

Abstract

The Belgian Survival Fund – Evaluation outcome is not sufficiently exploited

The core task of the Belgian Survival Fund (BSF) lies in improving food security of the most vulnerable population groups in the partner countries of Belgium as far as development cooperation is concerned. According to a Court's audit about the way lessons are drawn from the evaluations of development projects, the BSF does evaluate a large number of projects and uses these evaluations to redirect the projects but it fails to draw some necessary lessons from these evaluations in view of subsequent projects. Consequently, errors of the past are often repeated. The Court issued a few recommendations aimed at increasing the quality of the evaluations and at using them for all projects. The department involved and the Minister committed themselves to initiatives to meet this goal.

The Belgian Survival Fund, which is under the Directorate General for Development Cooperation (DGDC), financed a total of 122 development projects, with 74 of them still running in 20 African countries (April 2005). The BSF's share is 210 million euros in order to fulfil these projects carried out by multilateral organisations, Belgian NGO's and the Belgian Technical Cooperation (BTC). Project evaluation is a tool for redirecting projects and drawing lessons from successes and failures in order to allow for a more efficient and more effective management.

The Court checked whether the quality of the evaluations (carried out by the multilateral organisations themselves or by private consultancy agencies) is satisfactory and whether they had been used to redirect certain projects and to draw lessons for subsequent projects.

More than half of the projects that could be evaluated were assessed. These evaluations make it possible to have a correct insight into the performed activities and their immediate results (infrastructure, trainings, etc.). They nevertheless had shortcomings : they generally contained little information as to the real impact of projects on poverty, they did not provide an insight into the actual sustainability of the results, they were insufficiently clear as to whether the poorest were reached and - in the event of failure - evaluation reports contained few explanations. These shortcomings limited the value of evaluations as a learning tool.

At this stage, evaluation reports are mainly used to redirect individual projects. In as far as possible, a consensus is sought with the implementing partner, which has broad autonomy. But when it goes to renew a project, the BSF makes the continuation of funding depend on certain adjustments.

There is, however, no systematic process used to draw lessons from the evaluations *applicable for all projects*. This increases the risk to repeat past errors, as shown incidentally by the examples described in the Court's report. The BSF has, thus, not yet learned sufficiently how to reach the poorest: many projects targeted the *active poor* (for instance, farmland owners), hoping that the benefits derived from these activities would spill over to the poorest, but there was no effective process and measurement of this *trickle down* effect. Evaluation reports showed that the causes of a project's failure were recurrent weaknesses such as the formulation of erroneous assumptions in the projects' preparation phase (leading, for example, to the selection of inadequate activities) and to shortcomings at management level of project implementation (such as deficient project management, unclear organizational structure, problems with human resource management, ...).

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When evaluating projects, the BSF should carry out a further check as to whether the poorest have been reached and focus more on explaining the gaps noticed and the projects' real impact and sustainability. However, it is not enough to increase evaluations' usability to get a better use of evaluations, the BSF should also work out systems aimed at stimulating a global learning process from projects.

The head of the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation as well as the Minister of Development Cooperation reacted constructively to the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Court's report. They said that the use of audit would not be confined to the Belgian Survival Fund, but that it contained conclusions that were also valid for the whole DGDC. The department plans to initiate steps to use the report in the broader framework of the DGDC or of the Development Cooperation section.