

Reaping the Fruits of Evaluation?

Most aid organisations have introduced management response systems to assist them in ensuring that evaluation findings, conclusions and recommendations are considered and acted upon appropriately. Nonetheless, it remains unclear what factors need to be considered to ensure timely and systematic responses to evaluations. This evaluation (SADEV 2008:7) endeavours to increase knowledge about developing management response systems, the effects that they have, and the features that make them relevant. The evaluation is based on three case studies in the design and implementation of management response systems: at Sida, EuropeAid, and IFAD. SADEV presents a set of recommendations, which include the importance of adapting the system to overall policymaking structures, of designing an effective follow-up tool that checks the implementation status of agreed actions, and of increasing the involvement of evaluation stakeholders and partners in the response process.

“The main common objective is to increase the use of evaluation findings and to ensure that evaluations are considered in ongoing or future decision-making processes.”

“It is crucial that a management response systems is adapted to the organisational context and overall policymaking structures, in order to maximise its utility.”

There is currently a dearth of information about how to develop management response systems, the effects they have, and the features that make them relevant. The management response systems at Sida, EuropeAid, and IFAD represent different approaches to designing and implementing these systems.

The systems adopted by these three organisations were assessed against the standard evaluation criteria of effectiveness and relevance. Information about the systems was obtained primarily through document analysis, and through interviews with management, operational and evaluation unit staff within the three subject organisations, and with representatives from partner governments, implementing agencies and evaluation consultants.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The analysis of the three organisations reveals that, although the systems operate differently, their main objectives largely correspond. The main common objective is to increase the use of evaluation findings and to ensure that evaluations are considered in ongoing or future decision-making processes.

The main conclusion of this evaluation is that the relevance and the effectiveness of a management response system depends to a large extent on how well it is adapted to the organisational context and forums in which decisions are made. The objectives and design of a response system need to be anchored in the nature of the evaluation system, and adapted to

the evaluation types conducted by the organisation. The objectives and use of the different types of evaluation vary, and it is neither appropriate nor feasible that all evaluations are responded to in the same manner.

This evaluation revealed that the manner in which a management response system is launched and the clarity of the designation of responsibilities are decisive of its effectiveness. During implementation, response systems perform more effectively when the responsibility for supervising the process is delegated to a central organisational body.

One of the most important components of a management response system is the follow-up tool, which monitors the implementation of agreed actions. The design and use of the follow-up tool will affect the achievement of the system objectives. Effective follow-up tools are characterised by 1) clarity in terms of documentation, 2) a high degree of transparency and 3) being directed towards actors that can act upon implementation failures. IFAD's is a concrete example of an effective follow-up tool, which introduced more transparency to the response process and incentivised subsequent action by management by holding it accountable.

Evaluation recommendations are not always directed towards the aid organisations but frequently also towards partners. Successful responses require that the evaluation stakeholders are involved in the response process and are permitted the opportunity to respond to the evaluation findings. Normally the aid organisations draft the response to recommendations (for example, Sida and EuropeAid). It is important that stakeholders are involved systematically in both the evaluation and response processes to ensure the credibility of responses.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SYSTEMS

The three organisations differ considerably in the effectiveness of their implementation of their response systems. Sida's system is divided into two subsystems; one for evaluations commissioned by the central evaluation office and the other for the operational departments. The centralised component of the system performs reasonably well, although it is difficult to assess the extent to which the system has contributed to enhanced learning, which is the overall objective of the system. The system of the operational departments has performed less satisfactorily. Few reports are responded to in a formal manner, and the administrative procedures of the system are not well known to Sida staff. The objective of learning is arguably an unrealistic objective for a management response system.

The management response systems at IFAD and EuropeAid have been successfully implemented, and are reasonably effective. The policy and programming cycles of EuropeAid's system have not been calibrated to correspond, and the system only partially achieves its main objective of ensuring that evaluation lessons feed into new operations.

IFAD's system meets most of its objectives. There are few incentives for the partner government to act on the evaluation findings, so partners are invariably less committed than IFAD management to implementing recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the recommendations have been extracted from the analysis of the three organisations assessed in this evaluation, they are relevant, with only minor modification, to most aid organisations involved in developing or redesigning a management response system.

- Adapt the management response system to the organisational context
- Consider overall policymaking structures and determine the role of the management response system in these contexts
- Ensure clear guidelines and regulations for administrative procedures
- Document the response process and make the response document available to staff and relevant actors
- Appoint a responsible unit to supervise the response process
- Design an effective follow-up tool that checks the implementation status of agreed actions
- Designate a receiver of information who has the authority to act upon non-compliance
- Increase the involvement of stakeholders and partners in the response process, and ensure that the actor that is the subject of the evaluation findings or recommendations makes the response
- Ensure sufficient time is allocated to joint discussion and reflection among stakeholders

SOURCES AND FURTHER INFORMATION

This policy brief is based on Bandstein and Hedblom (2008) *Reaping the Fruits of Evaluation? An Evaluation of Management Response Systems within Aid Organisations*, SADEV Report 2008:7. SADEV's publications are available at www.sadev.se.