



KINGDOM OF BELGIUM
Federal Public Service
**Foreign Affairs,
Foreign Trade and
Development Cooperation**

Which future for impact evaluation in the Belgian NGO sector?

Lessons from four case studies

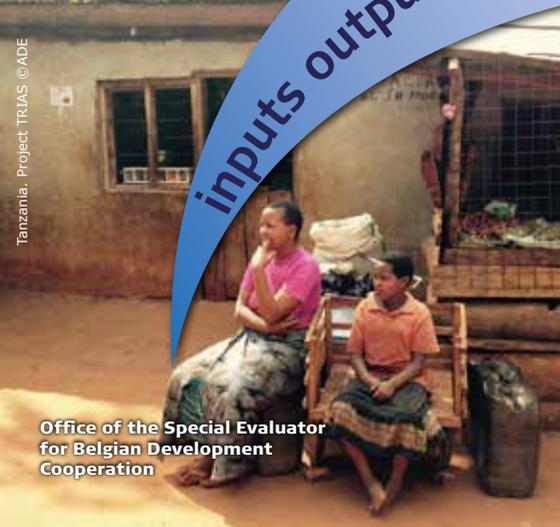
Synthesis



Indonesia ©Jacqueline Liénard



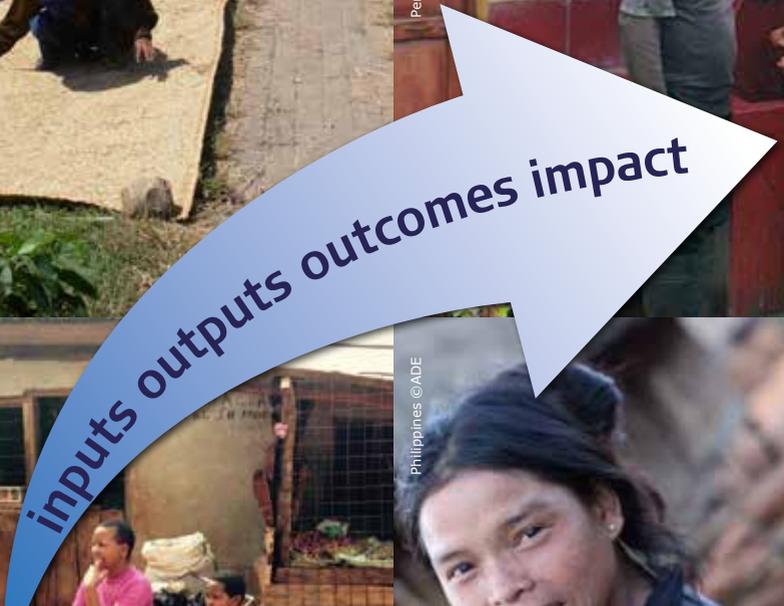
Peru, Project IDP ©Sven Krug



Tanzania, Project TRIAS ©ADE



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Introduction

This evaluation was carried out by the consultancy firm ADE in collaboration with FocusUp. It is part of a cycle of annual evaluations launched in 2012 by the Special Evaluation Office of Belgian Development Cooperation.

The aim of these evaluations is to learn more about the feasibility of evaluating the impact of the interventions implemented by the different stakeholders of Belgian cooperation.

There are many questions raised by these evaluations: Which rigorous methods enable an assessment of the effects of the intervention on the partners but also at the level of the end beneficiaries? Should quantitative tools be favoured over qualitative approaches? How to assess

if the changes observed among beneficiaries can really be attributed to the intervention and not to other factors? Is the counterfactual approach, which compares beneficiary groups with non-beneficiary groups, ethical? Is an impact evaluation not too expensive? etc.

The main objective of this evaluation was to extract useful information about the methodological approach to be implemented, but also about the added value of this type of evaluation for non-governmental cooperation. The participative and formative dimension was favoured although the aim was also to report on the results and effects of the interventions evaluated.

Four case studies

The ex post evaluation examined the impact of **four interventions of Belgian non-governmental cooperation**. The four case studies were selected in a participative manner from the 22 interventions voluntarily proposed by 12 Belgian Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO). The 22 interventions were subject to a critical documentary analysis and a discussion with NGOs' representatives in Belgium.

The four case studies were selected on the basis of three criteria: (i) *the technical feasibility of using mixed methods*; (ii) *the context (during the intervention and the evaluation)*; (iii) *the added value of the evaluation in terms of cost/benefit ratio and learn-*

ing for the NGO sector in Belgium.

