

“Standard Assessment Framework”: A Proposal to Fill a Gap in the “Paris Declaration”

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Background: The “Paris Declaration” (PD), is a statement by which, in 2005, leading representatives/actors of International Development Cooperation agreed on a series of ways and means with a view to improving aid effectiveness. Among those ways and means, the need for the establishment, by partner countries, of national “Assessment Frameworks” was stressed without, however, alluding to the nature and content of such frameworks. This must be considered a serious gap.

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to make a proposal with a view to filling in this gap and thus to provide Policy and Decision Makers, Program and Project Planners, Implementers and Evaluators as well as Parliaments and other professionally interested quarters, with an operational instrument allowing to seriously enhance chances of realizing the objective of the PD: improving aid-effectiveness.

Setting: Developing countries anywhere and their developed partner countries and partner organizations.

Intervention: The article is addressing the problems and the possibilities of any systematic intervention: Policies, Programs and Projects, designed to further the development of developing countries.

Research Design: The article undertakes to address the problems and opportunities

mentioned above by establishing a “Standard Assessment Framework” (SAF) designed to concentrate the minds of all actors on the creation of sustainable benefits for the target groups of development interventions; welding Planning, Implementation/Monitoring and Evaluation into one single mutually reinforcing system, always to be kept up to date.

Data Collection and Analysis: The SAF has been developed over time by numerous inputs from a great variety of sources and presents, thus, a depository of lessons of experience still open to further inputs and improvements. The templates of members of the “Development Assistance Committee” (DAC) of the Paris based OECD were, i. a., systematically taken into consideration.

Findings: The SAF represents, thus, in a nutshell, the most important findings of interventions too numerous to be mentioned individually or to be tracked. It therefore presents simultaneously, however, a general grid that should structure findings in a much more detailed way, to be consigned to a SAF Data-Base that can be built up on the basis of experiences made in the past and on those accumulating further under current and future evaluation work.

Keywords: *Standard Assessment Framework; planning and evaluation; learning and operational feedback; common development language; Paris Declaration*

The “Paris Declaration” (PD) endorsed March 2005, is an international agreement to which, subsequent to their conference in Paris, over one hundred Ministers, Heads of Agencies and other Senior Officials adhered and committed their countries and organizations to increase aid effectiveness. In particular, the Conference underlined the importance of the following key aspects of International Development Cooperation:

Ownership: Poverty reduction strategies and programmes were to be set by partner countries engaging in a broad consultative process; these national strategies were to find their operational expression in associated transparent planning, budget and performance assessment frameworks.

Alignment: Donor countries and aid agencies were to align behind these strategies, respecting their priorities, and make use of partner countries’ institutions, systems and procedures, while helping to strengthen their capacities.

Harmonization: Donor countries were to simplify and to coordinate their development cooperation procedures, accelerate progress in implementation, share information, avoid duplication of efforts and rationalize their activities to make them as cost-effective as possible. Donor policies and procedures were to be reformed and simplified to encourage collaborative behaviour.

Managing for Results: Donors and partner countries were to concentrate on measurable development results, making aid effectiveness a high priority. This called for transparent and monitorable performance assessment frameworks to assess progress against the national development strategies and programs.

Mutual Accountability: Donor and partner countries were to be made accountable for genuine development results; both were to enhance their transparency and respective accountability to their citizens and parliaments for their development policies, strategies and performance

Filling in the “GAP”

True, the “Paris Declaration” (PD) underlines the need for the establishment, by developing countries, of national “Assessment Frameworks” (NAFs) designed to guide and structure their involvement in International Development Cooperation. However, and that seems really remarkable, the PD does not further define such NAFs, a fact that must be considered a serious gap, given the great importance the PD appears to attach to that concept. True, in its “Indicator 11”, called “Results Oriented Frameworks”, the PD specifies that such frameworks “rely on timely and comprehensive data..., are transparent..., track...input, output and outcome indicators and produce unified reports...”, without, however, giving any hint at the nature and the structure of such frameworks. Starting with the necessary conceptual clarifications, the present article is designed to contribute to fill in this gap.

Traditionally, an “Assessment”, in International Development Cooperation, is the analysis of a Development Intervention (Policy, Program or Project) Proposal. It is designed to judge the quality of that proposal in terms of its completeness and its justification. In judging the proposal, donor priorities and procedures have sometimes weighed too

heavily in negotiations between partners, negotiations which should lead to a version of the proposal to which all parties involved can subscribe. The present draft of a “Standard Assessment Framework” (SAF) is designed to be acceptable to ALL actors concerned and to facilitate such negotiations in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect among equal partners.

