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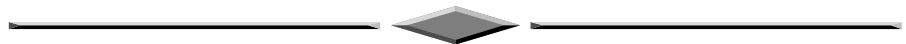
DAC Network on Development Evaluation

EVALUATION SYSTEMS IN DAC MEMBERS'
AGENCIES:

A study based on DAC Peer Reviews

Item IV

This document is intended as background to the discussion to be held at the second
meeting of the DAC Network on Development Evaluation on "Strengthening Evaluation
Systems in Member Agencies" [DCD/DAC/EV(2004)1].

2nd meeting
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Abstract

The search for increased effectiveness of aid and improved accountability mechanisms has led donors to place more emphasis on evaluation as the tool to discern what works, when and why in development assistance. Yet as the attention on evaluation grows a thorough analysis of the evolution of evaluation systems and their adaptation to new demands has yet to be carried out.

Primarily intended as background to the discussion on 'Evaluation Systems and Structures' [DCD/DAC/EV(2004)1] this paper discusses some of the challenges members' evaluation systems are currently facing, by drawing mainly on data contained in DAC Peer Reviews between 1996 and 2004 and information provided over the years to the Secretariat by members of the DAC Network on Development Evaluation. It briefly explores the demands members' evaluation systems have to confront and then focuses on some critical issues and concludes that:

- The Evaluation function in DAC members' is subject to increasing pressures coming from a more diverse range of actors.

- The scope of evaluation is expanding, and Evaluation Departments are required to engage in a broader range of activities and deliver new types of products.

- Several members still face unsettled issues involving their day to day operations, in terms of capacity, institutional position within their agency, and the use of evaluation results.

- Further attention to the challenges members' evaluation system face and how to address them is needed.

**1.	Introduction**

Evaluation provides information on development policy and implementation, with the goal to facilitate learning, increase accountability and ultimately raise the effectiveness of development cooperation. To achieve this, the evaluation function of aid agencies has to rely on sound systems and processes governing the entire evaluation cycle. In the context of this paper the term 'evaluation systems' refers to the procedural, institutional and policy arrangements shaping the evaluation function and its relationship to its internal and external environment - the aid agency, Parliament, other members' evaluation departments, etc. This includes the evaluation function's independence, the resources it relies upon and, not least, cultural attitudes to evaluation. Evaluation systems influence the demand for evaluation as well as its use, including particularly the dissemination, feedback and integration of evaluation findings by operations and policy departments. They not only affect the quality of evaluations but are also of key importance to the impact of evaluation products and results.

Although some of them were still underdeveloped until a few years ago, the evaluation systems of DAC aid agencies have progressively established themselves as fundamental elements of their management and policy improvement. Internal and external pressures on donors to rethink their activities and their broader role in development are responsible for this rapid expansion. With parliaments, media and the public at large questioning the value of development assistance, evaluation has come to play a guarantor role to reinforce the credibility of development cooperation by supporting donors' efforts to raise accountability, transparency and efficiency. At the same time, the aid community as a whole has become increasingly critical of its modes of operation. Key issues such as limited sustainability and ownership have been repeatedly identified without being solved whilst others have arisen, such as the concerns with the overall impact of aid.

Evaluation has been crucial to respond to these challenges, both by raising questions about the design, implementation and impact of aid and suggesting innovative solutions. However, members' evaluation systems have responded unevenly to these pressures. If, on the one hand, evaluation departments have in general experienced a manifest expansion in the scope and range of their tasks, on the other this has not always been matched by a corresponding strengthening of evaluation systems in terms of capacity and institutional position within their respective agency. This partly explains why, as DAC Peer Reviews show, members' evaluation systems often remain a problematic area of aid administration. Whilst during 1996-2000 Peer Review recommendations concentrated mainly on members' compliance with the DAC Principles on Aid Evaluation, in the last cycle (2000-2004) the focus has consistently been on the range of new tasks they are required to perform, the institutional dynamics regulating the evaluation function and the evolution in the ways evaluative work is used.

**2.	New demands on evaluation**

*2.1	Scope*

As any other area of public policy, development cooperation undergoes a constant process of change in terms of policies, implementation modalities, and actors involved. Peer Reviews show that whilst facilitating change, members' evaluation systems are at the same time subject to it. One element of this change concerns the expanding scope of evaluation work.

