

Assessing Relevance in Development: Meaning and Methods

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Abstract

A well-rounded evaluation in the development field will address each of the ODEC-DAC criteria for assessing development assistance: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. Of these, I argue that relevance is the most important criterion. Yet, from what I have seen of evaluation in AusAID, relevance is often misunderstood and undervalued.

This presentation highlights the importance of this undervalued criterion, offers my understanding of what ‘relevance’ is, and outlines some principles for addressing relevance.

Evaluation in the international development context offers extra challenges for the AES evaluator, who are generally operating in a culture and environment that is not their own. This makes it more difficult to identify when an intervention does not have the right fit in its context, and to deal with the fluidity of development. The relevance criterion is the key lens to deal with these challenges. Without it, evaluation is a static, inflexible tool that is likely to miss the questions that most need answering.

This presentation proposes an understanding of relevance on multiple levels. An evaluation must not only look at the relevance of the intervention’s objectives to its context, but also at the relevance of the way the intervention is implemented and interacts with the environment. Moreover, it must follow the relevance of an intervention over time, recognising that neither the intervention nor its context follows a linear course of change.

The presentation outlines some principles to support systematic assessment of relevance: prioritise contextual analysis in the evaluation, examine the underlying assumptions of the intervention, look beyond the intervention’s objectives to the broader change theory, leave room for exploring new questions as they arise, and recognise that there is no clear divide between relevance and the other criteria.

Overall, this presentation offers an exploration of meaning and methods of this key assessment criterion.

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¹ The views in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Office of Development Effectiveness or AusAID.

Introduction

The Office of Development Effectiveness (ODE) is an independent unit within AusAID that evaluates the effectiveness of the Australian aid program. ODE commissions large independent evaluations focused at a strategic cross-program level. Through these evaluations, ODE aims to generate evidence and lessons that inform more effective aid.

Over the last three years, as an evaluation manager in ODE, I have worked closely with external evaluation teams on a number of evaluations. As both the evaluation manager and a team member (reporting to the team leader in the latter role) I have played a large role in shaping the evaluation scope and in contributing to analysis.

A well-rounded evaluation in the development field will address each of the OECD-DAC criteria for assessing development assistance: relevance², effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.³ The following box provides the OECD-DAC definition of relevance.

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development—Development Assistance Committee (OECD DAC) definition of relevance

The extent to which the aid activity is suited to the priorities and policies of the target group, recipient and donor.

In evaluating the relevance of a programme or a project, it is useful to consider the following questions:

- To what extent are the objectives of the programme still valid?
- Are the activities and outputs of the programme consistent with the overall goal and the attainment of its objectives?
- Are the activities and outputs of the programme consistent with the intended impacts and effects?

I have increasingly focused on relevance in my evaluations, as it is particularly important for ODE's strategic-focused evaluations. However, I have encountered challenges in achieving a strong assessment of relevance. Not all of the evaluation consultants I have worked with systematically address the relevance criterion.

Within AusAID more broadly, I have also observed a limited understanding of 'relevance' (or misinterpretation) by many commissioners in AusAID that leads to it being undervalued. Most AusAID evaluations will require assessment of relevance, as it has been mandatory to cover all OECD DAC criteria. In practice this is generally not done as well as assessment of criterion such as effectiveness.

This paper highlights the importance of this undervalued criterion, offers my understanding of what 'relevance' is, and outlines some principles for addressing relevance. Overall, this

² Evaluators outside of the development field may not be familiar with the relevance criterion, instead using a similar criterion of 'appropriateness'.

³ <http://www.oecd.org/development/evaluationofdevelopmentprogrammes/dcdndep/39119068.pdf>

presentation offers an exploration of meaning and of this key assessment criterion and principles for assessing it.

The misunderstood criterion...

