



**DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION DIRECTORATE
DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE COMMITTEE**

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CLIENT SURVEY STUDY OF PEER REVIEWS

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The attached note has been prepared by the DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation Informal Sub-group on Peer Reviews for both the DAC meeting on 5 November and the subsequent Senior Level Meeting on 12 -13 December 2002.

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CLIENT SURVEY STUDY OF DAC PEER REVIEWS

Note by the DAC WP-EV Informal Sub-group on Peer Reviews¹

Background, purpose, approach and character of the study

1. The proposal for a client survey elaborated by the WP-EV Informal Subgroup on Peer Reviews was welcomed by the DAC Senior Level Meeting in December 2001 [DCD/DAC(2001)33]. The overarching goal of the client survey study is to help make peer reviews even more relevant to Members' needs. The specific purpose of the survey is to investigate Members' views on the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of the peer reviews in a systematic and client-focused way. The Informal sub-group selected an independent consultant to conduct the study as described in the agreed terms of reference [DCD/DIR(2002)12]. Following consultations with almost all DAC Delegates and the Secretariat, the consultant developed a detailed questionnaire on the basis of which he conducted in-depth interviews with key persons in 21 Member capitals (out of 23) involved in peer reviews.

2. The strength of the client study is that the views, assessments, and suggestions synthesised in the report reflect Members' views and needs rather than the judgements of an external observer whose opinions Members may or may not share. It should be noted that it is not a formal evaluation of the peer reviews according to standard evaluation criteria and yardsticks. It is, however, a methodologically sound survey of members' views and needs as the main stakeholders.

Strengths of the peer reviews

3. The strengths of the peer reviews are that they constitute a comprehensive review of Members aid policies and practices conducted by an independent and experienced international organisation (OECD) on the basis of standards commonly agreed by DAC Members and involving other Members as peer examiners. No other organisation conducts reviews of this type.

4. According to the survey, Members see a clear value-added and need for the peer reviews and have benefited from them: the interviewees almost unanimously considered the peer reviews to be highly important within the DAC's activities, and most Members (16) declared that the peer reviews had a high or some impact on their aid policies and practices.

5. As such peer reviews deserve particular attention and efforts aimed at improvement should be made in the knowledge that peer reviews are clearly of substantive value to Members.

¹ Following the request by the DAC for closer collaboration between the Peer Reviews and the WP-EV, an informal subgroup on peer reviews of volunteer Members of the WP-EV was created. The core group consisted of Germany, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, UK, and the Secretariat with Mr Jan Dybfest, Norway as Chair. WP-EV Members from Canada, Italy, Japan and US participated in some of the meetings.

Findings on weaknesses and challenges: suggested areas for improvement

6. Despite their overall positive assessment of the importance and impact of the peer reviews, DAC Members are seeking improvements in several areas. The ones most frequently highlighted refer to:

- **Experience-sharing and collective learning** in the DAC on the basis of the peer reviews. The majority of Members interviewed considered it less satisfactory or unsatisfactory, indicating that they had not seen much comparative discussion, let alone systematic efforts to synthesise and document lessons learnt and good practices;
- **Methodology of the peer reviews.** Although the standards applied in peer reviews are regarded as appropriate by almost all Members, they appear not to be sufficient in two respects. First, according to quite a number of interviewees, the standards are too input-oriented and therefore need to be supplemented by outcome-oriented standards. Second, several Members advocated clearer standards in the sense of more measurable indicators, benchmarks and checklists;
- **Thematic coverage of peer review.** While most Members said that on balance they were satisfied with both the coverage of the last review of their country and the current “menu” of main issues of the reviews, they would like more weight to be given to issues such as policy coherence, implementation (as opposed to stated policies), sector approaches and aid outcome.

7. There are a number of other areas where improvements are suggested including:

- **strengthening the peer character** of the reviews by Members devoting more resources to the peer review process in terms of qualified Examiners as well as better preparation for and more active participation in the peer review meetings;
- **giving field visits** a common approach by means of terms of reference or a basic questionnaire and conduct joint assessments (considered a very promising variant of field visits) whenever feasible and appropriate. Most Members regard field visits as highly important.
- **making recommendations more specific**, e.g. by highlighting good practices worth sharing (which presupposes that common lesson-learning from the peer reviews is improved);
- **intensifying the follow-up** to peer reviews of individual Members by the DAC either by making the mid-term follow-up visits to Members examined more formal with a requirement to report back to the DAC or by having the Member reviewed report on its progress in a half-day meeting in Paris;

8. Last, but not least, it should be stressed that as with any development co-operation activity, the impact of peer reviews depends not only on the inputs made (i.e. the quality of the reviews in terms of methodology, thematic coverage, specific recommendations etc.), but also, and ultimately in a decisive way, on the use made of them by DAC Members. The survey has shown that Members use the peer reviews in different ways ranging from limited use to intensive and visible use as a tool in the domestic discussions on the aid programme.

Follow-up to the Client Survey Study: action to be taken by different actors

9. The report on the Client Survey Study of DAC Peer Reviews contains a number of recommendations that, if shared and accepted, will require action by different actors:

- *DAC Members*: Members first need to ensure the peer character of the review process (including by appointing qualified Examiners and giving them sufficient time to play an active role at all stages of the peer review process as well as by actively engaging in the peer review process). Secondly, to a large extent it is the Members' responsibility to make use of the peer reviews in a way conducive to bring about a real impact on their aid programme.
- *DAC (regular meetings and/or SLM)*: A number of questions require discussion and decisions by the DAC, e.g. frequency of peer reviews; thematic coverage (e.g. giving more weight to some issues or selecting issues of particular interest for in-depth treatment during a given cycle of peer reviews; ways to enhance collective learning from peer reviews: strengthening the mid-point follow-up to peer reviews; outcome-oriented standards, further measurable indicators and benchmarks (on the basis of preparatory work by the Secretariat and subsidiary bodies).
- *Secretariat*: Careful consideration needs to be given to the various recommendations of the study which have implications for the Secretariat. Among other things, the DCD would have to distil, synthesise and document lessons learnt and good practices from different peer reviews to pave the way for a meaningful discussion in the DAC.
- *Working Parties and other subsidiary bodies*: Many Members would welcome supplementing the guidelines whose implementation by Members is to be assessed in the peer reviews by checklists or benchmarks. Some Members feel that the Working Parties and subsidiary bodies concerned should play a more active role in monitoring Members' implementation of agreed DAC guidelines within their respective subsidiary body area.
- *Working Party on Aid Evaluation (WP-EV)*: Quite a number of Members would welcome more support and guidance from the WP-EV in methodology, particularly regarding outcome-oriented standards; ways to assess the contribution of individual donors to achieving the Millennium Development Goals in a more systematic way; and more measurable performance indicators and benchmarks.