



2021 Annual Report on Evaluation – Selected Highlights

From the Director's desk

When I started in this position four years ago, I had a mission: Evaluations have to be useful! Now I think I could say the mission is accomplished. We keep on getting positive feedback from different audiences.

There are a few lessons learnt I would like to share with you on how we have improved the utility. We haven't reinvented the wheel or changed the world.

- ▣ **Be pragmatic.** Think who are the users, what is the purpose of this evaluation and why is it important to conduct it. Answers to these questions form the basis for the evaluation
- ▣ **Involve the users of the evaluations already at the design phase.** Search for a firm consensus with the users on the purpose, objective and timing of the evaluation.
- ▣ **Commit the owners of the evaluation.** Formulate the recommendations and the management response in such a way that they are clear, make sense and help the owners in their policy work and operations.

We have invested a lot on these issues and can honestly say the usefulness has improved. We have introduced a practice of **drafting a Concept Note before drafting the TOR**. A concept note defining the purpose, use and timing of the evaluation is prepared together with the users, and it is our first step towards ensuring end user's ownership and commitment.

Furthermore, we have **developed the work of reference groups** by focusing on the composition of the group, capacitating the members and prepared a comprehensive TOR and guidelines for the reference group.

The third important issue we have done is **ensuring that the recommendations are formulated in such a way that they are better in line with the purpose of the evaluation**. This is followed by an improved process of drafting the **management response**, following immediately after the evaluation is ready. The **circle closes with follow up and reporting on the implementation of the recommendations** – a process that is initiated by the evaluation unit but ideally becomes an inherent part of the learning process for the end users and even more widely for the decision makers in our Ministry.

All that for serving better the users and without compromising the independency.

Anu Saxén
Director, Development Evaluation Unit

Networking cultivates evaluation culture

The most important task of the Development Evaluation Unit in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (MFA) is to provide the MFA with **useful and timely information as well as recommendations to improve development policy and cooperation**. In addition, the unit values international cooperation in the field of evaluations, which is an excellent way to learn and influence and which benefits the whole MFA.

In 2021, three policy level evaluations were completed. In addition, the unit participated in **joint evaluations**: Evaluation of the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN), [Joint Evaluation of the Protection of the Rights of Refugees During the Covid-19 Pandemic](#) and [System-Wide Evaluation of the UNDS Response to COVID-19](#).

The unit also **promoted evaluation capacity development** e.g. with Global Evaluation Initiative (GEI), International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) and EvalPartners. Furthermore, we advanced the evaluation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in partnership with the UNICEF, German Institute for Development Evaluation (Deval), International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and EVALSDGs, by developing a guidebook on how to evaluate the SDGs. The guidance was complemented by a series of workshops and other knowledge products.

The 2021 Annual Report on Evaluation showcases the spectrum of evaluation activities within the Development Evaluation Unit over the past year. This brief presents some selected highlights from the report that is available in Finnish on the [MFA's website](#).

Evaluation on Development Cooperation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Central Asia holds a significant **geo-political location** and has become an increasingly important partner to the European Union. Finland's engagement is guided by the EU policies and strategies for this region and for partnerships in the Eastern Europe. Similarly, Finland's partnership with Ukraine is based not only on development policy but also on **Finland's foreign and security policy** objectives. Finland supports Ukraine's reform process to strengthen democracy development.

Finland has engaged in development cooperation in the region for several decades. Since 2009, Finland has had two regional programmes, Wider Europe Initiative I and II, followed by the Country Strategies for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as well as Ukraine in 2018-2021. The number of partnership countries has reduced

over time. Currently, bilateral development cooperation is mostly implemented in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

The independent evaluation assessed the development policy and cooperation implemented during 2009-2021 by the Department for Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. It strategically examined development cooperation as a whole, the different impacts achieved as well as the sustainability of results through the various funding channels over the decade. The evaluation covered 11 countries under the Department, of which Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Ukraine were analyzed in more detail.

Findings on sustainability

There are particular challenges in ensuring **economic sustainability**, and with aid dependency. The projects often rely on continued cooperation. Even in the most sustainable cases, the positive impacts of projects are often limited when compared with the problem at hand, unless the target is a whole sector.

Assessing **social sustainability** in shorter-term projects is challenging, as change takes time. Social sustainability is strengthened if the project activities take into account inclusion, societal priorities, social cohesion or awareness raising activities.

Ecological sustainability has been stronger in projects that include functions related to infrastructure and technology transfer and have conducted environmental impact assessments in key sectors. Inter-institutional and cross-border cooperation can increase sustainability.

Levels of sustainability vary in different projects. Sustainability as well as wider impacts, scale-up of results and synergies are difficult to assess. The sustainability of projects is often stronger in one dimension and weaker in another.

Practices supporting **the planning of sustainability**, like exit plans, have not been adequate. Information on sustainability can not be found in the documentation of decision-making, for example when continuing or ending project funding. The ministry does not function as a learning organisation in this respect. Furthermore, no documentation on the coordination between different donors at the time of ending a project is found. Planning for sustainability is particularly important in projects in which Finland is the only donor.

The evaluation showed that there has been **strong coherence and complementarity between Finland's development cooperation activities and foreign and security policy priorities in the region**. Finland's development policy objectives have been integrated well into its work in the region. Finland has a strong reputation as a donor committed to addressing core challenges that face partner countries.

