis SEO decided to contract consultants for a full analysis to draw lessons learned and discuss the way forward. The analysis is based on an inventory of self-assessment reports and assessor reports, while also the quality of evaluations of certified actors has been assessed both by the organisations as well as the consultants. In the section on results, reference is made to the preliminary outcomes of this analysis.

Perceptions of the certification process

Interviewees representing all development actors perceive the heavy workload and the length of the process as the main certification challenge. While for the development actors eight days were planned for the process, in practice, it took many days and months to finalise the entire process. The heavy workload was particularly apparent as certification was seen as a partial duplication of screening processes as it took place right after the periodic performance assessment of NGAs in view of new programme funding. In 2016, DGD contracted Deloitte

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Stavaza certificering, 2021, internal document.

¹³ Comments by SEO, January 2022

¹⁴ https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/development_cooperation/how_we_work/special_evaluation_office/certification accessed on 18 October 2021.

¹⁵ SEO. (2017). Study on the development of an instrument for the certification of evaluation systems of actors of the Belgian Development Cooperation, FOD Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation.

for this screening on various performance criteria, including M&E systems. One year later, SEO started the more in-depth certification process of evaluations in which overlap could not be avoided.

While interviewees are positive about the self-assessment and participatory workshops, they perceived the role of the assessors as unclear. The assessor's main function is seen as facilitating a reflection process with limited added value after the self-assessment. In theory, the assessment was supposed to avoid *ticking the boxes* on whether evaluation elements are present, such as a standardised ToRs, and instead to make it a brainstorm and capacity building exercise on for instance elaborating specific evaluation questions. Yet, in practice, this appeared to be difficult, and interviewees still perceive the process as ticking boxes which is less useful and with far too generic recommendations by the assessors. Despite a common template and criteria, the interpretation by assessors varies, which leads to variation in depth of analysis and quality of assessment reports. As further elaborated on below, this limited the usefulness of the reports for some organisations.

As the assessors are consultants contracted by the SEO, the development actors are mainly or only in contact with the assessors. Interviewees mention that they had almost no contact with the SEO on the certification process, limiting dialogue. This shows that consultants were the main face of SEO in the certification processes.

Results

Some development actors view certifications as an obligation and others view it as an opportunity. In interviews, reflection on the core function of evaluations is mentioned as the main contribution of certification. Development actors value the process as an opportunity to improve their evaluation systems and to reflect on the usefulness of different elements and approaches. Some interviewees mention that it increased awareness of measuring results and that it was useful for staff members to show the importance of M&E at managerial level. In interviews, institutional actors are in general more positive about the process than NGAs as some institutional actors mention follow-up actions after having received the certificate, by for instance hiring an external consultant to help implementing the recommendation plan.

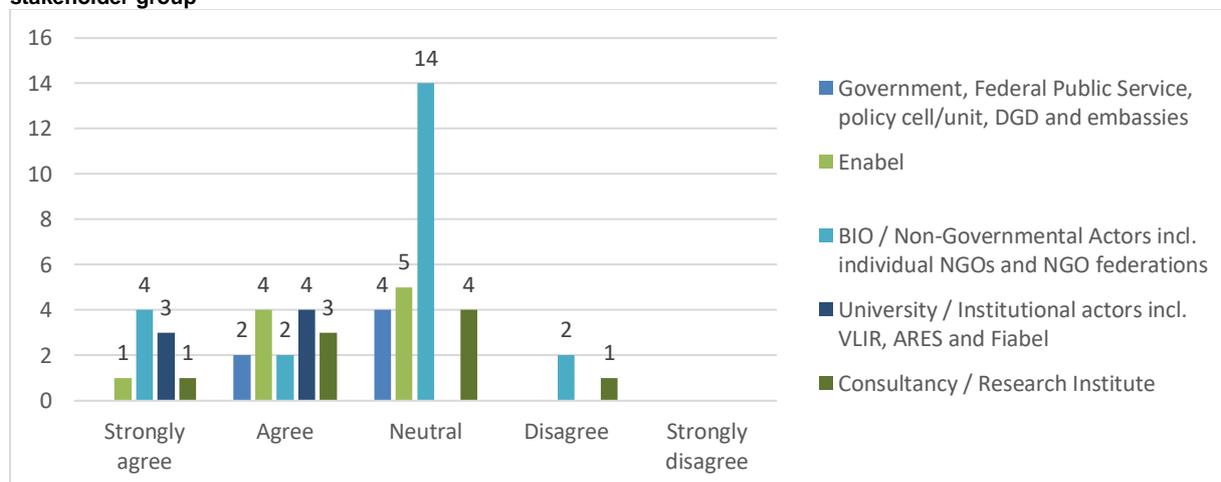
This is confirmed by the draft report of the transversal analysis of certification, which shows that certified development actors have made improvements in the evaluation process. Their evaluation capacities have improved, evaluation processes are better organised with an improved evaluation planning, better quality ToRs, and attention to quality assurance throughout the process. The report states that evaluation budgets are still relatively low. In this peer review, these findings are confirmed to a large extent as 54% of the survey respondents agrees or strongly agrees that the certification improves the evaluation capacity of actors (see Annex 4, Table A4.4). However, interviewees are especially critical about the added value of certification because of the heavy and costly process, which is also reflected in the transversal analysis report of certification.

The key issue is whether better evaluation processes also lead to better quality internal evaluations and better use. In the transversal analysis the quality of 199 evaluation reports of 77 organisations has been assessed against the criteria of validity, reliability and usefulness. Both the NGAs themselves as well as the assessors scored the evaluation reports. The self-evaluation scores were in all cases higher than the scores of the assessors. Nevertheless, the evaluation reports in general were considered to be of good to sufficient quality with good descriptions and well structured. Issues for improvements are methodology and concrete recommendations. As there has been no baseline, it could not be assessed whether the quality of internal evaluations improved due to certification based on this information. Also, the linkages to monitoring have not been addressed.

In this peer review, it has been found that only 44% of the survey respondents are of the opinion that certification leads to better evaluations as illustrated in Figure 4.1, while a high number of respondents does not express an

opinion. Institutional actors are most positive, and certified actors are primarily neutral. This means that there is no conclusive evidence whether certification did lead to better quality evaluations.

Figure 4.1 Perceptions of survey respondents on better evaluations by certified development actors, per stakeholder group



* The single respondent of the parliament group is added to Government.

Certification remains an optional process without obligations – except for Enabel as certification is mentioned in the management contract – and interviews suggest that follow-up has been limited. In theory, DGD would be responsible for follow-up in the periodic institutional dialogue with all dossier managers.¹⁶ In practice, however, the agenda in such dialogues proved to be already extensive, often not allowing time for covering the certification assessment.

4.5 Balance between activities

SEO has a wide range of activities in which it is involved. At present, the work load due to the many different activities is too high and it goes at the expense of the core task of SEO to do good quality, credible and useful external evaluations.

Especially the responsibility for certification of evaluation systems of development actors stands out as hardly any evaluation office has such a screening responsibility. Although SEO aimed to make it an evaluation capacity exercise, it is still an additional activity that had an impact on the management of evaluations, especially as SEO is already confronted with staff constraints.

As a result of the certification workload, less evaluations could be implemented. Given the operational character of the certification task, the question should be raised if this task – which is planned to be done every five years albeit it in a lighter form – should not be transferred to DGD as it is part of the screening process. In this way, more efficiencies can be realised. SEO, on the other hand, could focus on independent transversal meta-evaluations of internal evaluations, which is a typical SEO task. This would allow SEO also to focus more on complementarity between external and internal evaluations.

Other more or less demanding non-core tasks of SEO such as participation in MOPAN should also be discussed, including the option whether DGD is not better situated for this task.

¹⁶ Interviews, and: SEO. (2017). Study on the development of an instrument for the certification of evaluation systems of actors of the Belgium Development Cooperation, FOD Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation.

5 Findings regarding credibility

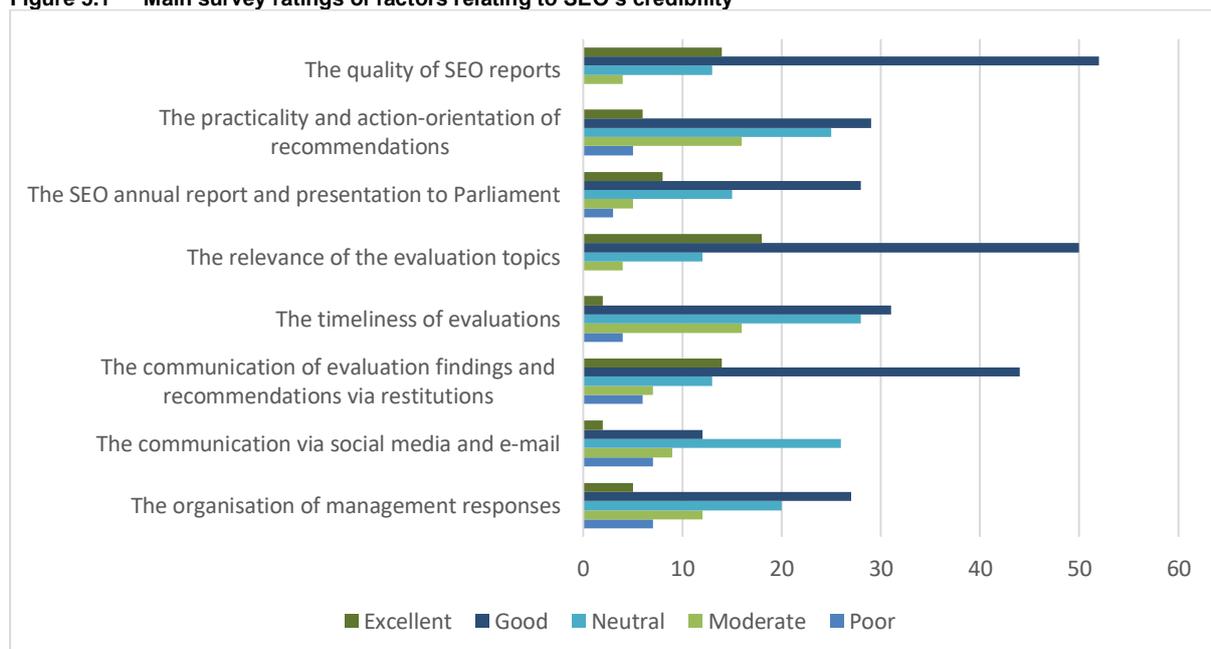
In this chapter the answers to the third review question: “What are the main factors determining the credibility of the SEO?” are presented. The structure of the chapter follows the review matrix. In this chapter, the focus is on the main aspects determining credibility, while the explanatory factors are dealt with in Chapter 6 regarding utility and use to avoid repetition.

