

Operational strategy

This document describes the operational strategy of the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA). The strategy outlines the long-term direction of EBA's activities and its future work. It also presents EBA's criteria for prioritising studies. The operational strategy is one starting point for EBA's work, but EBA is also very open to, and interested in, external views of issues that should be looked at and studies that should be carried out. The strategy is revised annually.

EBA's terms of reference (ToR 2013:11) form the basis of its work. Under the terms of reference, EBA is to evaluate and analyse Sweden's international aid in order to improve aid and build up a long-term, high-quality knowledge base. EBA's task is to commission, compile, implement and communicate evaluations, analyses and studies on the implementation, results and effectiveness of aid. Through its work, EBA will contribute to broadening and deepening the basis for the continuous improvement of aid policy.

The long-term direction of activities

EBA's activities aim to help improve Sweden's international aid and build up a high-quality knowledge base. What is the accumulated knowledge from research, evaluation and proven experience about what direction aid should take and how it should be implemented and evaluated? Where do international agreements and standards that Sweden has signed up to stand in relation to this knowledge? We are to contribute factual information, critical analysis and new perspectives. Our focus should be important and high-priority issues of principle with regard to aid. The studies¹ that EBA commissions should be such that they can influence political decisions, primarily in Sweden, but also internationally. We see our primary task as improving aid, but also putting aid issues in a wider context and highlighting what comes after aid. Our studies should be forward-looking, but for educational purposes it is necessary to also look back and to analyse current aid.

EBA's studies are usually carried out by those who proposed them, either spontaneously or following a call for interest. The authors are responsible for their own analysis, conclusions and recommendations. The fact that the author has clear ownership of the study is important in terms of quality, and also helps ensure that more perspectives on aid are presented. The quality of reports is scrutinised by the expert group, which decides which reports are published.

¹ We use 'studies' as an umbrella term for the projects EBA commissions, i.e. studies include evaluations, analyses and other types of knowledge bases.

Various methods are used to find authors for EBA's reports. Through its monitoring, EBA identifies people with knowledge that is relevant to Swedish aid and contacts them to gauge their interest in writing for EBA. With some issues it is appropriate to issue a call for interest. There is also a need to map out Swedish aid. Such studies can be carried out by the EBA secretariat or procured.

One important aspect of EBA's work is maintaining an active network of leading organisations that analyse and assess aid. EBA will work with other actors where deemed relevant and effective for the implementation of studies.

Another important aspect is disseminating knowledge and creating forums in which various actors can take part in a discussion on aid.

Overarching issues

Aid covers a broad area, stretching over many sectors of society and covering a large number of countries and organisations. Aid therefore needs to be looked at from many angles and tackled from the perspectives of donor and recipient countries alike.

And the role of aid in a wider context, as part of global development, must not be forgotten either. One important issue is the role that aid should play in financing the development goals. Public aid is merely a tool for contributing to poverty reduction and sustainable development. Many challenges of relevance to people in low income countries are global issues that must be dealt with beyond the borders of an individual country and with resources outside the national aid budget.

Overall, the issues can be divided into three categories, concerning:

- the reasons behind and direction of aid;
- the implementation of aid; and
- the results of aid.

Reasons behind and direction of aid

Firstly, this category includes issues concerning the overall *direction of Swedish aid*. What knowledge is there on issues such as: how can aid improve living conditions for people living in poverty and oppression? How should scant resources be used most effectively, e.g. what should be the division between humanitarian aid and development assistance and which countries should aid be given to? Is Swedish aid given according to prevailing knowledge of how aid should be directed? How has the distribution of resources between different areas such as education, democracy, health care, etc. been justified, and what governs the direction of aid in practice? How can public aid be coordinated with other sources of financing, e.g. aid given by private actors and contributions in other policy areas within the framework of a concerted policy for global development?

Secondly, there are issues concerning *reasons for a particular kind of aid contribution*: what is the contribution intended to lead to? Another relevant issue is the extent to which some aid contributions are driven by reasons other than combating poverty or oppression.

Implementation of aid

EBA wants to make existing knowledge about the effectiveness of Swedish aid available, and contribute knowledge of how implementation can be improved. One key issue is the importance of recipient ownership to long-term sustainability. An example of an issue of how the implementation of aid can be improved is how to achieve stability in long-term aid despite fluctuations in the scale of the need for more short-term measures, such as

reception of refugees. With respect to the organisation of aid, one key issue is how effective, high-quality, cost-effective activities can best be achieved, e.g. what advantages and disadvantages are there in different contexts to having several different actors involved in the implementation of aid? Other important governance and organisational questions concerning effectiveness include coordination in Sweden and internationally, and the level – national, EU or international – at which aid should be governed.

As background for analysis of how the implementation of aid can be improved we need surveys of, for example, how aid activities are organised, how they are governed, how Swedish aid is implemented (through what channels, using what instruments and coordination?), and how aid is evaluated.

In addition, implementation needs to be evaluated; for example, does governance have an impact on the choice of contributions, are different channels and instruments used in accordance with prevailing knowledge of how aid should be implemented, and to what extent is implementation governed by considerations other than aid policy?