The evaluation found that Finland has **contributed to significant changes in all areas of support**, especially in the socio-economic situation, environment, human rights and the rule of law. Finland's long-term commitment to supporting interventions has facilitated tangible and sustainable results. Similarly, Finland's commitment to addressing the needs of persons in disadvantaged positions had led to improvements in their rights. Sustainability is difficult to evaluate, however, and dependence on external funding is a challenge. Local capacity building and local ownership have strengthened the sustainability of results.

In terms of strategic **recommendations**, the evaluation suggested to develop an overarching vision for development cooperation for the whole region. **Stakeholder participation in programming** could be enhanced. **Results Based Management** could be strengthened with sufficient human resources. **Civil society could be involved in the programmatic cycle** of Finland's development cooperation. **Monitoring and reporting** practices could be improved in order for the ministry to be better able to function as a learning organisation.

Evaluation on the Transition of Finnish-Vietnamese Cooperation

Vietnam was one of Finland's main development cooperation partner countries for almost four decades. **Given the rapid economic growth in Vietnam, Finland and Vietnam embarked upon a transition process** lasting from 2008 until 2020 aiming to decrease the bilateral development cooperation while strengthening trade and new type of cooperation and partnerships.

The evaluation assessed the successes and weaknesses of transitioning and how Finland's development cooperation has supported this transition towards more diverse and equal cooperation. The report also highlights broader lessons from the transition of Finnish-Vietnamese cooperation for similar processes in Finland's other partner countries.

The evaluation concluded that bilateral development cooperation decreased while other type of cooperation has steadily increased which also was the objective for the transition. **Trade and investments have become important vehicles for achieving development objectives and creating mutually beneficial**

partnerships. This has led to a significant increase in trade and investments between the two countries. Other partnerships remain also vibrant, particularly in education, tourism and diaspora.

The evaluation points out that there is a **risk of scattering cooperation and thematic areas because there is no longer framework in place to steer the cooperation**. Ultimately, this can result in a more limited development impact, and ineffective contribution to cross-cutting objectives and SDGs. These objectives have not been systematically addressed in private sector instruments.

In terms of **recommendations**, the evaluation suggested to **formally close the transition process**. In addition, **Finnish thematic and sector leadership and expertise in climate change** should be further developed. **Dialogue on human rights with Vietnam** should be continued. With other countries about to transition, Finland should consider **building a new partnership arrangement right from the start of the transition process**.

The most important lessons from transitioning:

- Transition takes time, and a vision and strategy are required for a successful transition.
- Strategic partnership arrangements bring potential to focus and steer specific actions;
- Wide stakeholder participation in the planning and implementation of transition is beneficial;
- The importance of good, targeted and timely communication is evident;
- Focus on key economic sectors for both countries in a transition process strengthens partnerships on the ground;
- The private sector can bring important contributions to Sustainable Development Goals and climate action;
- Attention to Small and Medium Enterprises in responsible international business can boost trade and investments while securing sustainable development impact;
- A 'one-stop shop' concept is helpful for the private sector to access suitable support instruments.

Water as an entry point for Peace Mediation – Evaluation on Finnish Water Diplomacy

The evaluation studied the **future ambition and possibilities of the Finnish water diplomacy**. At the same time it **looked at the past water sector cooperation to identify lessons that can be learned** from processes where diplomatic objectives are intertwined with technical cooperation.

The forward looking track of the evaluation focused on identification of the Finnish ambition. **The concrete actions recommended in the evaluation report are aimed at helping Finland fulfill its potential and achieve its ambition**, also in terms of implementing the Finnish International Water Strategy, Finn Water Way.

The backward looking evaluative track studied the Finnish cooperation in the Mekong region and in the Nile Basin. The Finnish-Russian transboundary water agreements and Finland's long standing cooperation within United Nations Economic Commission with Europe (UNECE) were also included in the scope of the evaluation. As an initiator of two important water conventions Finland has continued its technical and financial support to UNECE's Water Convention Secretariat and numerous Working Groups since the beginning.

Instead of focusing on the achievements at project level, the evaluation sought to **identify strengths and weaknesses that could yield lessons for future initiatives combining diplomatic objectives with technical cooperation**.

The evaluation concludes that **Finland has potential to become one of the leading water diplomacy actors in the near future**. However, there is a **gap between the ambition and the current situation**. Challenges identified by the evaluation are linked to resources and organizational issues. Moreover, the **evaluation recommends that Finland should be less shy about its achievements and also actively seek international partners with complementary knowledge and skills**. The key strength identified by the evaluation lies in the **highly motivated water diplomacy network**. Besides the committed sector ministries, its backbone is formed by Finnish research institutes, non-governmental organizations and other private actors.

Ongoing and upcoming evaluations

Ongoing evaluations:

- Metaevaluation of MFA's Project and Programme Evaluations 2017-2020
- Evaluation of Finland's Humanitarian Assistance 2016-2022
- Evaluation of the Finnish Development Policy Influencing in the European Union

Other:

- From Reactivity to Resilience: Assessment of the Response of Finnish Development Policy and Cooperation to COVID-19 Pandemic

Upcoming evaluations to be started in 2022:

- Influencing through development communications
- JPO programme and international recruitments
- Human rights and human rights-based development policy and cooperation
- Natural resources, climate change and safeguarding biodiversity
- Review of the use and utility of centralised evaluations

For the full annual report and evaluation reports, see [MFA's website](#).