

Policy and guidelines for quality assurance of studies

Target group and focus: This document is aimed at programme managers, the Managing Director of the secretariat and the members of the Expert Group, but also at people who are writing or considering writing a report for EBA, or who are interested in how the Expert Group addresses quality. This document applies to all EBA reports, irrespective of the type of study (evaluations, mappings, reviews, etc.) and to EBA's other publications where applicable.

Content of the document: This document describes EBA's remit and mandate as regards the question of quality, the concept of quality, EBA's quality criteria and the process for quality assuring EBA studies. It also describes responsibilities and roles and provides a list of references for further information and inspiration.

A form is appended to the document to support authors, programme managers and chairs of reference groups when assessing the quality of individual reports (Appendix 1). Appendix 2 presents EBA's view of use. Appendix 3 provides a summary of different forms of potential bias in evaluations and studies.

Relationship to other steering documents and policies: This document particularly supplements documents on EBA's methods and procedures, communication strategy, policy on conflicts of interest, procurement policy and guidelines for reference groups.

1. Background, EBA's mandate and double independence

Consistently high quality in EBA's studies and learning processes is fundamental to EBA being able to contribute to improving aid in the long term, to the legitimacy and impact of its operations and its ability to meet its targets.¹

The starting point for EBA's work is its terms of reference as a Government Committee (dir. 2016:71). These state that EBA is to "evaluate and analyse Sweden's international aid and so contribute towards knowledge as a basis for the Government's development and governance of aid." The terms of reference clearly state that the production and operations of the Expert Group are to be characterised by high quality: "The Expert Group is to commission or carry out and communicate high-quality evaluations, analyses and studies on the delivery, results and effectiveness of aid. The Expert Group is to have an independent position in relation to what it examines and is to be independently responsible for selecting studies and for quality."

EBA's principle of double independence (on the one hand EBA's independence in relation to the Government regarding what is studied and what authors to engage, and on the other hand the authors' own responsibility for conclusions and recommendations in EBA reports) is linked to

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

the question of quality. Independence is not a *sufficient* condition for quality, nor is it a goal in its own right, but it has an important role to play for a high-quality, critical approach characterised by integrity as a basis for learning. However, independence is not to be understood as absence of the proximity that is essential to relevance. Safeguarding **relevance for the constituent** demands good dialogue with target groups, both in terms of what is done and during the course of the analysis work. EBA has several different forms of dialogue with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) regarding the studies that are planned, conducted and published. **Good quality performance** demands that authors are knowledgeable about the object of the study. The Expert Group determines whether proximity to the material constitutes a problem for the respective study. This will partly depend on the question asked by the study, its purpose and its intended users. Independence is expected to reduce the risk of different forms of potential *bias* (see Appendix 3) and so improve the validity of the studies.

2. What does EBA mean by quality?

Quality is a multifaceted concept that is hard to encapsulate and has preoccupied philosophers since antiquity. Definitions of the concept state that it equates to properties. It is difficult to say more than this, because what makes e.g. a car or a theatre performance good are properties other than those that make an analysis or an evaluation good. Nor is there any general, generic definition of quality besides the slightly vague “properties”. Which properties make an evaluation good must be defined specifically for the field of evaluation.

This has, indeed, been done within the sector; a lively discussion has been conducted for many decades now, and the debate has engaged those who commission evaluations, those who conduct them and those who are their object. We can note a widespread unanimity on some of the properties that an evaluation should have. EBA’s quality principles are inspired by the Joint Committee on Standards (1994) and can be seen as an adaptation of the OECD’s quality standards (OECD-DAC, 2010) to EBA’s operations.

Firstly, a study must have **utility**; it ought to be used and contribute towards learning. This makes demands of those commissioning and conducting the study, and of the political/administrative systems affected. Use and usefulness are processes that are founded before a study is launched. Bearing this in mind, one should be cautious about starting a study if there will be no opportunity to use the results. This demands that the process involve stakeholders so that the groundwork is laid for use, and that a final report is well-written, clear and the practical implications are prominent (see Appendix 2 for a more exhaustive description of EBA’s view of use).

Secondly, studies must be **accurate**; their assessments must simply “be right”. This means that an evaluation must be firmly anchored in scientific methods. The results must be assessed using traditional scientific criteria for reliability and internal, external and construct validity. Furthermore, it is important that the method and approach are clearly set out so that users can assess its accuracy and any limitations.

