

Expert Group for Aid Studies

UD 2013:01

Operational Strategy

The activities of the Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA) are guided by its terms of reference as a Swedish government committee (dir. 2016:71), which require it to “evaluate and analyse Sweden’s international development assistance, thereby helping to build an evidence base for the development and management of that assistance by the Government. The Expert Group is to commission or conduct and to communicate evaluations, analyses and studies of a high quality relating to the implementation, results and effectiveness of development assistance.” In addition, the EBA is to “strengthen the sum total of analysis and evaluation efforts in this field by providing a complement to other such activities, with a particular focus on issues and areas of study in which its independent position offers clear added value. The studies undertaken are to relate to questions of strategic importance for development assistance and development policy. ... A key element of the Expert Group’s remit is to assess Swedish development assistance with respect to its relevance, effectiveness, impact, sustainability, efficiency and other characteristics.”

The present document describes the direction of the EBA’s work in the light of its interpretation of these terms of reference. The document *EBA Methods and Procedures* gives a more detailed account of the steps which the EBA takes to commission studies. These two documents will be updated as the need arises. The more specific focus of activities each year is set out in the EBA’s Operational Plan.

Long-term direction of the EBA’s work

The principal objective of the EBA is to contribute to developing the direction, management and implementation of Sweden’s international development assistance. This objective encompasses questions relating to the relevance of aid in the short, medium and long term.

To this end, the EBA develops and disseminates evidence – chiefly in the form of evaluations and analyses. The evidence which the EBA develops should be:

- relevant, objective and capable of being put to use
- additional: EBA studies should offer clear added value.

The EBA seeks to disseminate evidence

- in an effective manner, geared to relevant target groups.

Overarching issues

Development assistance is a wide-ranging field. It encompasses many sectors of society and thematic areas, and involves a large number of countries and organisations. Development assistance therefore needs to be elucidated from many different angles, adopting a multi-stakeholder approach.

It is not possible for the EBA to study all areas simultaneously, and it therefore seeks to give priority during different periods to issues or themes judged at the time to be of particular relevance. Rather than consisting of specific policy areas, these themes will more often revolve around questions of particular importance to development assistance. The thematic focus may shift or remain the same over time, as new issues are raised by the studies conducted. Priorities are reviewed annually and are presented in the EBA's Operational Plan.

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

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

Forming an integral part of all three of these is an assessment of the results of aid. Do the direction, priorities, management and implementation of development assistance help to achieve the desired and intended results? What factors help to ensure successful aid interventions, and what factors stand in their way? Are the direction/priorities/management and implementation of aid appropriate in the light of the overall evidence from research, evaluations and tried-and-tested experience? Are the goals set actually achieved?

From overarching issues to delivery

The Expert Group's remit under its terms of reference is both to evaluate and to analyse development assistance. Different definitions of these two concepts exist. The EBA uses what is perhaps the commonest definition of evaluation (originally from the American Evaluation Association, AEA): "a systematic inquiry into the worth or merit of an object". "Worth or merit" means that a value judgement is involved, "systematic" that that value judgement is to build on a transparent, scientifically based investigation. The term "analysis" is used by the EBA in the more general sense of a carefully conducted study. In addition, the EBA develops other forms of evidence, such as syntheses, reviews and descriptions of methods. It is not a research funding body, although this does not mean that its reports cannot build on other ongoing research and/or form a basis for future academic publications. "Studies" is used as an overall term for the projects the EBA commissions, and they are most commonly presented in publications known as *EBA Reports*. Descriptions of individual reports indicate the types of study involved.

All in all, the above means that the EBA addresses problems, priorities and challenges using the types of analysis and the methodologies that are best suited to answering the questions concerned, rather than applying a predetermined study design. The EBA works together with other national and international stakeholders when this is considered relevant and effective.

Relevant starting points for relevant studies

In general, the EBA takes current policy and practice as the starting point for its studies of questions concerning the relevance of development assistance in the long, medium and short term. 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. Inclusive stakeholder involvement as studies are carried out ensures that there is continuous feedback and testing of relevance.

A natural basis for studies on the *reasons for and long-term direction of aid* is to be found in the Government's overarching development policy objectives, expressed for example in the *Policy Framework for Swedish Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Assistance* (Government Communication 2016/17:60), international undertakings (including the 2030 Agenda, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the European Consensus on Development, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 and the World Humanitarian Summit), standing instructions to government agencies in the development assistance field, and the strategies guiding development assistance. At the same time, the EBA has to be able to assess and question the direction adopted by the Government, by means of both critical studies and complementary perspectives.

Natural points of departure for an analysis of the *management and priorities of aid* in the medium and short term are the strategies guiding development assistance and the priorities set out in the Budget Bill for the year in question.

Studies of questions concerning the *implementation of aid* will for example deal with different modalities of assistance, actors and reforms in this field. 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 undertaken by other stakeholders.

EBA studies are usually carried out 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.

The authors of EBA studies are independently responsible for the analysis, conclusions and any recommendations they contain. The fact that an author has clear ownership of his or her study is important in ensuring its quality, as well as helping to promote a wider range of perspectives on development assistance. The Expert Group undertakes quality assurance, makes the decision to publish the study and, as a complement to the author's own efforts, communicates it externally.

Dissemination of knowledge

The EBA's efforts to disseminate knowledge should be forward-looking and seek to achieve dissemination that is as broad and at the same time as effective as possible. The EBA should constantly endeavour to reach the right target group for each study. The main focus and overall priorities are laid down in the EBA's Communication Strategy.

The EBA actively seeks to make completed studies more widely known. Although its principal remit is to contribute to the development and management of aid by the Government, its analyses should also be of relevance and interest to other stakeholders, including Swedish missions abroad, the Riksdag, government agencies, civil society, the media and the general public. International stakeholders are important for the EBA, both as a target group and as partners. Through various networks, the EBA disseminates its studies in a wider context, learns about studies conducted by others, and thus receives important input for new studies.

The EBA's knowledge-sharing role includes presenting new or synthesised knowledge in priority areas. The Expert Group can also present specific conclusions as its own.

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, these events are webcast live and recorded to facilitate wider dissemination. Completed studies are disseminated through various channels and are often presented in several different contexts, geared to the interests and needs of individual groups. This is in line with the EBA's remit to actively disseminate lessons learnt, conclusions and recommendations from completed studies, and to operate in an open and transparent manner.

Experience-based self-assessment

Self-assessment by the EBA is part of a systematic endeavour to develop its activities in the short and long term. This involves an assessment both of its methods and procedures, for example in the form of evaluations of seminars or completed projects, and of how individual studies have been disseminated, received and used in various contexts. At regular intervals, the EBA conducts interviews with the intended main users of its studies.