Main findings regarding SEO's credibility:

- The quality of SEO evaluations and the relevance of evaluation topics are very positively appreciated by most stakeholders;
- The two main weaknesses that negatively affect SEO's credibility to some extent are: 1) The practicality and action-orientation of recommendations, and 2) The timeliness of evaluations;
- Stakeholders agree that, in principle, the annual SEO report to Parliament is useful as an accountability instrument but discussions remain limited. More attention to cross-cutting issues addressed in various evaluations rather than presentation of individual evaluations, could stimulate debate and lead to more overarching conclusions;
- While consultants are responsible for conducting the evaluation and finalisation of reports, they are hardly involved in follow-up, except for restitution meetings. This creates a missing link in the evaluation process and a gap in the dialogue. It could be considered for SEO to be more visible throughout the evaluation, with a small follow-up role for the consultants;
- The management response system in itself is considered to be useful, but parallel management responses by various development actors make the system rather heavy. Follow-up in practice is limited.

In Figure 5.1, the main survey ratings of factors relating to credibility are presented:

Figure 5.1 Main survey ratings of factors relating to SEO's credibility



5.1 Perceived quality of reports

SEO evaluations

57% of the survey respondents consider the quality of the evaluation reports as good, and another 15% even thinks the reports are excellent (see Figure 5.1 and Annex 4, Table A4.5). This is a very good rating. The quality of the report depends on different factors such as the quality of the consultants, the quality of the ToR, evaluability, the evaluation process including quality assurance mechanisms and interests from stakeholders. Different stakeholders set different criteria and indicators to assess the quality of evaluation reports. The positive rating is somewhat in contrast with more critical observations made in the open questions of the survey and in interviews. These critical observations are that the reports are too long and too vague. Some also perceive that too many issues are being dealt with. The main criticisms are regarding recommendations, which are discussed below.

SEO has a template, but no strict guidelines regarding templates, length of reports and executive summaries. SEO aims to limit the length of reports and increasingly asks consultants to move parts of the text of the draft report to annexes and by specifying the maximum number of pages in the ToR. Consultants do appreciate this flexibility and lack of rigour. Most other evaluation departments have more strict requirements for the final reports and summaries. A check on the length of Executive summaries of the five selected evaluations¹⁷ shows that the length varies between 3.5 and 7 pages, including three summaries with more than five pages. SEO is of the opinion that the guidelines can be further clarified.

SEO has experimented with short policy reports as a separate more user-friendly summary of the evaluations. For the six evaluation, one policy paper for the evaluation of core-funding to multilateral organisations is published on the website. It is 8 pages long and has some pictures. This might be attractive to a broader audience, but it has not been mentioned in interviews or in the survey as a significant improvement. One might wonder if the standard executive summaries should not be user-friendly for a large audience. Executive summaries do not need to deal necessarily with answers to all evaluation questions and all evaluation criteria. At present, there can be three different summaries of SEO evaluations: parallel to each other 1) the executive summary in the report; 2) a policy paper; 3) the summary in SEO's annual report (see below). This is quite time-consuming and not very efficient. SEO may want to consider developing guidelines for user-friendly short summaries made by the consultants implementing the evaluation. The final chapter of the evaluation reports presents conclusions and recommendations while providing answers to the evaluation questions. These final chapters, as is already the case, are longer than the summaries and somewhat more technical. There is no need for rather long and technical summaries according to most stakeholders.

Practicality of recommendations

Stakeholders are of the opinion that the practicality of the recommendations, in particular the specificity and action-orientation of recommendations could be improved. This is indeed reflected in a substantial lower rating of this aspect in the survey (see Annex 4, Table A4.5). The content of the recommendations is felt to be too general, which negatively affects follow-up. Interviewees wonder who might find them interesting and precise enough to be able to take them forward. In the selected evaluations, the number of recommendations and the way how they are presented varies enormously. There are quite some general recommendations such as improving the strategic and operational frameworks, better collaboration among stakeholders, elaboration and use of Theories of Change. This shows that there is room for improvement to make more specific and practical recommendations.

The (perceived) quality and usefulness of recommendations is an overall evaluation issue of concern and is not specific to SEO. Other evaluation departments have experimented with workshops to jointly develop the

¹⁷ The NGO impact evaluation on youth engagement is excluded, because it is not a typical SEO evaluation.

recommendations with stakeholders, and SEO has also tried this out. More attention to the forward-looking focus of the evaluation from the start onwards is another option to get better recommendations, which SEO is aware of and attempts to do, for instance with the evaluation on entrepreneurship in Benin.

Annual SEO reports to Parliament

SEO produces an annual report in which the evaluations published during the previous year are summarised. This report is presented to the Parliamentary Committee on External Relations. The elaboration of the annual report is quite time-consuming. The rating of these reports is substantially lower than the rating of SEO's evaluation reports (see Annex 4, Table A4.5). Some interviewees have suggested that it might be more interesting to draw generic across evaluations, while above it has been suggested that the summaries in evaluation reports can be used for the annual reports as well provide that they are user-friendly. A disadvantage of the present system is that SEO makes its own summary of the evaluation report without consulting the authors, which may lead to different interpretations and accents. In 2019, the Committee indicated that the annual reports were interesting, but that readability could be improved. The SEO made efforts to do so, and in 2020 and 2021 the Committee stated that it was satisfied with the improvements. The annual meetings with Parliament are discussed in section 6.1.

Evaluation topics and timeliness

Both these issues affect the credibility of SEO evaluations. The survey findings regarding the relevance of the evaluation topics and the timeliness of evaluations are in sharp contrast. The ratings for relevance are very positive, while the rating on timeliness is considerably less positive. As findings regarding the relevance of evaluation topics have already been discussed in relation to SEO's evaluation programming (see section 3.1), the discussion here focuses on some elements of timeliness.

The timing of SEO evaluations is mentioned as an issue that requires more attention. Evaluations should be properly timed to allow stakeholders to make use of the results in new policies, strategies, programme proposals and implementation processes. Although the evaluation planning is based on needs assessments, the timing issue is insufficiently considered according to various stakeholders. Examples are provided of premature evaluations of topics which were hardly implemented at the time (for instance, D4D, comprehensive approach in combination with entrepreneurship in Benin evaluation). Another example is the evaluation of private sector development, which was finalised, only after a new policy note was published.¹⁸ Not only SEO is responsible but also government and development actors.

5.2 Communication

Restitution

The communication of evaluation findings and recommendations via restitutions is rated rather high in the survey with 69% of the survey respondents answering good or excellent (excl. NA). This score is reflected but also very much nuanced in the interviews. Interviewees mentioned the restitution meetings of the evaluations of the Belgian Fund for Food Security and Decent Work specifically as examples of good restitutions.

Furthermore, some critical issues are raised in interviews: although organising a restitution meeting for a large group of stakeholders ensures that groups such as attachés are present, the large size and variety of the stakeholder groups are an obstacle for effective dialogue and debate. Moreover, interviewees mention that they miss a clear purpose of the meeting, because findings are generally presented without much room for dialogue, and it is perceived as one-way communication. Interviewees are sometimes disappointed by the outcomes of the meeting as they feel there was no real dialogue. For instance, for the evaluations on Agricultural

¹⁸ OECD-DAC peer review Belgium, 2020.

Entrepreneurship in Benin and the exit evaluation a joint restitution meeting was organised. However, according to some stakeholders hardly any cross-linkages between the evaluations were established, while the SEO is of the opinion that cross-linkages were established via the presentation of innovative projects and that there was a good debate. These very different perceptions clearly show the challenges related to organising good restitution meetings. Some perceive it as a missed opportunity to discuss common critical conclusions and to start a debate, while others see it as (the start of) a good debate. While, in principle, restitution meetings are organised prior to management responses, it is not always whether and how restitutions have been used as input. Currently, the dominant perception in interviews and the answers to open survey questions is that restitution meetings do not lead sufficiently to debate, learning and knowledge exchange despite the high survey ranking.

Other means of communication

25% of the survey respondents in the survey rate the communication via social media and e-mail as good or excellent, and 46% answer the question with neutral (see Annex 4, table A4.5). This is a rather low rating. Only recently SEO started to be more active on social media and to focus on more attractive forms of communication, as recently a communications officer joined SEO. Therefore, this may explain the limited visibility as some comments in the survey suggest. Yet an interviewee also mentions that recently, the SEO has become more visible on social media. Interviewees have made some comments on the website, mentioning that information is comprehensive and clearly presented, although not very attractive. The SEO also asks federations and institutional actors to disseminate evaluations findings among organisation's members, but it could not be checked to what extent this has been the case.

Several interviewees suggested to present evaluation results more visually, for instance by presenting main findings with two-pagers and infographics (see section 5.1). The 2016 communication of the NGO impact evaluations is an example that was particularly well received. as SEO made a film that was published on the website, and it organised different events on the evaluation.

5.3 Management response system

Management responses are published on the SEO website. The different actors produce their own management response in which they indicate whether and how they will address the recommendations. For the selected evaluations, the number of management responses varies between one management response from DGD for the evaluation of core-funding of multilateral organisations to four management responses for the evaluation of the Common Strategic Framework Decent Work, and three for the other three evaluations. The management response system gets one of the lowest ratings in the survey as only one third is positive, while one fifth rates it as moderate or poor (see Annex 4, Table A4.5).

Consultants do regret that they are not at all informed or involved in management responses. They have to check the SEO website. Consultants see a missing link between the finalisation of the evaluation and the management response, and this also applies to SEO to some extent. In most cases the dialogue from the valuation process, is felt to end abruptly. SEO has made some efforts to be somewhat more pro-active in management response process, by organising sessions with DGD staff to explain evaluation findings and how to go about the management response. In most cases, there is no direct link between the restitutions and management responses, which is considered as a missed opportunity.

The multiple management responses with no links between each other, are also considered as problematic. Not in all cases it is opportune that institutional actors prepare a management response. The work burden of preparing a management response is also perceived to be high. In the case of the rather politicised evaluation of the Belgian Fund for Food Security, the management responses served to indicate the position of each actor.

This evaluation is probably an exception, and, in most cases, stakeholders argue that a joint management response would be better. Those stakeholders who expressed themselves on the subject, see the policy cell as the main actor to coordinate this process among the stakeholders involved.

The problem is not necessarily with the template of the management response, although given the issues with quality of the recommendations, the exclusively focus on recommendations reinforces the weaknesses. The main issue is that there is insufficiently dialogue and the Management responses become a bureaucratic formality. SEO has some system in place to do a follow-up of the management responses after two years. This was praised in the 2020 OECD-DAC peer review of Belgium, stating “The monitoring of recommendations is exemplary”.¹⁹ This praise was apparently related to the follow-up of a recommendation of the 2015 OECD-DAC peer review. In practice, this follow-up remains rather formalistic and does not go in-depth, which means that the added value according to stakeholders is limited.

