How-To-Note
Rigorous Impact Evaluation in GIZ Governance Programmes

Why GIZ Governance programmes should conduct impact assessments within their programmes and how to get the most out of them

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How-to Note:

Why should GIZ Governance programs conduct impact assessments within their programmes and how to get the most out of them

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Why should I integrate an impact assessment in my programme? How will the programme benefit from it? Are the benefits worth the effort and expenses? How do I design and implement it in detail? Who is addressable for support? What should I pay attention to in order to get the most out of it?

This note is meant to answer these questions. It addresses leaders and project staff of governance programmes who are interested in using this tool within their specific governance programme or project. This note provides a guideline and good practice recommendations on how to design and conduct an impact assessment and on how to fully utilise the benefits of the results for the programme and for communication with commissioners, partners and other donors. Additionally, this note will point to indirect benefits that can arise and that should not be ignored.

Results of impact assessments are highly relevant for the GIZ as an institution. However, in this note we stress the benefits for the programme or project itself.

In particular this note addresses the following aspects:

- What are rigorous impact assessments and why should GIZ Governance programmes conduct them more often within their programmes?
- Which phases does an impact assessment include? How do I set one up and which aspects deserve special attention in each phase to maximise the benefits for my programme?
- What are the benefits I can expect from implementing and impact assessment?
- Whom to ask at headquarters in case I need support?

This note complements the policy brief "Strategic use of Rigorous Impact Evaluation" and the corporate strategic review on "Rigorous Impact Evaluation" written by the GIZ evaluation unit which focuses on the strategic use of rigorous impact evaluations (RIE) at GIZ. Based on the review findings, the policy brief presents recommendations for strategic planning and implementation of purpose-sensitive RIE using a number of key levers. By adopting central coordination and needs-based support mechanisms, the evaluation unit intends to promote the strategic use of RIE for evidence-based learning and decision-making within the organisation.

[1] The author would like to thank everyone involved in the 'Impact Initiative Africa' for their openness and engagement to realize this ambitious project. This publication is closely linked to the report "Applying Rigorous Impact Evaluation in GIZ Governance Programmes: Results of a GIZ Initiative on Impacts in Governance" and benefits directly from all the insights provided by the large number of colleagues listed in the acknowledgement there. Special thanks here go to Renate Kirsch as well as to the colleagues at the GIZ corporate evaluation unit Claudia Kornahrens, Franziska Krisch, Tatjana Till, and Michael Florian, who provided very valuable inputs as well as thorough feedback on previous versions of this note.

I. What are rigorous impact assessments and why are they relevant?

Pressure is increasing for international development cooperation to prove the impact of their work. This refers also to standards that are accepted to claim impact. In this vein, private and public commissioners as well as the general public are increasingly asking for robust evidence of impact.

Methodologically, it is not an easy task to identify and quantify the impact of development interventions. Rigorous methods of impact assessment (experimental and quasi-experimental methods) precisely allow to empirically estimate the effect attributable to a specific intervention. At the core of this task lies a counterfactual analysis that compares the situation after the GIZ intervention to the situation that would have existed in absence of it.

Many consider that the challenge to identify and measure impacts is particularly acute in the governance sector. Governance programmes aim at supporting transformation processes in partner countries that are dependent on broader political developments and do not evolve in a linear manner. Furthermore, governance interventions require long time periods for the impact to be visible, and their causal chains tend to be longer and more complex than in other sectors. To be successful, governance and peace interventions have to be particularly sensitive to the context they operate in and adapt quickly to changing circumstances.

This claim might be partly true, but does certainly not hold for the whole of the interventions implemented in the sector. The work in the recently implemented “Impact Initiative Africa” shows that there are many examples of within governance programmes that lend themselves to be assessed with rigorous methods. This is not to say that all interventions should (and in fact can) be assessed with rigorous methods. However, it is remarkable that in the GIZ these methods are rarely used; within the governance sector and beyond it. In international comparison, the amount of studies of this type generated within GIZ is strikingly scarce. This has consequences on the type of evidence the organisation can demonstrate on accomplished impacts and its capacity to contribute and shape international debates that increasingly point to the value of evidence gathered through rigorous impact assessments.

