

EBA Methods and Procedures

This document describes *how* the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) operates: how studies¹ are initiated; how the EBA sets priorities among studies; and the frameworks within which studies are conducted and quality-assured and the EBA's activities followed up. The EBA has also adopted an Operational Strategy, describing its remit and the questions it addresses. The EBA's Communication Strategy describes the aims and focus of its external communication efforts. The more specific focus of activities each year is set out in the EBA's Operational Plan.

Overarching issues

At an overarching level, the questions addressed by the EBA can be divided into three categories, relating to:

- the reasons for and long-term direction of aid
- the priorities and management of aid
- the implementation of aid.

The reasons for and long-term direction of aid

This category includes questions concerning the overall *direction of Swedish development assistance*. Questions such as: How can development assistance create preconditions for better living conditions for people living in poverty and under oppression? Does the design of Swedish development assistance take account of current understanding of how aid should be targeted? How can official development assistance interact with or complement other sources of finance?

The priorities and management of aid

This category generally relates to the Government's priorities, set out in Budget Bills and strategies. Questions in this area may include: How has the allocation of resources to different areas, such as education, democracy, health care etc., been justified, and what determines the direction of aid in practice? Are strategies an appropriate form of management? Do they permit the flexibility needed for effective aid in more difficult and changing environments? What factors shape the formulation of goals in these strategies?

The implementation of aid

The EBA does not normally evaluate individual projects or programmes, choosing instead to study issues of a broader policy character, often from a perspective of critical reappraisal. It also summarises knowledge from evaluations carried out by other

¹ The EBA uses "studies" as an overall term for projects that are intended to result in some form of report to or by the EBA.

stakeholders. The EBA wishes to provide new knowledge on the effectiveness of Swedish development assistance and to propose ways of improving implementation. One important question is the results of political reforms, another the extent to which organisations achieve their objectives. Other examples of issues of relevance are: Does the management of aid have an impact on the choice of interventions? Are different channels and instruments used on the basis of current understanding of how aid should be implemented? To what extent is implementation guided by other motives than those of development policy? Are organisations using the best methods for monitoring and evaluation? Are goals formulated in such a way that it is possible to track progress towards them?

Initiation of studies

Each year the Expert Group decides on a number of priority areas for new studies, which will generally be published the following year. Current priorities are set out in the EBA's annual Operational Plan. This does not mean that the EBA rigidly confines itself to a small set of questions. An important source for the studies initiated is an ongoing dialogue with the EBA's target groups, in particular the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, but also Sweden's missions abroad, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament) and other stakeholders. The EBA welcomes thoughts and ideas on studies from all actors in the field of development assistance. The EBA works together with other national and international stakeholders when this is considered relevant and effective.

EBA studies are usually authored by individuals who have themselves drawn up study proposals, in response to either a targeted or a broader invitation for proposals. The EBA also welcomes author-initiated proposals, and has a standing invitation to that effect on its website.

The initiation of studies in the EBA's priority areas is organised through a committee-like structure, with, for each area, two to four of the Expert Group's members working actively with programme managers at the Secretariat to set new studies in motion. The aim is to initiate several mutually complementary studies in each area.

At Expert Group meetings, outlines of potential study designs are also discussed. These are usually prepared by the Secretariat, to facilitate the subsequent development of project proposals. Outlines may also be in the form of shorter "concept notes" from possible authors.

Decisions on project proposals

The Expert Group decides whether a given study is to be carried out, based on a project proposal and a quality assessment conducted by the Secretariat (a "Secretariat memorandum"), which sets the proposal in a wider context.

The **project proposal** should include information about the questions the study aims to shed light on and its relevance to the overall remit of the EBA. The Expert Group's *Guidelines for project proposals*, aimed at external authors, describe what a project proposal is expected to contain.

The **Secretariat memorandum** sets out the Secretariat's assessment of the quality of the proposal (evaluation questions, evaluability, method and design, links to earlier research and other studies in the field), together with a description of the background to and reasons

for the study, the type of study envisaged, its intended use by intended users, the authors' qualifications, a timetable and budget for the study, and an assessment of how the proposal relates to the Expert Group's Operational Strategy, priority areas and relevance criteria.

The EBA uses **five relevance criteria** for project proposals received and prior to decisions to issue a broad invitation for proposals:

- advancement of knowledge (does the project offer something new for actors in development assistance?);
- policy relevance (will the expected results be of use to policymakers, can they contribute to the development of aid?);
- current relevance (link to current developments in the aid sector?);
- share of the development assistance budget or significance of the expected impacts of the phenomenon to be studied;
- important questions of principle relating to development assistance (for example, ethical issues in this area).

