

Outcome and Impact Assessment in International Development

Zewo Guidelines for Projects and Programmes

What is impact assessment for?

If an aid agency is to use its funds economically and effectively, it needs to know more than what the effect of its action on the target group should be. It also needs to ask itself the following questions on a regular basis:

Are we doing the right things?

- Are we improving the situation of the target group?
- Are we contributing to the achievement of overarching goals?
- Are we setting the right priorities?

Are we doing things properly?

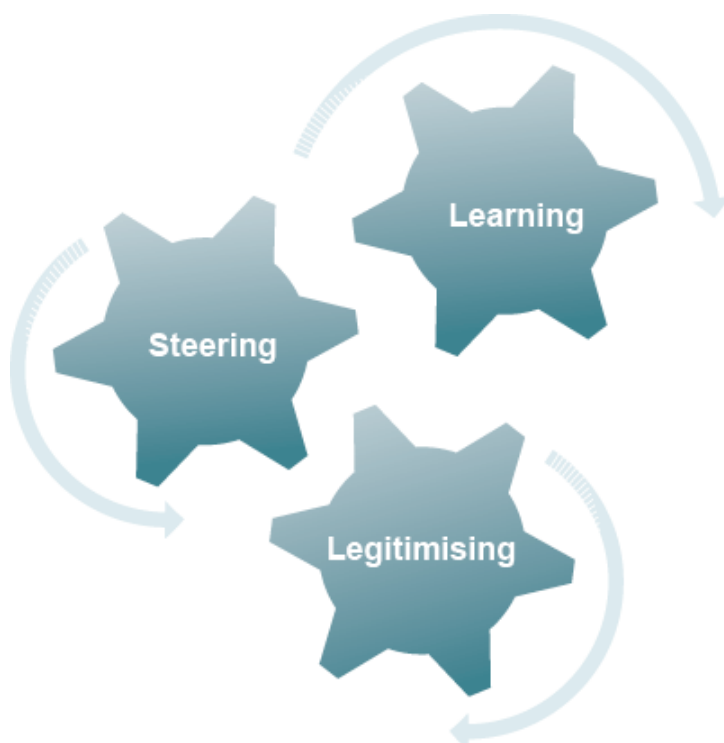
- Are we achieving our objectives?
- What have we done well, and what not?
- Have the target group's expectations been fulfilled?

How can we do things better?

- What should we do differently in future?
- How can we have a greater impact with the same inputs?
- How can we achieve the same impact with less inputs?

IMPORTANT

A systematic impact assessment helps to find answers to these questions. It is a good basis for an organisation to learn from its own experiences, steer projects by results, and legitimise its actions.



There should also be clarification of what the impact assessment findings are going to be used for. The requirements of a good impact assessment system will vary depending on whether it is meant to prove something, improve something or find out something. It also makes a difference whether a specific effect (outcome or impact) needs to be clearly attributed to one activity, or whether it is enough to make a case for the plausibility of the specific project or programme's contribution to achieving the objective.

N.B.

For an impact assessment system to be implemented properly, all the participants must be clear about its purpose and its usefulness from the very beginning. Transparent planning, with broad consultation and the involvement of partners, helps to break down resistance, as well as increasing people's sense of responsibility for the project and assisting their willingness to carry it through.



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Learning

For whom?

The organisation and other direct stakeholders use the results of the outcome and impact assessment. All levels of staff should find out what effect the outputs have had, and to what extent the set objectives have been achieved.

Why?

The organisation is searching for ways to optimise its action and wants to know whether it is doing things properly. It improves its performance by putting findings from the impact assessment into practice in its work. Impact assessment forms the basis of institutional learning and encourages a results-based approach at all levels of the organisation.

How?

Things are studied close-up. It is generally only a specific part of the results chain that is examined. A desire to change is crucial. The findings must be understood and accepted. The willingness to implement change is increased if participants deal with the results on a step-by-step basis. Scheduled 'learning events' promote learning, and the lesson learnt can therefore be processed and disseminated.

By whom?

The impact assessment can be carried out by the participants themselves. It requires a good knowledge of specific measures and short information paths.



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Steering

For whom?

An impact assessment provides those in charge of the organisation with an extra basis for decision-making.

Why?

The organisation wants to know if it is doing the right things. The findings of an impact assessment will help it to understand why its action has succeeded or failed. It can take appropriate measures where necessary to ensure that available resources are used sustainably.

How?

It is important that the results needed by decision-makers are available at the right time. The scheduling of the impact assessment must therefore fit in with existing decision-making processes. The preparation must be simple, intelligible and standardised.

By whom?

The impact assessment may contain both work steps carried out internally and by external experts.



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Legitimising

For whom?

The organisation needs to show accountability to the general public, funders, donors and other stakeholder groups. Development agencies are increasingly legitimising their activities towards their partner organisations and beneficiaries as well (downward accountability).

Why?

The organisation wants to demonstrate what changes its outputs have brought about for the target group and what contribution it has made to solving a problem. It wants to find out whether it was correct to implement the project and whether the activity should be continued. The organisation can gain additional legitimacy for its action with the findings from its impact assessment.

How?

Things are studied wide-angle, i.e. on the entire results chain rather than its individual components. It is crucial for the evaluation that the methodology is rigorous, the design good and the processing carried out correctly. The evaluation must be perceived as credible, technically competent and independent.

By whom?

The demands on the impact assessment can be satisfied better if it is carried out by independent experts rather than by directly involved individuals.