¹⁹ OECD-DAC peer review Belgium, 2020.

6 Findings regarding utility and use

In this chapter the answers to the fourth review question: “To what extent does SEO contribute to accountability and learning and are evaluations used for decision-making?” are presented in line with the review matrix. After sections on accountability, perceived usefulness and actual use the SEO contribution to evaluation capacity building is discussed. Finally, factors explaining utility and use are presented.

Main findings regarding utility and use:

- The SEO evaluations are used to inform Parliament, which is useful from an accountability perspective. This does, however, not lead to in-depth debate or media attention;
- The actual use of evaluations provides a mixed picture, in line with international evaluation practice. There is evidence that at least 50% of the evaluations have been used during and/or after the evaluation process for changes in planning and implementation by development actors. There is less evidence of use at policy or strategic level;
- SEO did contribute to evaluation capacity building, and this led to more knowledge and better organization of evaluation processes. There are some indications that this led to better evaluations, but this evidence is not yet conclusive;
- The main factors determining utility and use are timing of evaluations, complementarity, participatory approach and practicality and specificity of recommendations.

In Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2 below, the main survey results regarding use and utility are presented:

Figure 6.1 Survey perceptions on use and utility

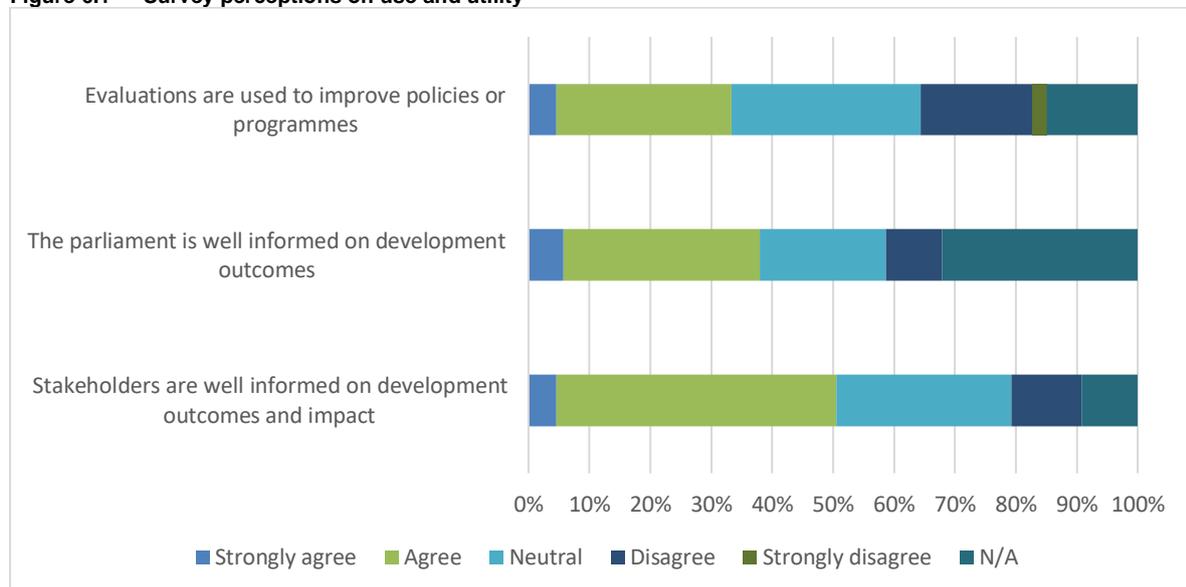
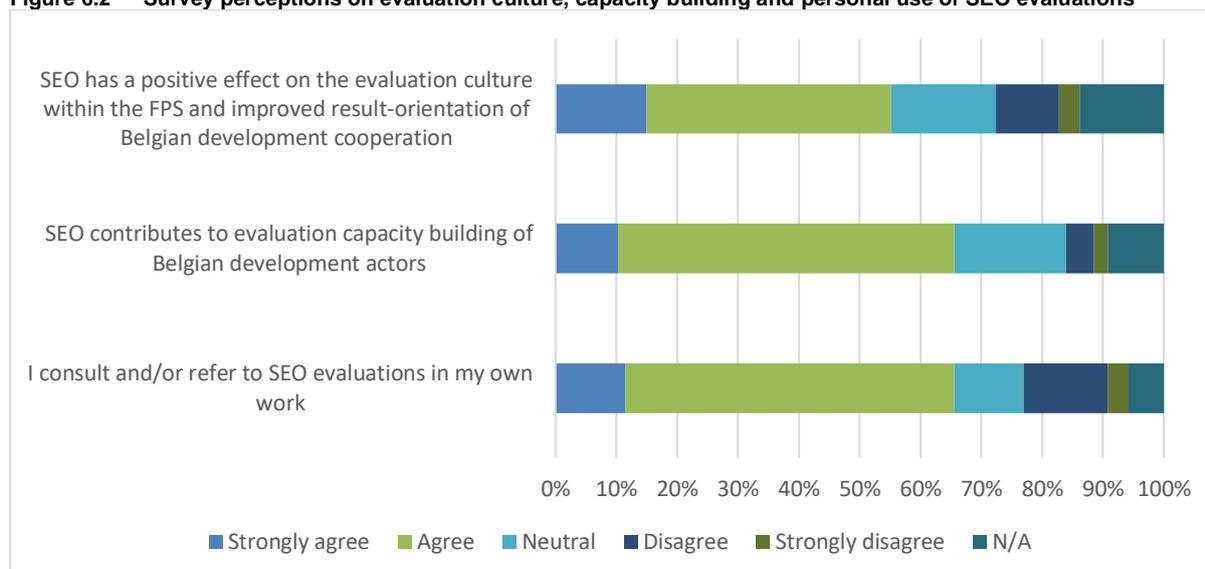


Figure 6.2 Survey perceptions on evaluation culture, capacity building and personal use of SEO evaluations



6.1 Accountability: information to Parliament and the public

Every year the Special Evaluator presents the annual SEO report to the Parliamentary Committee on External Relations followed by an exchange of thoughts. Both the annual reports and the minutes of these exchanges can be found on the SEO website. See for a discussion on the annual reports section 5.1. The presentation and discussion in Parliament is especially important from an accountability perspective. In this way, the SEO reports to the elected representatives of the Belgian public. It is an opportunity to reach a broader audience and to contribute to the policy debate on development cooperation.

During the various annual sessions Members of Parliament ask additional questions and react on evaluation findings and conclusions. This is valued by most stakeholders as indicated in interviews and the survey, although some stakeholders see limited value added. Interviewees indicate that the setting in which the annual SEO report is presented is an important challenge as it is difficult to have an in-depth discussion in Parliament.

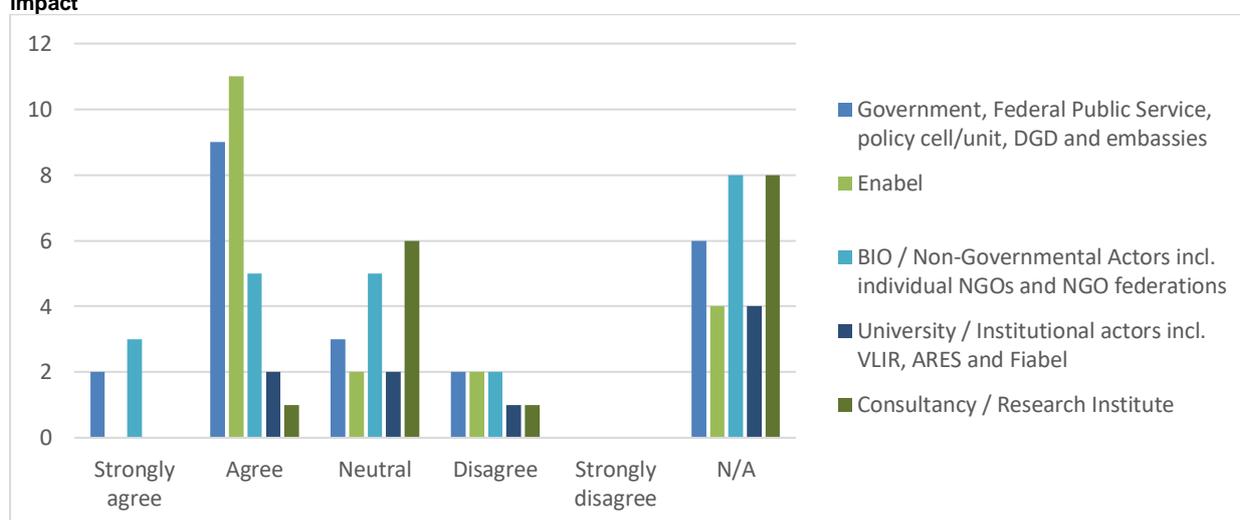
It should be noted that despite efforts to interview parliamentarians, no interview could be planned and only one parliamentarian responded to the survey. 38% of the survey respondents agreed that the Parliament is well informed on development outcomes by SEO (incl. N/A), while more than 50% was neutral or did not have an opinion, and 9% disagreed (see Figure 6.1, and Annex 4, Table A4.6). This is comparable to the rating of the SEO annual report to Parliament (see section 5.1). There is no evidence that SEO evaluations led to substantial media attention.

In terms of actual follow-up there is no concrete evidence that any follow-up action by Parliament has been taken. There are no instances reported where parliamentarians asked the Minister questions based on SEO evaluation findings or recommendations. For example, in the case of the evaluation of the Belgian Fund for Food Security there was a restitution with the parliamentary work group on development cooperation, which led to lively debate as the evaluation made clear that the Fund served a purpose and had some good results, while the Minister had decided to abolish it. After this restitution there was no follow-up as indicated by interviewees.

6.2 Perceived usefulness of evaluations

The opinions regarding the usefulness of SEO evaluations vary quite substantially among the various stakeholders but is mainly positive and higher than for information to Parliament, as is illustrated in Figure 6.3 below. The appreciation varies also in relation to which evaluations the actors have been involved in. Some respondents are quite positive and state that they found the participation in the evaluation processes quite useful, even if these processes were quite heavy and time-consuming. The perceptions on usefulness are closely related to the perceptions on the quality and accessibility of reports and of the recommendations. A few critical respondents indicate that they find the reports too long, dealing with too many issues and too ‘middle-of-the road’. This represents a quite generic criticism of evaluations and might not be specific too SEO. More specific critical remarks are that the usefulness of evaluations is very much dependent on an appropriate timing, and this has been mentioned as a specific weakness in SEO planning of evaluations (see section 5.1).

