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Meta-Evaluation of Evaluative Studies

Cross-Sectional Analysis – Final Report

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Summary

The purpose of this meta-evaluation was to deliver information on the methodological quality and usefulness of evaluative studies (ES) in GIZ as well as to understand why ES are commissioned (context) and how they are implemented (methodological approach). The sample consisted of 26 ES commissioned between 2020 and 2022. The methodological quality of the ES was assessed based on a comprehensive assessment grid which was divided into different sub-sections on the quality of the reports' introductions, the methodologies, the findings as well as the conclusions and recommendations. Based on eight qualitative interviews conducted with commissioning projects and programmes as well as staff of the evaluation support service, the usefulness of ES' results and the role of the evaluation support service were explored.

Findings

The sample of ES is characterised by high variance with respect to deployed resources, evaluation objects, criteria, and methodological approaches. The methodological quality of ES and the quality of their findings also differ greatly, with the average quality being lower than the quality of CPEs. The overall quality, however, should be seen in the context of ES's significantly lower budget and their usefulness for the commissioning units.

The majority of ES can be heuristically allocated to three groups (i) low-budget evaluations of project components or single measures, typically based on interviews and centred around a specific knowledge interest of the commission projects, thus rather serving learning purposes. (ii) Evaluations based on the OECD-DAC criteria, featuring monitoring data, on-site data collection, interviews, focus group discussion, and/or surveys; some of them are intentionally oriented towards the CPE system with the commissioning project staff being in exchange with the GIZ evaluation unit for that purpose. And (iii) evaluations with objects, criteria, or methodological frameworks not fitting into categories (i) or (ii), such as ex-ante evaluations, process analyses, systematic reviews, or evaluations of measures or technical approaches across several projects.

The quality of ES and their findings vary between completely inappropriate and completely appropriate within all three groups. Interviews with the commissioning projects indicated that the perception of the usefulness of results ranges from highly useful to not very useful. In some cases, project managers openly question the methodological quality of the ES. However, at large, project staff harness insights and recommendations from ES for internal learning, steering, and the planning of follow-on measures as well as for demonstrating the achievement of objectives to donors. Only half of the projects interviewed were aware of the existence of the evaluation support service. Those who received support from the GIZ evaluation unit throughout the evaluation's commissioning and management process perceived it as very competent and helpful. All interviewees remarked that they would appreciate and benefit from evaluation support if managing ES in the future.

The meta-evaluation team draws the following recommendations directed to the GIZ evaluation unit:

- Engage in a more proactive promotion of the evaluation support within GIZ.
- Strengthen the following thematic aspects of the evaluation support service: (i) the anticipation of the tasks as well as overall workload connected with the management of an ES and (ii) the management of expectations concerning the scope and sophistication of findings in relation to the available budget and the methods applied.
- Consider the development of a standardised framework for ES which is based on the OECD-DAC criteria and rather oriented towards the CPE system to provide guidance to commissioners and evaluators and to increase comparability between ES for potential synthesis while at the same time allowing flexibility.

Introduction

Evaluative Studies (ES) in GIZ are commissioned and managed by projects and programmes in operational units. They suit knowledge requirements of those operative units and are characterised by flexibility regarding the evaluation object, selected evaluation criteria, and applied methods. In contrast to central project evaluations, ES are not directly managed by the GIZ evaluation unit. However, the evaluation unit provides – upon request - evaluation support service to project managers of the commissioning projects or programmes. Due to the decentralised character of ES, there is no systematic inventory of the total number of commissioned ES and a comprehensive analysis of their quality and usefulness had not been conducted so far.

To shed light on ES, in 2022 the GIZ evaluation unit commissioned a meta-evaluation of a sample of 26 ES commissioned between 2020 and 2022. The purpose of this meta-evaluation is to deliver information on the methodological quality and usefulness of ES in GIZ as well as to understand why ES are commissioned (context) and how they are implemented (methodological approach). This meta-evaluation had three main objectives:

First, to conduct a descriptive analysis of the sample of ES and to provide an aggregated overview of the evaluations' object (whole project, project component, individual measure, process, etc.), the geographical region of their implementation, time of implementation within the project cycles, the development sector as well as the evaluations' purpose and objective. The analysis should further describe the evaluation criteria used as well as the methodological approach applied.

Second, to assess the quality of ES regarding their methodological rigour and the usefulness of findings. The assessment is supposed to outline typical characteristics and patterns found among the sample of ES, point out their strength and weaknesses, and conclude whether they comply with minimum quality standards.

Third, to provide recommendations for future development of the evaluation support service to the GIZ evaluation unit. This includes the questions if and how the findings of ES could be synthetised to draw overarching insights and how to improve the evaluation support service for operative units in charge of the management of ES.

The meta-evaluation was based on a systematic review of selected evaluation reports and acknowledging corresponding ToRs. In addition, interviews were conducted with the operational staff of the projects and programmes which commissioned ES to gain insights regarding their perspective on the usefulness of the ES' findings and regarding their experience with the evaluation support service.

This report is structured as follows: After introducing the methodological approach (chapter 2) the sample of the ES at hand is described (chapter 3) and findings of the methodological quality assessment are presented (chapter 4). Subsequently, findings from the interviews concerning the usefulness of ES (chapter 5) and the evaluation support services (chapter 6) are outlined. A discussion follows with regards to typical patterns of ES, the role of the ToRs, the quality of ES compared to CPEs, and the potential for exploitation of results by the GIZ evaluation unit (chapter 7). Finally, conclusions regarding the quality and usefulness of ES and the role of the ES are outlined and recommendations regarding the synthesis of ES and the future development of the evaluation support service are presented (chapter 8).

Methodology

Sample of reports: The final reports of ES were the main data sources for this meta-evaluation. In GIZ ES are decentralised and not systematically recorded in an inventory. Thus, to identify the population of evaluative studies, GIZ's Corporate Unit Evaluation conducted a keyword search for "evaluations" (including synonyms and similar terms) in its Procurement Portal as well as in its contract database for contracts concluded in Germany. After merging the data sets, the 281 hits were first manually checked for false positives (i.e., contracts on services or products different from ES). For the remaining hits, GIZ searched for the evaluation reports in question in the documents database. If this search did not reveal any evaluation reports, the ES were requested from the commissioning projects by email. In this way, GIZ was able to identify a total of 38 ES for the years 2020 to mid-2022. ES contracted outside Germany could not be identified in this way. The meta-evaluation team considered all ES for descriptive analysis. However, an in-depth assessment was only performed on a sub-sample of 26 ES to cope with the given resources.

The sub-sample was identified based on three selection criteria: (1) exclusion of untypical cases (i.e., systematic reviews, ex-ante assessments, process evaluations), thus single cases which do not allow deriving valid conclusions on an evaluation type, (2) including at least one ES by each commissioning project or programme, thus allowing maximum variance of commissioners, and (3)ensuring that from each project or programme which has commissioned more than three ES at least two ES were included, thus accounting for within-commissioners heterogeneity. Thereby for all projects or programmes commissioning multiple ES, the selection occurred randomised. Following this procedure, 26 ES commissioned by 22 projects or programmes were identified. For 16 ES the Terms of Reference (TOR) were provided to the meta-evaluation team and included in the assessment.