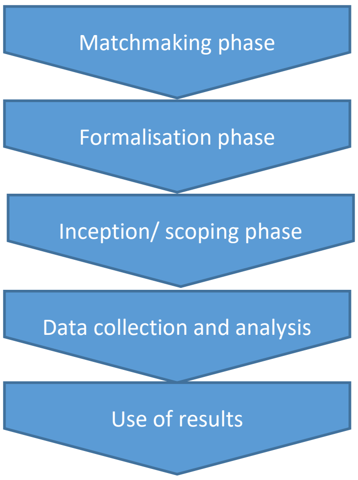
This note intents to do serve as a guidelines for those interested in implementing an impact assessment within GIZ. It does not aim at be exhaustive in offering a detailed recipe for setting up and conducting an impact assessment. This would be an impossible endeavour as taking into account the context in which the assessment is going to operate and the interests of the project and other stakeholders is crucial to take final decisions. In this sense, this note rather offers elements to think about different aspects in a structured way, shares some ideas on how to solve particular challenges that are common to all impact assessments and indicates issues to take into account in order to help projects make informed decisions. In essence the idea is to offer guidance to navigate this process by addressing concerns and challenges that most often are raised by GIZ colleagues thinking about initiating rigorous impact assessments. In this line, aspects connected to defining contents, how to organise the process, but also budget are addressed

The note is structured in the following way. After this short introduction the five phases of an impact assessment are presented in a schematic way highlighting for each of them the most relevant aspects to consider. After that the benefits you can expect from an impact assessment, especially when carefully designed, are summarised in order to indicate the various usages you can and should aim to derive from the exercise. The short note closes indicates which and where you can find further support to set up a rigorous impact assessment

II. The different phases of an impact assessment

An impact assessment includes a number of phases that are always similar regardless the scope and context of the study. In the following, the main issues to address in each of these phases are discussed. Even though the different phases logically build on each other, this process should not be conceived as being purely linear. In practise, the process has commonly an iterative nature and it is completely normal that there are loops to preceding phases in order to make adjustments.

Figure 1: The five phases of an impact assessment



Source: Funk et al.(2018)- adapted

a. Matchmaking phase:

The matchmaking phase is key because it is the starting point of a long cooperative project between the researchers and the programme. It involves an open and honest discussion about expectations, ideas and opportunities. The main goal is identifying jointly whether there is scope to envision a cooperation that is appealing to both sides and whether there seems to exist potential to implement a rigorous impact assessment in the content of the particular project.

This discussion has a content dimension centred around the potential to assess programme activities using rigorous methods. Particular relevant questions are: (i) whether there are activities that are about to start where good baseline data could be collected. (ii)Whether it possible to use randomisation or any other approach to create a reasonable counterfactual to the group of actors receiving support from the programme? (iii) The degree to which the programme has explicitly discussed and formulated the theory of change associated to its activities and expectations about expected impact

Beyond content and potential focus of the assessment, which will be furthered defined in the inception phase. In order to understand each other's expectations, motivations and potential concerns better it is helpful that all actors involved are use the same language and gain a common understanding of key concepts such as impact and rigour. Furthermore, details about how each partner expect the cooperation to work need to be fleshed out.

Box 1: The difference between an impact assessment and what monitoring data can offer.

Monitoring systems track inputs, outputs and, observe how outcomes change over time. They cannot provide information about causal effects of your programme. The impact assessment by contrast aims to determine the proportion of the observed change in outcome that can be attributed to your intervention. As a result of the ambitious goal and the methodological requirements it implies, the dynamic that an impact assessment can set in motion in terms of triggering processes leading to the benefits for your programme (see figure 2) is not comparable with what a monitoring system can achieve. In particular, the depth of the discussions about the logic of the intervention, the level of scrutiny necessary for an assessment, as well as the appeal of the results your own team, your partners and your commissioners is qualitatively different from what a monitoring system can provide. Even a very advanced monitoring system will never be able to give you the kind of benefits that an impact assessment can.