Expanding portfolios

Over the last few years, aid policy has seen the emergence of new aid delivery mechanisms at the expense of more established forms of assistance. Correspondingly, the notion of evaluation as an essentially standard assessment of aid performed against a conventional framework has become

increasingly problematic. As a result of these trends, all donors have been challenged to adjust their evaluation systems as rapidly as their aid programmes expand into different aid modalities. Evaluation units' activity portfolios have considerably grown to include project evaluations as well as sector, country and process evaluations. Project-by-project evaluations are giving way to programmes of thematic evaluations aiming at establishing the nature and degree of the impact of development assistance in its key thematic areas. Previously noticeable in evaluation practice only, these changes are increasingly being reflected in members' evaluation policies.

External accountability and internal lessons learning

A second element of change is provided by the pressures for external accountability. In several member agencies the evaluation function does not play a real accountability role. Parliament is often not directly involved in any evaluative assessment of the overall performance of the development cooperation system, while in others reporting mainly has a descriptive character, very much means and input oriented and lacking any reference to impact. Since several years though, both Parliaments and the public have become increasingly vocal about the need for objective information on the results of aid. To answer these concerns and honour the commitments made about future ODA levels, OECD governments will need to base quantitative increases in aid on regular, rigorous and objective screening of the impact of assistance. The evidence presented in Peer Reviews shows that evaluation is often required to provide the basis of reporting back to political leadership and taxpayers. Yet, DAC members' experience with using evaluation systems to respond to their accountability needs is varied. When evaluation is solicited in this sense, tensions can arise from combination of evaluation for internal and external goals, such as organisational lesson learning on the one hand and aid agency accountability on the other.

The dual use of evaluation raises resource constraint issues, as self evaluation (an intrinsic part of the learning process) can be limited by external accountability purposes, and vice versa. But besides issues of capacity, the overlapping of internal and external goals can generate confusion regarding the role evaluation is supposed to play. The need to better address the information needs of various actors (parliament, civil society the private sector and the wider public) on aid policies and programmes can lead evaluation to become a communication tool. Calls for a reduction of the length and complexity of the evaluation process can yield more user friendly information, but also a disincentive for rigorous methodology and the objectivity of the evaluation process.

Results-based management and evaluation

Getting the balance right between internal lessons learning and external accountability is partly influenced by the progressive introduction of results based management and its interplay with evaluation. Although the establishment of a results culture has been central to aid agencies' reform efforts for a few years, most donors are still in the early stages of setting up results based management approaches to their programmes. Peer Reviews point to possible problems caused by the interplay between this trend and the effective functioning of evaluations systems. Evaluation units are often charged with operationalising and implementing results orientation, at a time when the donors still have a relatively weak understanding of exactly how to operate simple, integrated, and yet meaningful result based management systems. Often the necessary steps towards simplification and integration are left to practice, leaving evaluation units with year-long hangovers by over demand.

The realisation that RBM and evaluation serve different functions and that the two are not mutually excludable has led several donors to explore the complementarity of the two systems and the information they generate. However, there are indications that in other cases evaluation has been sidelined in favour of performance monitoring. One Peer Review for instance quotes a government official in the field saying that 'the preoccupation with results monitoring has led the agency to move away from using evaluation'.

More generally, Peer Reviews note that management's emphasis on results-based management leads to the crowding out of evaluation and to a higher demand for monitoring and self evaluation, at the expense of external and ex post evaluations. As results indicators are often incapable of distinguishing between 'doing things right' and 'doing the rights things', providing strategic information for management and 'telling the story' - i.e. provide the information that both parliament and the public need in the most 'digestible' way – becomes more problematic. The danger therefore lies in the tendency to control data rather than interpreting it and to 'reporting development rather than doing it'. At the same time, Peer Reviews suggest that systems where the results monitoring function is separate from the evaluation function are not problem free, with duplications, delays and lack of communication between the two information flows. The links between the evaluation function and these new initiatives will have to be further clarified in the future.

Assessing Multilaterals and NGOs

In addition to internal performance assessment, current efforts to devise more strategic approach to aid allocations, DAC evaluation departments are subject to demands to assess the performance of external organisations, such as multilateral organisations and NGOs. Peer Reviews show a strong tendency across agencies to task evaluation departments with assessing multilaterals organisations, particularly those characterised by a high multilateral share and extensive use of multi-bi arrangements. Whilst some evaluation departments are devising ways to rely on multilaterals existing systems to capitalise on them and extract strategic lessons, in other cases these demands are pushing evaluation even more into an audit mode.

