Zusammen bewerten – gemeinsam verändern

Instrumentarium zur Selbstevaluierung von Projekten in der Internationalen Zusammenarbeit (SEPIZ)

SLE SEMINAR FÜR LÄNDLICHE ENTWICKLUNG

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Evaluate Together – Cooperate for Change. A Guideline for Project Self-Assessment in International Cooperation. Berlin, 2004

Summary

Although self-assessment is by no means a new phenomenon in international development cooperation, it seems to take an outsider position in the wide range of project evaluation concepts and methods. Contrary to external evaluations, here individuals, projects, and organisations assess their own actions and the respective consequences. In the case of external evaluation, this task is carried out by specialists who are not members of the organisation.

International development institutions tend to choose the path of external evaluation to confirm the impact of development measures objectively (i.e., through an objective procedure based on criteria explicitly related to the content of the project). Normally accomplished by an external consultant, the aim of an evaluation is to confirm the legitimacy of measures taken and, if necessary, adapt and improve on them.

Given the declining availability of public finance, on the one hand, and the perennial criticism of the negligible impact of development cooperation, on the other, the significance of evaluation and the accompanying debate has gained momentum.

Characteristics and objectives of self-assessment

Nevertheless, self-assessment concepts have always managed to hold their own ground. This is particularly the case when a critical look at one's own work promises a deeper insight and thus the potential for change. It is precisely these characteristics of self-assessment that distinguish it from external evaluation.

- Subjectivity: the focus is on subjective (personal) assessment and thus on the role of each participant as an "expert" on the strengths and weaknesses of the project and the organisation. Everything that has been minimised in external evaluations, where several methods serve to eliminate subjectivity as far as possible, is desired and required in self-assessment.

- Learning process: the people, projects and organisations that take part in self-assessment enter a process of systematic self-reflection and increased dialogue. This process is an important learning experience. Accordingly, every self-

assessment is at the same time a qualification for its participants.

- Responsibility for processes and results: it is quite obvious that people who are actively involved in and can influence a process will always assume greater responsibility and identify with the outcomes to a higher degree. The results are thus more easily accepted and supported.

The objectives of self-assessment and external evaluation may display similarities, albeit with a different focus. Both strive for **increased knowledge** that serves as a basis for steering decisions. Both methods function as a **control** mechanism, since they also reveal deficits. Last but not least, both self-assessment and external evaluation deliver basic data for the verification of input, output, and impact, and thus for **legitimacy**.

Self-assessment pursues objectives that are primarily directed at strengthening **participation, qualification, and ownership**. Consequently, the objectives of self-assessment are clearly emancipative.

Some conceptual thoughts on "Project Self-Assessment in International Cooperation"

Starting point for the development of a method for project self-assessment was the idea of focusing more strongly on the above-mentioned strengths and objectives of self-assessment in the organisation's projects abroad. Accordingly, German Agro Action (DWHH) contracted a team from the Centre of Advanced Training in Rural Development (SLE) to develop, test, and adapt a customised method of self-assessing DWHH projects. The team spent three months testing the method in different types of projects implemented by the DWHH in Mozambique. Three projects were chosen. Two development cooperation projects, one of which was self-implemented and the other partner-implemented, and one emergency relief project with integrated rehabilitation components.

The content and form of the method developed are mainly oriented towards objectives and criteria put forward by the DWHH in advance. These concern basic principles and methodological issues: promotion of institutional learning (i.e., participatory processes including the entire project staff through all levels), relevance to all DWHH project types, comparability, and time and cost efficiency.

The result of the test phase is a method that guarantees a minimum of transferability and comparability, and at the same time promotes learning processes and participation.

Its five key characteristics are:

- Standardisation: the method developed is strongly standardised with regard to procedure, content, and instruments applied, as well as documentation of results. Thus self-assessment is easy to apply, time- and cost-effective, and produces comparative results.