Methods: The assessment of the quality of the evaluation reports was based on a comprehensive assessment grid operationalised in Microsoft Excel. The grid entailed sections to assess the quality of the introduction (i.e., parts introducing the evaluation), the methodology, the findings as well as conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation reports. Each section was structured in several sub-sections, describing core features of the reports to be assessed (e.g., context analysis, data collection instruments, or the quality of findings regarding an OECD DAC-criterion).

The quality of these sub-sections was rated by the evaluators on a four-step scale with the categories "good or very good", "satisfactory", "need for improvement", and "inadequate". To deepen the analysis, the grid also included several items within each sub-section. These items were, whenever appropriate and sufficient, assessed dichotomously taking presence as a quality marker. For the sub-section data collection, for instance, possible data collection tools were listed as items and marked as present, if they were applied in the respective ES. Some items were also rated on a four-step scale if mere presence did not indicate quality. Staying with the example of data collection, the item "data collection techniques are described in the report" was rated on a scale with the categories "no", "short and incomplete", "short and complete" and "detailed and complete". (For a summary of the assessment grid please refer to the annex.) Assessments at the (sub-)section level were not based on statistical aggregation but are a result of overall expert judgment by the meta-evaluation team taking all corresponding sub-assessments into consideration. Figure 1 shows the assessment grid's sub-section on the evaluation object as an example.

Figure 1: Assessment grid, sub-section evaluation object

Evaluation object		inadequate (1), need for improvement (2), satisfactory (3), good or very good (4)	Read the whole section and rate row x-x. Afterwards rate section in general here, reflecting assessments below.
	The description of the object includes **time period.**	no (0), yes (1)	
	The description of the object includes **budget.**	no (0), yes (1)	
	The description of the object includes **geographical area/region** of intervention.	no (0), yes (1)	
	The description of the object includes **measures/activities/instruments of the intervention.**	no (0), yes (1)	
	The description of the object includes **target groups.**	no (0), yes (1)	
	The description of the object includes **objectives of the intervention.**	no (0), yes (1)	
	The **intervention logic/ Theory of Change** (causal hypotheses between activities/outputs and objectives/intended impacts) is described?	no (1), brief and incomplete (2), moderate (3), complete and comprehensive (4)	(1) not at all, (2) one-two sentences, rather cryptic, incomplete (3) paragraph or table, giving an idea but program does not become fully clear or table is not described in the text, (4) minimum one paragraph with three sentences and very comprehensive table with explanation or very detailed description without table, logic of the programme becomes clear, overall comprehensive and easy to understand, (n.a.) if evaluators mentions the lack of an (appropriate) framework
	Report contains a **results model** (graphic of the intervention logic/ ToC).	no (0), yes (1)	
	The intervention logic/ **ToC is assessed by the evaluator(s)** as appropriate, otherwise shortcomings	no (0), yes (1)	
	The description of the object includes **implementation arrangements** (organisational set-up, partner partner structure etc.).	no (0), yes (1)	
	The description of the object includes **changes** regarding **implementation.**	no (0), yes (1)	

Each report was assessed individually applying the analysis grid. Subsequently, the quantitative assessments (value of ratings of single items and sub-sections) were aggregated across the sample of 26 ES. Aggregated results were descriptively analysed. The distribution of absolute frequencies was visualised in cumulative bar charts to display varying quality levels. The low number of cases did not allow further group comparisons.

To assess the usefulness of ES and to examine the role of the evaluation support service, seven qualitative interviews were conducted with GIZ staff in charge of the management of ES (six interviews) and an adviser from the evaluation support (one interview). The interviews were structured by an interview guideline which was drafted based on the objectives of this meta-evaluation as outlined in the introduction chapter. Interviews were conducted either by the evaluation team or by a member of the GIZ's Corporate Unit Evaluation. Due to the low number of interviews, no particular analysis method was applied. All interviews were coded by analysis questions and synthesised.

Limitations: Several minor limitations arise from the given circumstances and the chosen research design. They are described here for transparency purposes, but do not impose major constraints on the significance of the findings. First, the sample of reports provided by the GIZ evaluation unit for this meta-evaluation is not representative. A randomised sampling was not possible as the number of the basic population (i.e. all ES commissioned between 2020 and 2022) cannot be established without any doubt. Thus, findings and conclusions do not account for all ES in GIZ, but only for the particular group of reports analysed. The findings at hand are not statistically representative. Although the identification strategy does not suggest systematic biases, the small sample size urges for treating meta-evaluation results as rather exploratory and indicative while refraining from generalisation as statistical requirements are not met.

Second, to minimise the risk of subjective assessment and to facilitate inter-subjective comparability regarding the quality assessment, many ratings in the analysis questions have been limited to simple yes-or-no questions. Whenever a four-step rating scale was necessary to allow for the differentiation of ratings of more complex items and sub-sections, each point of the rating scale was specified in a narrative providing guidance to the evaluation team. During the calibration phase, the meta-evaluators exchanged regularly to harmonise their rating patterns. This resulted in a fairly reliable instrument. Blind cross-analyses to estimate agreement rates

were, however, due to resource constraints not possible.

Third, due to methodological constraints and given the short time frame of less than 2.5 hours available for the meta evaluation of each report, the assignment cannot be understood as a re-evaluation of single interventions. A re-evaluation was also not the aim of this meta-evaluation. Therefore, the findings on the quality assessment of an ES under this meta-evaluation cannot be interpreted at case level. The analysis strictly remains on the interpretation of results on an aggregated level describing quality across all reports of the sample.

Fourth, the number of semi-structured interviews conducted with operating units commissioning ES and with the GIZ evaluation unit was limited to eight. Therefore, findings must be interpreted with care to avoid generalisation from single cases. Where the report refers to single statements from interviewees, this is indicated as such in a transparent manner. Due to the small sample size, it is important to note that findings and conclusions derived from the interviews have explorative character only and do not claim contextual representativeness. Further, some of the interviews were conducted by the commissioner of this meta-evaluation (i.e., staff of the GIZ evaluation unit). To maintain comparability and quality of interview data across different interviewers, the interviews were based on a semi-structured guideline outlining several open questions to be followed by the interviewer. Given the decentralised nature of ES, GIZ's Corporate Unit Evaluation is never involved in the commission of ES as a direct actor and showed a genuine interest to shed light on ES. Therefore, no larger biases are expected by this resource-saving measure.

Evaluative Studies in GIZ: Descriptive Analysis

ES in GIZ are directly commissioned and managed by project or programme staff without the involvement of GIZ's Corporate Unit Evaluation. While central project evaluations commissioned by the GIZ evaluation unit are always assessing a project as a whole and are structured by the six OECD DAC criteria with a standardised set of pre-defined evaluation questions, ES are very flexible regarding the object, criteria, and questions of the evaluation.