The same considerations apply to the need for assessing NGO's programmes and activities. Several donors are concentrating on requiring NGOs and implementing agencies to step up their systems, standards and practices in order to conduct more rigorous self evaluations. Once again, the challenge here lies in supporting the development of NGOs' evaluation capacities to help them demonstrate the impact and sustainability of their programmes autonomously.

Engaging in joint work and sharing common knowledge

For some years now the evaluation units have carried out meta-evaluations, sector evaluations and thematic evaluations jointly with others. As the donor community realises the importance of sharing knowledge and collective learning, the need for examining the complementarity of evaluations systems of various agencies arise. The Peer Reviews highlight how joint evaluations are in fact leading to more coordinated action on several fronts, such as the synchronisation of evaluation planning and the common use of evaluation results. Sharing evaluative knowledge nevertheless depends on its acceptance by management and policy makers. In this respect, issues concerning the institutional position of the evaluation function within their agencies and particularly its autonomy vis-à-vis management affects both the outcome of joint work, the use of jointly produced evaluation results and the convergence of evaluation practices.

Evaluation capacity building

Technical and advisory assistance to Partner countries in evaluation provides another element of DAC evaluation systems' expanding portfolios. Donors have long realised that partner countries should be involved in evaluations of programmes that affect them. Yet the inclusion of partner countries and more generally of the poor in evaluation requires a strengthening of their evaluation and statistical capacities, a task which is often assigned to evaluation units, with once again ensuing capacity issues.

2.2   *Capacity*

Rising demands on evaluation have meant that perceptions of its relevance have changed. In one DAC country for instance, Parliament explicitly called for increased importance to be attached to development evaluation in the wake of a major reform of the ODA system, after expressing fears that increases in ODA could be hard to achieve or even counterproductive without a proper assessment of aid activities.

These changes in perceptions can sometimes lead to increases in allocations to evaluation departments. However, new tasks usually have a negative effect on capacity, particularly in the short term and when added to the entire gamut of tasks evaluation units have to carry out without a corresponding strengthening of evaluation systems. With the move towards results based management, evaluation systems are pushed towards taking over new tasks in order to avoid becoming irrelevant. Not all units have an evaluation budget assigned institutionally and several appear to be understaffed. In some agencies evaluation managers are often required to work on non evaluation tasks. Capacity constraints are often more acute at field level, not least in contexts of advanced donor harmonisation, where understaffed and under resourced local offices find it difficult to usefully process and share the information coming from other donors.

More demands do not therefore always mean more funds. Indeed, Peer reviews signal quite an opposite trend. Particularly perhaps in small agencies, weaknesses persist in the capacity of several evaluation units' both in terms of the finances and staff needed for planning and managing the evaluations. As one Peer Review notes, because of the lack of capacity in their evaluation function, donors have 'insufficient resources to gauge the impact of [their] activities'.

The combined effect of increasing and diversifying demands and low capacity also has an impact on the ways evaluation units conduct their work. Whilst most try to increase their in-house capacities, others are shifting to outsourced studies and consultants. Others, in order to maximise the skill mix of the evaluation staff, give up looking at cross sections of the aid programme and concentrate on specific types of evaluation over multi-annual cycles. The outcome of these processes on the effectiveness of evaluation systems however still needs to be grasped.

3.   Institutional design

Evaluation systems are not self contained structures. Their work takes place in relation to other actors within aid agencies (management, operational and policy departments) and their external environment (Parliament, the public, research centres, partners, other donors and development actors such as NGOs). The nature and role of the evaluation function therefore depends on the institutional arrangements governing its position within this network of actors. These governance arrangements are usually clarified in the evaluation unit's mandate, the aid agency's official organigram and the legal rules regulating evaluation officers' tenure. But they can also have a more informal character based on conventions and norms of behaviours embedded in the agency, and revolving around notions of authority or perceptions about the role of the administration vis-à-vis the public. Because of these subtleties, a thorough comparison of the institutional set up of donors' evaluation systems is not possible in the space of this study. However, an examination of Peer Reviews shows that the quality of DAC evaluation systems' institutional design is uneven across agencies, and that no arrangement is completely problem-free.