Such commonly accepted SAF would be used to guide and structure the establishment of any proposal for any development intervention within any developing country and could thus go a long way to render the above mentioned negotiations superfluous or, at least, to seriously limit their length and importance. The probability of rapidly arriving at an agreement between the partners will, indeed, be greatly enhanced if the partners have arrived, prior to the establishment of a country specific “National Assessment Framework” (NAF), as advocated by the Paris Declaration, at a common understanding of the nature of any Assessment Framework (AF). Such understanding can, indeed, be greatly facilitated by the establishment, in common agreement among ALL partners involved in International Development Cooperation, of such “Standard Assessment Framework” (SAF) incorporating the essential features of any AF. What can be said about those “essential features”?

The Essential Features of all “Assessment Frameworks”

There is one common aspect ALL development interventions worthy of that name have to present, without any exception: they should improve the living conditions of the people at whom they are directed. In other words and employing a

somewhat more technical language: In a democratic setting, all public development interventions: Policies, Programs and Projects, are designed to realize sustainable benefits for their target groups. The design of all Public Development Interventions, ODA co-financed or not, must be conceived on the basis of this principle. All of the SAF design elements considered below, have to serve this objective.

The SAF will, furthermore, serve as the basis for the establishment of all National Assessment Frameworks (NAFs). The NAFs, in turn, can be adapted (i.e. subdivided or “categorized”) to suit more closely any regional/sector/theme specifics. Ultimately, thus, the SAF/NAFs will guide the establishment of the Terms of Reference (ToR) that structure all of the standard documents established along the “Policy/Program/Project Cycle”, or “3P Cycle”, for Planning, for Implementation / Monitoring as well as for Evaluation, of any specific Development Intervention: Policy, Program or Project (“3P”) anywhere. Each of these Interventions will thus conserve its unique individuality while incorporating the common wisdom as enshrined in the SAF/NAFs. The above mentioned standard documents will comprise: “3P Idea” documents, pre-feasibility studies, feasibility studies, implementation and monitoring reports and evaluation reports. If thus applied in operational practice, the SAF will help development partners to assess the extent to which development interventions will/have contribute(d) to poverty alleviation, wealth creation, reduction of inequalities, capacity building, all of which will culminate in sustainable benefits for target groups.

Parallel Structuring of Planning and Evaluation?

The fact that, thus, planning, implementation -/- monitoring and evaluation should be conceived along the same lines of reasoning will not be obvious without justification. Evaluators often give the impression that they want to stay aloof from action, thus keeping their independence, and conceiving “ad hoc” and for each 3P anew, their own terms of reference for their evaluations. This stance ignores a vital fact: Evaluators, like planners, should agree to promote, together and above anything else, the creation of conditions leading to the realization of sustainable benefits for the target groups of development interventions. What else could be the purpose of evaluations? Other than that there’s none: “Benefit focused Planning” should thus be echoed by “Benefit focused Evaluation”.

The ToR for each 3P, as traced by the SAF/NAFs and then their progressive adaptations to sectors/themes/regions/countries down to the last specific concrete, unique project, should thus be identical for planners and for evaluators. There is just ONE fundamental difference between the application of these identical ToR by planning on the one hand and evaluation on the other: Planning is affirmative and looks forward, while Evaluation is inquisitive and looks backwards, Planning is intention driven and considers future possibilities/probabilities, while evaluation looks exclusively at existing facts. But the questions asked in both cases are on the same subject, point by point, as contained in the common ToR. Please notice that Planners, when trying to avoid the errors they committed “last time”, are engaged in

“evaluation”, while evaluators, when making recommendations for future development interventions, are engaged in “planning”, and so they should be: Planners’ and Evaluators’ minds and imaginations are ever free to travel between the realms of past and future. It is only these two realms that are never allowed to touch, forever divided, as they are, by the fleeting NOW.

Some evaluators may be scandalized by and violently opposed to such parallel structuring of the ToR, fearing for what they cherish most of all: their independence. Don’t despair, dear colleagues! Note that the SAF and ALL its “derivatives”, down to the last specific ToR for the smallest “Project” in country C, province P, will obligatorily contain one point that can never be “adapted away”, and that is the point: “Other Aspects”. That will give you the possibility to argue your case: you can say that the idea of identical ToR for planning and evaluation is all nonsense, and WHY. You can invent, under that point, your own ToR and restart the entire evaluation exercise accordingly. There’s ONLY ONE thing that is NOT permitted by the SAF: ignoring the ToR planners have used: You MUST use them, “inter alia”, as well! If you do and if planners have made a serious effort to apply SAF inspired ToR, then chances are that you will find them sufficient. If not, there’s always (remember!) the point: “Other Aspects”... Evaluators may find that the ToR used by planners are insufficient, erroneous or, worst of all, virtually absent. Then they will have to reconstruct what they think might have been planners’ ToR and judge them in the light of the SAF/NAF.

Evaluators may also find that the Objective of the development intervention, even if it is expressed in terms of the realization of sustainable

benefits for the intervention's target group (that's a condition sine qua non, remember!), is not convincing. Then they will propose a different objective (still expressed in terms of sustainable benefits for the target group!). This case will be rare, though. In general one can expect that the objective of a development intervention, if conceived by planners within a democratic setting (that's an important point contained in the SAF), will also be acceptable to evaluators.