Projects or programmes can commission ES of project components defined by a certain implementation region, by a field of activity (Handlungsfeld), or by a particular measure. Further, they can freely select the evaluation criteria the ES is based on according to their knowledge interests (or those of other actors involved, such as donors or partner organisations). While evaluation standards are supposed to be adhered to in general, there are no mandatory guidelines on the evaluation methodology, meaning that ES can vary regarding evaluation designs, data sources, and data collection techniques applied. The high level of flexibility and the proximity to projects' operative units is supposed to facilitate evaluation results that support internal learning, evidence-based decision making, and impact-oriented management.

The interviews with GIZ staff showed that often several persons from the project team were in charge of the commission and management of an ES, including M&E focal points, officers responsible for project management and implementation (Auftragsverantwortliche, Durchführungsverantwortliche) as well as national and field technical advisors. Concerning the interviews conducted, there was only one case where a single person was in charge of evaluation management. Another interviewee stated that the evaluation process for one ES was accompanied by a sounding board which included an external expert from a German university.

Under this assignment, a **convenience sample of 38 ES**, commissioned by 22 GIZ projects or programmes was made available to the evaluation team. The sample is not representative in statistical terms (see chapter

2). Thus, the following numbers are only describing the studies selected in the sample but do not account for ES in GIZ in general.

The majority of evaluative studies was **commissioned by** global or sector programmes – the former accounting for almost half (17 out of 38) of the commissions whereas the latter was for about a quarter (10). There are two global programmes each of them commissioned six ES.

Looking at the **geographical distribution** of the evaluation objects, Africa is strongly represented with 17 ES commissioned by 10 interventions, followed by 9 worldwide ES commissioned by 8 interventions. In Europe 5 ES were commissioned by 4 interventions while in the MENA region, 4 ES were commissioned by 3 interventions. The sample further contains 2 ES in Asia (commissioned by one intervention) and one ES in South America.

Concerning the **evaluation objects**, 11 (out of 38) ES were evaluating a project as a whole, while another 11 ES focused on a regional or country-specific component of the commissioning project or programme. The remainder comprised evaluation objects such as project components in terms of thematic fields of activities (Handlungsfelder, 5 ES) or particular measures/approaches across several projects (3). In addition, the sample contains two case studies, one systematic review, one process analysis, and one evaluation of a non-GIZ intervention among the sample of ES.[1]

Regarding the **nature of the evaluation**, slightly above one-third of the ES (14 out of 38) were conducted as final evaluations at the end of the project's or programme's implementation phases. Slightly less than a third of the ES (12) were commissioned as mid-term evaluations. The sample also included one ex-ante evaluation and one ex-post evaluation. About one quarter of the reports (10) did not contain any information on the time of the intervention with respect to the project's life span.

Roughly half of the ES (16 out of 38) featured only learning as their **main purpose of the evaluation** while the remaining half (17) referred to both, learning and accountability. There was no ES commissioned for accountability only. The remaining five reports did not describe the purpose of the respective ES.

With regards to the **evaluation criteria**, about two thirds of ES (25 out of 38) were based on the OECD-DAC criteria whereas the remaining ES were based on other criteria, or no criteria were cited in the report.

Finally, on the **evaluation design,** the majority of ES (27 out of 38) applied qualitative methods only, while 11 ES featured a mixed-methods design. None of the ES followed a purely quantitative design.

Quality of Evaluative Studies

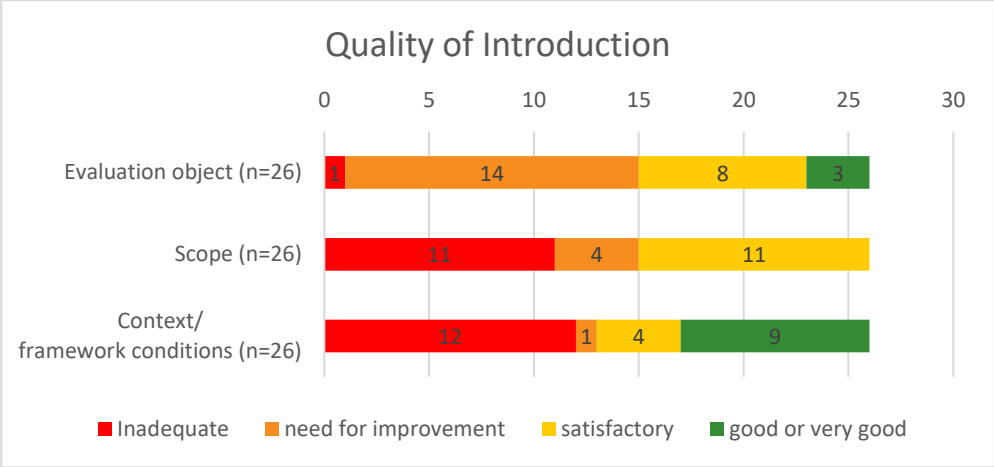
A total of 26 reports were included in the quality assessment. The quality of the ES was analysed for the four main sections of the evaluation reports: (1) the introduction, (2) the methods section, including the description of data sources, instruments, and data analysis, (3) the findings sections, and (4) the section on conclusions and recommendations.

[1] Two interventions were labeled as "unclear", as the evaluation object was not clearly defined in the report.

Quality of Introductions

Regarding the reports' introductions, four sub-sections were at the focus of the assessment: clarity on the outline of the objectives of the evaluation, the description of the evaluation object (i.e., the intervention that was evaluated), the definition of the scope of the evaluation and the provided context analysis. Figure 2 shows the aggregated quality assessments for the sub-sections of ES's introductions.

Figure 2: Aggregated quality assessments for the sub-sections of ES's introductions.



Objective(s) of the evaluation: The majority of reports (22 out of 26) features a description of the evaluation objective. 14 reports point out the intended users of the evaluation. 19 reports describe the evaluation criteria, whereas 16 also outline the evaluation questions in detail either in the main report or in the annex.

Evaluation object: The quality of the description of the evaluation object was assessed based on whether the evaluators described the time period, budget, geographical region, target groups, and activities of the respective intervention. It was further included to what extent the reports introduced the interventions' theory of change including its objectives and underlying results hypotheses. The assessment revealed that only three reports were of high quality in this regard. More than half of the reports (15 out of 26) show need for improvement regarding the description of the evaluation object. This is mainly the case because the reports lack a coherent description of the interventions' theory of change. In addition, more than one third of the reports (8) do not include a clear description of the intervention's target groups.

Scope: The assessment of scope was based on, whether (or not) a clear outline regarding the period, geographical area, and components of the intervention which should be analysed by the evaluators was presented in the report. The assessment shows that more than half of the reports (15 out of 26) do not contain a definition of the scope of the evaluation, or the definition of scope shows need for improvement. The remaining reports present the scope in a satisfactory way, while there is no report with a good or very good section on scope.

Context analysis: To assess the quality of the context analysis it was checked whether reports referred to countries' or region's socio-economic, political, and cultural context concerning the intervention, whether the evaluation object was anchored with the developments of its respective sector and whether the stakeholder setting and relevant policies or strategies were explained. The assessment showed that half of the reports (13 out of 26) contain a context analysis that is satisfactory, good, or very good. However, the remaining half (13) does not refer to framework conditions at all or the analysis provided is inadequate.