3.1 Impartiality and independence

A mixed picture

The legitimacy and credibility of evaluation rely on its objectiveness and critical distance from policy makers and managers. Over the last five years there has been a consistent trend towards more independent evaluation functions in virtually all aid agencies, partially in response to members' observance of the DAC Principles[1] but also explicit calls by the public concerning the need for public sector reform in general. However, in many instances the independence of evaluation systems from operational management is still lacking, and in some cases evaluation units have actually relinquished part of their independence vis-à-vis operations and policy, with as a consequence potential conflicts of interests between 'evaluators' and 'evaluated'. Some elements of this mixed picture are below.

Institutional position

The impartiality of the evaluation function depends on its location within the aid agency and the governance arrangements linking it to the bodies which it reports and is accountable to. This can include parliament, state-secretaries, ministers or politically-appointed head of agencies, boards of directors or simply the top layers of management and policy departments within the agency. In 1998 the evaluation unit of one member agency was separated from the specialist programme support function and made to report directly to the head of the Development Cooperation division. A committee set up to review the aid programme also recommended establishing a new ministerial oversight and advisory body whose remit would include enhancing the independence of the evaluation and audit arrangements. The Peer Review noted that in order to provide independent and strategic advice to the minister, the board had to be separate from the evaluation process. In the case of another member, the Peer Review noted that the three evaluation units within the development cooperation system remained accountable directly to the top management of heir respective agencies. As they had to rely on annual proposals from the operating departments, they lacked any real autonomy in evaluation programming. In one agency, the division in charge of evaluation was a subsidiary to the auditing department, which in turn reported to the Agency's Directorate-General although, according to the DAC Principles, there might have been a case for a direct reporting line to the Supervisory Board. In another member country, until 2002, the lack of independence of the evaluation units of two agencies impacted negatively on the overall credibility of evaluation. This led both agencies to subsequently address this weakness by empowering their evaluation units with independent authority.

Other variables affecting independence

Beside its location, other factors influence the impartiality of the evaluation function. These include the evaluation unit's mandate, the resources available or the general perceptions of the importance of evaluation within the agency. The impartiality of one member's evaluation unit is limited by the fact that its prime responsibilities concern non-evaluation tasks such as project appraisal and quality control on financing proposals. In addition to draining resources away from the proper 'evaluation function', these responsibilities place the unit on the 'other side of the fence' within the programming and operational sides of the agency, raising conflicts of interest. In another similar case, although independence seemed guaranteed by the formal separation between the evaluation function and management, the fact that the evaluation unit was to varying degrees also responsible for planning and strategy development left the door open to potential conflicts of interest.

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1 .   OCDE/GD(91)208 Development Assistance Committee, Principles for Evaluation of Development Assistance; OECD (1998) Review of the DAC Principles for Evaluation of Development Assistance

Independence is also partially relinquished when responsibility for identifying the contents of the evaluation programme, framing terms of reference and selecting consultants is devolved to operations departments. In one member country the responsibility for approving and clearing evaluation reports was not given to the evaluation department, which therefore remained effectively unable to control its end products. In other cases, evaluation is still confused with in-house monitoring, allowing for management control and the risk of objectivity being not necessarily guaranteed.

3.2 *Functional integration*

Striking a balance

Although independence is crucial, evaluation systems need a degree of functional integration within the agency's decision making, policy and operational departments. Striking the right balance between independence and integration is therefore a prerequisite if evaluation has to support policy development and continuous improvement in aid effectiveness. Peer reviews show that members' evaluation systems are often defective in this respect, particularly with regard to:

- Links to policy, planning and resource allocation functions

- Two-ways communication with senior management

- Servicing of programme managers, especially in programme design

- Tasks related to input into the design of monitoring and reporting systems

- Communication with other evaluation functions within country's the aid system

Fragmentation versus integration

Despite their different roles and responsibilities, the interplay of internal and external evaluation is crucial to the efficient working of the overall evaluation system. Yet, evidence in Peer Review shows that a disconnection between the two often prevents the development of systemic synergies. In the context of the reform of one member's development cooperation system, Parliament requested the creation of a new position of special evaluator. In order to secure its independence, the special evaluator office was placed outside the Directorate General for Development Cooperation within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and attached instead to the MFA General Secretariat, reporting directly to Parliament. As a result, the former evaluation department (part of a former Studies and Evaluation directorate) was abolished. The high degree of separation of the newly created office combined with the lack of any internal evaluation function had serious implications on the capacity of evaluation results to be incorporated in the system. Basing the evaluation unit out of the reach of decision-making and operation structural weakened its potential to cover the various phases of the project cycle and more importantly to have the necessary leverage on strategy and policy. This partly contributed to the discontinuation of the external evaluator, and the creation of a special evaluation unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Coordination in multi-agency systems

In countries where ODA responsibility is shared among two or more departments, integration can be more complicated. In these cases the evaluation function is generally located at the level of the different agencies, often with loose or no coordination. The degree of compartmentalisation in these systems raises the question of how information from the various evaluation units is shared. Peer Reviews show that in multi agency systems a special effort is required to support joint learning among different groups. Splits in

the knowledge base do often prevent the accumulation of a critical mass of expertise and the translation of evaluative results in feedback for political and policy objectives.