From what I have seen of evaluation in AusAID, relevance is often misunderstood and undervalued.⁴ My observations are backed up by an analysis of the quality of 162 of AusAID's independent completion evaluations.⁵ This study found:

- Variable interpretations among evaluators of the OECD-DAC criteria, often in a “somewhat narrow, mechanical fashion”.
- High ratings given by evaluators for the relevance of the intervention, on average higher than ratings for other criterion.
 - Relevance was rated as adequate or better in over 87 per cent of activities and either ‘good’ or ‘very high quality’ in 56 per cent of activities. It was rated as less than satisfactory in less than 13 per cent of activities. In no cases was it rated as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’.
 - This contrasted with the ratings for effectiveness: just over 30 per cent were very high quality or good quality; 20 per cent were less than adequate or poor quality.

In relation to assessment of relevance, the author, Peter Bazeley, concluded:

The conceptualisation of ‘relevance’ needs to be much smarter, moving beyond being satisfied that (and awarding high evaluation ratings because) an activity is ‘in line with’ partner government and AusAID policies, to demonstrating – from an aid effectiveness perspective – that the activity represents the right choice of intervention, modality and approach to contribute maximally (among all the possibilities for useful intervention) to the achievement of higher-level development objectives.⁶

The high quality ratings, combined with a narrow interpretation of the criterion, suggest to me that assessments of relevance are not highly robust.

To explore this further, I randomly chose four evaluation reports published on AusAID's website to illustrate how relevance is assessed. The following table summarises the approach to assessing relevance taken in each of these reports.

⁴ Relevance is not the only criterion that tends to be neglected. For similar reasons, there is misunderstanding of the meaning of the impact criterion, particular in relation to its use in a process evaluation. Insufficient time is usually given to assess impact properly when it is one of many criteria. The sustainability criterion also often poorly dealt with, and both commissioners and evaluators rarely allocate sufficient time to deal with efficiency in a systematic manner.

⁵ Peter Bazeley (2011) *Study of Independent Completion Reports and other evaluation documents: commissioned in support of the Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness*, the Australian Agency for International Development. Available from: <http://www.aidreview.gov.au/publications/study-icr.pdf>

⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

Evaluation question related to relevance	Basis for analysis of relevance	Quality rating
Appropriateness of program design and objectives.	Appropriateness of program design, focusing on the process and quality of design. Appropriateness of objectives in terms of recipient priorities and AusAID policies and objectives, focusing on consistency with formal strategies/agreements and whether objectives were modified to reflect changes in priorities.	None given for relevance.
Was the program design appropriate?	Program design consistent with relevant AusAID and partner strategies. Program design consistent with principles of working in fragile context. Program design articulates principles to guide program implementation. Iterative design process and revision of program objectives.	6 (very high quality)
The rationale of the program and its components.	Theory-based analysis: whether program consistent with principles of sector theory and addresses key drivers of change. Basis of program rationale/strategy.	5 (good quality)
Not given.	Relevance to high level objectives of aid program, and partner priorities. Relevance to context and needs of beneficiaries.	5 (good quality)

Based on these four examples, it appears a common strategy for assessment of relevance is to look at the appropriateness of program design, particularly in terms of whether the design reflects the goals of formal strategies of AusAID and its partners. Three of the four examples included consideration of whether program objectives were updated over time. Beyond that, however, there is a lack of consistency on what the evaluators had decided was the basis of relevance.

One of the four cases used a theory-based approach, but the basis of the assessment was primarily on whether the program was consistent with a particular sector theory.

None of reports provided detailed contextual analysis, making it difficult to judge the quality of the assessment. For example, the report providing an assessment of the relevance of the program to the context and needs of beneficiaries did not define who the beneficiaries were or what their needs were.

Together, these evaluation reports do not reflect a consistent and systematic assessment of relevance in the international development field. This can be a problem for the commissioner,

who will not know what they are getting until a report is provided (by which time it is generally too late to strengthen the assessment).

Part of the problem also lies with the commissioner. These four evaluations do not demonstrate strong demand from commissioners to better understand the relevance of their programs. For example, one terms of reference stated the need to assess all OECD-DAC criteria, but then listed the issues of particular interest which covered all the criteria except relevance. The lack of interest from commissioners is also reflected in lack of key evaluation questions relating to relevance in their terms of reference (though in some cases evaluators had developed sub-questions to assess the relevance criterion).