Quality of Methods

The assessment of the appropriateness of methods that were applied in the ES was focused on an adequate evaluation design, the composition of sources of evidence, plausible data collection techniques, plausible sampling strategies, appropriate data analysis methods, and how limitations of the applied methods were addressed by the evaluators. Figure 3 summarises the aggregated quality assessments for the sub-sections of the reports' methodology sections.

Figure 3: Aggregated quality assessment for the sub-sections of ES's methods.

Evaluation design: An evaluation design is understood as a strategy on how to address causality in the evaluation process, for instance through a contribution analysis approach, a pre-post design, or an experimental design. From the sample at hand, there was only one report where the description of the evaluation design was assessed as satisfactory. More than half of the reports (16 out of 26) did not outline the evaluation design at all or the description was completely inadequate. The remaining reports (9) show need for improvement in this respect. Though not outlining a particular design, at least one third (8) of the reports referred to a general evaluation approach such as participatory, theory-based, or mixed-methods approach.

Sources of evidence: The assessment of sources was based on whether evaluators used an appropriate mix of sources, such as project documents, M&E data, and additional literature as well as staff from the implementing organisations, the beneficiaries, or representatives of the institutional environment and civil society. The assessment also includes whether sources are described comprehensively and to what extent evaluators justify the selection of sources. The sources of evidence were assessed as appropriate or completely appropriate for the vast majority of reports (21 out of 26). This was mainly the case because two thirds of the reports (17) feature a complete description of sources. However, evaluators justified their selection of sources in only four

reports.

Data collection: Regarding the quality of data collection, it was assessed whether the mix of data collection instruments applied by the evaluators was appropriate, whether they described their instruments comprehensively, and whether instruments were applied without severe failure. Data collection was assessed as completely inappropriate or rather inappropriate for half of the ES (14 out of 26), while for the other half (12) it was assessed as rather or completely appropriate. Reports that were assessed as rather inappropriate often showed shortcomings regarding a complete and coherent description of the data collection instruments applied. One report did not feature any description of the data collection techniques. In slightly less than half of the reports (11 out of 26), the description was short and incomplete, while in slightly above half of reports (14), the description was complete to detailed. In two cases (out of 26) data collection was rated as completely inappropriate because the application of data collection techniques was affected by severe methodological failures.[2] The data collection instruments applied were also part of the assessment: In 25 ES interviews were used for data collection. Focus group discussions were applied in seven ES. In six cases, evaluators implemented a quantitative survey.

Sampling: To assess the quality of the sampling it was assessed whether the sample was described comprehensively whether the sampling strategy was appropriate and whether the sampling strategy was justified by the evaluators. Sampling was assessed as completely inappropriate or rather inappropriate for slightly less than half of the ES (12 out of 26), while for slightly more than half (14) it was assessed as rather or completely appropriate. Sampling was often assessed as (rather) inappropriate because of missing, incomplete, or inconsistent descriptions of the sample and the sampling strategy. In six reports (out of 26), the sample was not described at all and in two reports brief and incomplete, in another six reports the description was moderate but still incomplete, while in 12 reports it was complete. However, a sampling strategy was outlined in less than half of the reports (11) while in only three cases the evaluators justified their sampling strategy.

Data analysis: The assessment of data analysis was based on whether the mix of analysis methods applied by the evaluators was appropriate, whether they described their methods comprehensively, and whether methods were applied without severe failure. Data analysis was assessed as rather appropriate for only two ES (out of 26) while for the other 24 ES, it was rated rather inappropriate or completely inappropriate. This was mainly due to the finding that 16 (out of 26) reports did not include any description of data analysis at all while six reports show a brief and incomplete description and four reports a moderate but incomplete one. There was no report with a complete description of data analysis methods. An appropriate mix of methods (triangulation) was applied in only five reports. In five reports data analysis was characterised by severe methodological failure (e.g., generalisation from single cases to an entire population).

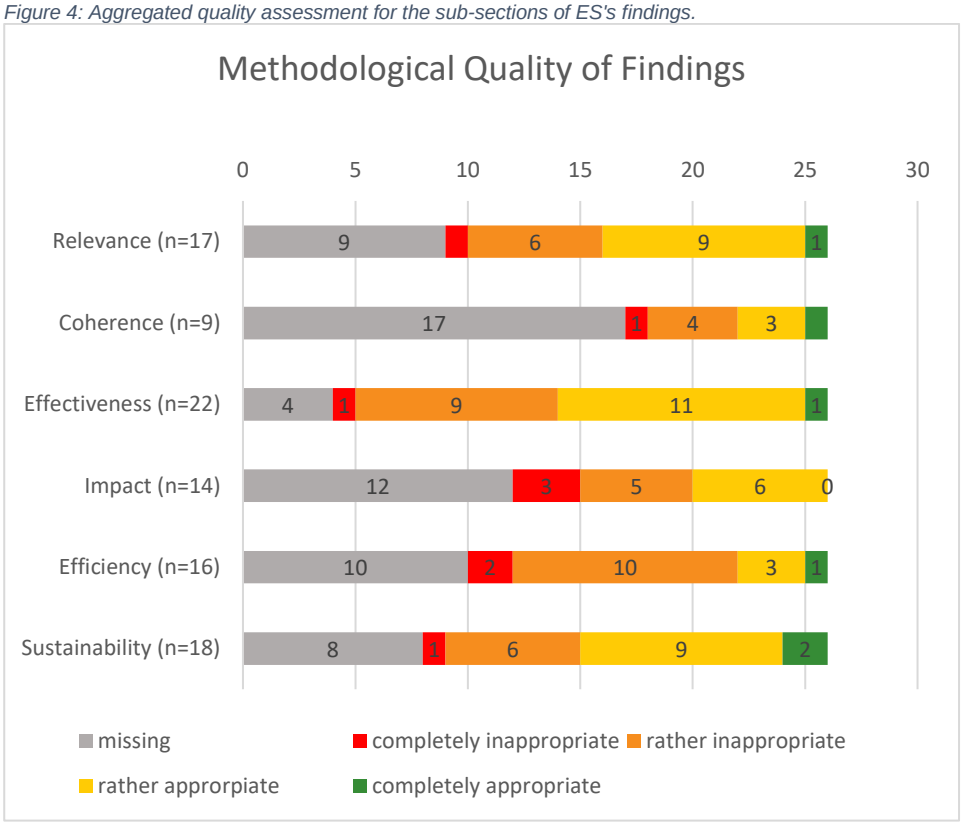
Limitations: The way how evaluators address limitations of the applied methods and mention limitations at all was assessed as completely inappropriate or rather inappropriate for more than half of the ES (16 out of 26). This was often due to evaluators not discussing the influence of outlined limitations on the evaluation process and the evaluation findings and respective coping strategies. 21 (out of 26) reports discuss limitations, but only 10 reflect on possible influence of the limitations on the evaluation and its findings, while only eight describe coping strategies.