Donors with multiple ministries and separate implementing agencies have attempted to create systemic connections in different ways. In one case, overall responsibility for all external assistance has been granted to one single evaluation unit, down from the three bodies previously in charge. In another case an inter-ministerial committee ensures strategic guidance and coordination to the various elements of the system, even though some scope remains for ensuring greater inter-ministerial internalisation of experience and lessons leaned, including those related to the evaluation process itself. To allow for the integration of the feedback loops of all agencies into an overall leaning system one member entrusted a supervisory and standard setting role to a Quality Enhancement and Improvement cluster located in one of its agencies.

However, the management of evaluation results and processes at systemic level remains problematic. In one case, the Ministry of Economy and Finance manages roughly half of the country's total ODA but has no evaluation function nor does it entertain any relation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' own evaluation unit. The same disconnect between Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Finance was noted in another Peer Review. Another case showed that internal compartmentalisation engendered a lack of horizontal dissemination throughout the agency. The creation of an ad-hoc development cooperation agency caused a split of the evaluation function between an understaffed unit within the MFA's Division for Evaluation, Policy and Strategy, and an equally understaffed unit in the newly created agency. In other cases, the institutional set up of evaluation is made even more complicated by the institutional oversight and audit role of one agency (typically the ministry of foreign affairs) over another (typically the agency specialised in development cooperation).

Decentralisation

The relationship between headquarters and field missions in the area of evaluation is a recurrent theme in Peer Reviews. Evaluation systems characterised by limited decentralization often encounter fragmentation issues along organizational lines and tend to lack a comprehensive overview of the impact of the entire country programme. As development results are achieved on the ground, the creation of systemic linkages between the field and the centre is crucial to managing evaluations effectively and using their results. Particularly in light of the recent initiatives towards harmonisation and alignment, donors are increasingly moving towards decentralised aid management systems. This calls for a revision of evaluation practices which so far have remained HQ-centred, with the management of the entire evaluation system relegated in capitals.

However the experience of decentralised evaluation among DAC members is varied. Some donors have set up complex systems granting broad decision making authority on evaluation activities to embassies and field offices whilst others have opted for various types of ad hoc decentralisation involving the devolution of financial and managerial responsibility for some evaluations, with the central office retaining the responsibility of control of the quality and results and the follow up stages.

What is certain is that decentralisation affects evaluation systems in all its dimensions, impinging on its quality and effectiveness. Capacity overstretch is a typical example. Field offices often require evaluation training activities and methodological guidance both on the conduct of evaluations and associated procedures such as dissemination and feedback. In one member agency, decentralisation engendered capacity issues, as ex-post evaluations by field offices required training of local staff in evaluation methodologies. In another DAC country, a range of 'decentralised evaluations' are conducted by operation units in the MFA and by the embassies, but often these are ad hoc and of an uneven quality. At field level reporting is of poor quality and learning is minimal. To solve this problem the evaluation

office created an evaluation help desk to support decentralised evaluations, which in turn impinged on its capacities to carry out broader evaluation activities. Impartiality is another issue sometimes arising with decentralised evaluation. In one case decentralisation brought about changes in the organization of self-assessments, with responsibility for project evaluation moved from headquarters to the field. The selection of evaluation teams by the project director could give rise to questions related to rigour and objectivity.

Beside capacity constraints, decentralisation can affect the overall institutional setup of the evaluations system. Bottom-up approaches to learning often have limits in the lack of cross comparison and fertilisation. Lesson learning at field level remains constrained by the vertical nature of information flows oriented towards headquarters, thus limiting horizontal exchange and learning. In one member's experience for instance, the findings of evaluations conducted by individual geographical divisions did not seem to be systematically or comprehensively reviewed, and clearer lines of delegation between HQs and embassies and streamlined information flows in both directions were needed. Finally, the emergence of aid delivery modalities is pushing for a more proactive approach by field missions to opportunities to joint evaluation. One Peer Review noted the need for the field missions to participate in and initiate collaborative approaches and joint partner efforts, so as to provide a mutually reinforcing system of oversight while reducing the need for redundant feedback systems.