Relevance was addressed in all these evaluations because AusAID had made that mandatory,⁷ not necessarily because commissioner had identified it as area of key concern. Without clear direction from the commissioner on what they considered to be important about relevance, assessment relies on the varying interpretation of the criterion by each evaluation team.

...and the most important criterion

Many of AusAID's evaluations appear to prioritise the effectiveness criterion—possibly because the key demand from decision-makers is to know whether a program is achieving its objectives, and because the evaluation field has well developed methodological approaches for assessing effectiveness. However, while assessing effectiveness is important, it is meaningless without being placed in context. Knowing whether aid objectives have been achieved is only one step—decision-makers also need to know whether those objectives were appropriate for the circumstances. Likewise, a relevance lens is important to determine whether the program has been implemented in a way that is most appropriate to its operating context.

Over time, I have become convinced that relevance is the central criterion for development evaluations. Evaluation in the international development context offers extra challenges for the AES evaluator, who is operating in a culture and environment that is not their own. In the international development field, Australian and New Zealand evaluators are generally out of our own culture and environment, in a context that we can never fully understand. We go in, often for a very short time, to examine interventions aiming to affect human behaviour in highly complex contexts.

In such a situation, it is more difficult for an evaluator to recognise when an aspect of an intervention does not fit well in its environment, or when external factors are having an impact. This also makes it more difficult for the evaluator to take into account the fluidity of development—that is, the constantly changing and non-linear nature of the development change process.

The relevance criterion is the key lens to deal with these challenges. **An emphasis on relevance increases the likelihood that we will ask the right questions.** Without it, evaluations are likely to miss the questions that most need answering.

⁷ AusAID is now moving beyond a mandatory approach of assessment of all of the OECD-DAC criteria to encourage commissioners to be more thoughtful in defining what they need to know from the evaluation. This approach has the risk, of course, of relevance being left out of the terms of reference altogether.

This is especially the case for ODE evaluations, which examine aid effectiveness themes that apply across the aid program, or country programs covering multiple sectors. In these cases, the focus is on aid strategy rather than specific programs. But I find it difficult to see a case of any aid intervention of any scale that does not need to be analysed in its context. It always is useful for an evaluation to ask (in the words of Peter Bazeley): is the program “doing the right things in the right way?”

ODE’s well-resourced evaluations have helped us to explore a more in-depth approach to assessing relevance—although this is still a learning process.

The following table outlines key relevance questions from ODE evaluations that I have managed.

ODE Evaluation ⁸	Questions for assessing relevance
Working Beyond Government: Evaluation of AusAID’s engagement with civil society in developing countries	<p>To what extent is AusAID’s engagement with civil society based on analysis of the roles and nature of civil society in the particular country?</p> <p>To what extent is AusAID’s engagement with civil society relevant to broader development goals and priorities?</p> <p>To what extent has AusAID engaged with the most relevant parts of civil society?</p> <p>To what extent is AusAID’s engagement with civil society in fragile contexts likely to contribute to a more robust nation-state?</p>
Vanuatu Kastom Governance Partnership: Case study report	<p>To what extent did the modalities used to engage with civil society partners suit the intended outcomes?</p> <p>To what extent was AusAID’s engagement through the Kastom Governance Partnership appropriate to the roles, aspirations and capabilities of its civil society partners in Vanuatu?</p> <p>To what extent was the activity designed to ensure enduring outcomes/sustainability?</p> <p>To what extent has the Kastom Governance Partnership promoted gender equality?</p>
Responding to Crisis: Evaluation of the Australian aid program’s contribution to the national HIV response in Papua New Guinea, 2006-2010	<p>To what extent are AusAID’s program priorities, activities and processes relevant for the PNG context and why?</p> <p><i>Following stakeholder consultation for scoping of the evaluation, it was determined that the major areas of focus related to relevance may include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevance of AusAID’s priorities and approaches in the changing context of the epidemic • Geographic focus of the program and response • AusAID’s approach to prevention of HIV • AusAID’s approach—integrated versus vertical approach to HIV