[2] For instance, in one case, evaluators collected individual income data of farmers in Indonesian villages in focus group discussions. Focus group discussions are not a suitable instrument for collecting income data because participants may be reluctant to openly share correct income figures in a group setting and because the number of participants is much too small to attain a sample size large enough for statistical analysis.

Quality of Findings

The quality of findings was assessed for each OECD-DAC criterion. It was also captured whether reports refer to Capacity Works factors in the findings section and whether evaluators attained good evaluation practice to differentiate findings from recommendations. Figure 4 shows the aggregated quality assessments for the sub-sections of the report's findings regarding the OECD-DAC criteria. The grey bars underline that often only a selection of OECD-DAC criteria was requested to be assessed by a specific ES.

Figure 4: Aggregated quality assessment for the sub-sections of ES's findings.



Relevance: Relevance (i.e., is the intervention doing the right thing?) is addressed in 17 (out of 26) reports. The quality of findings on relevance was assessed as not or rather not appropriate in 7 out of 17 reports whereas in 10 reports it was assessed as rather or fully appropriate. In all of the 17 relevance sections, the evaluators discuss if the interventions met the needs of the target groups and – with one exemption – if the interventions were consistent with the partner governments' or regional policies. About two thirds of the reports (12 out of 17) also featured a discussion on whether the intervention was addressing international conventions, policies, or goals. Two thirds of the reports (11 out of 17) also contain an analysis of whether the design of the intervention was appropriate. Sensitivity to context conditions and adaptability to changing framework conditions was discussed in about half of the reports (9 out of 17).

Coherence: Coherence (i.e., how well does the intervention fit?) is addressed in only 9 (out of 26) reports. For roughly half (4 out of 9), the quality of the findings was assessed as not or rather not appropriate whereas for the other half (5 out of 9) it was assessed as rather or fully appropriate. Internal coherence – i.e., the coherence with other GIZ or BMZ interventions – was discussed in 7 (out of 9) coherence sections, whereas external coherence – i.e., the coherence with interventions of other organisations and donors not part of German governmental development cooperation – was addressed in 8 (of the 9) sections.

Effectiveness: Effectiveness (i.e., is the intervention achieving its objectives?) is treated in 22 (out of 26) reports. For slightly less than half of the reports (9 out of 22) the quality of findings provided on effectiveness was assessed as rather not appropriate, while for the other half (11 out of 22) it was assessed as rather appropriate. For only one report, the quality of the effectiveness section was assessed as fully appropriate. In almost all reports (20 out of 22) evaluators report output and outcome achievement. However, in twelve (out of 22) sections on effectiveness evaluators do not address causal relations between activities, outputs, and outcomes of the interventions which was one of the main reasons for reports to be rated as rather not or not appropriate. In seven cases (out of 22), evaluators acknowledge causality but only to some extent or the methodological approach shows major shortcomings. Seven sections (out of 22) on effectiveness showed a rather appropriate assessment of causality. There was no report where the assessment of causality was found to be fully convincing.

Impact: Impact (i.e., what difference does the intervention make?) is addressed in 14 (out of 26) reports. The quality of eight (out of 14) sections on impact was assessed as not or rather not appropriate. This was mainly due to a lack of assessing the causal relationship between the interventions' achievements on the outcome level and the observed changes on the impact level, which accounts for nine (out of 14) sections on impact. Confounding factors or alternative explanations regarding observed impacts are discussed in only two reports. Unintended impacts are reported in seven (out of 14) ES.

Efficiency: Efficiency (i.e., how well are resources being used?) is captured in 16 (out of 26) reports. The quality of 12 (out of 16) sections on efficiency was assessed as not or rather not appropriate. For three reports (out of 16) the efficiency section was assessed as rather appropriate and for only one report as fully appropriate. In the majority of the reports addressing efficiency (12 out of 16) evaluators discuss the quality of implementation management, but in less than half (7 out of 16) the spending of budget is put in relation to the outputs or outcomes achieved (i.e., production and allocation efficiency), which was the main shortcoming why reports were rated as not or rather not appropriate. The follow-the-money approach was applied by only two evaluators, while an external benchmark was used in one case.

Sustainability: Sustainability (i.e., will the benefits last?) is addressed in 18 (out of 26) reports. For 7 (out of 18) reports, the quality of the section on sustainability was assessed as not or rather not appropriate, while for 11 reports it was assessed as rather or fully appropriate. In the majority of reports addressing sustainability (16 out of 18), evaluators took the technical capacities of relevant local actors – such as partner organisations, target groups, or government agencies – into consideration to assess whether they have sufficient capacity to ensure the sustainability of the intervention's results. In slightly above half of the reports (12 out of 18), evaluators discuss the financial capacity of local actors, and in half of the reports (9 out of 18) also the willingness of those actors to carry on activities to make the results sustainable (ownership). It was further found that about half of the reports (8 out of 18) acknowledge multiple dimensions of sustainability going beyond technical and financial aspects, which could include social, political, environmental, or institutional dimensions.

Other evaluation criteria than the OECD-DAC criteria were rarely applied. Capacity Works as a management tool of GIZ was explicitly referred to in only one report.

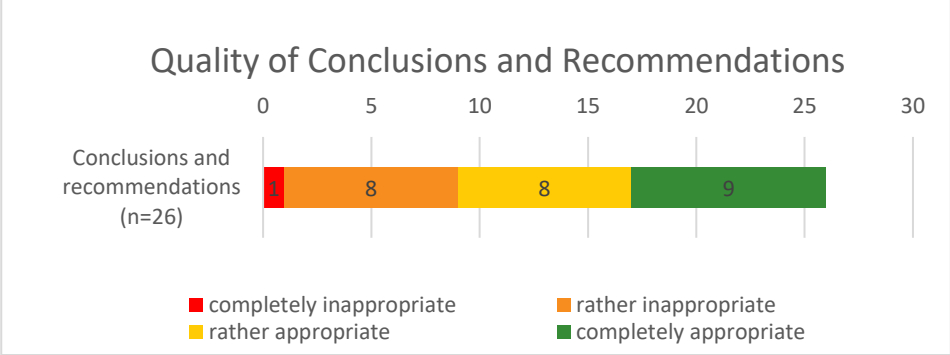
Finally, the meta-evaluation team further assessed if reports confuse findings with recommendations throughout the finding sections. This was the case in seven out of 26 reports.

Quality of Conclusions and Recommendations

Finally, the quality of conclusions and recommendations was assessed.

Conclusions and recommendations: To assess the quality of conclusions and recommendations it was assessed whether reports contain conclusions that go beyond the description of findings, whether the conclusions are presented in a separate conclusion section, whether the reports feature recommendations, and whether the recommendations are formulated specifically and are addressed to particular actors. For roughly two thirds of the reports (17 out of 26), conclusions and recommendations were assessed as rather appropriate or appropriate. One third of the reports (8) provided conclusions and recommendations that were assessed as rather not appropriate, while only one report entailed completely inappropriate conclusions. The majority of reports were assessed as rather appropriate or appropriate because they provide conclusions that go beyond the description of findings (23 out of 26) and feature separate conclusion sections (22). In addition, the majority of reports (21) also provided recommendations and those recommendations were formulated specifically in(17 out of 26) reports. However, recommendations were addressed to particular actors in only 8 cases. Figure 5 shows the aggregated quality assessment of the conclusion and recommendation sections.