Figure 6.3 Survey perceptions on the extent to which stakeholders are well informed on development outcomes and impact



6.3 Actual use of evaluations

The survey findings on actual use of SEO evaluations are slightly positive as 33% of the survey respondents indicate that they are of the opinion that evaluations are used to improve policies and programmes, while 21% is of the opinion that this is not the case, and the remainder (46%) is neutral (see Annex 4, Table A4.6). When it comes to personal use in terms of consulting or referencing SEO evaluation, the outcomes are more positive as more than two third is positive (see Annex 4, Table A4.7).

In the interviews – both the general interviews and in relation to the six selected evaluations- evidence on concrete use of evaluations was asked for. The analysis of the actual use of the six selected evaluations leads to a mixed picture:

- For three evaluations evidence was found on actual use of the evaluation results, especially by the development actors and to a limited extent by policymakers. The Impact evaluations of university cooperation and youth engagement led to learning and adoption of lessons learned through the evaluations in new programming, improvement of monitoring and evaluation, and better knowledge. This was also the case for the evaluation of the Common Strategic Framework (GSK- *Gemeenschappelijk Strategisch Kader*) Decent Work where the actors involved learned lessons, but also insights from the evaluation were used for an approved new GSK;

- For two evaluations – the Belgian Fund for Food Security and Agricultural Entrepreneurship Benin – there is no evidence on actual use. Both evaluations were politically motivated as the Minister took the decision to stop funding the Fund and entrepreneurship was a new political priority at the time and scope and timing were problematic;
- For one evaluation – core-funding multilateral organisations – it is too early to draw conclusions on actual use. However, as the Management response by DGD does only partially accept 3 of the 4 recommendations, the chances for actual use are probably not very high.

The findings from the general interviews reflect the findings on actual use of the six evaluations. Various examples of evaluations have been quoted that were apparently not used at all, while for other evaluations positive examples of use have been mentioned. Although there is hardly any international literature on actual use of evaluations, it might be assumed that SEO evaluations do not perform better or worse than evaluations commissioned by other evaluation departments. In section 6.5 the main factors determining use of evaluations are discussed.

6.4 Contribution to evaluation capacity building and evaluation culture

According to the ToC especially the certification and networking activities, and to a lesser extent the SEO evaluations are expected to contribute to evaluation capacity building. More than two third (66%, see Annex 4, Table A4.7) of the survey respondents indicate that SEO contributes to evaluation capacity building of Belgian development actors. This is a very positive result. There have been some networking events organised by SEO such as on the revised OECD-DAC criteria that may have contributed to this positive result. However, it is fair to assume, based on the interviews, that this positive result is primarily due to the certification processes (see section 4.4).

In addition, more than half of the survey respondents (55%, see Annex 4, Table A4.7) is of the opinion that SEO contributes positively to the evaluation culture and results-orientation of the Belgian Development Cooperation.

6.5 Factors affecting use and utility

International literature mentions factors that affect the actual use of evaluations. For example, the peer review of four evaluation functions refers to findings from a World Bank IEG study regarding factors affecting the adoption of recommendations.²⁰ The following factors were mentioned:

- in-depth discussion with management during the drafting of recommendations;
- credibility of the evaluation results;
- sense of shared ownership over the evaluation and the findings;
- quality of the recommendations, specifically in terms of their timeliness, how actionable they are, and their cost-effectiveness, clarity, and coherence;
- advocates/champions supporting the adoption of the recommendations; and
- institutional incentives and accountability for adopting the recommendations.

In interviews, most of these factors are reflected, while they are situated in the specific Belgian context. One Belgian contextual factor that is frequently mentioned is the evaluation fatigue and perceived overkill as the Belgian legal framework includes a lot of evaluation requirements. Some development actors have formulated joint programmes, rather than various interventions, which limits the number of evaluations. Given the certification responsibilities of SEO, it has been questioned whether SEO should not be more proactive aiming to

²⁰ Patrick Grasso, Peer Review of Four Evaluation Functions, November 2020. P. 18.

limit the number of evaluations to improve the quality and use of decentralised/internal evaluations on the one hand and improve the complementarity between internal and external SEO evaluations on the other.

The following factors have been mentioned in interviews as stimulating good use of evaluations:

- Appropriate timing of evaluations;
- Participatory evaluation processes;
- Good quality of recommendations. Suggestions have been made to give more attention to the formulation of actionable recommendations in a workshop or another form of continuation of the dialogue that took place during the evaluation process.

Credibility of evaluations is - with the exception of evaluators (SEO staff and consultants) not mentioned as a key factor affecting use.

Factors negatively affecting use are mainly related to the Belgian context. References are also made to the limited evaluation culture within FPS, although some point at improvement over time. In addition, the limited in-depth interest from Parliament is also mentioned. Another factor limiting use is the poor knowledge management in the system, in particular the FPS.²¹

²¹ Jacqueline Liénard, Faut-il réévaluer l'évaluation?, Echos du COTA, Eté de l'Efficacité, Août 2013.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

The main findings presented in the chapters above - related to the four questions on the enabling environment, SEO work processes, credibility, and utility and use - have been validated in four focus group discussions (with SEO staff, government actors, non-government actors, Enabel and BIO). This contributed to the formulation of eight main conclusions presented below.

7.1 Conclusions

9. 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.

The SEO is an external evaluation office under the administrative authority of the President of the Management Committee of the FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. This status should ensure its independence. In practice, the government (FPS, including policy cell and DGD) decides on the mandate (since 2014 the mandate is limited to Belgian Development Cooperation, rather than international cooperation), the staff – including the profile and appointment of the Special Evaluator –, the type of activities (since 2024 certification of the evaluation systems of Belgian development actors became the responsibility of SEO) and the budget. This means that SEO is not fully protected from outside influence.

10. 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.

The evaluation culture of the Belgian Development Cooperation is on the one hand a contextual factor for SEO, while on the other SEO is a key actor able to influence the evaluation culture. SEO has considered the evaluation culture so far mainly as a contextual factor although through its participatory approach in planning, implementation and follow-up of its evaluation it has had some positive effect on the evaluation culture. However, as the evaluation requirements in Belgian Development Cooperation are higher (in terms of mandatory mid-term and final evaluations of interventions) than in most other donor countries (this applies to almost all autonomous development actors with the exception of BIO), this negatively affects the functioning and performance of SEO. While SEO considers the two main objectives of accountability and learning as complementary to each other, in practice the learning function has received less attention, and the system is still focused primarily on accountability. Some stakeholders perceive the SEO as being primarily a government actor and are of the opinion that SEO should be more outspoken on issues of evaluation requirements and culture.

11. 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.

SEO's main activity is doing independent strategic evaluations on which most time and resources are spent. In addition, SEO has been responsible for the certification of evaluation systems of development actors, which is an additional task defined in the 2014 Royal Decree for SEO. This task has been quite demanding for SEO (see conclusion 6). SEO has also been active in national and international networking activities such as MOPAN (which is partially focused on evaluation) and in evaluation capacity building in Belgium and in partner countries.

Questions can be raised regarding the number and type of activities SEO is implementing in addition to its core evaluation tasks, and reorientation on its core functions is indicated.

12. 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.

SEO explicitly aims for a participatory approach of its evaluation planning through consultation processes with all Belgian stakeholders, which is very much appreciated. The overview of evaluations shows a wide variety of themes, instruments and channels of support. The number of SEO-evaluations declined from 3-4 published evaluations per year before 2015, to on average two evaluations from 2015 onwards. The impact evaluations started with governmental cooperation (2013), followed by the non-governmental cooperation (2016), and university cooperation (2018), while a series of five recent NGO impact evaluations is just finalised, which were the responsibility of the development actors themselves with support from SEO. The last meta-evaluation dates from 2013.

SEO applies some criteria for its planning, but these criteria are not fully transparent such as the evaluation coverage of budget lines and the timing of evaluations. While in theory, it is assumed that internal and external evaluations should be complementary to each other, in practice this has proved to be problematic. While government assumes that internal evaluations will focus on final beneficiaries i.e. the population and partner organisations in partner countries, budgets and other interests do not often allow for this. SEO in its strategic evaluations is often also not able to reach final beneficiaries sufficiently.

13. SEO evaluations are conducted in an independent and impartial way, while paying due attention to a participatory approach.

SEO adheres to international norms and standards in its evaluations. The participatory approach around the planning is also followed during implementation where key stakeholders participate in reference groups. Quality assurance is addressed but might be affected in some cases by SEO staff constraints. Before 2016, external experts also participated in reference groups, which is not the case anymore, which is considered by various stakeholders as a shortcoming as there is not external independent voice represented in the reference groups. The consultants responsible for implementation of the evaluation are selected by SEO involving development actors and avoidance of Conflicts of Interest is given due attention. During the implementation process consultants are the main face of SEO evaluations limiting the visibility of SEO to some extent.

14. Certification processes were a new task imposed on SEO, 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.

In 2014, SEO was given the responsibility in the revised Royal Decree to certify the evaluation systems of the autonomous Belgian development actors. SEO decided to focus the certification processes on evaluation capacity building, rather than only on screening of the systems. This has been appreciated by stakeholders. The screening of NGAs, including a screening of M&E systems, is part of more general screening processes related to funding. The peer review found evidence of a positive contribution to evaluation capacity building of development actors and better organized evaluation processes. However, there is no conclusive evidence whether certification has led to better internal evaluations. In addition, the links to monitoring, results-based management and systemic learning have been given limited attention. Certification has also imposed a heavy burden on SEO staff and on development actors. SEO and stakeholders have started discussions on changes in future certification processes based on an assessment of experiences so far. However, a fundamental question is whether SEO should remain responsible for certification given its independent role and core tasks. No other cases are known of evaluation offices being responsible for screening.

15. 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.

Stakeholders agree that SEO produces credible evaluations. Credible evaluations depend on good interaction between SEO evaluation managers and the consultants. SEO has some guidelines for implementation of its evaluations but is not very strict in terms of templates to be used. Consultants appreciate this flexibility, which allows them to tell a story. SEO has become stricter over time in terms of maximum length of reports and/or summaries.

While consultants are responsible for conducting the evaluation and finalisation of reports, they are hardly involved in follow-up, except for restitution meetings. This creates a missing link in the evaluation process and some gap in the dialogue, although recently attempts have been made to fill this gap.

The management response system in itself is considered to be useful, but it remains rather formal with parallel management responses by various development actors, which make the system rather heavy.

SEO has recently experimented with different communication forms such as shorter executive summaries and policy letters. This is considered to be useful, although more attention might be paid to the dialogue on overarching issues beyond individual evaluations both with development actors as well as in the annual meeting with Parliament.

16. 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.

Stakeholders agree that, in principle, the annual SEO report to Parliament is useful as an accountability instrument but discussions remain limited.

