



UiO : **University of Oslo**

# **Confronting the contradiction: An exploration into the dual purpose of accountability and learning in aid evaluation**

Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) Report 2017:6  
Report launch seminar, Stockholm, May 4, 2017



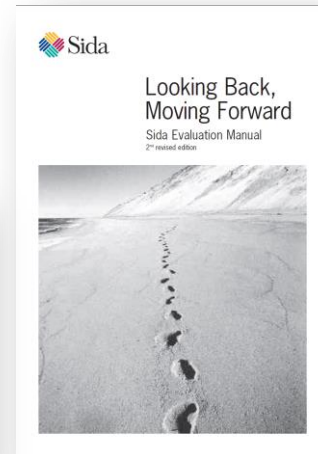
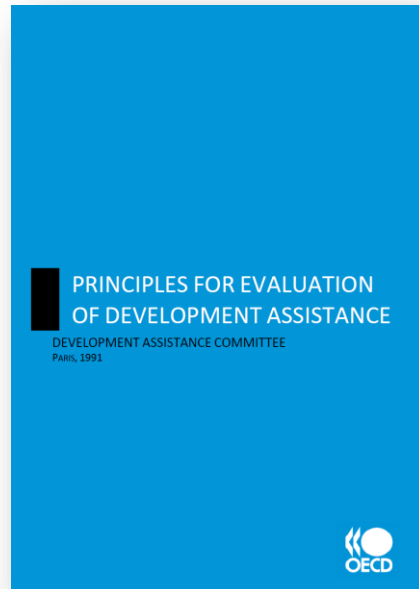
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# The dual purpose of aid evaluation: Both accountability and learning

## OECD/DAC

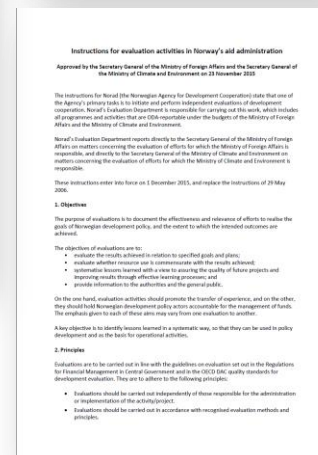
“The main purposes of evaluation are:

- to improve future aid policy, programmes and projects through feedback of lessons learned;
- to provide a basis for accountability, including the provision of information to the public.”



## Sida

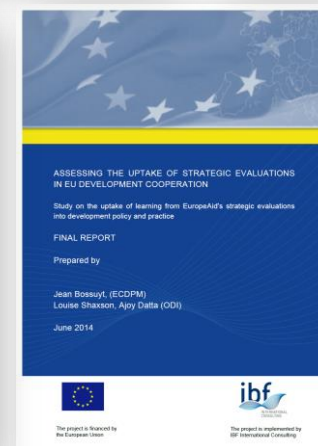
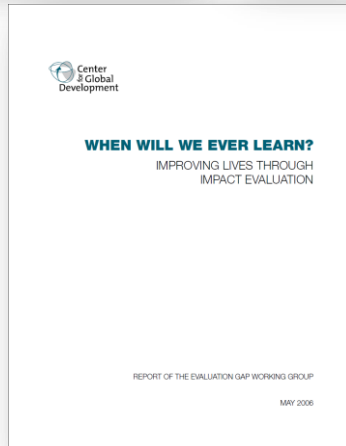
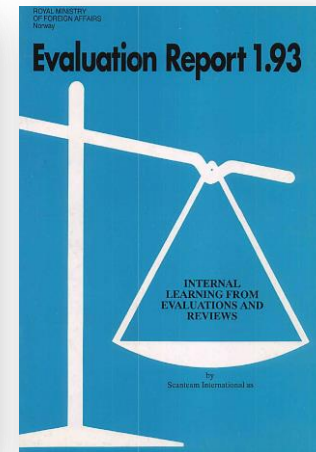
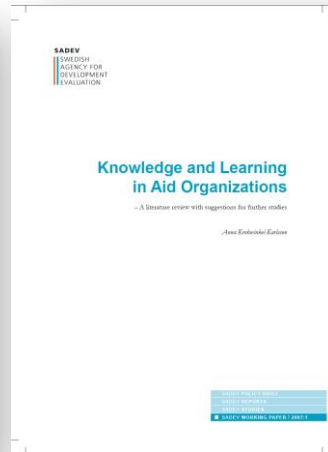
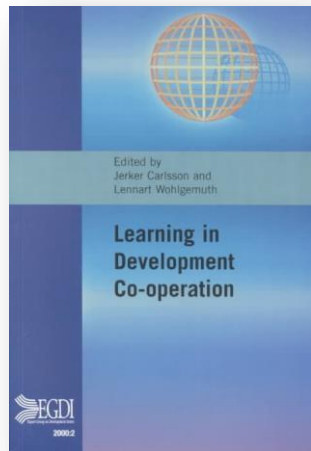
“In development co-operation, the standard answer to the question of the practical purpose of evaluation is that it serves two broad types of ends: accountability and learning.”