Figure 5: Aggregated quality assessment for the sub-sections of ES's conclusions and recommendations.



The Usefulness of Evaluative Studies – the perspective of the commissioning units

Rationale for commissioning: The following analysis is based on seven interviews with GIZ staff who were in charge with the management of an ES. There are different reasons, why project managing unites commission ES. In several cases, donors required an evaluation of the intervention, or the heads of the projects (AV) wanted to be prepared to account for projects' results to donors or the Bundesrechnungshof (German federal audit court). Sometimes the decision for an ES was taken by the head of a division within GIZ. Empirically grounded reflections on the impact of a project, project components, or a particular measure and learning from what has worked and what doesn't were also mentioned as a main reason for commissioning an ES. Results and recommendations were then expected to contribute to the steering of an ongoing project or to feed into the planning of a follow-up project (phase). One interviewee also reported that an ES was also conducted because local stakeholders were interested in an assessment of the project's results. In addition, some ES were also seen as a preparation for potentially upcoming central project evaluations (CPE). In this case, projects wanted to collect data at mid-term from stakeholders or beneficiaries that may not anymore be available at a later point.

Perceived usefulness and uses: The project managers' perspective on the usefulness of the ES' findings and recommendations varies from case to case. Some of them appreciated the results of the ES and saw them as clearly useful. One interviewee reported that the ES provided a good analysis of the strength and weaknesses of the intervention which contributed to internal learning. In another case, an interviewee was satisfied, that the ES delivered evidence on the impact of the project concept which was used to demonstrate the success of the intervention to the donors. Some of the interviewees reported that the recommendations of the ES were put into practice and initiated changes to the project concept, in one case documented by change offers to the BMZ. Other project managers stated that the conclusions from the ES informed the planning of a follow-on project, again leading to an adaption of the project concept based on the empirical evidence. One interviewee reported that the project shared best practices identified in the evaluation with other stakeholders and that those positive results could be used to convince other donors of their project concept.

However, the GIZ staff was not always satisfied with the quality of the ES and their findings. In several cases, they reported that the analysis was rather cursory and did not go into detail. Consequently, one interviewee criticised that the findings did not go beyond a summary of what the staff already knew before and the report did not provide clear and specific recommendations. Another interviewee stated that the report did not provide enough insights into the actual impact of the intervention. Project managers also questioned the methodological quality of some ES. In one case it was criticised that the number of interviews was not large enough, that some conclusions and recommendations were based on single statements of interviewees while it was overall not very transparent how interview content was assessed and how the recommendations were derived from the data. Another project manager noted that, from his/her perspective, the evaluators did not collect enough primary data while also acknowledging that they did not have enough time to do so. One person concluded that the high cost in terms of time resources for the commission and management of the evaluation did clearly exceed the limited benefits of its results.

Nevertheless, the fact that interviewees were criticising the quality of the evaluations did not always imply that the results were not of use. One person interviewed noted, that since the project staff was involved in the evaluation, the whole process was contributing to internal learning – even though the report was not of good quality. Another interviewee pointed out that despite not delivering new insights to the project staff, the results of the evaluation were useful to report the success of the intervention to the donors.

Factors compromising quality: Interviewees described several factors that had a negative impact on the evaluation process and the quality of the findings of ES. In two cases, unprecise ToR which did not outline the requested evaluation methods were assumed to have contributed to findings which were rather cursory or methodologically not well grounded. Two interviewees reported that difficult framework conditions in the partner countries, such as weak infrastructure and political instability made it difficult to reach stakeholders or beneficiaries and hampered the data collection. One interviewee stated that the overall time frame of the evaluation was too short, giving the evaluators not enough time to collect more primary data.

Evaluation Support Service

Role of the evaluation support: The GIZ evaluation unit provides support services to project staff in charge

with the commissioning and management of ES. This evaluation support is provided upon direct request of anyone seeking advice regarding the evaluation process. Information on the evaluation support can be found by project staff on the GIZ website, but there is no active promotion or dissemination of information on the service within GIZ. According to the evaluation unit, the evaluation support provides four types of services: (1) advise to project staff, particularly regarding the development of ToRs, including methodological questions, budgeting (i.e., what is feasible within a certain budget), assessment of proposals, selection of external evaluators, assessment of the quality of evaluation reports as well as the use of evaluation results and recommendations; (2) provision of documents such as templates for ToRs and of literature on evaluation methods; and (3) evaluation capacity development for GIZ staff.

Use and usefulness of the evaluation support: Out of the seven interviewees who commissioned ES three did contact the evaluation support for advice. One project received support for the development of the ToRs. The other two projects wanted to commission an ES oriented towards the evaluation criteria and questions of the standardised CPE system. One of these projects received support throughout the whole evaluation process, including questions regarding the ToR, the tendering process, and the methodological conceptualisation of the ES. All three project managers interviewed described the services of the evaluation support as very responsive, flexible, competent, and overall, very helpful. One project manager stated that, without the evaluation support, s/he would have been overcharged with the development of the ToR.

One interviewee shared some ideas on how the advice of evaluation support could be improved. This includes advice on how to estimate and plan the tasks and the associated workload an ES will bring along for the project team from the outset. Furthermore, s/he suggested that the evaluation support could provide more orientation on the shape, scope, and quality of findings that can be expected concerning a given budget and chosen methodological approach. The interviewee was working for the project unit support, being responsible for the coordination of several projects. S/he was not a member of the project team and had to coordinate the evaluation from a neutral position. Therefore, s/he further reported that a briefing from the evaluation support on her role as an evaluation manager with the task to balance the expectations and interests of different stakeholders while assuring evaluation quality would have been of help.

Three interviewees did not receive advice from the evaluation support – simply because they did not know about this service within GIZ. All of them indicated that evaluation support would have been of help and that they would make use of such a service in case of commissioning ES in the future. They stated that they would benefit from such support, particularly concerning the development of precise and comprehensive ToR, the selection of suitable consultants, and the assessment of the quality of findings.

Discussion

ES in the light of their ToRs: The review of the 16 available ToRs showed that the resources available for ES were – with some exemptions – lower than those of CPEs, typically ranging between 10 and 40 working days. There is a big variation among the ToRs with respect to how detailed, precise, and methodologically elaborated they describe the requirements of the commissioned assignment. The ToRs of ES with higher budgets tend to be more sophisticated and set a methodological frame for the evaluation team. In general, based on a rudimentary ToR assessment, the evaluation reports tend to be coherent with the ToRs regarding applied evaluation

criteria, selected evaluation questions, and methods. The level of analytical sophistication and methodological elaboration of ES often reflects the available budget. However, the meta-evaluation team did not find indications for a causal relationship between the quality of ToR and the quality of the respective ES. Instead, there are cases of short and unprecise ToRs that led to ES of decent quality (in terms of the quality assessment) as well as ES of rather low quality despite being commissioned based on an elaborated and methodologically advanced ToR.