The actual use of SEO evaluations provides a mixed picture, in line with international evaluation practice. There is evidence that at least 50% of the evaluations have been used during and/or after the evaluation process for changes in planning and implementation by development actors. There is less evidence of use at policy or strategic level.

The main factors determining utility and use are timing of evaluations, complementarity, participatory approach and practicality and specificity of recommendations

7.2 Recommendations

The findings validated in the focus groups have laid the basis for the formulation of recommendations, where also the way forward has been discussed. The point of departure is that the strengths of SEO will remain or further reinforced, while addressing the challenges. Recommendations have been formulated taking the Belgian and international development cooperation context into account. Good practice examples have been derived from international evaluation practice based on experiences of peer review panel members. Recommendations are not only addressed at SEO but also at other government and development actors as SEO is not operating in isolation.

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.

The following aspects deserve attention:

- ✓ The complementarity of external and internal evaluations should be further reinforced, which requires transparency from all actors. SEO will remain responsible for strategic evaluations but

should be able to build better on internal evaluations, while SEO should also conduct meta-evaluations to provide insight into the quality of internal evaluations. More attention should be given in the planning to reaching the final beneficiaries by doing (joint?) internal and/or external impact and effect evaluations.

- ✓ Shifting the attention from an accountability perspective focusing on a large number of mandatory evaluations to learning by adopting lessons learned, which will require investments in knowledge and results-based management (in particular also at government level).
- ✓ Reducing the evaluation burden by doing fewer small evaluations at intervention level in line with international practice and focusing on meaningful good quality evaluations. This will require changes in the Royal Decree for NGAs and probably also in the new management contract with Enabel. Development actors, in particular NGAs, should also work more together on joint evaluations.

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.

The following aspects deserve attention:

- ✓ As the evaluation systems of most development actors have now been certified, and as there is no obligation in the law for renewed certification, a new focus on good quality internal evaluations and learning from these evaluations by all actors (including government) is needed. Lessons from the certification processes have been formulated and discussed in a transversal analysis done by SEO. SEO should no longer be responsible for certification in the near future, and screening of M&E systems should be part and parcel of grant application processes in line with international practice.
- ✓ The responsibility for MOPAN should be transferred from SEO to DGD, while SEO can assist DGD regarding the evaluation element of MOPAN, which is only a limited part of MOPAN.
- ✓ The government (either the policy cell or DGD) should reinforce its coordinating role regarding Management Responses to SEO evaluations focusing on systemic learning.

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:
 - ✓ Developing less standard ToRs emphasizing the importance of innovative methodological approaches in proposals, and the engagement of partner country consultants.
 - ✓ More involvement of external experts in reference groups.
 - ✓ Reinforced attention to internal SEO evaluation capacity-building in order to be able to play the role of key evaluation knowledge actor.

- √ Developing some guidelines (and templates?) for final report and summaries.
- √ SEO's visibility in the evaluation process can be improved by making SEO evaluation managers and consultants jointly responsible for the organization of focus groups or workshops to formulate actionable and concrete recommendations.
- √ The handover from consultants to evaluation manager can be further smoothed towards the end of the evaluation process by involving consultants in the first part of the follow-up process.
- √ Maintaining the participatory approach throughout the evaluation process, while stimulating more in-depth dialogue on the conclusions and recommendations to improve the use of evaluation results and stimulate learning.
- √ Start an open discussion with stakeholders on the adequacy of the present Management Response process and agree on improvements to be made and monitoring.
- [SEO should revise its outdated 2014 evaluation policy.](#)
 - √ Develop a Theory of Change paying due attention to the enabling environment and core functions.
 - √ Keep the evaluation policy document very concise, while in addition flexible quality guidelines can be developed, which can also be used by development actors (a working document in which lessons learned and good practices will continuously be incorporated).
- [SEO could share the outcomes of this theory-based peer review in OECD-DAC EvalNet and contribute in this way to a revision of the toolkit for peer review of the evaluation function.](#)

Annex 1 Technical Specifications

B. Technical specifications

B1. Background

The Special Evaluation Office (SEO) is mandated to evaluate the Belgian Development Cooperation. It is an external evaluation office under the administrative authority of the President of the Management Committee of the FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. This status guarantees its independence regarding the choice, implementation and dissemination of its evaluations.

Evaluation makes it possible to account for the use of public funds and to learn from what works and what does not work, in order to support concomitant decision-making, with the aim of improving the Belgian Development Cooperation.

Every year, the SEO convenes a Follow-up Committee, which is composed of the main users of the evaluations such as the Cabinet of the Minister in charge of Development Cooperation, the DG Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Belgian Development agency (Enabel), the Belgian Investment company for developing countries (BIO) and the federations of non-governmental actors. The objective is to give an advice on the content of the office's programming and its implementation.

The Royal Decree of 25th of February 2010 as amended by the Royal Decree of 25th of April 2014, establishing a 'Special Evaluation Office of the Belgian Development Cooperation', 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 Co-operation and Development (DAC-OECD) (Art. 10).

The last peer review of the evaluation function of the Belgian Development Cooperation was conducted in 2009-2010, before the creation of the SEO in its current form. In fact, a lot of institutional and strategic changes have occurred since then, making it all the more important to renew this exercise: merger of two evaluation units, development of a new evaluation policy/strategy (2014), institutional reorganisations, new law and reorientation of the priorities of the Belgian Development Cooperation, evaluation policy being updated etc.

In this context, the present contract concerns **the recruitment of a (team of) external consultant(s) to accompany and facilitate the peer review process.**

B2. Objective and scope of the evaluation

The main objective of the 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.

The peer review process should result in the formulation of practical recommendations to the Special Evaluator, and to the senior management of the FPS Foreign Affairs and/or the Minister when necessary. The results of the process will be communicated to the Parliament and the general public, and lessons learned will be shared within the evaluation network of the Development Assistance Committee (EvalNet).

The temporal scope of the peer review will cover the period from 2010 to present, corresponding to the period since the last peer review, with a focus on the last 4 to 5 years, since the beginning of the current Special Evaluator's mandate.

The review will only cover the evaluation function of the SEO, but will examine the links and collaborations with the evaluation units of development actors (Enabel, BIO, non-governmental actors (NGA), institutional actors (IA),...). The representatives of the Follow-up Committee will be consulted in the framework of the peer review.

B3. Approach and methodology

The three main selected criteria to guide the peer review of the SEO evaluation function are the following: **independence, credibility and utility.**

The peer review process will be based on the key norms and standards of the OECD/DAC Development Evaluation Network, and will make particular use of the Peer Review Toolkit ('Evaluation systems and use: a working tool for peer reviews and assessments', 2006).

This tool offers 8 main categories of evaluation questions:

1. Evaluation policy: role, responsibility and objectives of the evaluation office
2. Impartiality, transparency and independence
3. Resources and staff
4. Evaluation partnerships and capacity building
5. Quality
6. Planning, coordination and harmonisation
7. Dissemination, feedback, knowledge management and learning
8. Evaluation Use

The questions relating to each of these categories can be found in the document in annex to these specifications.

A peer review panel will be assisted by the (team of) external consultant(s) whose recruitment is subject of the present contract. The (team of) external consultant(s) will be responsible for the implementation of the main steps of the process:

- SEO self-assessment
- Document review (see list of reference documents)
- Survey/questionnaire to key users
- Semi-structured interviews of key stakeholders
- Peer exchange

B4. Members of the peer panel

The peer review panel consists of the following members:

- 3 high-level evaluators from EvalNet member states:
 - The Netherlands (IOB)
 - Portugal (GAA - Camoes)
 - Germany (DEval)

- 1 representative of the OECD/DAC EvalNet
- 2 SEO staff members

The (team of) external consultant(s) will report to the Chair of the panel, the Special Evaluator of the Belgian Development Cooperation.

The peers give their advice on the method and criteria proposed for the peer review, participate in the exchange of practices, and react to the review findings and areas for improvement proposed by the (team of) external consultant(s).

The peers adopt an advisory role:

- By reading and commenting on the outputs of the SEO and the (team of) external consultant(s);
- By participating in the panel meetings (about 5 online meetings: July; September; October/November; December; February);
- By joining the Peer Exchange in Brussels (+/- 3 days) in January 2022.

B5. Process

The present contract will be carried out in three phases, each phase ending with the preparation of a report by the (team of) external consultant(s) which will be presented to, and validated by, the peer review panel.

Phase 1: Preparation phase (September, October 2021)

- Receive a briefing on the evaluation mission by the peer review panel;
- Facilitate the revision of the *Theory of Change* (ToC) and the self-assessment of the SEO, and synthesise the main lessons to draw from these exercises;
- Collect relevant documentation on the SEO evaluation function, including relevant policies, strategies and plans, and conduct a preliminary analysis;
- Prepare a short inception report describing the approach and work plan (5-10 pp).

Phase 2: Data collection phase (October, November, December 2021)

- Undertake a systematic analysis of the documentation, drawing out the implications for key topics to be considered by the peer review;
- Develop a survey/questionnaire to be submitted to key users;
- Prepare and conduct interviews of key stakeholders;
- Analyse a sample of evaluations conducted by the SEO (assess the quality of processes and products);
- Prepare a report based on a preliminary assessment (30-40 pp) for the use of members of the peer review panel, and for consideration by the SEO staff;
- Interact with the peer panel and the SEO staff.

Phase 3: Peer Exchange and final report writing phase (January, February 2022)

- Support the preparation of the Peer Exchange by proposing a planning with objectives and accompany the peer panel members during their visit to Brussels;
- After the visit, draft the review report based on key issues and specific outline received from the peer review panel;
- Finalise the peer review report by including the conclusions and recommendations (max. 50 pp without annexes) after having integrated all remarks of the peer review panel members;
- Elaborate an executive summary of the report (3-5 pp).

B6. Expertise and experience required

The (team of) external consultant(s) will have at least the following experience and skills:

- University degree at Master's level in social sciences or any other relevant field;
- A minimum of 10 years of professional experience in evaluation and results-based management;
- In-depth knowledge of the peer review process and evaluation of the evaluation function;
- Experience in conducting and managing evaluations in international contexts and within bilateral organisations;
- Knowledge of French, Dutch and English;
- Very good facilitation and English-writing skills;
- Experience in international relations and knowledge of current development issues;
- Knowledge of the Belgian development cooperation and the *Theory of Change* (ToC);
- Experience in team management and knowledge in organisational development (process management, change management,...) are an asset.

In order to avoid any conflict of interest, tenderers are requested to communicate potential conflicts of interest that could hinder the performance of this contract and to specify any evaluation carried out for the Belgian Development Cooperation in the CV of the proposed evaluators.