4.   Using evaluations

Far from being a mere data generating exercise, evaluation aims to foster organisational and policy change. Its impact is determined not only by the methodologies used or the quality of reporting but by what happens when the evaluation is actually over. In addition to ensuring the highest standards of quality of their outputs, effective evaluation systems are responsible for their follow up, by establishing mechanisms which encourage and improve evaluation utilisation by internal (policy makers, managers) and external actors (Parliament, the public). Whilst on the one hand evaluation is subject to a widening range of demands, evidence from Peer Reviews shows that utilisation of evaluation conclusions and recommendations remains a challenge in many agencies. In several cases evaluation remains a tool limited to checking the consonance of projects' outcomes with their stated objectives or for changing the mere operational side of things. All too often little attention is given to its relevance for policy considerations, or its potential role for advocacy and education.

4.1   *Knowledge management*

Improving feedback

DAC member countries have long acknowledged the need to improve and develop their evaluation feedback practices.[2] Indeed, over the course of two peer review cycles there has been a clear evolution in the way donors conceive feedback, away from concerns strictly related to dissemination to a broader and more systematic attention to the real use and impact of evaluation. Yet, in some agencies, the introduction of sophisticated reporting tools has not been matched by a comparable attention to how evaluation results are applied. In these cases the lack of effective feedback arrangements compromises the role of the overall evaluation systems. One Peer Review for instance noted that efforts aimed at improving the quality of evaluations report were ineffectual given the lack of a regular system of follow-up on the findings and recommendations to ensure that lessons learned are taken into account in future programming.

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2.   OECD/DAC (2001) Evaluation feedback for effective learning and accountability

Addressing diverse audiences

From an earlier focus on the needs of internal management, evaluation is today asked to address an expanding range of actors. As a result of concerns regarding the real impact of development assistance, evaluation results are supposed to ensure accountability and facilitate an understanding by the public and policy makers of the opportunities and constraints faced by donors and partners in the development process. Moreover, the collective need for better information requires evaluation units to progressively engage in joint work and to pay more attention to 'external' sources of information such as research centres, academic institutions and government departments in both OECD and partner countries. Following the increased emphasis on coordinated action among donors, Peer reviews highlight the need for an examination of the complementarity at field level of evaluation and feedback systems of various donors, particularly in contexts where harmonisation and alignment have reached a certain level and where the needs of collective donor and government learning are more pressing.

From dissemination to knowledge management

Because of the trends above, evaluation systems require appropriate knowledge management mechanisms. Addressing diverse audiences requires approaches tailored to each of them. Peer Reviews show that many DAC members' agencies are still limited to notions of dissemination and feedback systems still relatively focused on internal actors, such as operations departments and senior management, thus neglecting their potential the entire donor and partner community.

At the same time though Peer Reviews note a wealth of experimentation with knowledge management instruments. The Knowledge Warehouse set up by one member to including evaluation, policy documents and other 'knowledge reports' is a good example. Developed in-house to meet the specific needs of the agency and its clients as identified through client surveys and other feedback, it consists of a lessons learned database designed to enable quick, user-friendly access to lessons that can be factored into new projects and programmes. Other members have been looking into creative measures to improve the way information is handled and shared in its multi-faceted system. Work by one member on feedback approaches tailored to different audiences is exemplary in its innovation. Because of the great importance attached to the idea of partnerships, another member encourages Partner countries' local authorities to join the steering committees for country evaluation, and holds feedback seminars where partners are invited. The Centre for Development Information and Evaluation within one other member agency combines evaluation findings with other external research. These individual attempts to devise new knowledge management approaches deserve a broader consideration by the evaluation community and an in-depth analysis of their pros and cons.

4.2   *Learning from and capitalising on evaluation*

Managing knowledge is about making sure that information is used appropriately. In addition to certifying the quality of evaluation results, evaluation systems have to ensure that they are incorporated into new policy and operations. Because of the level of analysis they operate on, Peer Reviews are generally unable to carry out rigorous assessments of the obstacles to integrating evaluation results into programming and policy making. Yet, they highlight that the incorporation of findings and recommendations in strategy and policy decisions following the dissemination phase varies across agencies, with many donors still lacking systems to facilitate learning and ensure that evaluation findings are taken systematically into account.