The rigorous methodological approach was, in absolute terms, feasible for all 22 interventions presented by the NGOs. However, once the cost/benefit ratio for the (ex post) deployment of such a system and the security situation of the intervention area were taken into account, only five interventions were eligible for conducting a rigorous ex post impact evaluation. Given that the study planned to conduct four case studies and that two interventions were linked to the same NGO, the decision was made to select four interventions that satisfied all three selection criteria.

The four interventions selected were **(1)** support for the value chain for organic rice in the Boyolali district in Indonesia (VECO), **(2)** the project for access to drinking water in the Huánuco region in Peru (Iles de Paix), **(3)** the support project for the production chain for sunflowers and chicken in Tanzania (TRIAS), **(4)** the support project for the right to healthcare in the Philippines (M3M).

It should be noted that the sample of NGOs participating in this study is neither representative of the totality of development actions conducted in the NGO sector in Belgium, nor representative of the evaluation practices of these stakeholders. Nevertheless, due to the fact that the stakeholders concerned were included in the evaluation process, the discussions conducted in this study are, at least partially, relevant to all development cooperation stakeholders in our country.



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Define the impact

Neither the literature, nor discussions with stakeholders from the NGO sector helped to provide an exact definition of the term 'impact'. However, it was necessary to define this term in order to structure this exercise and demarcate everyone's expectations.

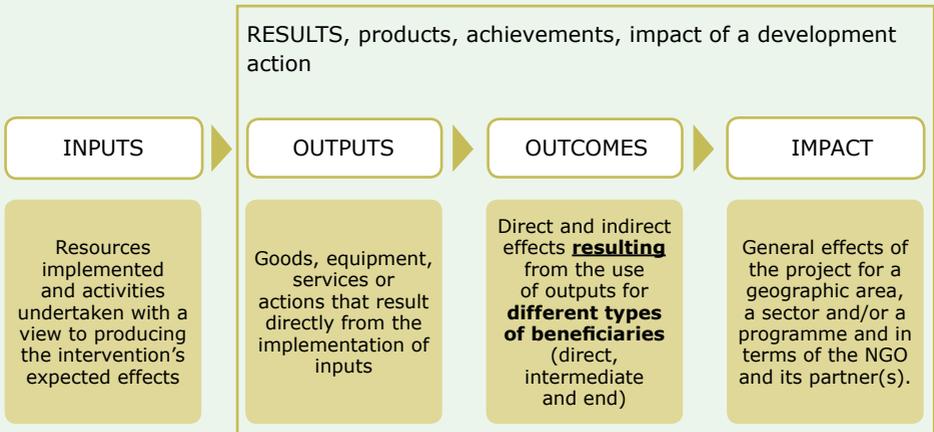
With a view to evaluating the impact of the interventions selected, the logical framework was used as a

tool to structure the analysis. Figure 1 below presents the definitions of the elements of the logical framework that were used for this study. The definitions proposed are based on those used for the ex post evaluation of four governmental cooperation projects (2013). They were then amended slightly to reflect the partnership approach specific to the NGO sector.

The evaluators distinguished "outcomes" from "impact". "Outcomes" are defined as being all the direct and indirect effects resulting from the use of the "outputs" at the level of the different types of beneficiaries: direct beneficiaries -partners-, intermediate beneficiaries and end beneficiaries.

"Impact" makes reference to the effects generated by the project on a general level.

Figure 1 : Definitions of the concepts of the logical framework used for the four case studies