b. Formalisation phase:

If the discussion in the matchmaking phase indicate that there is a common ground for cooperation as well as a content corridor that appears promising. Further discussing to concretize the cooperative can start. Planning the actual assessment should start as early as possible in the project cycle (or even before the project cycle even starts). The number of questions that can be tested rigorously as well as the methodological approaches that can be applied are reduced remarkably after the activities of the programme start. Furthermore, planning early in the project cycle also allows to exploit to a larger extent the synergies between the impact **assessment and the rest of activities of the programme** by coordinate intermediary outputs and milestones in order to maximize the benefits from the assessment for your programme.

Agree on outputs you want to achieve

In the formalisation phase the partners agree on the expected outputs which can include beyond the classic end-report, things such as policy briefs, activities to accompany other processes of the programmes such as for instance data collection processes or commenting results models. Other outputs can be a capacity building workshop on impact assessment for the programme or also for partners of the programmes. When defining outputs it is important to also already think about potential dissemination activities and goals (see last section on use of results).

Establish a budget

In this phase, also the budget has to be defined. Although the specific details of the assessment will be defined in the inception phase already at this phase key elements should be agreed upon.

- Personnel cost
- How often will the researchers be in the country and for how long?
- Budget for data collection: Is the own data collection necessary or can the assessment relay on existing data efforts? In many cases, the availability of data is heavily underestimated in partner countries. Poor usage rather than existence is the biggest problem. Working with secondary and administrative data collected by partners is attractive both in terms of costs and building capacity and maximising benefits for the partners.

Decide on the involvement of program staff

Although not necessarily listed in a budget, in the formalisation phase, there should be a clear agreement on the degree to which persons working in the programme will be directly involved in the implementation of the impact assessment. That requires from a management point of view, beyond motivating these persons, making sure that they have time enough to devote to this task and engage meaningfully in the process.

Set up a steering committee for decision making

Finally the formalisation phase is also the right point in time to discuss the governance setup for the assessment. To increase use, usability and ownership it is worth considering to create some kind of steering committee including different stakeholders (e.g., programme members, local government partners, representatives from headquarters, interested persons from local academia and other donors) to accompany the assessment, track progress and plan an effective and efficient usage of the results.

Inception / scoping phase:

Goal of this phase is to define the scope and the actual design that will be implemented. For this it is best, if researchers have gained an on-site understanding of the already and define the details of the impact assessment. Beyond that, while in matchmaking the number of actors was limited (probably upper management of the project and individual researcher) in this phase it is crucial to develop a common understanding of goals of the cooperation among all actors involved in the assessment as well as building a trust relationship between them. This implies always involving in the discussion and explaining the goal to the rest of the project staff, but also potentially involved stakeholder in the country and in headquarters

Identifying the research question

Probably the most important decision in setting up an impact assessment is defining the right question. In the vast majority of cases, impact assessments will not be able to estimate the impact of the activities of your programme as a whole. Narrowing the scope of the question and focusing on a particular intervention is crucial; it represents a compromise between breadth and precision. Good questions are those which are **relevant, clear, testable and feasible.**

The most important criterion in defining the question is **relevance for your programme**. The more relevant the question, the more potential benefits the impact assessment can have.

Box 2: What makes a question relevant?

Questions can be relevant for various reasons:

- The potential for upscaling legitimizes testing in small scale
- The centrality of an intervention in your portfolio
- The fact that some interventions are particularly contested by someone.
- Interest to provide evidence to an approach or instrument the program has applied or developed and to which you want to prove that it is effective.
- An intervention you are particularly uncertain about its effectiveness
- Novelty or capacity to contribute to ongoing efforts in this area in the country

There are no good or bad reasons. The key is that you make them explicit to you and the team working on setting up the assessment.

The selected research question will direct all following decisions of the whole impact assessment; therefore, it should be not only relevant but also extremely clear. Everyone should understand precisely what is meant and there should be no room for confusion so that all the people involved will work in precisely the same direction.