B7. Output and planning

B7.1 Expected output

For the present contract, the SEO estimates the time for the execution of the services to be approximately: **45 to 62 working days.**

The overall estimated working time required for the assignment is to be allocated as follow:

- Documentary review, survey, interviews, review of the evaluations' sample, including quality assessment (25-30 days)

- Drafting of the inception report and the report based on the preliminary assessment (5-10 days)
- Interaction with the peer review committee and the SEO staff (5-7 days)
- Preparation and accompaniment of the visit to Brussels (5 days)
- Writing the final report and summary (5-10 days)

The (team of) external consultant(s) will undertake the tasks described in point B5. The tasks will be carried out in several phases.

The (team of) external consultant(s) will report to the expert panel on the substantive issues of the peer review. Administrative and financial matters, including procurement and payments, access to documents, etc. will be managed by the Special Evaluation Office.

The main expected outputs include:

1. The inception report (5-10 pp);
2. The facilitation and synthesis of the main lessons learned from the SEO *Theory of Change* (ToC) revision and self-assessment;
3. The development and implementation/analysis of the survey to be administered to key users;
4. The design and conduction of semi-structured interviews of key stakeholders;
5. The quality assessment of evaluations' processes and products (the sample must be validated by the peer panel based on a proposal from the (team of) external consultant(s));
6. The report based on a preliminary assessment of the evaluation function of the SEO, including the key issues to be addressed during the visit to Brussels (30-40 pp);
7. The final peer review report, describing common issues of interest, lessons learned and challenges/limitations of the methodology and proposing clear conclusions and recommendations (max. 50 pp);
8. The executive summary of the final report (3-5 pp).

All reports must be written in English. The text should be of good quality, easy to read and reflect a logical train of thought. The style and content of the report should also be accessible and understandable to lay readers.

At the start of the contract, the consultant will receive instructions from the SEO on the form and layout of the report. These instructions should be followed carefully in order to obtain ready-to-print electronic files.

B7.2 Indicative planning

The consultancy will start in September 2021 and will be completed at the latest in February-March 2022. By the time the (team of) external consultant(s) is (are) engaged, the expert peer review panel will already have been established and will have met to review and approve the project's terms of reference.

	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Awarding of contract							
Start phase / Inception Report							
Data collection phase / Preliminary assessment report							
Peer Exchange / Visit to Brussels							
Final report writing phase / Final report							

B8. Reference documents

The SEO will provide the following non-exhaustive list of documents to the contractor:

- The Royal Decree of 25.02.2010 establishing the Special Evaluation Office and the Royal Decree of 25.02.2014 amending the Royal Decree of 25.02.2010
- The evaluation policy of the SEO (2014)
- The multi-annual indicative programmes of the SEO
- The annual reports of the SEO 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020
- OECD DAC framework on development evaluation: key norms and standards (Part III 'EVALUATION SYSTEMS AND USE: A WORKING TOOL FOR PEER REVIEWS AND ASSESSMENTS')
- The report of the last Peer Review of the evaluation function in Belgium (2010)
- The report of the last SEO self-assessment (2017)
- A sample of evaluations conducted by the SEO between 2010/2017 and 2021
- Belgium - DAC Peer Reviews of Development Co-operation, 2015, OECD
- Belgium - DAC Peer Reviews of Development Co-operation, 2020, OECD
- Evaluation Systems in Development Co-operation, 2016 Review, OECD
- Strategic Note on "Development Results", DGD, 2015
- Evaluation capacity building project documents from partners of the SEO

B9. Awarding of the contract

In order to select the most economically attractive tender, the tenders will be compared against a set of award criteria (see section A11.3.). These criteria will be weighted to obtain a final ranking.

Annex 2 Methodology

Review matrix

Table A2.1 Peer review matrix

Review questions	Elements /indicators	Methods	Sources
1. What are the main factors determining the enabling environment for the SEO evaluation function?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation mandate ensuring independence; • Role, governance structure and position of the SEO; • SEO staff: evolution over time; • HR management and qualifications of SEO staff, training of staff; • Evaluation budget and expenditures; • Perception of organisational independence and protection from outside influence by key stakeholders. 	<p>Document review</p> <p>Interviews key stakeholders</p> <p>Survey</p>	<p>Legal framework: laws, Royal Decrees</p> <p>Evaluation policy</p> <p>Self-assessment</p> <p>SEO website</p> <p>SEO staff, DGD, development actors</p> <p>All stakeholders</p>
2. How do the SEO work processes and methods ensure independence and affect the quality of outputs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency of the criteria used for the evaluation planning; • Coverage of the evaluation planning; • Participative approach involving key stakeholders; • Clear evaluation policy; • Transparent evaluation processes from preparation to ToR, selection of evaluation team, implementation, finalisation and follow-up; • Existence of clear quality assurance mechanisms that are adopted in practice (including clarity of communication); • Evaluation ethics, norms and standards are guiding the activities; • Rules for avoiding Col; • Clear objectives, guidelines and processes for certification; • Good partnerships with various stakeholders allowing for joint evaluations and evaluation capacity building activities; • Balance between the various groups of activities. 	<p>Document review</p> <p>Interviews key stakeholders</p> <p>Survey</p>	<p>SEO self-evaluation, SEO website, internal working documents and guidelines, correspondence DEO with DGD, development actors, agenda and minutes of meetings</p> <p>All selected interviewees</p> <p>All stakeholders</p>
3. What are the main factors determining the credibility of the SEO?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived quality of SEO outputs and the way outputs are presented; • Evaluations focus on outcome (and impact) level including focus on final beneficiaries; • Strategic evaluations are complementary to internal evaluations; • SEO contribution in national and international platforms and networks; 	<p>Document review</p>	<p>SEO self-evaluation, Evaluation reports and other SEO outputs,</p> <p>All selected interviewees</p>

- Variation in implementors;
- Variation in political sensitivity of the evaluations.

As indicated above, SEO has also been engaged with joint evaluations. The overview of joint international evaluations is presented in Table A3.2 but given the fact that these evaluations are rather old, none is selected for in-depth analysis. In table A3.3 the joint impact evaluations with NGOs as a follow-up of the 2016 impact evaluation (number 14 in Table A3.1) are presented, in which the evaluation on youth engagement is selected for further analysis.

Data collection methods

Document review

The following documents of the SEO have been analysed:

- **Strategic SEO documents:** SEO Evaluation Policy (2014); Annual Report SEO (covering 2016-2020, website); Evaluation reports and Management responses (published on the website); Evaluation Needs SEO (2016, 2018); and Royal Decrees (2010 and 2014) regarding the SEO;
- **Certificate and international network documents:** Framework on Certification of M&E systems (n.d.), Certification self-evaluation Manual, Assessor Manual, Study on Certification Development (2017), format leads, narrative (website); General correspondence and state of affairs (n.d.); Framework International Seminar (2020); Transversal Analysis on the evaluation capacities of development actors (2021);
- **Selected SEO evaluations:** ToR's; composition and minutes reference groups; final reports; management responses;
- **Internal correspondence:** Notes; draft Self-Evaluation SEO and Final Self-Evaluation (2021); internal reflection report (2017);
- **Peer Reviews, International literature and documents other donors:** OECD-DAC Peer review of the Evaluation Function (2010), DAC Peer Reviews of Development Co-operation, OECD (2015), and Peer Review Belgium (2020);
- **Policy and strategy documents DGD, FS and other development actors** Management Contract Enabel (2017).

Interviews

A total of 34 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders were conducted, mainly online. The interviews were semi-structured on the basis of the review matrix. Of course, the interviews regarding selected evaluation processes focussed specifically on these evaluation processes. An interview template was prepared based on the review matrix, which also allowed for proper analysis and validation of evaluation findings. The following groups of key stakeholders were interviewed:

- SEO: 6 interviews;
- FPS, DGD and Policy Cell: 5 interviews;
- Enabel and BIO: 6 interviews;
- Other development actors (NGO umbrella organisations, institutional actors, NGOs): 8 interviews;
- Consultants: 9 interviews.

No members of the federal parliament were available for interviews. All interviews were confidential and anonymity was guaranteed.

Survey

The evaluation team used an online survey as a complementary data collection tool, especially to reach a broader group of stakeholders. The consultant team approached 342 people, and was assisted by the SEO in identifying the right people for the survey. 103 respondents answered the first question, of which 87 reached the end. The response rate is 42%.

The questionnaire was developed in line with the review matrix and after having conducted several interviews. The groups of stakeholders are similar to the list presented above: 1) Government, Federal Public Service, policy cell, DGD and embassies; 2) Enabel; 3) BIO / Non-Governmental Actors incl. individual NGOs and federations; 4) University / Institutional actors incl. VLIR, ARES and Fiabel; 5) Consultancy / Research Institute. The consultant team developed the survey in the survey tool CheckMarket (www.checkmarket.com). Testing was done internally, as well as with a small sample of external respondents (e.g. SEO). Taking into account the EU General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 ("GDPR"), the peer review team ensured confidentiality of personal data of potential survey respondents.

Annex 3 Overview SEO evaluations, 2010-2021

Table A3.1 SEO Strategic Evaluations

Title	Date of publication	Type of evaluation	Involved actors	Implementor	Countries	
SELECTED						
1	An evaluation of the Belgian core funding policy of multilateral organisations	April 2021	Channel/instrument	Multilateral partners, DGD	ADE	Burundi, DRC, Morocco, Niger, Palestine, Rwanda, and Uganda
2	Evaluation of the Common Strategic Framework Decent Work	November 2020	Strategic framework/thematic	DGD, Enabel, BIO, NGOs, labour unions	Humanya, DRIS	--
3	Evaluation of the Belgian Fund for Food Security, the integration of the food security theme and the multi-actor approach within the Belgian Development Cooperation	December 2019	Thematic	DGD, Enabel, NGOs	Particip	Mozambique, Tanzania, Benin, Guinee
4	Impact Evaluation of the Belgian University Development Cooperation	July 2018	Impact evaluation	DGD, Universities	Syspons/Nuffic	Benin, Ethiopia, Vietnam
5	Evaluation of inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector in Benin	June 2018	Thematic, country	DGD, Enabel, partner	South Research	Benin
NOT SELECTED / EXCLUDED						
6	Evaluation of the international climate finance by the Belgian federal government	September 2021	Thematic	DGD, Enabel, BIO, NGAs and IAs	ADE/Trinomics	Senegal, Tanzania
7	Digital for Development » (D4D) & Follow-up study: What are the developments related to the Covid-19 context?	Sept 2021 November 2020	Thematic	DGD, Enabel, BIO, NGOs	EY	Uganda
8	Evaluation of the Belgian exit strategies of 6 countries from direct bilateral cooperation	October 2019	land	DGD, Enabel	ADE	Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Zuid-Afrika, Algeria, Vietnam