Patterns of ES: Looking at the similarities and differences of ES, the majority of ES from the sample at hand can be heuristically allocated to three groups. The first group comprises ES commissioned with a low budget (ranging from 10 to 20 working days), based on interviews, typically with the project staff and/or members of the target group. The evaluation object is usually not the whole project but a project component or a single measure and they are typically centred around a specific knowledge interest of the commissioning project, thus rather serving learning purposes and not accountability. Evaluation reports are mainly short, but the small budget does not automatically lead to low-quality findings. Instead, there are examples of reports which were rated as rather appropriate in the quality assessment, particularly concerning their findings section, and may serve the specific knowledge requirements and questions of the commissioning project quite well.

The second group contains ES that are based on the OECD-DAC criteria and assess a whole project or a (regional) component of global or sector programmes. Those ES are based on a medium-sized budget, typically ranging between 30 and 40 working days. Some of them are based on existing monitoring data which is complemented by interviews and focus group discussions based on field visits. Some of them are intentionally oriented towards the CPE system with the commissioning project staff being in exchange with the GIZ evaluation unit for that purpose. In individual cases, ES were commissioned by global or sector programmes to assess several regional project components to generate a solid database for a potentially upcoming CPE of the whole programme.

A third group of ES contains studies that are not based on OECD DAC criteria and vary greatly in terms of their evaluation object and methodological framework. This includes ex-ante evaluations, context or process analysis, and systematic reviews; evaluations of measures or methodological approaches across several projects; or individual measures or components of a project that are of specific interest to the steering of the project.

ES versus CPEs: The quality assessment suggests that ES are on average of lower quality than CPE. This does not come as a surprise, acknowledging the outcomes of the quality assessments in the context of the lower budgets of the ES as well as against the specific function they have for the commissioning projects. Particularly the quality assessment of the introduction and methods section was largely based on how comprehensive evaluators described the evaluation object, scope, and framework conditions and how detailed they outlined the methods applied. Weak ratings in this regard can be interpreted as a logical consequence given parts of the ES commissioned with a budget ranging from 10 to 20 working days allow only limited time for report writing.

Sometimes the ToR set limits to the length of the report. This also points to the assumption that projects do not always benefit from an extensive report, but rather from a short and to-the-point description and interpretation of fit-for-purpose findings. Particularly if the evaluation object and the contexts conditions may be quite clear to the project staff. Given the rather internal readership (i.e., project staff, partners, and stakeholders with intervention-specific knowledge), an extensive description of both in the report might be not appreciated. It seems plausible that the resources this would require are used more efficiently for other tasks. Similarly, if the scope of the evaluation was defined orally or the evaluation simply assesses the whole project or a clearly defined

measure, there may be no point of describing it in the report. Further, if the ES is just based on a small number of interviews, it may be not deemed necessary by evaluators and commissioners to have a long discussion of the evaluation design, the methodological approach, or the data analysis. However, this cannot be generalised for ES in our sample, as there were also reports with introductions and methods sections being assessed as incomplete, despite the ES being based on a large budget.

Exploiting evaluation results of ES by GIZ evaluation unit: While such a reporting style may not be suitable for publishing evaluation results and while it puts serious limitations to ES' use beyond the project contexts, it may meet the requirements of the commissioning projects quite well. Yet, this prevents GIZ's evaluation unit to exploit results at organisational level (i.e., in the course of systematic reviews) as validity of results without the tacit knowledge of the commissioners cannot be assessed by outsiders.

In general, the high variance of ES in terms of their budget, object, objectives, evaluation criteria, and methodological approaches limits the possibility to synthesise and use their results on an organisational level. Particular ES with small budgets, those with a focus on internal learning, which are not based on the OECD DAC criteria, and those where the evaluation object is not a project or a project component are deemed to be hardly usable outside of their commissioning context. Results aggregation from those types of ES are expected to be only feasible if a higher degree of standardisation for ES would be introduced. This would require more resources – resources of the evaluation unit but also of the evaluators. The latter would have to follow standardised protocols and templates which may overload their assessments while only being partially suitable for the particular context.

Nevertheless, there is also a number of ES that follow the OECD-DAC criteria and are already oriented towards CPEs. Sometimes, they were commissioned to assess different regional components of global and sector programmes – in some cases also to provide a more detailed database for an upcoming CPE of the entire programme. This type of ES is regarded as more suitable for synthesis or evaluation results at organisational level. Potential aggregation of such ES may come with a positive cost-benefit ratio given their comparable structure. Yet, further standardisation of such ES may be beneficial for the evaluation unit and at the same time could also support project managers when commissioning ES that are supposed to generate a specific evidence base for later CPEs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The meta-evaluation showed that the sample of ES is characterised by a large variety of evaluation objects and objectives as well as methodological approaches. The methodological quality of ES and the findings they have generated also differ greatly, with the average quality, however, being lower than the quality of CPEs. The overall quality should be seen in the context of their significantly lower budget and the usefulness they have for the commissioning units.

Interviews with the commissioning projects or programmes indicate that ES are used to demonstrate the achievements of objectives to donors. In addition, they can generate insights and recommendations that are harnessed by the project staff for internal learning, steering, and the planning of follow-on measures. This is partially still the case if ES are of limited scope or show certain methodological shortcomings.

Large heterogeneity regarding evaluation objects, objectives, and methodological approaches imposes limits for GIZ to exploit evaluation results of ES on an organisational level. Many ES are not or only partly based on the OECD criteria, do not assess a whole project or a regional component, but a single measure, methodological approach, or process, are of limited budget and scope or tailored to very specific knowledge interests of the commissioning project.

However, there is a group of ES which address all six OECD-DAC criteria for entire projects or (regional) components of global or sector programmes and which appear as a light version of CPEs oriented towards the standardised CPE framework. Such ES show potential for the use of results on organisational level but the fact that they have not (yet) been grounded on a comparable framework still challenges the synthesis of evaluation results.

Projects managers who received support from the evaluation unit described the advice as competent and very helpful with regards to the commissioning and the management of ES. However, out of the interviewees consulted in this meta-evaluation only half reported awareness of this service.

Recommendations

- ES that are based on the OECD-DAC criteria and rather oriented towards the CPE system may benefit from a more standardised framework that gives the commissioning projects and the evaluators guidance and increases their comparability with regards to a potential synthesis. We recommend the evaluation unit to consider the development of a standardised framework with evaluation questions, report templates, methodological standards, and guidance provided by the evaluation support. This could be derived from the CPE framework but should be smaller in size, methodologically less ambitious, and more flexible to handle to be suitable for ES with typically smaller budgets and scope than CPEs and intervention-specific knowledge interests.

- Interviews revealed that the evaluation support service is not yet well-known within GIZ. All interviewees said, however, that they would appreciate and benefit from evaluation support if managing ES in the future. Therefore, we recommend to the GIZ evaluation unit to engage in a more proactive promotion of the evaluation support within the organisation.