It is crucial that the question is **testable**, in the sense that it states a relationship between variables that can be analysed empirically in order to be confirmed or denied. The researcher is best equipped to answer this question although the reasons why some options are not possible should be explained in such a manner that everyone can understand the constraints. Making sure that the necessary empirical data to answer the question exist (or can be generated) is fundamental.

Deciding on the methodological approach

Discussions on the right approach and method should be secondary. The selection of the method derives from the question asked, not the other way round. Different methods have different strengths and weaknesses and as such are particularly well suited to answer some questions and not others. Arguably, in the vast majority of cases, a wise combination of methods will be the best option. Mixed methods approaches that combine the strengths of experimental and quasi-experimental designs and more qualitative approaches, such as comparative case studies and process tracing, are particularly promising to understand the size of the potential impact, and the causal mechanisms linking the programme's intervention with the outcomes. In any discussion about methods do consider and discuss any ethical concerns that the design might raise (e.g. is randomisation fair and acceptable; does the design respect the do-no harm principles).

Check if the selected research design can be implemented with the available resources

Finally, it is crucial that the question is feasible and can be resolved given the available resources. This includes time, human resources and funding for activities such as surveys or interviews. Unrealistic expectations will lead to frustration and hurt the dynamic of the impact assessment severely.

Anticipate the political response to the research

Also the political salience of the topic is important to consider to the degree that the impact assessment might risk being undermined or that the results of the assessment might be heavily politizised. In general, it is crucial to be sensible to the political context both in terms of potentials and risks. Researchers are normally not able, given the comparatively lower context knowledge than the project member to lead this discussion

Give attention to an inclusive and transparent decision making process

Beyond the question itself, making the procedure and reasons leading to the specific question and the assessment's design as inclusive and understandable as possible for every actor involved is key to strengthen ownership and trust among everyone (see Box 3).

Box 3: Suggestions for selecting the right question
- Invest time in discussing the question within the core team of the impact assessment team and the broader team of the programme. - Get feedback from headquarters (assure their interest) - List arguments in favour and against different questions along different dimensions (e.g. relevance for the programme, relevance for the policy discussions in the country as well as other potential strategic considerations: aspect concerning methodological aspects) - Make explicit the project team, the researcher and potentially to stakehoders what weight the team defining the question attached in the decision making to different dimensions. Furthermore document the decision as well as why other questions where discarded. It is important that the decision can be reconstructed

c. Data collection and analysis

In general, programme managers will need to invest far more in the preparatory phase of the impact assessment than in the actual implementation of it. Implementation is mainly done by the research team. **Two aspects are crucial for proper implementation:**

1. **Continuous trustful communication between research and program team, and**
2. **Approaching this phase in a manner that it is perceived as a learning opportunity for your team and partners and not as a black box.**

These aspects should be guiding principles stated from the start but often can be forgotten as the assessment is implemented.

No matter how well you plan in the team, unexpected events might come up at some point during the process of an impact assessment. Many people fear that running an impact assessment implies a certain rigidity in planning that might preclude changes in the programme activities if required. This fear is commonly overestimated. Of course, the necessities of the programme are paramount and they should always trump any necessities of the impact assessment if these two are in conflict. However, in most cases, this is never an issue and if the programme has to make major adaptations, the impact assessment can manage these. The key is continuous trustful communication that allows the persons involved in the assessment to have any relevant information as soon as possible in order to react. Of course, this is applicable in both directions—if something in the assessment plan is delayed, the programme at large should be informed as soon as possible to adapt and preserve the integration in the overall planning of the programme.

Impact assessments can rapidly be opposed by project staff, if they feel the assessment is being used to control and evaluate them personally, rather than the effectiveness of the intervention. It is your task to signal on a regular basis the relevance you attach to the process, the goals you have in mind and explicitly the openness in terms of the results.