	Title	Date of publication	Type of evaluation	Involved actors	Implementor	Countries
9	Evaluation of development education actions financed or co-financed by the Belgian Development Cooperation between 2014 and 2017	October 2018	Thematic, sectoral	DGD, NGOs	KU Leuven, HIVA, DRIS	--
10	Evaluation of the support of the Belgian Development Cooperation to the private sector	May 2018	Thematic	DGD, multiple partners	ADE	Peru, Rwanda, Tanzania
11	Evaluation of the institutional actors' policy support	July 2016	Instrument	DGD, knowledge institutes	DRIS	--
12	Ex-post evaluation of the sustainability of the Belgian governmental development cooperation	February 2016	Agriculture & health/country	Enabel	Hera, ADE	Benin, Bolivia
13	A study of the evaluability of (co)-financed interventions of the Belgian Cooperation	February 2016	Broad	Multiple (<i>Management response not published</i>)	South Research, IOB	Benin, DRC, Rwanda
14	Which future for impact evaluation in the Belgian NGO sector? Lessons from four case studies	January 2016	Impact multi-sector	Four NGOs (<i>Management response not published</i>)	ADE	Indonesia, Peru, Tanzania, Philippines
15	A difficult path towards equality. Gender and Development in Belgian Cooperation	November 2014	Thematic	Multiple	South Research, IOB	Benin, Bolivia, DRC, Morocco and Vietnam
16	BIO - Phase 2 & phase 1. Evaluation of the Belgian Investment Company for Developing Countries (BIO)	June 2014 Augustus 2012	Instrument	BIO	Carnegie Consult	Cambodia, DRC, Ivory coast, Kenya, Morocco, Nicaragua, Uganda, Peru and Vietnam
17	How green is our Development Aid? Thematic Evaluation of the Belgian Cooperation in the Field of Environment	September 2013	Thematic		ADE	Vietnam, Tanzania, Congo (DRC), Peru and Burkina Faso
18	Meta- evaluation of the programmes of NGAs	July 2013	Meta	DGD, NGAs incl. NGOs, universities, local gvt, etc	ADE	--
19	Impact measuring, the Quest of the Grail? Ex post Impact Evaluation of four Bilateral Cooperation projects	October 2013	Impact multi-sector	DGD, BTC	ADE/CRED	Senegal, Morocco and DR Congo

	Title	Date of publication	Type of evaluation	Involved actors	Implementor	Countries
20	Evaluation of the quality of the performance of the Belgian Technical Cooperation – 2011	February 2012	Intervention	BTC	ADE/Particip	12 countries
21	Evaluation of the Results Reporting by DGD	September 2012	Instrument	DGD	Provenium	
22	Coming to Terms with Reality. Evaluation of the Belgian Debt Relief Policy (2000-2009)	October 2011	Channel		IOB	Cameroon
23	Evaluation of the micro-interventions programme	October 2011	Programme	DGD and BTC	Internal SEO team	
24	Evaluation of the information campaigns regarding the projects and programmes of the Belgian Survival Fund	June 2011	Instrument		DRIS, HIVA, Sonecom	--
25	Evaluation of the Commission Women and development	July 2011	Platform	DGD	MDF, Latiture Sol	
26	Evaluation of the instruments to support foreign trade (FINEXPO)	October 2010	Instrument	FPS, FINEXPO, FINEXO	See, SEOR	Vietnam and Ghana
27	Evaluation of NGO partner relations aimed at capacity building	June 2010	Partnerships		HIVA/ACE/IOB	
28	Evaluation of the quality of the performance of the Belgium Technical Cooperation (BTC) – 2009	January 2010	Interventions	BTC	Ecorys/South Research/IDEA	

Table A3.2 SEO Joint international evaluations

	Title	Year	Partners	Countries
1	Joint Evaluation on the Budget Support to Burundi (2005-2013)	2015	Belgium, European Commission, France and the government of Burundi.	Burundi
2	Joint evaluation of the cooperation of Germany, Belgium, the European Commission, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Sweden with Burundi	2014	Belgium, the European Commission, France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom	Burundi
3	Joint evaluation of conflict prevention and peace building in the Democratic Republic of Congo	2011	Belgium, Canada, Netherlands, UK, Japan, Germany, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNIFEM, UNDP, OHCHR, OECD.	DRC
4	Mutual interests - mutual benefits. Evaluation of the 2005 debt relief agreement between the Paris Club and Nigeria	2011	Belgium, the Netherlands.	Nigeria
5	Joint evaluation of the cooperation of the European Commission, Belgium, Denmark, France and Luxembourg with Niger between 2000-2008	2010	European Commission, Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxembourg	Niger

Table A3.3 SEO ongoing joint impact evaluations with NGOs

	Title	Actors involved	Implementor	Paying institution	Country
1	<i>Youth Engagement – Involving youth in the promotion of human rights in developing countries</i>	<i>Kiyo – Solidagro – Viva Salud</i>	HIVA	DBE	Belgium
2	Coordination of CSO advocacy for climate justice in Belgium	CNCD/11.11.11	ACE Europe / HIVA	NGO-federatie	Belgium
3	The Integrated fight against Vulnerability and Exclusion in Rwanda (LIVE)	ADA	ADE	NGO-federatie	Rwanda
4	Min Ajiki 2.0, Support to empowerment of women in Morocco	APEFE	ADE	NGO-federatie	Morocco
5	'Gender'- Approach in the support to labour unions in the textile factories in Indonesia	ISVI/IFSI	Focup-Up	DBE	Indonesia

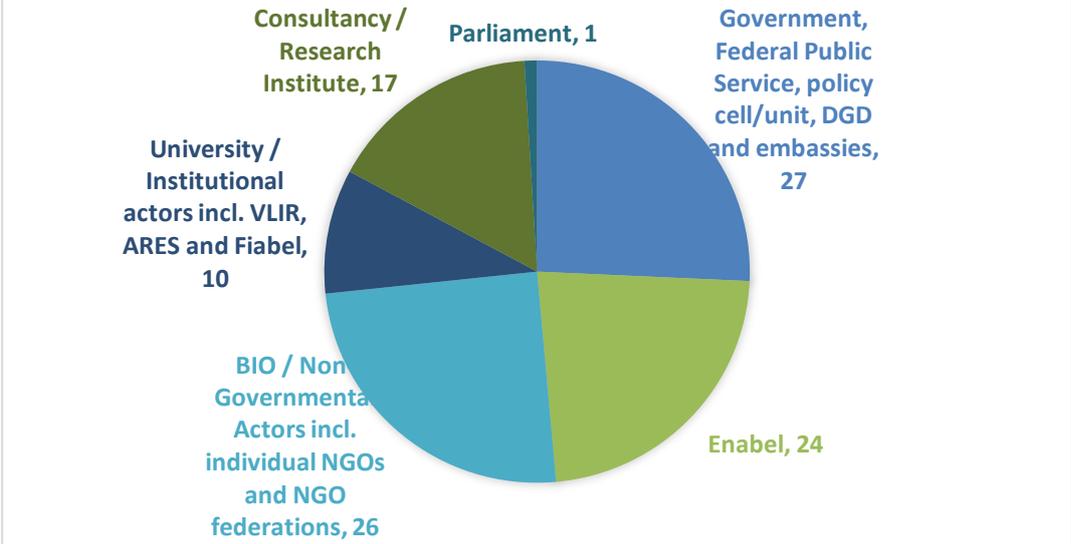
Annex 4 Survey Data

Figure A4.1 Survey respondents according to type of organisation

Question 1. Please indicate what type of organisation you are/were working for in the period 2016-2021, in your affiliation with the SEO?

Questions:	13
Directly approached:	243
Total responded:	103 (42%)
Reached end:	87 (85%)

Figure A4.1. Respondents' position in their affiliation with the SEO



Respondents: 103. * The respondent from the parliament will be included with the government in the analysis. Two respondents indicate that they are affiliated to two different types of organisations.

Table A4.1. Respondents' involvement with the SEO

Question 2. Please indicate your involvement:

	Yes	No
Have you been (actively) involved in an evaluation process of the SEO in the past 5 years?	71	32
Have you been involved in a certification process?	37	66

Respondents: 103.

Table A4.2. Perception on the independence of the SEO

Question 3. How would you rate the following factors affecting SEO's independence?

	Poor	Moderate	Neutral	Good	Excellent	N/A
The independent position of the SEO within the Federal Public Service	1	6	15	52	17	12
Protection from outside influence on evaluation planning, priority-setting and publications	0	6	24	47	9	17

Respondents: 103.