## Norad

“On the one hand, evaluation activities should promote the transfer of experience, and on the other, they should hold Norwegian development policy actors accountable for the management of funds.”

# At the same time: a persistent experience of a lack of learning



# Our approach

**We explored the following hypothesis:**

*The concern for accountability itself impedes learning; put strongly, the two are incompatible.*

We operationalised the hypothesis into three integrated levels:

- 1) Evaluation **texts**
- 2) Evaluation **processes**
- 3) Evaluation **systems**

# Structure of the report

- 1) Introduction: Approach and main conclusion
- 2) Literature review
- 3) Inside the evaluation texts
- 4) Inside the evaluation processes
- 5) Inside the evaluation systems
- 6) Conclusion and recommendations

## Our main conclusion

### The dual purpose of accountability and learning in practice involves fundamental trade-offs

- These trade-offs emerge at **all three levels**, and are effects of practical **tensions and contradictions**
- Learning may happen **on-site** for those practically involved
  - For programme officers, evaluation managers, evaluation team
  - May here be more easily compatible with accountability
- Much harder to synthesise and transfer → “**big learning**”
  - The further removed from the field the process, the more difficult
  - Exaggerated expectations of what evaluation may solve

# Our interdisciplinary approach

Research discipline	Analytical approach
History	Study of processes unfolding over time, identify continuity and ruptures, contextualise current situations
Science and Technology Studies (STS)	Study of knowledge production in public administrations: tools, routines, practices
Rhetoric	Study of texts through close reading: genre, structure, production, reception
Political Economy	Study of power, politics, and systems of aid

# Fundamental questions

- **What is learning?**

- For whom? How?

→ Practical experiences,  
not theoretical definitions!

- **What is accountability?**

- For whom? How?

→ How are the purposes  
handled in practice?

- Who **writes** evaluations?

- Who **reads** them?

- Who **learns**?

→ **Evaluation  
for whom?**



# Data collection and verification

## **Historical mapping** of the central aid evaluation units

- Sweden (1971) and Norway (1977)
- Reviewed openly available publication databases
- Map changing systems and organisational set-ups

## Sample of 20 evaluation **reports**

## In-depth **interviews** with 7 key senior evaluation managers

## Iterative **writing process**

- Feedback from EBA's reference group
- Feedback from informants and other experts

