



Australian Government

AusAID

Office of Development Effectiveness

Assessing Relevance in Development: meaning and methods

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Emily Rudland

The views in this presentation are
those of the presenter and not
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Relevance

The misunderstood criterion...

...and the most important criterion



OECD-DAC definition of relevance

Criteria for assessing development assistance: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability.

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?



Assessing relevance in AusAID

- Study of 162 AusAID evaluations:
 - ‘Narrow, mechanical’ interpretation of relevance
 - high quality ratings (on average higher than for other criteria)

“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.”

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.



Examples from AusAID evaluations

4 randomly chosen independent completion evaluations show that:

- Relevance often assessed in relation to program design, esp. whether it reflects goals of formal strategies.
- Consideration of whether program objectives updated.

But, otherwise:

- Lack of consistency on what evaluators decide is basis for assessing relevance.
- Where theory-based analysis used, the suitability of the 'theory' itself was not tested.
- No detailed contextual analysis provided to substantiate assessment.
- Lack of demand/direction from the commissioner.



Why is it so important?

Looking at relevance increases the likelihood that we will ask the right questions:

- Manages limitations of evaluators operating in a culture/environment not their own, examining complex processes of social change.
- How do you recognise when an intervention does not fit with its environment? When external factors are having an impact (or being impacted)?

Not looking at relevance makes evaluation a static, inflexible tool likely to miss the questions that most need answering.



ODE evaluations

- The perspective of key stakeholders
- The circumstances of AusAID's partners
- Choice of partners/geographic focus
- Extent to which programs based on good contextual analysis
- Links between program activities and broad development goals
- Suitability of the way the program is implemented to its context and intended outcomes
- Impact of the program on particular development issues (e.g. gender equality, national ownership)



What is important

Asking the right questions backed up with a sound, multi-faceted analysis:

- Understanding of relevance on multiple levels
- Understanding of relevance over time



Principles for assessing relevance

- Prioritise contextual analysis in the evaluation
- Examine the underlying assumptions
- Look beyond the interventions objectives to the broader change theory
- Leave room for exploring new questions as they arise
- Recognise that there is no clear divide between relevance and other criteria



Conclusion

A case for commissioners and evaluators to provide greater attention to systematic assessment of relevance in international development.

Proposed meaning and principles for assessment of relevance in any circumstance.

This is AusAID's experience: does it reflect wider experience in the field?