Figure A4.2. Perceptions on SEO's independent position per stakeholder group

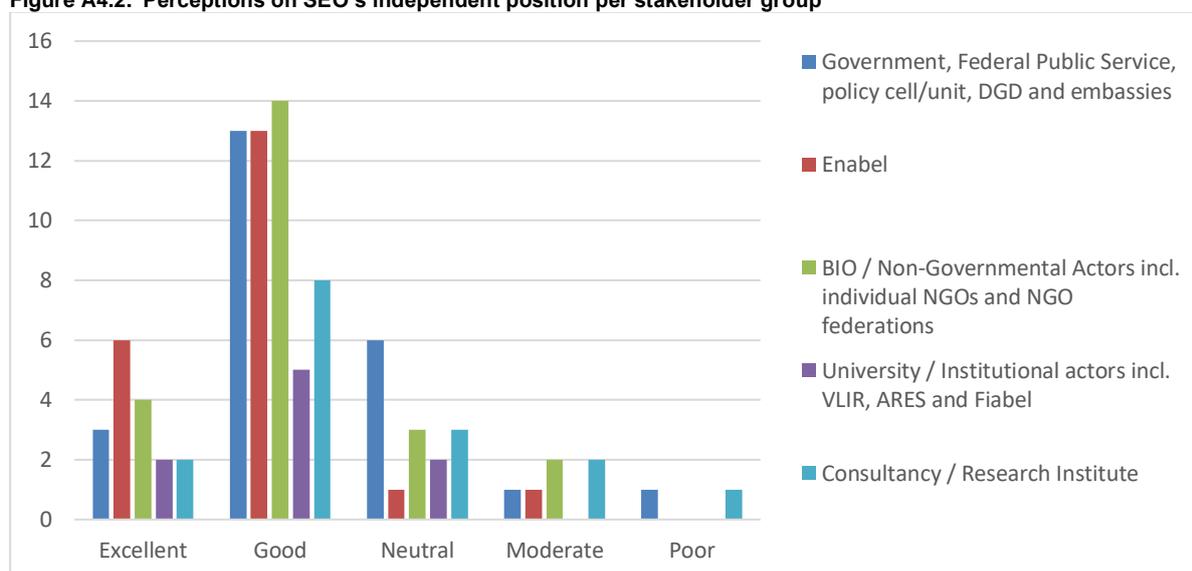
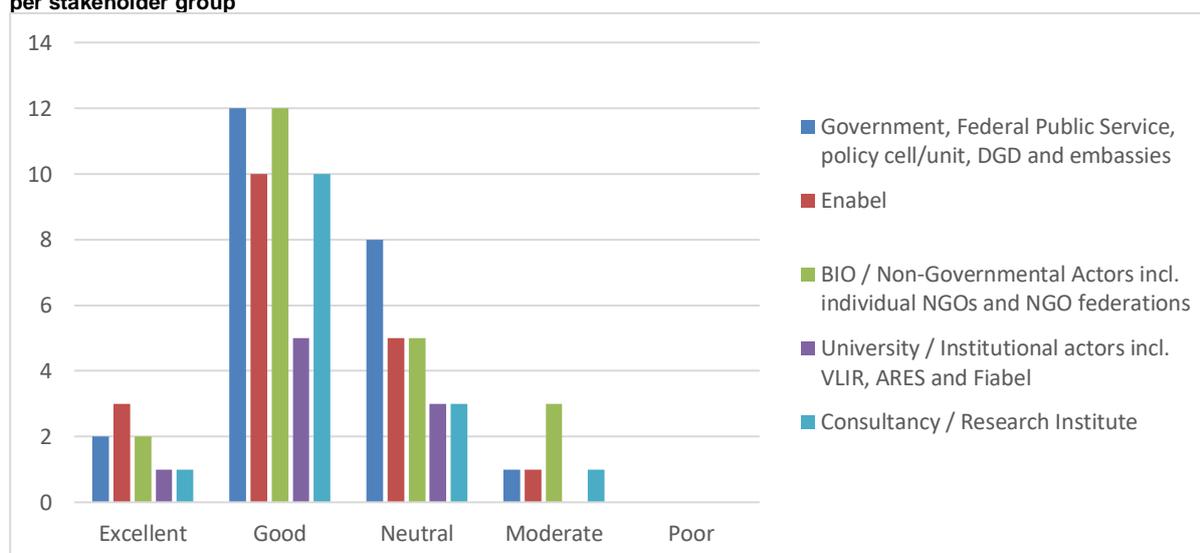


Figure A4.3. Perceptions on the protection from outside influence on evaluation planning, priority-setting and publications, per stakeholder group



Question 4. Comments and suggestions for improvements of SEO's independence

Open answers

Table A4.3. Perceptions on SEO's work processes

Question 5 – What is your opinion on the following statements regarding SEO's work processes?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	N/A
SEO's evaluations are complementary to evaluations implemented by development actors such as Enabel, BIO, NGAs, etc.	0	5	16	44	20	7
SEO has a participative approach in the preparation, implementation and finalisation of evaluations involving key stakeholders.	1	2	13	37	31	8
SEO evaluations focus sufficiently on outcomes and impact.	1	4	19	47	14	7
SEO evaluations focus sufficiently on final beneficiaries.	2	18	30	28	5	9
SEO adopts clear mechanisms of quality assurance and independence in the preparation of evaluations (including Terms of Reference and selection of consultants).	0	2	19	41	16	14
SEO adopts clear mechanisms of quality assurance and independence in the implementation of evaluations (including composition of the Reference Group and feedback mechanisms).	0	0	16	49	17	10

Respondents: 92.

Question 6 – Comments and suggestions for improvement of SEO’s work processes

Open answers

Table A4.4. Perceptions on certification

Question 7 - How would you rate the following elements regarding the certification of evaluation systems?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	N/A
The objectives of certification are clear and shared by stakeholders	0	1	11	35	8	37
The guidelines for certification are clear	0	1	12	30	10	39
The roles and responsibilities of the various actors in the certification process are clear	0	1	11	29	10	41
Certification improves the evaluation capacity of certified actors	0	3	22	22	8	37
Certification leads to better (internal) evaluations by certified development actors	0	3	27	15	9	38

Respondents: 103.

Question 8 - Comments and suggestions for improvements of certification

Open answers

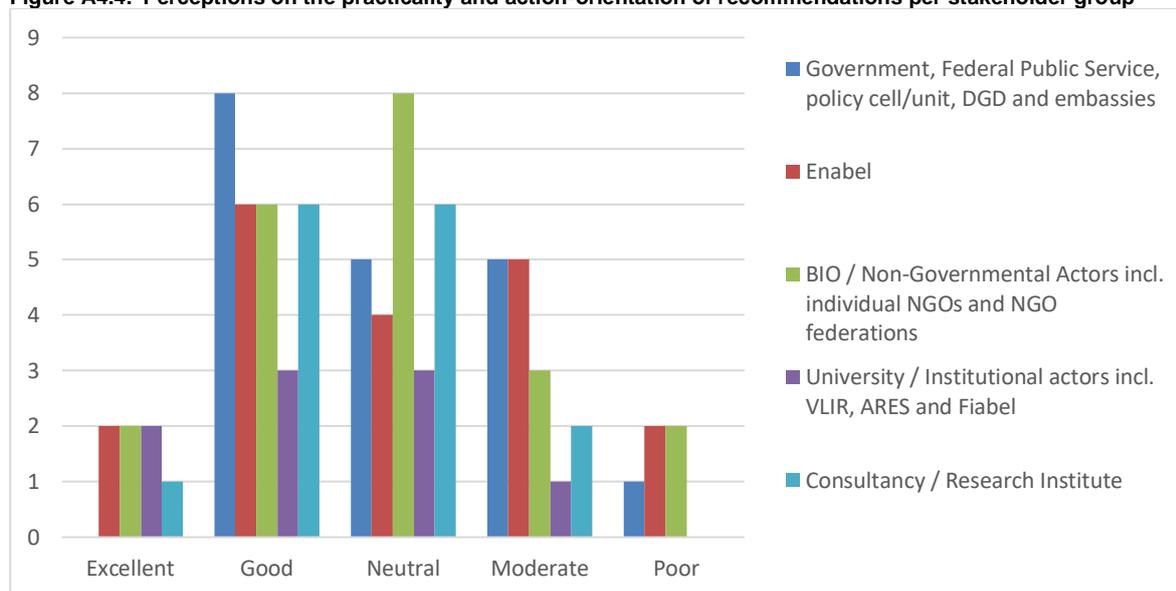
Table A4.5. Perceptions on SEO’s credibility

Question 9 – How would you rate the following elements of SEO’s credibility?

	Poor	Moderate	Neutral	Good	Excellent	N/A
The quality of SEO reports	0	4	13	52	14	7
The relevance of the evaluation topics	0	4	12	50	18	6
The practicality and action-orientation of recommendations	5	16	25	29	6	9
The timeliness of evaluations	4	16	28	31	2	9
The organisation of management responses	7	12	20	27	5	19
The communication of evaluation findings and recommendations via restitutions	6	7	13	44	14	6
The SEO annual report and presentation to Parliament	3	5	15	28	8	31
The communication via social media and e-mail	7	9	26	12	2	34

Respondents: 90.

Figure A4.4. Perceptions on the practicality and action-orientation of recommendations per stakeholder group



Question 10. Comments and suggestions for improvements of SEO's credibility
Open answers

Table A4.6. Perceptions on the use and utility of SEO evaluations

Question 11. How would you rate the use and utility of SEO's work?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	N/A
Stakeholders including government, DGD and development actors are well informed on development outcomes and impact.	0	10	25	40	4	8
The Parliament is well informed on development outcomes.	0	8	18	28	5	28
Evaluations are used to improve policies or programmes.	2	16	27	25	4	13

Respondents: 87.

Figure A4.5. Perceptions on use and utility of SEO evaluations for various groups of stakeholders

Question 11: Stakeholders including government, DGD and development actors are well informed on development outcomes and impact, per stakeholder group

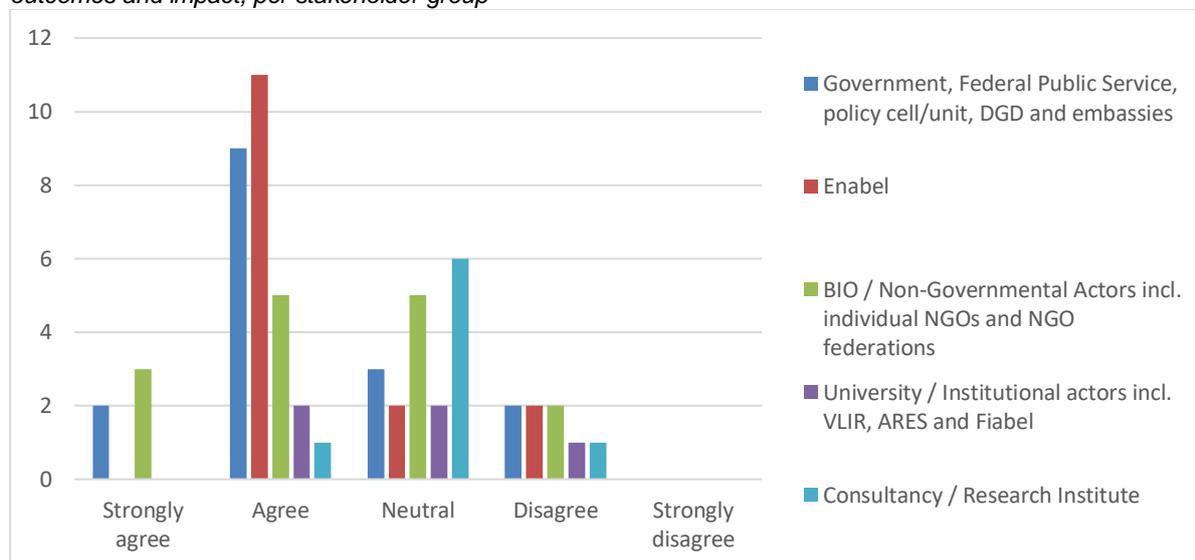


Table A4.7. Perceptions on some overarching issues

Question 12. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	N/A
SEO maintains a good balance between a participatory approach (involvement of key stakeholders in planning, implementation and follow-up of evaluations) and an independent and impartial approach	0	3	16	42	16	10
SEO has a positive effect on the evaluation culture within the FPS and improved results-orientation of the Belgian Development Cooperation	3	9	15	35	13	12
SEO contributes to evaluation capacity building of Belgian development actors	2	4	16	48	9	8
I consult and/or refer to SEO evaluations in my own work	3	12	10	47	10	5

Respondents: 87.

Question 13. Comments and suggestions for improvements in the use and utility of SEO's work

Open answers

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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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- Social policy;
- Natural resources;
- Regions & Cities;
- Transport & Infrastructure;
- Public sector reform;
- Security & Justice.

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