Thirdly, studies must be **feasible**. Evaluation is expensive in its own right and is also associated with high indirect and hidden costs that make it extra crucial to assure oneself that the process is carried out feasibly. For the sake of feasibility, studies must have a clear focus and a limited number of well thought-out questions. Authors must not gather more data or empirical material than necessary, and the work must be adapted flexibly over the course of the project.

Fourthly, studies must be conducted with **propriety**. Evaluations often involve people sharing information that may expose them to consequences from superiors in their organisation, from those in political power, or colleagues/the general public. Individual privacy and protection for informants must be comprehensive and unconditional in cases where there is the slightest suspicion that providing the information may incur consequences. Those who come into contact with the study must be treated with respect, dignity and consideration in all circumstances.

EBA's starting point is not to exclude or take a stance in relation to the various scientific disciplines and their often varying views of methodology and scientific rigour. The starting point is to avoid methodological reductionism (the assumption that the quality of research or evaluation is identical with a specific method) and that in the social sciences and in the field of evaluation there is a "lowest common denominator" for quality able to form the basis of management and planning. As far as EBA is concerned, the questions come first and the choice of scientific method comes second. Sometimes the questions lead to our studies being conducted using quantitatively focused or experimental methods, and sometimes to more qualitatively focused studies that may, for example, be based on comparative analyses, ethnography or case studies.

EBA advocates for quality work also incorporating the substance, not merely the form. It is not sufficient for a study to have feasibility, propriety, accuracy and utility. A study having these properties makes it likely that it also has something intelligent and interesting to say on the matter. In principle, however, it may be the case that a study that has these properties still does not bring any new knowledge to its field. EBA therefore places an emphasis on factual questions when assessing quality. A team of authors should always have both specialist field expertise regarding the areas covered by the study and methodological expertise, with the capacity to achieve an end product characterised by *scientific rigour*.

Nor can the quality of a study be solely reduced to the quality of the report itself. The starting point is rather that a high-quality study is a result of the initial dialogue and planning that precedes decisions on focus, specification of purpose and questions, methodological scientific rigour and transparency, the study's learning impact/learning potential, that central actors are able to be heard, an ethical process and efficient use of the study's resources.

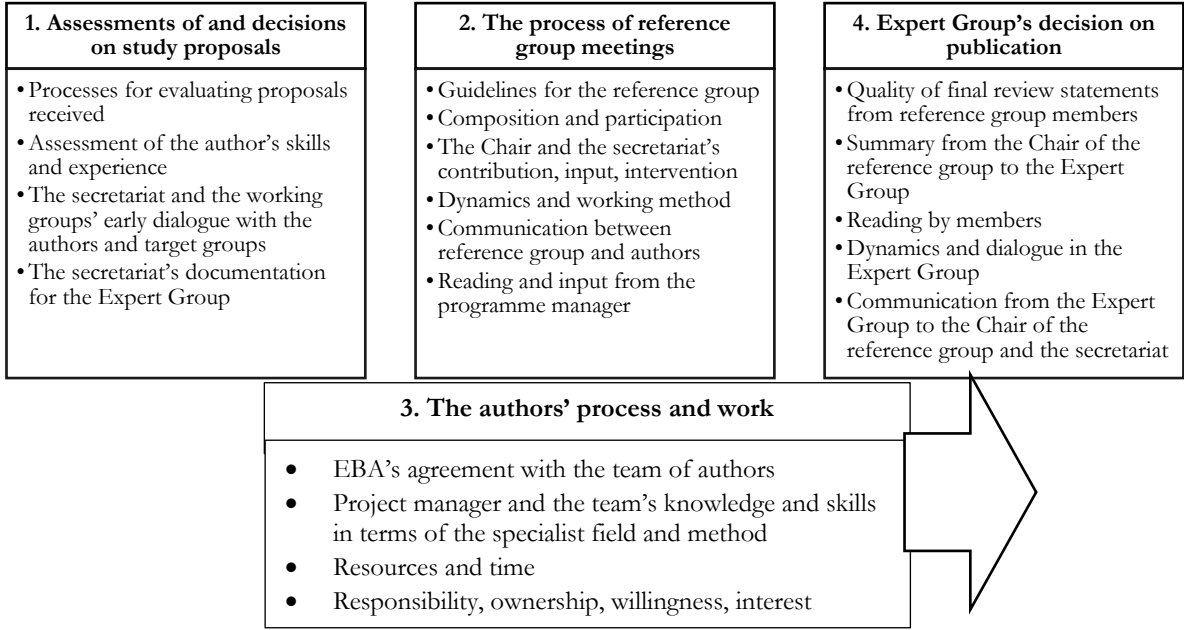
The quality criteria discussed above can be nuanced in individual cases, and it may be the case that different quality aspects become dominant in different studies. The quality assurance process must be designed such that the properties that constitute quality can be tailored and adapted to different contexts. It is true that the criteria described above are produced specifically for evaluations, and the referred-to sources show in detail how these are applied to evaluation specifically. However, EBA considers that the general concepts are applicable to all our studies.