To reach a decision following a **broad invitation for proposals**, the proposals received are ranked by a review group comprising both Expert Group members and Secretariat staff. This ranking is based on the assessment criteria (and their relative weighting) indicated by the terms of reference of the invitation.

Conduct of studies

The EBA primarily makes use of external authors with previous knowledge in the area to be studied. The authors it commissions are independently responsible for their analysis, conclusions and any recommendations. The Expert Group undertakes quality assurance, decides on the publication of studies and, as a complement to the authors' own efforts, communicates them externally.

When it is considered appropriate, staff of the EBA Secretariat may carry out studies, for example when there is judged to be an opportunity for institutional learning linked to producing a study. In such cases, members of staff author studies without additional payment, as part of their regular employment. These reports are produced according to the same rules as externally authored studies. As a rule, the Managing Director acts as project manager for reports authored within the Secretariat. The memorandum forming the basis for the decision to launch such a study must include an assessment of the suitability of it being authored within the Secretariat.

In exceptional cases, members of the Expert Group may themselves author studies for the EBA. A conceivable example could be when a member has unique expertise in a priority area. However, this has to be weighed against possible conflicts of interest and the risk of the author being too close to the Expert Group in other ways, and the fact that in such cases the specialist knowledge of the member concerned cannot be used in the review of the report. There therefore need to be powerful arguments for using members as EBA authors. In such instances, the proposal must be considered by at least two outside reviewers. In other respects, it will be dealt with in the same way as other proposals.

For each study, a reference group consisting of a project manager from the Secretariat and individuals with relevant expertise is appointed. This group may also include representatives of target groups, to facilitate continuous learning and feedback. Its purpose is to provide support to the authors, thereby enhancing the quality of their report. The

reference group is chaired by an Expert Group member, appointed by a decision of the Expert Group. It includes a project manager from the Secretariat, who in addition to providing practical support contributes expertise according to his or her individual qualifications. The other members of the reference group are appointed by its chair, in consultation with the authors and the project manager. Prior to the study being finalised, members of the reference group (with the exception of the project manager) make their own assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the report, which forms the basis for the Expert Group's decision and serves as final feedback to the author. The EBA can also choose to make use of external peer reviewers, who may be anonymous.

Decisions to publish reports are made at regular meetings. The Expert Group may choose to ask for revisions to be made to the text before deciding to adopt the final report, or alternatively it can entrust the reference group chair and the Secretariat with ensuring that the necessary adjustments are made, without the need for a new decision on publication.

Communication

The Expert Group is concerned to ensure the greatest possible transparency. Minutes are taken at its meetings and published on the EBA website. The EBA submits an overall report on its work to the Government twice a year, in the spring and the autumn. The spring report, known as the *EBA Aid Review*, summarises the contents and conclusions of the studies published over the past year. This publication is printed in a Swedish and an English edition. It is mainly here that the Expert Group highlights issues and conclusions which it judges to be of particular importance. The autumn report is a communication to the Government Offices, giving an account of the EBA's work over the past twelve-month period (October–September) and of current and planned activities.

The Expert Group determines the subject of a given study, assesses its quality, and decides whether it is to be published in the *EBA Reports* series. The Group does not normally express a position on the conclusions and recommendations put forward, but can choose to do so if it considers it necessary.

As a rule, completed studies are launched at public events that are free of charge to those attending, and at which complementary and competing perspectives are also considered. In general, launches and other seminars held under EBA auspices are recorded to facilitate wider dissemination.

The EBA actively seeks to disseminate studies after they have been launched, by means of targeted presentations to relevant decision makers and through workshops, blogs, podcasts or other media, with a view to promoting relevant evidence-based conversations on important development assistance issues. The aim is to achieve dissemination that is as broad and at the same time as effective as possible.

Follow-up of projects

The EBA aims to systematically develop its activities in the light of experience gained.

One aspect of this involves assessing the impact of EBA activities: how individual studies have been disseminated, received and used in various contexts. The Secretariat regularly follows up the impact of studies with their intended main users, for example, and tracks

other aspects of dissemination and use, for example citations of EBA reports in various contexts.

Another aspect involves learning from the methods and processes employed at seminars, in studies and in communication activities. Regular author forums are an important source of learning and of questions for new studies.

The EBA actively seeks to develop new and even more effective forms of follow-up.