

# CONFRONTING THE CONTRADICTION

## AN EXPLORATION INTO THE DUAL PURPOSE OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEARNING IN AID EVALUATION

*Numerous donor publications ask why there is so little learning from aid evaluations. Aid agencies customarily define evaluation as having a dual purpose: learning and accountability. This study explores this dual purpose: **Might there in fact be a contradiction between accountability and learning?***

The study starts from the **hypothesis** that the concern for accountability itself impedes learning; put strongly, the two are incompatible. This strong hypothesis is operationalized empirically at three levels of analysis: *evaluation texts, evaluation processes, and evaluation systems*.

The study combines **analytical approaches from History, Rhetoric, and Political Economy**. The empirical material covers the central evaluation units in Sweden and Norway over a 40-year period, consisting of in-depth interviews with senior evaluation managers, a mapping of historical documents, and a sample of evaluation reports.

### SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

*We conclude that **the dual purpose of accountability and learning in practice involves fundamental trade-offs**. These trade-offs are effects of tensions and contradictions that emerge at all three levels (evaluation texts, evaluation processes, and evaluation systems). In practice, this leads to a prioritisation of the accountability at the expense of learning.*

*Our analysis points to **a fundamental problem of exaggerated expectations of what aid evaluation may accomplish**. The expansive growth of evaluation reports and other aid documentation makes many assume that increased knowledge and learning will automatically follow. **This, we show, is clearly not the case.***

### THE EVALUATION TEXT

Our rhetorical analysis of evaluation reports shows that while these texts may clearly contribute to accountability, they may to a much lesser extent contribute to learning. The quality and usefulness of reports are contingent on processes and structures outside the report itself, notably by how the Terms of Reference are formulated by those commissioning the evaluation report and by the resources made available for evaluation.

### THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Our study shows that the evaluation process is often more important for learning than the report itself. The two purposes entail different questions and diverging methods. Building and sustaining internal engagement for the evaluation is critical to ensure interest, trust, relevance, learning, and use, but these concerns must be constantly balanced against the accountability principles of critical distance and independence.

### THE EVALUATION SYSTEM

Aid evaluation is always but one part of a larger context of diverging concerns and interests. The Swedish and Norwegian aid agencies have several times reorganized their evaluation functions, thus institutionalising the balance between the purposes of accountability and learning. While evaluation reports ensures transparency and are thus obvious democratic value, it may come at the cost of learning and recipients' interests if accountability is defined to mean merely the publication of documented results for a home audience.

### WHO LEARNS FROM EVALUATION REPORTS?

Our study shows that learning is experienced to happen among actors involved in specific evaluation processes (notably evaluation consultants, evaluation managers, and programme officers). At this level, accountability and learning may be more easily reconciled. Yet the ambition of generalising and synthesising findings from evaluations for learning on a larger organisational scale ("big learning") remains a major challenge. Given that mainly external actors write evaluation reports, the potential for internal learning is clearly reduced.

### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 **We must talk openly about the trade-offs between accountability and learning.**
- 2 **We must adjust our expectations to both aid interventions and aid evaluations.**

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

Following these recommendations would require all actors to actively make a set of choices. The first three are relevant in specific evaluation processes, the fourth has larger political implications:

#### CHOICE 1

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

#### CHOICE 2

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

#### CHOICE 3

*Should the evaluation report include recommendations?*

#### CHOICE 4

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



### AUTHORS



**DESMOND MCNEILL**  
Research Director, Centre for Development & Environment (SUM), University of Oslo, Norway



**HILDE REINERTSEN**  
Postdoctoral Fellow, TIK Centre for Technology, Innovation and Culture, University of Oslo, Norway



**KRISTIAN BJØRK DAHL**  
Senior Researcher, Uni Research Rokkan Centre, Bergen, Norway

EBA Report Series **2017:6** can be downloaded here: <https://bit.ly/2HNDg04>