Involving program staff in this phase will not only improve the quality of the assessment itself, but also increase exposure and improve ownership of the process in your team; this will help maximise the benefits both in terms of the usage of the results and capacity development spill-overs for your programme.

d. Use of the results

Using RIE results for better program implementation

It is not necessary to wait until the end of an assessment and the publication of the results for the programme to benefit from the insights generated. If the assessment is well coordinated with the programme planning (see formalisation phase), researchers can support monitoring and evaluation efforts and contribute to important milestones of the programme (see section of benefits). Commonly data collected at baseline, give important information to confirm or disconfirm whether assumptions that the programme holds and on which it based it intervention actually hold. This has direct repercussion on strategic decisions. Moreover the implementation of impact assessment, especially when in close cooperation with partners or even integrated into partners' processes generates a lot of detail information on bottlenecks and failures in partner's processes. A regular (in the best case institutionalised) exchange with the researchers is key to get this information that not always gets formally documented.

Using RIE results for better communication with partners and commissioners

Internal use is important, but the value of the impact assessment increases greatly when the results are shared outside the project. You have to take into account, that through an impact assessment you are generated strong empirical evidence on what works or does not work. This is giving you information to decide strategies on your own but also putting you in a strong position to affect policy debate.

When it comes to using the results beyond the programme, **the number of options is vast.** It is important to underline that intermediary and final results can be presented in different formats and used with different goals in mind. The keys are being innovative and adaptive to the needs of the persons you want to address and communicate with. What policymakers at the national level need and want to know will differ substantially from what municipal politicians, public employees or other donors would find relevant, useful and appealing. The goals you pursue in your communication might also diverge. You might be interested in "simply" presenting the results, but you might also want to strategically position issues on the agenda, push for a policy option, reach out to new networks or consolidate existing ones, etc. Accordingly there is a need to **design a communication strategy for disseminating the results**

If not before, at least the inception phase some basic ideas about what processes and actors you aspire to influence with the results should be in place. In the further implementation of the impact assessment as well as in line with the policy discussion in the country the specifics about the dissemination and communication strategy can be only defined at a later stage.

In terms of outlets and format it is important to indicate that the fact that there are many ways by which to present results should not preclude the existence of a more traditional final report. At the end, this report will be the basis for the rest of the products so it is important to have it. In terms of written outputs beyond the longer report and potential academic publications, there is the option of short policy papers that are particularly well suited to position ideas in policy debates and reach policymakers. Also, short opinion pieces in blogs or even social media can be an option. You might also consider making potential data you generated publicly available.

The possibilities for more engaging formats include presenting the results in different formats. There can be a major presentation in thematic or strategy workshops with different audiences and stakeholders, including national and international academic and policy conferences. You can use the results to present at other events that are thematically broader than the assessment, or try to focus on the topic of the assessment and build policy events around it. More private discussions of the results with particular relevant stakeholders should also be considered.

To reach more people and especially those located outside big (capital) cities, you could work with multimedia such as short videos that can attractively summarise the main findings. They also provide a platform that people can share easily among themselves. Giving interviews on the radio or newspapers is also a great instrument to gain diffusion. You could also consider contacting headquarters or other development actors in Germany to share the experience with the German development community. Strategic considerations such as positioning topics or reaching out to networks are, of course, as relevant when it comes to discussing the results at headquarters, as they are in discussing the results in the context of the partner country.

III. Benefits associated to implementing an impact assessment

Overall, which benefits can you expect from implementing the rigorous impact assessment and from going through the five phases described above? The experiences in GIZ and beyond, point to seven different types of benefits (See Figure 2) The first benefit of is the learning potential. A well-integrated impact assessment offers major **learning opportunities at different phases of its implementation**. Impact assessments are perfect to learn what works in your context **and test or pilot interventions** that could potentially be scaled up. To benefit from the impact assessment, you will not have to wait until the end of the process and the final report. In the design phase itself, particularly in discussions about the focus and the feasibility of the assessment, benefits will arise from the open and intensive process of self-reflection that will contribute to articulating the logic and approach of your programme. In general, the discussions concerning the design and the implementation of the assessment will help you and your team to be more precise and specific about causal chains, goals and expected impacts. Furthermore, in the initial phases of the assessment, you will gain in-depth insights into partner structures as well as on information and data availability. This will avoid duplication of efforts between your programme and other organisations, foster dialogue with partners and help sharpen your profile internally and externally. Finally, during the implementation and especially at the end of the assessment, you will gain indisputable evidence about the impact of your intervention, and a precise understanding of whether the core assumptions that the design of your programme relies on are valid.