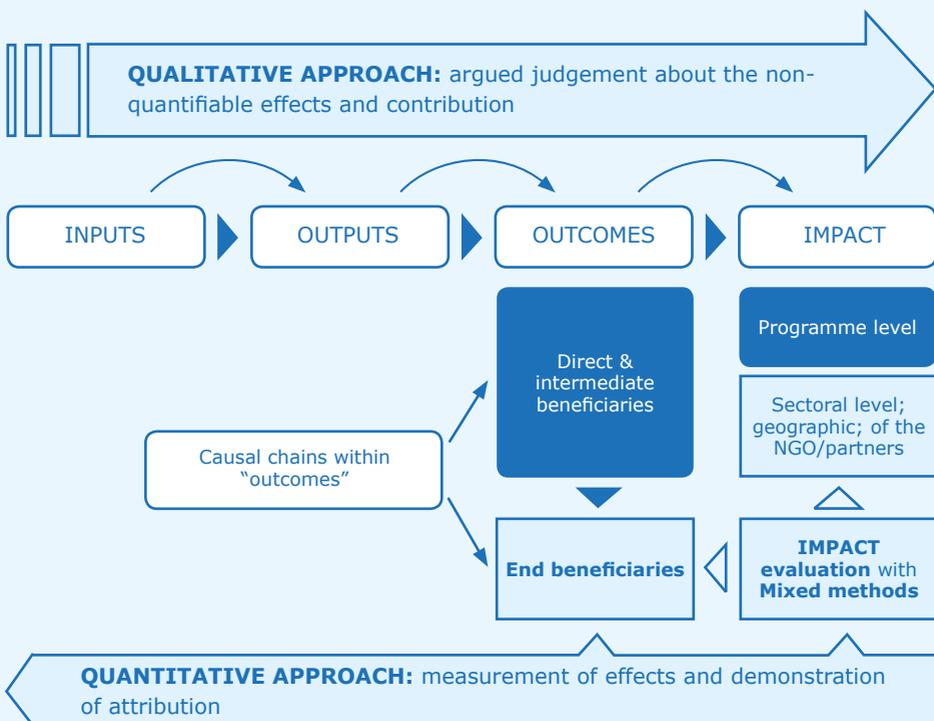


Methodological approach

For each of the four interventions selected, the evaluators developed a methodological approach that helped to rigorously evaluate, on the one hand, the effects (“outcomes”) of the development action at the level of the beneficiaries and, particularly, at the level of the end beneficiaries, and, on the other hand, the effects

on a general level (“impact”), especially at the level of the sector and the geographical level.

The evaluation favoured the use of mixed methods, i.e. a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, structured around the theory of change.



The methodological approaches varied according to the type of intervention and the data already available

from the NGO. Furthermore, they were developed taking account of time and financial constraints.

Although they are not equivalent in terms of scientific rigour, the proposed methodological approaches followed **four rigorous practices**:

1. The use of **relevant data collection tools** that had already been tested on the ground and implemented by a competent local team. This team was trained to use the tools as well as electronic tablets for a household survey. This helped to ensure the collection of relevant and reliable data and, as far as possible, avoided reporting bias, namely the exaggeration of reality by the respondents.
2. A **random selection** of the areas to be visited and respondents. This helped to avoid selection bias. When a completely random choice was not feasible, the evaluators took account of potential bias in the responses.
2. A **counterfactual approach**. This implied surveying a sample of individuals from a group of non-beneficiaries relatively similar to the group of beneficiaries. The non-beneficiaries would have been eligible for the intervention and the two groups would have developed in the same way if the intervention had not taken place.
4. The reconstruction of the **pre-intervention situation** ("baseline") based on questions calling on the memory of people ("recall data") and based on secondary data.

These last two practices were required in order to demonstrate the attribution of the changes observed in the intervention or at least explain the intervention's contribution to the effects.

Furthermore, a rigorous processing method for the data collected was observed. Appropriate econometric and statistical tools were used. The limits of the methodological approach and potential biases were clearly expressed and taken into account in the study observations.

The quantitative approach implemented varied depending on the interventions. In Indonesia and Peru, primary data was collected using a household survey. In Tanzania, secondary data available from the NGO and the World Bank was used. In the Philippines, there was no quantitative analysis due to a lack of available, reliable data.

The qualitative approach involved reconstructing, *ex post*, the theory of change for the selected interventions. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions also took place with key stakeholders in Belgium and in the field. It should be noted that the counterfactual approach was also implemented in the qualitative approach: interviews and discussion groups were organised within a control population.

The aim of using rigorous mixed methods was, therefore, to ensure that the most objective information possible was collected in order to make credible observations about the effects that could be attributed to an intervention, measure these effects where the data allowed, and explain the underlying mechanisms for the changes observed (or not).



Conclusions and lessons

In general, **the evaluation highlights the feasibility and need to account for the results of development assistance at the level of target populations.** Rigorous impact evaluation is a relevant tool for accounting for the effectiveness of aid. Furthermore, more than the type of methodological - qualitative or quantitative - approach it is the level of rigour with which the methodology is implemented that guarantees the credibility of the observations of an evaluation.

Relevance

The four interventions selected met the priority needs of the beneficiary populations. The choice of partners and the intervention procedures proved to be relevant for two interventions, but for the two others the judgement was more subtle (questions remain as to the viability of the local structures without the financial support of the NGO).

The evaluability of the impact

The monitoring and evaluation systems of the twelve participating NGOs are relatively developed in view of assessing the "outputs" and "outcomes" at the level of the direct beneficiaries, i.e. the partners. However, they are weak when assessing the results at the level of the end beneficiaries. The incentives for assessing the effect of the interventions at the level of the target populations are almost non-existent (at donor level). The NGOs feel more accountable for the effects on the ca-

capacity development of their partners than on the effects at the level of the beneficiary populations.