# Limitations of the research design

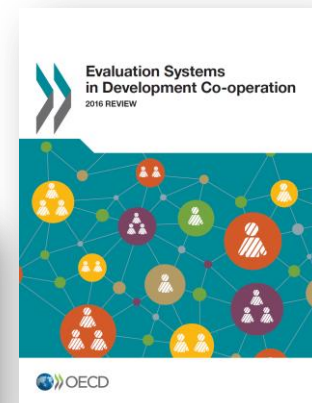
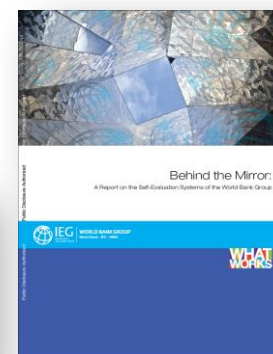
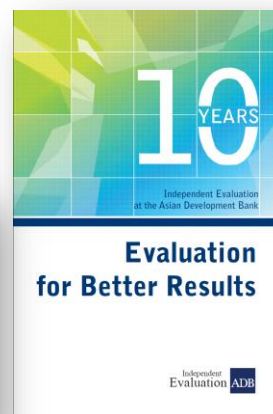
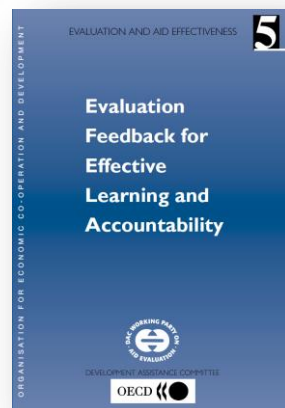
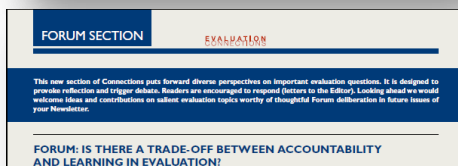
- Limited scope: Central evaluation units
  - Limited number of reports and interviews
  - No data from users, partners, recipients
- Historical + comparative approach
  - Less focus on current events
  - Not in-depth in either country
- Strong hypothesis + explorative methods
  - Problematic from a theory of science perspective
  - Hermeneutics v. hypothetical-deductive method

# Strengths of the research design

Historical-comparative approach enables contextualisation of the current situation:

- **No perfect solution** for striking the balance between accountability and learning
  - Repeated re-organisations of evaluation functions
  - Decentralised vs. centralised evaluation system
  - External vs. internal evaluation functions
  - Independence vs. integration of central units
- Unresolved tensions cause **practical trade-offs**

# Accountability and learning: A longstanding, ongoing debate



# Literature review: A spectrum of positions held on the relationship between accountability and learning

	Position in the spectrum	Typically found in...
<b>1</b>	Complementary objectives	Evaluation manuals, donor publications
<b>2</b>	A reconcilable dilemma	Practice-based research publications
<b>3</b>	A problematic trade-off	Practice-based research publications
<b>4</b>	An irreconcilable contradiction	Independent/critical academic research

# The evaluation reports

*What is an aid evaluation report?*

- Diversity of form, content, context  
→ but surprisingly consistent genre
- A document that *documents*  
→ clearly an accountability mechanism
- Also expected to enhance learning  
→ this function is more questionable
- Important: A product of the Terms of Reference (ToR)

# The evaluation reports

Main finding: **Relatively strong** on description/analysis, **weak** on lessons learned/recommendations

- Causes and contexts central to description/analysis are not factored into recommendations
- Recommendations either too specific and micro-level or too general and unworkable
- Politicized and/or conservative recommendations may exclude potential challenges to aid institution

# The evaluation process

- *Are evaluators:*
  - auditors or process facilitators?
- *Is their function:*
  - control or change?
- Should they prioritise:
  - external or internal trust?



# The evaluation process

Who **writes** reports? Mainly **external consultants**

- This responds to call for independence and critical distance
- Disincentives to critique
- Failure to arrive at *appropriate* recommendations
- Learning remains outside the aid system

Who **reads** reports? No clear answer...

- Few have time to read evaluation reports and absorb their content
- Often enthusiasm at start, less so when report is available
- "We know reports are not read"

# The evaluation system

- Formalised systems in place to ensure both accountability and learning
  - Systems for synthesis and communication
  - Systems for management response
  - Still: “big learning” remains elusive
- Particular Swedish feature: Internal units complemented by external agencies
  - Internal learning vs. external accountability

# The wider context of evaluation

- Evaluation is always a part of a wider political and institutional context
- Aid is a risky business – thus easy to criticise
- When aid is on the defensive, accountability may be emphasized  
...while learning suffers

# Key recommendations

*1) We must adjust our expectations to both aid interventions and aid evaluations.*

*2) We must talk openly about the trade-offs between accountability and learning.*

“We” here refers to all actors involved in doing and discussing development aid and aid evaluation.

## Implications: four key choices

1) *Does the evaluation process need an evaluation **report**, and if so, what kind?*

2) *Does the evaluation process benefit from an external evaluation **team**?*

3) *Should the evaluation report include **recommendations**?*

## Implications: four key choices

4) Should **accountability systems** be given the current high priority by donors, even when they come at the **expense of internal learning**?

# Thank you!

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