Box 4: Main benefits

I. Learn about what works and test interventions
II. Gain evidence about your impact and the validity of core assumptions your programme design relies on
III. Gain in depth insights for strategic decisions and the general management of the programme
IV. Build capacity in the area of impact evaluation for your team and partners
V. Acquire valuable inputs for internal and external accountability and reporting responsibilities
VI. Strengthen the positioning and profile of your programme in the partner country and beyond
VII. Contribute to strengthening evidence-based policy making as well as scientific and policy debates about what works

All the **insights generated can be used for strategic decisions** such as whether to roll out, adapt or expand a particular intervention in a certain context. In addition, preliminary and final results will allow you to estimate where your programme can make a bigger difference. This information is crucial for the **general management** of the programme, to plan how to invest your human and economic resources.

The impact assessment will also benefit **capacity building**. Just the exposure to the logic of the impact assessment and being involved in discussions about the design and the implementation will help your programme and the partners gain a better understanding of the basics of impact assessments and rigorous evaluation methods. The benefits can be maximised if some specific training units are included in the arrangement with the research team. The benefits will go beyond the improved understanding of the methods; they will enhance ownership of the process and create capabilities that can be easily replicated by your team and the partner in other areas. In particular, being engaged in an impact assessment exercise will enhance the capabilities to make interventions easier to evaluate, and sharpen the arguments when it comes to conditions under which the programme can claim to have a causal effect on a desired outcome (attribution beyond contribution).

In addition, preliminary results and insights as well as the final report at the end of the process will represent **valuable inputs for**

all sorts of accountability and reporting duties. This will be the case when it comes to reporting to the financers and when interacting with the GIZ headquarters and dealing with other questions that might arise.

Last but certainly not least, getting solid evidence about your impact and implementing a rigorous approach will send a strong signal to partners and donors. This will give you an edge in terms of **visibility and standing** in the debates. It will also strengthen your programme's position when it comes to acquiring further funding.

Beyond this list of benefits for your programme, it is important to note that the production of evidence on "what works", generating or supporting better quality statistical data in partner countries, and promoting an open mind-set to learn from evidence represents a **contribution of your programme to valuable public goods**. In this line, you contribute to more evidence-based policy making, open data movements in general as well as to specific policy and academic debates in the sector your programme works on. These goods will benefit your country partners most prominently and also the development community at large, including practitioners and researchers.

IV. Support from headquarters

Exploiting the full potential of RIE at GIZ is the objective of a newly created Evaluation Support service run by the corporate evaluation unit. It will perform the following functions, in particular (see policy brief "Strategic use of Rigorous Impact Evaluation" for further details):

- Support for designing and implementing purpose-oriented RIE
- Guidance on formulating the terms of reference (ToRs) and provision of useful documents (information on potentials, limitations, checklists, resources, etc.) for RIE practitioners
- Match-making and support of purpose-oriented cooperation with external evaluators
- Networking of RIE practitioners via the IDA community and webinars on evaluation
- Registration of planned RIE, provision of evidence in a central database and dissemination of RIE findings at GIZ
- Systematic identification of evidence gaps and evidence priority setting in cooperation between the Evaluation Unit, the Sector and Global Programmes (GloBe) Department, the regional departments and the Sectoral Department to meet the demand among commissioners
- Synthesis of related RIE across different contexts to generate transferable findings

The Evaluation Support (ES) is a service offer to all GIZ units globally. Through this service, the Evaluation Unit offers support to other GIZ units managing evaluations to collaboratively unlock the potential of RIE to serve their specific needs.

You can reach support service via **Evaluation Support**!

Recommended further reading

Corporate Evaluation Unit (2020): Rigorous Impact Evaluation. Cross-section analysis – Main Report, Bonn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. (https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/GIZ_Report_RIE_Review_final.pdf)

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Example of a multimedia video:

https://vimeo.com/244902875

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