⁸ All evaluation reports are available at www.ode.ausaid.gov.au

ODE Evaluation ⁸	Questions for assessing relevance
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of AusAID’s approach on government ownership (in the context of a one-donor dominated response) • AusAID’s approach to supporting PNG non-state actors’ ownership of the response.
Thinking and Working Politically: An evaluation of Policy Dialogue in AusAID	<p>What are the factors internal and external to AusAID that influence the success of policy dialogue?</p> <p>How successful has AusAID been in designing and managing policy dialogue (internal factors), why, and what can be learnt from this experience?</p> <p>How successful has AusAID been in implementing policy dialogue that is relevant and adaptive to specific development contexts (dealing with external factors), why, and what can be learnt from this experience?</p>

These questions include a focus on:

- the perspectives of key stakeholders
- the circumstances of AusAID’s partners
- choice of partners or geographic focus
- the extent to which programs are based on good contextual analysis
- the links between program activities and broad development goals
- the suitability of the way the program is implemented to its context and intended outcomes
- the impact of the program on particular development issues (such as gender equality or national ownership) which may or may not be program objectives.

If these questions had not been asked, it would have significantly limited the value of these evaluations. For example, the evaluation of AusAID’s partnership with customary authorities in Vanuatu found the program had been an effective approach to strengthening community governance. It was important to place this finding within a context of how the nature of the interactions between the partners (including levels of trust and negotiation of differing values) affects the focus and implementation of the partnership. Equally important was an understanding that the chiefly system within Vanuatu—which AusAID is strengthening through its funding and support—is a contested area with multiple views of what constitutes a chief and which chiefly system should be supported.

The findings about relevance do not detract from what the program had achieved, but rather provided AusAID and its partners with a new perspective to consider in managing the next phases of the program, and a reminder to monitor the effect of program activities on the highly political context around the program.

Another example is ODE’s evaluation of AusAID’s multi-sector program to support Papua New Guinea’s HIV response. The evaluation examined the program over a four-year period where there were major changes in the context. A key assumption underlying the way the

program was designed (that an emergency response was necessary) was partially invalidated by better data on the nature and extent of epidemic that emerged around the time of the evaluation. Other assumptions—such as those around the capabilities of national partners—could also be challenged in hindsight, and were important to framing understanding of what had and had not been achieved in terms of the program's intended objectives.

The evaluators judged the program based on what was known at the time, and also considered whether the program had been sufficiently flexible and adaptive to its changing context, and how decisions about the program approach had impacted on its effectiveness. This evaluation concluded that, based on what is now known about the circumstances in which AusAID is working, it was timely to significantly reorient the program approach. This conclusion would not have been reached if the evaluation had focused only on whether the program had achieved objectives that were formulated in a different time.

Clearly, assessment of relevance starts with asking the right questions (some of which will probably emerge during the course of the evaluation), and then backing this up with sound analysis. Based on my experience in these evaluations, this analysis should focus on:

- **Understanding of relevance on multiple levels.** An evaluation must not only look at the relevance of the intervention's objectives to its context, but also at the relevance of the way the intervention is implemented and interacts with the environment.
- **Understanding of relevance over time.** The evaluation must follow the relevance of an intervention over time, recognizing that neither the intervention nor its context follows a linear course of change.

How to assess relevance in the development context

I think it is likely that relevance is generally misunderstood, and not assessed systematically, because the evaluation field does not have a standard set of methods for examining relevance (as far as I have been able to determine). This may be because assessment needs to be based more on a systematic analytical approach, rather than a specific approach to collection of data. I suspect that those trained in social science research approaches are more likely to understand how to assess relevance. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw out some general principles for assessing relevance.