3. EBA's process for quality assurance of studies

EBA's quality assurance process can be said to begin with EBA's guidelines for the design and content of project proposals (EBA, 2019) and subsequent assessments of and decisions on proposals. It continues through governance of the authors' process and quality work (including in the agreements with the team of authors) via review by the reference groups, to the Expert Group's decision on publication, and in dialogue, communication work and in EBA's internal follow-up/learning.

The reference groups are EBA’s main instruments for safeguarding the quality of its studies. Their work is governed by the Guidelines for reference groups, which states that “the main purpose of the reference group is to provide support to the authors and so increase the quality and policy relevance of the report.” The system can be said to be similar to the peer review system that is central to academia. One difference is that researchers, “aid practitioners” and other relevant expertise all participate in EBA’s reference groups. The functionality of the reference group as a quality instrument is based on clear governance regarding purpose and expectations, the right composition of skills (method and specialist field), the dynamics and quality of the dialogue and the authors’ willingness to take on board relevant viewpoints. One important aspect is the continuous monitoring of how views are incorporated by the authors. The starting point here is that the authors are always expected to *seriously take into account* the opinions of the reference group, but that the author at the same time has their independence and can choose whether or not to incorporate the opinion in question. EBA’s view of quality improvement work is dynamic and adaptive, i.e. we conduct a continuous conversation with authors throughout the process rather than one-off check-ins. This is based on a view of quality as something that is gradually built and strengthened.

The diagram below lists a number of factors that affect the quality of an EBA report at different stages of the process. The focus is on the elements that the Expert Group and the secretariat are able to influence.



The early process is particularly important, as inaccurate decisions here can be difficult to correct later on in the project. The final quality assessment takes place in conjunction with the decision on publication and where the Expert Group is to assess whether the study is of sufficiently good quality to be published as an EBA report. Normally a final manuscript will need to be reviewed in the light of the quality assessment conducted by the Expert Group.

4. Responsibility and roles in EBA’s quality work

- *The main author* is always ultimately responsible for the quality of an EBA study. The main author is also the one with the greatest opportunity to affect the quality of a study. It is up to

the main author to judge whether they wish to use internal quality managers in the evaluation team. These do not replace any aspect of the quality work described in this memorandum.

- *The Expert Group* is collectively responsible for the general quality work in EBA's report publication. What is assessed by the Expert Group when making publication decisions is whether each individual study is of sufficiently high quality to be published. The Expert Group is also responsible for shutting down or granting extensions to work on studies that fail to meet the quality criteria.
- *The Chair of the reference group* is responsible for leading and planning the work of the reference group together with the responsible project manager. The Chair of the reference group is to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the study to other members of the Expert Group in conjunction with the publication decision. This is based on discussion in the reference group, the reference group's statements and on own assessments produced in cooperation with the responsible project manager. Where necessary and following agreement with the project manager and the Managing Director, the Chair of the reference group is to feed back to the Expert Group on quality problems in individual studies and in cases where the Expert Group may need to be informed.
- *The Managing Director* is responsible for reporting to the Expert Group on weaknesses in EBA's general quality work. The Managing Director is to ensure that the project manager and the Chairs of reference groups have the resources, knowledge and expertise to work in line with this quality policy. The Managing Director also has overarching responsibility for the quality of EBA's underlying reports and for Development Dissertation Briefs (DDB). The DDB series differs from other report series in that they are based on approved academic dissertations. The dissertations are judged to have undergone customary academic scrutiny. EBA's quality assurance therefore concerns the summary of the underlying product.
- *The individual programme manager* is responsible, throughout the whole process, for actively supporting the Expert Group and the Chair of the reference group in assessing the quality of studies and proposals based on the criteria. The programme manager is included in the reference group and besides providing practical support, also contributes knowledge according to their individual expertise. The programme manager plays an important role by, in dialogue with the Chair of the reference group, ensuring the best possible composition of the reference group in terms of capacity to assess methodological accuracy, utility, propriety, etc. The responsible programme manager is to read every individual study properly, from the proposal stage and on an ongoing basis, and alert the Managing Director and the Chair of the reference group if a proposal or a report has or is expected to have quality shortcomings. Individual project managers are also responsible for highlighting their own skills development needs to the Managing Director in terms of methodology, including evaluation method and design, research ethics, and research/evaluation financing.