Qualitative and quantitative evaluation tools are used by a certain number of NGOs but a lack of rigour in their application is often observed.

Achievement of "outcomes"

Overall, in the four case studies, the partners appreciated the support received. The partnership approach raises several challenges in the field, as much in terms of the partnership which is possible depending on the intervention areas, as the duration of the collaboration and even the financial relationship between the NGO and the partners. Two types of partnership are identified as interesting (and effective): public partnerships and partnerships with civil society groups.

Immediate beneficiaries are key stakeholders for achieving the effects at the level of the populations. However, a positive assessment of the effects at the level of the partners is necessary, but not sufficient, in order to guarantee that the expected effects will be achieved at the level of the end beneficiaries.

For two of the four interventions, the effects at the level of the end beneficiaries were identified, measured and attributed, at least in part, to the intervention. In the two other cases, the results were less tangible.



Achievement of impact

The proportion of individuals affected by the intervention in the intervention area could only be calculated in a single case (due to a lack of available data). For two of the four interventions, the spillover effect was clearly identified. The effect at the level of local policies was weak but present in three of the four interventions.

Sustainability

The sustainability of the effects on the end beneficiaries is often questioned by the sustainability of the effects on the intermediate beneficiaries (for example, the functioning of producer groups or water management committees, etc.). Furthermore, the sustainability of the effects of actions on the ground appear more credible when the partners are civil society organisations (in the field of activity) or in the case of public partnerships. The latter are present in the

intervention area before and after the project, therefore, the spillover effect is more likely. Also, they are less financially dependent.

Gender and environment

Women were clearly targeted beneficiaries in three of the four evaluated projects. None of the interventions explicitly mentioned preservation of the environment.

The added value of a rigorous mixed approach

The NGOs recognise a certain added value in implementing a rigorous mixed approach to assess the effect of development actions.

Definition of the term 'impact'

There is confusion regarding the definition of the term 'impact' in the NGO sector. A shared vision of the definition of the various levels of results of a development intervention

(direct, intermediate, end beneficiaries) appears to be essential in order to define the level of requirements in terms of results-based management and, therefore, in terms of accountability and the effectiveness of aid.

The use of rigorous mixed methods

The use of such methods is feasible, even ex post. However, the development of an ex ante rigorous mixed approach would significantly reduce implementation difficulties.

The NGOs recognise the contribution of the rigorous mixed approach in terms of observations concerning results and in methodological terms.

Therefore, this approach appears to be relevant, though 'policy influence' type interventions (interventions which attempt to influence policies) could be questioned.

Rigorous impact evaluation is affordable in many cases. Furthermore, the benefits generated using a relevant and rigorous monitoring and evaluation system from the start of an intervention may be greater than the additional costs incurred by more rigorous practices. This approach will also be more profitable if the incentives for rigorously accounting for the effects on the end populations are present in the Belgian development cooperation sector.





RECOMMENDATIONS

1. General recommendations

In general, there must be greater discussion between development cooperation stakeholders, in order to promote a common understanding of the issues, challenges and constraints and opportunities of the impact evaluation.

It is necessary, within all of Belgian cooperation, to work on the budgetary and human constraints which hinder the implementation of more rigorous

impact evaluations. This involves finding incentives that might encourage all stakeholders to account for the results of development actions at the level of end beneficiaries.

It is recommended that alternative methods of communication to paper are encouraged, such as video, for communicating the results with the key stakeholders (including the beneficiaries).

2. Recommendation to the Federal Parliament and the Minister of Development Cooperation

It is recommended to **promote the rigorous assessment of the results and changes generated by interventions at the level of the target populations.** To do so, it is necessary to allocate the resources

and expertise required and to provide good incentives both to the State structures (SEO, DGD) and to the partners involved in implementation (such as the NGOs), as well as to the evaluation's stakeholders.