- One interviewee indicated two thematic fields where advice from the evaluation unit would be of particular importance: (1) the anticipation of the tasks as well as overall workload connected with the management of an ES and (2) the management of expectations with respect to the scope and sophistication of findings in relation to the available budget and the methods applied. This was also confirmed by statements from the interview with the advisor from the evaluation unit. Therefore, we recommend to the GIZ evaluation unit to reflect on how advice regarding these two issues can be improved and extended.

Annex

Annex Table 1: Summary of the assessment tool for quality of evaluation reports

Specification
Introduction and background
Objectives of the evaluation (objective, intended users, criteria, evaluation questions)
Evaluation object (intervention's time period, budget, geographical area, measures/instruments, target groups, objectives, ToC, results model, implementation arrangements, changes)
Scope of the evaluation
Context analysis (country/regional context, policies or strategies, stakeholders, sector)
Methodology
Evaluation design (general evaluation approach, evaluation design)
Sources of evidence (data sources described, selection of sources is justified, project documents used, M&E data used, additional literature, implementing organisation used as a source, beneficiaries used as a source, the institutional environment used as a source, other sources, a mix of sources is appropriate)
Data collection (data collection techniques described, interviews conducted, focus group discussions, participatory observation, survey(s), other data collection method(s), mix of data collection techniques applied, application without severe failures)
Sampling (sample described, sampling strategy, justifying sampling strategy)
Data analysis methods (analysis methods described, mix of data analysis methods appropriate, data analysis methods applied without severe failures)
Limitations and challenges (limitations are discussed, the influence of limitation on evaluation is discussed, and coping strategies are described)
Findings
Evidence (findings are evidence-based, findings are not confused with recommendations)
DAC Criteria
Relevance appropriately captured (assessing if intervention meets the needs of the target group, needs of the final beneficiaries, intervention is consistent and supportive of partner government/ regional policies, addressing international policies/strategies, intervention is sensitive to the context conditions, intervention's design is appropriate, the intervention has been adapted to context changes)
Coherence appropriately captured (assessing internal coherence (with other GIZ/BMZ interventions), external coherence (with interventions of other donors/organisations)
Effectiveness appropriately captured (assessing if outputs have been achieved, outcomes have been achieved, assessment is based on indicators, the causal relation between activities, outputs, and outcomes is assessed, confounding factors/alternative explanations are discussed)
Efficiency appropriately captured (assessing production efficiency, allocation efficiency, follow-the-money-approach applied, assessment against the external benchmark, assessing implementation management)
Impact appropriately captured (assessing if intervention contributed to its intended long-term developmental objective, has any unintended impacts, the causal relation between outcomes and impacts is assessed, confounding factors/alternative explanations are discussed)
Sustainability appropriately captured (assessing interventions strategy or measures to ensure sustainability, assessing if target group/beneficiaries have the capacity and financial means to ensure the sustainability of results, if local actors are willing to ensure sustainability (ownership), if risks threatening the sustainability, if multiple dimensions of sustainability are discussed (e.g. social, political, environmental, etc.)
Capacity Works (strategy, cooperation, steering, process, learning, and innovation are discussed)
Other criteria (evaluation is based on other criteria)
Conclusions and Recommendations
Conclusions (report contains conclusions that go beyond the description of findings, contains conclusions section)
Recommendations (report contains recommendations, recommendations are specific, addressed to particular actors)

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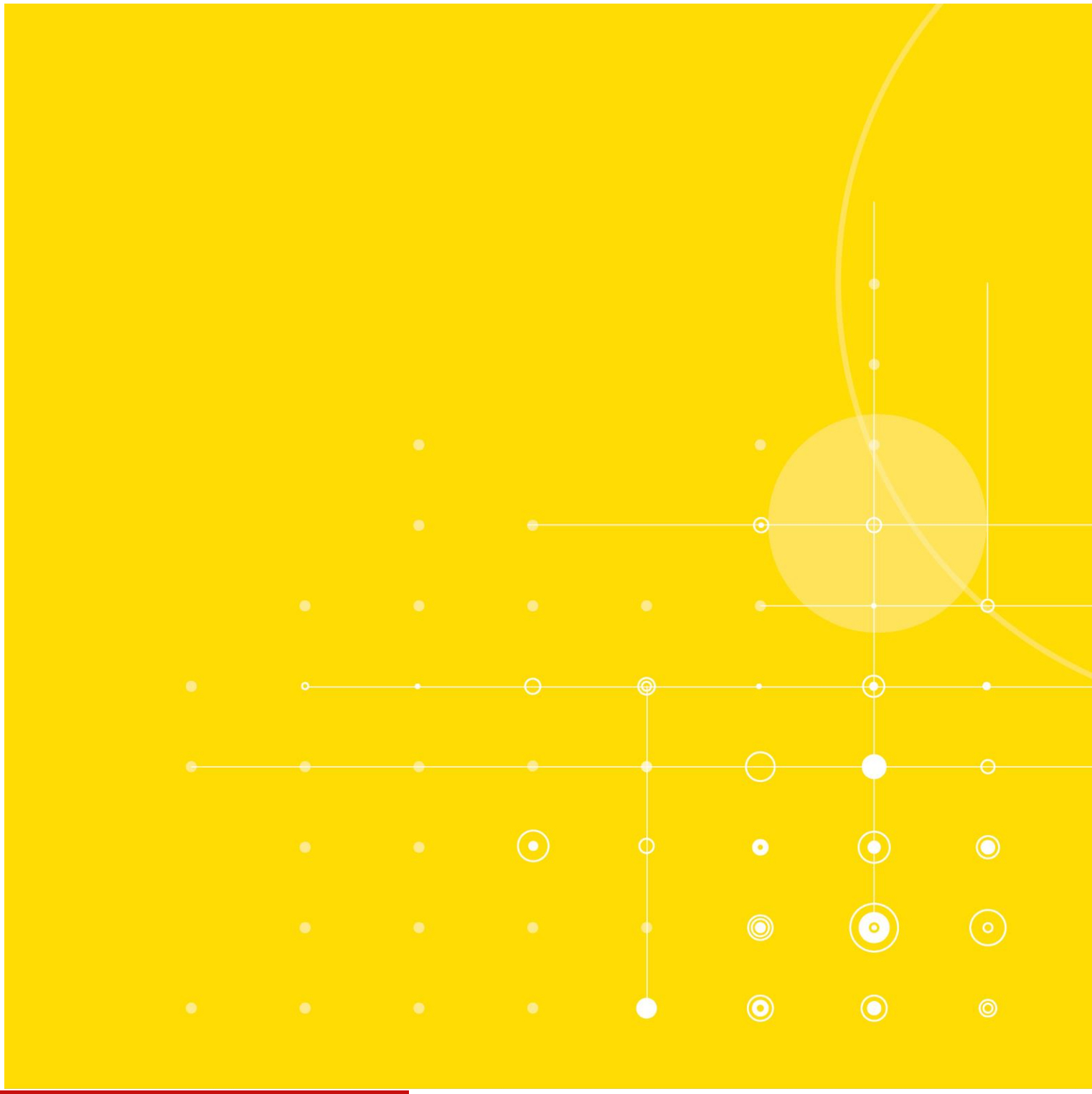

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