Another central document in terms of quality and the allocation of roles is EBA's conflict of interest policy, which seeks to avoid different forms of bias in EBA's studies (cf. Appendix 3).

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Appendix 1 – form for assessing the quality of studies

This form focuses on the report itself and is intended for use by programme managers and reference group chairs during the process from the decision that a study is to be conducted to the decision to publish. The quality of the launch and other conversations about the report after the publication decision are not addressed.

The form consists of several questions that can be asked of the study. The form is to ensure that conscious choices are made regarding the different parts of the study and not to act as a list in which every point is simply ticked off in a set order. The form is thus not to be used mechanically. Instead its aim is to strengthen the dialogue on the strengths and weaknesses of individual studies and make the work of the reference group chair and programme manager easier when preparing for reference group meetings and ahead of the Expert Group's decision.

Accuracy

Purpose, focus, concept

- Is it clear what **the study's purpose and fundamental questions** are? Are the study's questions specified and/or broken down?
- Are important or central **concepts** clearly defined or interpreted?
- Is the **object of the study** described clearly and exhaustively? Are temporal and spatial delimitations described clearly?

Theory, perspective, context

- Have the authors gone through the **relevant scientific literature**? Is the literature discussed with care in the report?
- Are the study's **theoretical assumptions or starting points** made clear?
- Are **scientific references** used to underpin conclusions and analysis? To what extent are references obtained from "grey literature" or other forms of non-scientific literature? Does the author refer to the literature correctly and consistently?
- Does the study contain a thorough analysis of the relevant **surrounding situation and context**?
- Does the report combine **field expertise with methodological or theoretical expertise**?

Material and data

- Does the study describe its **data/empirical material** and discuss data quality?
- Are **indicators, outcome data or comparative objects** well-chosen and relevant? Are their accuracy discussed?
- Are **sample selection processes** clearly described and correctly performed? Is the material representative and/or well-motivated based on the purpose and methods of the study? Is it clear what the authors consider they are able to make a statement on or not?

- Is the study based on **case studies**? Which conclusions does the relevant case study design allow the authors to draw? What level of generalisation is possible?
- Are the conclusions **triangulated** in any way with complementary data?
- Have lists, e.g. of **interviewees** and **interview guides/interview protocols/survey protocols** been appended to the report?

Analysis and conclusions

- **Are the study's fundamental questions answered** in line with the project proposal or call for proposals?
- How are questions of **causality and external influencing factors** handled in cases where the study makes statements on results, effectiveness or impact? Are there exogenous variables or confounding factors that have not been taken into account in the analysis?
- Are the conclusions statistically **robust/significant** (regarding quantitative analysis)?
- Is it shown to what extent the conclusions can be **generalised to other contexts**, that is, is external validity discussed?
- Can any **recommendations** be deduced logically from the data, analysis and conclusions of the report?

Transparency

- Do the authors make it clear what **restrictions** selected methods and approaches have?
- Does the report have a section or chapter that clearly and exhaustively discusses **the design and method of the study**?
- Can the author have had any form of **conflict of loyalty** in relation to the object of the evaluation? Does the author discuss their own **history or other conflicts of interest** in relation to what is being studied?

External review and consultations

- Have the authors taken on board important **recommendations or views from the reference group**?
- Has the study interviewed or had consultations with actors that are **particularly affected** by the analysis?
- Has the report been **fact checked** by relevant parties?

Utility and learning

Communication and accessibility

- Does the study have a **structure and table of contents** that gives the reader an overview of the analysis and any recommendations?
- Does the study contain a clear and exhaustive **summary** in Swedish and English?
- Is the report written in a **language** that is clear and comprehensible without jargon or too many specialist terms?
- Are the conclusions of the study presented **clearly and simply**?
- Does the study have a **reasonable number of pages**? Can/should it be shortened?
- Does the study present clear and focused **recommendations**?
- Is it clear **who** any recommendations are geared towards?
- Does the study have an **attention-grabbing and informative title**?

Substance and contributions

- Do conclusions and any recommendations add **anything new** for the target group?
- Is the study **additional** relative to the knowledge provided by other actors in the Swedish aid system?
- Are any recommendations **overlapping, obvious or lacking in additionality**?