3. Recommendations to the DGD

The DGD should encourage the internal implementation and appropriation of the principles and measures retained in the “Development Results” strategy paper (2014) in order

to **create incentives for ensuring that non-governmental cooperation accounts for the results of co-financed actions, at the level of target populations.**

To that end, the DGD could:

- Clarify and distinguish its objectives in terms of evaluation, objectives which may target: (i) *accountability*, (ii) *learning with a view to informing decision makers* and (iii) *learning with a view to sharing knowledge*;
- Promote a shared vision of the definitions of the various levels of results, especially for the “outcomes” and impact.
- Specify the level of the results upon which the NGOs must report, as well as the level of requirement and rigour of the reporting.
- Provide incentives to the NGOs so that they can implement effective and rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems for accounting for the results that can be attributed to their actions at the level of the target populations. Incentives are needed to produce relevant and usable baselines and adopt a counterfactual approach (even in case of a qualitative approach).
- Focus the funding on results (rigorously evaluated), but also on stakeholders’ ability to learn lessons from past experiences. Therefore, it is necessary to create incentives so that these monitoring and evaluation systems can also be used to report on failures, without this having an effect on future funding, if lessons have been learned.

The DGD should also **question the notion of strengthening partners’ capacities**, especially when the partnership lasts over time.

Also, it should **encourage NGOs to collaborate with different types of partners**. Partnerships with civil

society organisations in their field of expertise or even with decentralised, local public institutions may foster the sustainability of the results compared with partnerships with local NGOs that are highly dependent on the funding provided by Belgian NGOs in order to act among populations.

4. Recommendations to NGOs

NGOs should **develop a monitoring and evaluation system that allows them to account for the**

effects at the level of the end beneficiaries as well as for the results at a more general level.

To that end, NGOs could:

- Use the theory of change as a basis for building the monitoring and evaluation system so as to clarify the links between causes and effects, the hypotheses underlying the changes and the influence of the context on achieving results.
- Help to improve partners' self-evaluation capacities and provide them with incentives to be more rigorous in terms of data collection;
- Assess the effects of an intervention at a more general level (especially if the period covers an intervention cycle and not solely a funding cycle).

For their self-evaluation system, NGOs are encouraged to **adopt a more rigorous methodological approach that privileges mixed methods**. In particular, this approach implies the random selection of respondents and a counterfactual approach. It could help them to produce credible observations, demonstrate the attribution of results and explain the mechanisms underlying the changes. Indeed, the complexity of an intervention or the cost (which could be shared) of a rigorous mixed approach are not valid excuses for not developing a more effective and

rigorous monitoring and evaluation system.

NGOs should **consider the possibility of diversifying their collaboration with different types of partners**: civil society organisations in their field of expertise or even decentralised, local public institutions, in addition to local NGOs.

NGOs are encouraged to **systematically explain how and why the intervention will have effects on women, young people and the environment**.



5. Recommendations to the SEO

Part of the annual SEO budget could be dedicated to producing strategic impact evaluations

in order to examine the results of development aid at the level of the target populations and/or at a more general level.

The SEO should **design and support the creation of a framework and methodological support system to strengthen the impact evaluation capacity of all Belgian**

development cooperation stakeholders.

The SEO should **design the assessment and certification of the quality of NGO evaluation systems as a lever which encourages a relationship of trust between the DGD and NGOs**, in such a way that the latter are no longer required to report on activities and outputs and are able to concentrate on “outcomes” and impact.

Box: The impact evaluation and the programme approach

All the interventions that are subject to this evaluation are governed by the Law of 25 May 1999 on development cooperation. The evaluation focuses on four interventions implemented in the south by non-governmental organisations of Belgian development cooperation, subsidised by the Belgian State under the Royal decree of 24 September 2006.

Some interventions evaluated are part of ‘programme’ funding and others are part of ‘project’ funding. This evaluation aimed to review the definition of the impact in terms of a non-governmental development cooperation intervention and not in terms of a programme as a whole. Similarly, its objective was to assess the effects for the end beneficiaries and at a more general level for an intervention and not for the programme of which it is part.

According to the NGOs, a programme can consist of several different interventions in the same area or the same type of intervention in several regions of the world. These interventions may have synergies with each other. In the first case, the analysis of the attribution of effects must therefore be taken into account. The analysis must also take account of these potential synergies when explaining ‘why’ and ‘how’ the intervention did or did not achieve the expected effects. In the second case, it may be interesting to use the observations made during the evaluation of an intervention in a region in order to draw conclusions from it about the interventions implemented in other regions of the world. Or, it may even be interesting to assess an intervention’s contribution to achieving the global impact of the programme of which it is part.



This document, the synthesis report, the annexes, the management responses and a related video are available in three languages on this website:

http://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/development_cooperation/how_we_work/special_evaluation_office/reports



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Development Cooperation**

Office of the Special Evaluator for Belgian Development
Cooperation

Editor: Dirk Achten
President of the Executive

Graphic Production:
www.mediaprocess.be