Managing evaluation follow up

Donors show a variety of ways to promote the use of evaluation results among staff. These vary from encouragement to enforcement. In some cases evaluation units are responsible for setting up formal mechanisms ensuring the implementation of recommendations, such as meetings with managers and policy staff and agreed timeframes and frameworks. One country uses 'completion point workshops' where those supposed to implement the evaluation recommendations discuss the conclusions and take a formal stance regarding their use. In another agency, the evaluation division is responsible for the supervision of the implementation of the recommendations made by the evaluators, and the operating units have one year to report about compliance to the recommendations and explain the reasons for the possible non application of the recommendations. In yet another case, the evaluation unit is responsible for the systematic follow up of each evaluation, which starts with the elaboration of a memorandum based on the recommendations and identifying the departments responsible for the agreed follow up activities. The evaluation secretariat then controls the implementation of these activities, and supervises the dissemination of knowledge throughout the system.

In other instances however evaluation units are not involved in appropriation and follow up actions. In once member for instance evaluations findings and recommendations are forwarded to the implementation bodies in the Economic Cooperation bureau which is charged with incorporation.

Guaranteeing ownership

The appropriation of lessons learned is affected by the institutional set up of the system, in particular by the position of the evaluation function and its relationship with internal and external actors. Because ownership is fundamental to any learning process, the acceptance by all stakeholders of evaluation results is crucial to their being used. Follow up systems seem to be more effective when they see the involvement of the top-level management of the aid agency (Director, Secretary General) or political actors (Undersecretary of State, Minister). The position of the evaluation function also seems to play a role, though not a clear one. In the case of one aid agency, the independence of the evaluation department helped raise the impartiality of results and their acceptance by operation units. The peer review of another member notes that a high degree of independence achieved by severing links with decision-makers and operations can be counterproductive for learning and appropriation purposes. The degree of centralisation or 'verticality' of the aid agency and the fragmentation of the aid system also plays a role in ensuring ownership, leading to complicated processes. This seems to be the case at least in one case, where a committee composed of operational managers submits conclusions and recommendations from evaluations to a Supervisory Council, which then charges the 'evaluation and capitalisation unit' to incorporate lessons learned in the preparation of new projects and programs. Some donors still seem to be struggling to take account of field realities. In the case of another a highly centralised aid administration, a system for incorporating lessons from the field into its strategy and policy is still lacking.

In order to increase ownership and maximise the use of evaluation results, evaluation units sometimes strike strategic alliances with other departments. The Evaluation Department of one member agency relies on an internal Performance Assessment Network, whose main role is to support the development of new systems and techniques to improve performance management, as a vehicle for sharing knowledge among other departments. In another member system, measures have been taken to ensure that lessons from evaluation are turned into recommendations for input to strategic thinking and decision making. The fact that the evaluation unit in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has retained membership of the operations committee helps in this respect.

Another indication of the increasing attention to ownership is the transition, signalled by Peer Reviews, from ex post evaluations as the prime feedback vehicle to assisted self-evaluations to guide

adjustments during all the project cycle stages. Moreover, whereas once the primary focus lied simply on assessing the results of past activities, attention now seems increasing oriented to current and future objectives. Peer Reviews note that to be effective evaluations need to provide line managers with timely lessons learned that are specific enough to be applied to on-going and new activities. Broad overview of the achievements of past activities, when de-linked to the agencies' current activities and interests, tend to remain disregarded. Evaluation work programmes formulated by selecting activities based on relevance to current or future programmes, replicability, innovative features notable successes or difficulties and current priorities have more chances of producing high impact products.

Conclusions

Due to the multiplicity of factors described above, DAC evaluation systems have evolved substantially over recent years. Although the information available in Peer Reviews is limited, this study has outlined a number of areas where further attention seems critical to reinforce the role of evaluation. The issues highlighted above are but a few examples of trends affecting one or more agencies or evaluation departments. Whatever their scope however, the challenges they raise concern the entire DAC evaluation community and more in-depth research and a fuller analysis of these trends and their repercussions is therefore needed. In this respect, collaboration among DAC members' evaluation departments will be key to avoiding past mistakes and benefiting from innovative solutions to the design and implementation of evaluation systems, through cross fertilisation and joint learning.