Process and dialogue

- Have representatives of the **target group(s) actively participated** in the reference group for the study?
- Has the **dialogue** with the MFA's contact(s) been maintained (including presentation of preliminary results)? Have Sida or other organisations concerned been kept informed on the study throughout?
- Which special measures need to be taken during the **dissemination phase** for the study to reach its target groups?

Feasibility and implementation

Cost

- Would it have been possible to attain the same knowledge at a lower **cost**? How?
- Is the cost of the study reasonable **in relation to the cost of what is studied**?

- Was the **budget** sufficient to enable an accurate end product that is qualitative in other respects (propriety, utility, etc.) to be delivered? Did unpredicted costs arise and how were these communicated? Did the Expert Group grant additional financing?

Delivery and implementability

- Did the team of authors deliver **what was decided** in the project proposal (or in the inception report where applicable)?
- Are there **differences between the final version and the project proposal** that were not aired in the reference group? If so, are these deviations explained and understood in the report?
- Was it **possible to implement** the study given its purpose and questions and the more general conditions on the ground?

Punctuality

- Was the report **delivered on time**?
- Has the **use of time** between the different steps of the report (preparation, data collection, processing/analysis, reporting) been reasonably balanced?

Propriety

Ethical substance

- Does the author mention any **ethical considerations**? Are there any that should be mentioned? On this point, there may sometimes be grounds to reflect on whether on any point it is not possible to follow research ethics guidelines and to motivate any deviations from these.
- **Are there informants in the study who could be negatively affected** if other people, groups or actors found out about the informant's participation in the study?
- Has it been possible to guarantee the **safety of informants** when working on the study?
- How is the **privacy of informants** to be guaranteed during work on the study? In evaluation processes, in some cases, special considerations may need to be made regarding how the privacy of the decision makers whose decisions are examined and assessed within the remit of the evaluation is to be ensured.
- Does the report describe any individual(s) in a way that can be seen as **unethical, lacking respect for people, organisations or actors**?
- Do the writers ensure that conclusions or quotes cannot be **traced back to individual informants**? In evaluation processes it can sometimes be important to account for how a decision-maker justified or justifies their decisions in exercising their public authority. In such cases, the decision-maker should have the right to see and approve any quotes or conclusions prior to publication.

Ethical transparency

- Does the report show how **good research ethics were upheld** in the work? Were there any points where it was not possible to follow guidelines on research ethics? If so, how was deviating from these justified?
- Does the report state whether interviewees or respondents were **anonymous** and if/how interviewees were informed of this? In evaluation processes it can in certain cases be important to account for how a decision-maker justified or justifies their decisions in exercising their public authority. In such cases, the decision-maker should have the right to see and approve any quotes or conclusions prior to publication.

Process, participation, inclusion

- How has the study ensured that people who are **particularly affected by the analysis have the opportunity to see and comment** on it?
- Was it possible to take into account the **cultural context** in which the study was conducted while performing the study?
- Has the author or EBA **informed those concerned** of the purpose of the study?
- Has the author or EBA informed participants in the study that they have **the right to decide whether or not to participate**? In evaluation processes it can in certain cases be important to account for how a decision-maker justified or justifies their decisions in exercising their public authority. How has this situation been handled?
- Has the author **stored personal data** in a manner such that they cannot be accessed by unauthorised parties?
- How is the author to ensure that **the data collected about individuals is only used for the purpose of the study**?
- Are there aspects of **the study's accuracy, utility or feasibility** which raise questions regarding the study's research ethics?

Appendix 2 – On the use of EBA’s studies

Three types of use can be distinguished in terms of products such as evaluations, analyses, reviews, etc. These are:

Instrumental use. This means that the conclusions and recommendations of the study are directly used for decisions on activities. This may involve developing new directives, strategies and guidelines, strengthening governance, implementing organisational changes, concluding the intervention, or reinforcing it so as to attain the results. The majority of EBA studies give rise to a number of proposals, recommendations or conclusions geared towards concerned parties at MFA, Sida or other organisations.

Conceptual use. This refers to such use deriving from the study generating learning and insights that can affect the assessment of aid processes, the environment in which they are carried out, and which may be significant in completely different contexts from those to which the study refers. The majority of EBA studies provide such opportunities and arise when someone has reflected on the study – and are not necessarily linked to conclusions and recommendations.