I believe the following principles support systematic assessment of relevance in any circumstance:

- **Prioritise contextual analysis in the evaluation:** The basis of assessing relevance comes from an understanding of how the program fits within its context. To a large extent, the same data collected to assess other criteria can be used for this analysis. For example, the Kastom Governance Partnership evaluation team spent a lot of time on understanding the context and then built the analysis of relevance on the data collected for the effectiveness assessment. The focus of the contextual analysis will depend on the evaluation subject, but is likely to be needed at multiple levels and over time (as specified above). This analysis will also focus beyond the sphere of the intervention itself—for example, political-economy analysis will be useful in most situations, as it examines the motivations, incentives and relationships that affect how decisions by partners are made.

- **Examine the underlying assumptions of the intervention:** Every aid intervention will implicitly or explicitly make assumptions about how the intervention will work in its context. (In AusAID's case, this is often implicit, and therefore does not get a lot of focus in evaluations.) To assess relevance, it is necessary to identify these assumptions, and to test their validity—as shown in the case of the evaluation of AusAID's HIV program in Papua New Guinea. If the evidence does not substantiate the assumption, it is likely that the intervention will not achieve much beyond delivery of outputs (and may even cause unintended harm). It is important that the evaluation looks at assumptions on two levels:
 - directly at the level of the intervention (for example, if certain activities occur, there will be direct changes in beneficiary's behaviour)
 - at assumptions about how change will occur outside the direct influence of the intervention (whether other factors will help or hinder the development changes that the intervention is meant to contribute to).
- **Look beyond the intervention's objectives to the broader change theory:** The most systematic way to identify an intervention's assumptions, and to consider how an intervention relates to other factors affecting development outcomes, is to frame the evaluation around a theory of how change occurs in the context, and how the intervention is believed to contribute to that change process. A theory-based approach is more likely to produce a framework for systematic analysis. A caution here, however, is to ensure the theory itself is open for scrutiny and not simply to adopt a favourite theory of change and judge the program against it. For example, in ODE's policy dialogue evaluation the first step was to develop a 'theory of policy dialogue success' based on a review of international literature, which was used as the evaluation framework and tested in case studies. The theory was refined based on what was learnt in the case studies.
- **Leave room for exploring new questions as they arise:** An iterative analysis as the evaluation proceeds is the most effective way to facilitate assessment of relevance; in-depth understanding of the context can be developed as methods are implemented. It is important that the evaluation methodology and timetable is not too rigid, but rather leaves space for new questions to arise and be explored.
- **Recognise that there is clear divide between relevance and the other criteria:** It is not possible to neatly distinguish relevance from effectiveness, or from sustainability, and so on. These concepts provide an analytical lens to help evaluators to be systematic in their approach. I doubt it is possible to have an effective intervention that is not relevant, or vice versa—these two aspects of an intervention's performance are overlapping and interdependent. So, while it might be useful to distinguish between these criteria in organising collection of data, analysis and reporting, a good analysis of relevance will be closely linked to analysis of the other criterion. Assessment of relevance could be applied as a cross-cutting analysis, which is incorporated into each evaluation method. For example, the civil society evaluation explored its questions on relevance through a variety of methods, including a literature review, program case studies, and country case studies. As a unit of analysis, it can be helpful to breakdown analysis of relevance to individual

components of the program, drawn together by an overall analysis (as with the PNG HIV evaluation).

Conclusion

This paper has presented a case for both commissioners and evaluators to provide greater attention to the systematic assessment of relevance in international development evaluations. The value of a focus on relevance is to ensure that the right questions are asked to understand the interaction between an aid intervention and its context. A good assessment of relevance can make assessment of other criterion—such as effectiveness—much more useful to decision-makers.

Based on AusAID's evaluation experience, it appears that assessment of relevance is often hindered by misunderstanding of what it means, lack of attention by commissioners in prioritizing relevance in their terms of reference, and wide variation in the approaches to assessing relevance.

A more in-depth understanding of relevance can be based on consideration of the relevance on the intervention in its context on multiple levels, and over time. A systematic assessment of relevance can be facilitated by application of some simple methodological principles focused on contextual analysis, a theory-based approach that tests key assumptions and an iterative evaluation process. It is also helpful to apply relevance as a cross-cutting lens in the evaluation.