- Participation: self-assessment comprises all groups represented in the project: project staff, implementing partners, and beneficiaries. It can be assumed that individuals and groups assess projects differently, depending on their position in or relation to the project. Only when the different perceptions have been collected and compared can a comprehensive understanding of the project be obtained.

- Learning together: by giving instructions for systematic reflection, increasing dialogue, and bringing different opinions together and into the discussion, SEPIZ promotes an intensive learning process.

- Action orientation: self-assessment consists of various phases: first of all, the identification of problems and potential for change, secondly, analysis, i.e., detailed discussion of the most important aspects, and finally, decision-making processes concerning what action to take. Thus, the method goes beyond mere project assessment. It consciously aims at initiating change.

- A broad subject range and a depth of content: assessing the relevance and application of the method to different project types demands both a wide approach and an in-depth analysis of the potential for change. Thus, in a first step, the important characteristics of the project are assessed, followed by an in-depth analyis of some of the key aspects.

Content and procedure of SEPIZ

The method was principally designed to assess criteria such as efficiency, relevance, sustainability and impact, and at the same time generate information on key issues in development such as HIV/Aids, gender, environment, and conflict sensitivity. Additionally it sets work management aspects on the agenda. The method obtains its flexibility through a modular system: the modules are applied specifically to the respective beneficiaries. Depending on the type of project, they can be modified or extended. Thus self-assessment of emergency aid projects requires consideration of aspects such as women's safety, timeliness of measures, aptness of measures, transparency, and safety of project staff.

Self-assessment begins with separate workshops where participants of each group systematically go through phases of assessment and analysis. It is thus possible to gain a

general idea of the entire range of aspects essential to a project and its work. At the same time it focuses on the challenges, which are analysed and discussed in detail in the follow-up. The last step is a synthesis of group assessment results and the elaboration of proposals for solutions.

Since moderation and process support are a key element in the procedure, an external moderator will accompany the entire process. Self-assessment workshops with beneficiaries are facilitated by specifically trained project staff.

The main tools used to support the process are a standardised questionnaire, (pre)-structured group discussions, schemes for problem analysis, and documentation.

Suitability of SEPIZ

The evaluation of the test phase experience has proved the basic suitability of the tools developed. Important aspects will be highlighted in the following paragraph:

SEPIZ is suitable for covering a wide range of self-assessment objectives. It can be applied most effectively where learning processes and ownership play a dominant role and control is understood in the sense of self-control. Thus, results should remain within the project and only reach external structures in the form of summaries.

SEPIZ has proved extremely helpful when change is at stake. Given its strong focus on participatory assessment and analysis, as well as its action-oriented approach, its ability to motivate for change is one of its principal strengths.

Given the fact that the SEPIZ assessment follows a standardised catalogue of criteria but is in itself based on individual values (as opposed to objective ones), SEPIZ can only replace external evaluation up to a point. Nevertheless, key areas of challenge as perceived by the different actors can be analysed in greater detail, and decisions taken on concrete steps in the direction of change. Depending on the goal, therefore, SEPIZ can function as an interim evaluation or serve as a preparatory measure for external evaluations.

With its standardised procedures and instruments, SEPIZ facilitates the application and subsequent analysis of results. It is a time-saving method that produces comparative results and a well-structured documentation. A further advantage of its standardisation is the ease with which projects can apply the method on their own. It does, however, involve restrictions where creativity is concerned. In order to guarantee a genuinely democratic and action-oriented application of SEPIZ, external moderators and facilitators

(at target group level) should be employed. Their role is to structure the process of re-flection and if need be to jump in as mediators.

The test case study in Mozambique has proved the method suitable for all project types. This means, however, that other countries or socio-cultural contexts may call for some modification of the method.

We advise adopting self-assessment as a permanent element of the project manage-ment cycle. Where internal project monitoring instruments are of a rudimentary nature, self-assessment can play a significant role in project steering. Information and data from existing monitoring systems facilitate group discussions and allow for "objective" results.