Process use. This refers to the utility that arises during the course of the study, independent of what its result may be. Process utility arises, e.g. when those working in a study gain ideas for changing/improving operations, build networks and gain space for reflection and meetings that are beneficial – in the area addressed by the study and in entirely different contexts.

These three areas of use do not contradict each other and may all co-exist to a greater or lesser extent. However, they are based on slightly different measures.

To strengthen instrumental use, EBA arranges, for example, targeted meetings with those who are most closely affected in management and among staff; they may participate in reference groups and in panel debates where studies are presented. Explicit stances, e.g. by some form of management response may also be ways of strengthening instrumental utility. When relevant, EBA attempts to match the publication of studies to needs in the Government’s processes.

Conceptual use builds on a wide dissemination of studies. It demands that many share – and are interested in – the content. The seminars and discussions that follow the studies are important, and that they are taken further in EBA’s podcasts and in the media. The design of the publications and their style are also important.

Process use is based on participation in the process. Reference groups play an important role but so do other aspects of the work. Open, non-standardised methods and processes, meetings with different stakeholders, opportunities to address new paths and develop questions, are methodological elements that often contribute towards process use.

Appendix 3 – Four types of potential bias in research and evaluation

<p>The researcher's/evaluator's bias</p>	<p>Allegiance bias, conservative bias, bias based on perspective, standpoint, positionality, or in relation to people who are similar/not similar to me, etc.</p>	<p>Researchers may have an allegiance bias, where their attachment to a particular theory or school causes them to discount or ignore other plausible explanations.</p> <p>Evaluators may have a conservative bias, where they are slow to revise their beliefs because they overweight prior evidence relative to new information.</p> <p>Perspective, standpoint or positionality are important concepts in qualitative research. At the same time, there may be limited consideration of the positionality of their respondents. The informant's bias, position and agenda are then not considered. The respondent may also be prevented in various ways from providing a complete picture, which is why propriety and accuracy sometimes go hand in hand as quality criteria.</p> <p>Other potential bias in the research process includes bias in relation to people who are similar/not similar to me. Researchers or evaluators may find informants more convincing if they are similar to the researcher themselves, if they are charismatic or if a more personal contact has been established.</p>
<p>Methodological bias</p>	<p>Availability bias, diplomatic bias, courtesy bias and bias caused by distance from data generation and data collection, etc.</p>	<p>One problem is sometimes courtesy bias, in which the respondents may tend to tell the evaluator what they think they want to hear or what the informant wants them to communicate further. This may be exacerbated by diplomatic bias, in which the researcher's politeness or timidity may make them reluctant to probe or challenge anomalous responses.</p> <p>There is also a risk of bias due to mediation of data via interpreters, transcription and translation. Mixed quality of notes and difficulties obtaining the knowledge attained by being present at the interview. One challenge is that analysis is often performed by people who did not carry out or plan the fieldwork.</p> <p>Availability bias can mean that people over-estimate the likelihood of or the importance of memorable, frequently discussed or "strong" events.</p>
<p>Empirical bias</p>	<p>Cognitive bias, detection bias, sensitivity to patterns, attribution errors, over-evaluation of</p>	<p>One type of bias is the tendency to see patterns where none exist, which means that the researcher over-interprets or underestimates certain processes or parts of data.</p>

	<p>things with which I am over-familiar, halo effect, etc.</p>	<p>Other forms of bias affect capacity to judge causal links, as with attribution error, where other people are interpreted based on internal (individual) circumstances or factors rather than external (structural) ones. People are more inclined to link change to specific, close-at-hand, clear or talked-about events or actors than with processes that are developed slowly or over a long period.</p> <p>Self-overestimation can lead to informants over-evaluating their own contribution or that of their own organisation to the social changes relative to broader political or societal processes.</p>
<p>Contextual bias</p>	<p>Friendship or group-based bias, pro-intervention/project bias</p>	<p>Another form of bias can also arise through the relationship that sometimes develops between evaluators and staff in and surrounding the project or at an agency. This can be termed friendship bias or at organisational level, contract renewal bias. This can potentially strongly influence an evaluator's independence.</p> <p>There may be elements of seeing the intervention or the client of the evaluation as part of one's own group.</p> <p>There may ultimately also be a tendency to focus on the conventional sources of bias of one's own research environment. Evaluators of quantitative effects may tend to focus on statistical significance but forget things that are less quantifiable, such as pro-project bias or positionality. There is a focus on the known instead of the unknown.</p>

Source: Camfield et al (2014). EBA's tabulation.