Another relevant question is what knowledge is available concerning the effects of different forms of governance. For example, how has the transition from country strategies to results strategies affected aid activities, to what extent does results reporting govern the direction of aid, and how have the results reporting requirements in the strategies been satisfied?

One key aspect is the choice of channel and form of the aid. Sweden's aid is provided via many different channels (Swedish and international organisations, bilaterally to partner countries, multilateral organisations including the EU, and the private sector). How aid is channelled has an impact on the results that aid can achieve, and this is therefore an important area for EBA to study. There are different advantages and disadvantages to different channels, and a number of questions related to choice of channel: what incentive problems exist for different actors? How should the efficiency of an aid organisation be measured? Are different channels differently suited to different types of aid contributions? To what extent is the choice of channel governed by objectives other than aid policy objectives? Aid is also provided in different forms (a rough division is between project support, programme support and budget support) and via different instruments (such as grants, loans and various types of financial guarantees). EBA has a role in evaluating and analysing how different forms and instruments have been used and which should be chosen for different types of contributions.

If aid is to be effective, the actors involved must learn from their own and others' experiences and from research. One important question is thus how activities are organised so that new knowledge is created and developed for continued learning. Another is how activities are evaluated: are the best follow-up and evaluation methods used, and are the objectives formulated so as to make it possible to evaluate their fulfilment?

The results of aid

This category includes questions concerning *the results of aid in general*, and *the results of Swedish aid*.

Examples of general questions include: what do we know about what works for a specific kind of aid (e.g. support to education), where and why? What evidence exists that specific forms of aid-funded interventions achieve desired development impacts? Is there evidence to show that certain interventions are destructive? Various methods to find answers to this kind of question are possible. One method is meta-analyses aimed at answering questions

of which type of aid contributions in a specific area have been found in the evaluations to work or not to work. Another important general question is how desired results should be measured, e.g. how reduced poverty should be measured in light of a multidimensional concept of poverty. Other questions concern the advantages and disadvantages of various evaluation methods and which methods should be used to evaluate the results both of individual aid contributions and more generally.

The questions concerning the results of Swedish aid can be divided as follows: *What is Swedish aid used for? What effects have contributions had? To what extent are results in line with the goals adopted for aid policy?*

With respect to what Swedish aid is used for, there is a need to chart actual use as a starting point for further analysis of aid.

To be able to develop aid in the future, it is vital to assess the effects of aid contributions that have been carried out. EBA sees its role as contributing knowledge of the overall effects of aid. This could mean the effects of a certain form of aid, e.g. support for institution-building, or for a certain country or sector. EBA also wants to contribute to analysis of whether the results of Swedish aid are in line with the goals that have been set for aid: the extent to which Swedish aid can be said to contribute to poverty reduction. By contrast, EBA does not normally consider evaluating individual aid contributions to be part of its role.

Criteria for setting priorities

The priorities between the many different potential studies covered by EBA's mandate should be determined by the importance of the studies for both long-term *knowledge-building* and more short-term *policy relevance*. Policy relevance refers to the fact that EBA's studies should be relevant and applicable for political decision-makers, although the time perspective may vary. A report that leads to knowledge-building can contribute to the future direction of policy. Not every report need contain recommendations that have policy relevance. However, studies that do not result in policy recommendations should lead to long-term knowledge-building and thus also serve as a basis for further studies that in turn could result in recommendations.

The *topicality* of the question will also be of importance when determining which studies will be carried out. EBA is to contribute to the debate on the development of Swedish aid and implemented studies should therefore be linked to developments within the aid field.

A further priority criterion for EBA's work is that the study's scope represents a *significant share of the aid budget* or is expected to have a *significant impact*. In addition, there are issues that neither affect a large share of the aid budget nor can be said to have major financial consequences in any other respect, but that are *relevant to the principles* of aid. One example is ethical issues linked to aid.

Duplication of work must be avoided. Many actors carry out research, evaluations and analyses in the area of aid, and it is important to make use of all available knowledge when selecting studies. EBA therefore carries out active monitoring to identify areas where the need for additional knowledge is particularly great. There is a need to compile and refine the knowledge and results that already exist and translate the results from research and evaluations into relevant policy conclusions. In areas where there is a lack of relevant knowledge, it may be necessary to conduct more extensive projects. Access to resources will determine the extent to which more resource-intensive projects may be possible.

The work ahead

In 2016, EBA plans to continue to publish studies in all three of the categories above. We plan to continue to look at institutions' role in aid and publish evaluations of the results of Swedish long-term development cooperation. We will also publish synthesis evaluations that bring together existing knowledge from robust evaluations and continue our work to publish analysis of evaluation methods. We also plan to publish studies into how aid is governed and implemented, both overall and in individual regions and countries.

EBA seeks to publish studies in topical areas with a clear relevance to aid policy. To do this effectively, we are dependent on engagement from aid policy decision-makers and others. EBA also conducts its own regular monitoring to identify interesting research of relevance to Swedish aid. All in all, this means the studies planned for the coming year may change. It may also mean that EBA will organise seminars on topics for which there are not yet any EBA reports. Moreover, the point in time at which various planned studies are carried out and published depends on the availability of the authors.