Summing Up

Summing up, the advantages of the parallel structuring of ToR for (forward-looking) "Benefit focused Planning" and (backward-looking) "Benefit focused Evaluation", in the light of the SAF, appear convincing: This "amalgamated system" will:

- a. make planners and evaluators of all partners agree and concentrate on the ONE topic that matters in the end: the realization of sustainable benefits for the target groups of development interventions; this being the way impact should be expressed;
- b. make evaluation "Learning" and "Operational Feed-back" (that remain two important but unresolved problems today) part of an integrated system and therefore, as the term implies, "systematic", that's to say automatic; and that will put a stop to the well known problem that "lesson-forgetting" tends to proceed at the same pace as evaluation "lesson-learning".
- c. accumulate lessons from experience while simultaneously encouraging the necessary attention to the specifics of each

- individual development policy, program and project;
- d. keep lessons learned "up to date", as new insights contributed by evaluations will be routinely incorporated into the SAF/NAF system which will thus acquire and maintain its "dynamic nature";
- e. allow the development of a detailed "Data Base", containing ample comments on each important aspect presented in the SAF/NAFs, at the disposal of planners and evaluators, of implementers and monitors, of target groups and other stakeholders and the interested public (with its parliamentary representatives) in general: the volume of such data bank may turn out to be considerable, as the SAF is adapted to country/region/sector/thematic NAFs and as these are used as the basis for specific policies, programs and projects;
- f. be easy to use (in spite of the considerable volume of the "Data Base") as the most important elements will always appear "up-front" in a highly concentrated form on a minimum of pages, thus allowing all actors to descend just to the level of information detail they need to make sure they don't miss any element, as taught by experience, that they consider important for the specific "P" of the 3P they are involved with;
- g. in that way, quite naturally, simplify the exchange of information, experience and lessons learned among all actors concerned and spread a "common development language" among stakeholders everywhere. Such common language will, moreover,

greatly facilitate all joint evaluations among ODA partners/-organizations and might evolve, eventually, into a true “Communication Strategy” pursued by actors/stakeholders concerned as they learn together and act accordingly.

Here, then, is the Standard Assessment Framework we propose:

Standard Assessment Framework

1. Summary
2. Background
 - 2.1. Government/sectoral and Donor policies: coherence and complementarity, Democracy and Human Rights, Good governance
 - 2.2. Features of the sector(s) in the given country (or international) context
 - 2.3. Problems and opportunities to be addressed – (priorities) (Relevance)
 - 2.4. Selection criteria for beneficiaries and benefits (“Pro-Poor” focus)
 - 2.5. Stakeholder analysis: interests, role (active/affected) in the intervention
 - 2.6. Other related interventions, cooperation/harmonization with other donors/actors, past best practice
 - 2.7. Documents and data available
 - 2.8. Project/program/policy history, including (a) the process of its advocacy and

preparation, (b) application of SAF and (c) evaluation lessons learned/applied

3. Intervention (intended and unintended results): Logic Model and Theory of Change: Logical Framework
 - 3.1. Objectives/Goals: Realization of sustainable benefits for target groups; contributions to these benefits on the (a) Policy, (b) Program and (c) Project levels (Impact)
 - 3.2. Outcome/Purpose: Realization of necessary conditions contributing to the creation of sustainable benefits for target groups (e.g. improved governance, better access to basic services, new knowledge and skills applied, changed attitudes and behaviour) (Effectiveness)
 - 3.3. Outputs: tangible and intangible results needed for achieving the purpose of the intervention: capital goods, products, knowledge (e.g. infrastructure, equipment installed, new capacities and skills acquired) (Efficiency)
 - 3.4. Inputs and activities (Economy)
 - 3.5. Flexibility mechanisms allowing the Intervention’s periodic adaption
 - 3.6. Alternative solutions
4. Assumptions
 - 4.1. Assumptions at different intervention levels
 - 4.2. Risks and risk management
5. Implementation
 - 5.1. Physical and non-physical means

- 5.2. Organization: roles and responsibilities, systems, procedures/alignment, transparency, ethics. Capacity of implementing agencies
- 5.3. Timetable
- 5.4. Cost estimate and cost-effectiveness (including non-monetary costs), financing plan
- 5.5. Special conditions: accompanying measures taken by Government and/or other development actors, reliability and predictability of funding, mutual accountability
6. Quality and Feasibility Factors ensuring Viability/Sustainability
 - 6.1. Economic and financial viability
 - 6.2. Policy support
 - 6.3. Appropriate technology and “soft” implementation techniques
 - 6.4. Environmental aspects, including climate change
 - 6.5. Socio-cultural aspects (including intercultural dialogue): gender issues, inclusion/participation, empowerment, ownership
 - 6.6. Institutional and management capacity, strengthening and use of local structures (public, voluntary and private), cross-sector cooperation among actors involved, decentralization of responsibilities: subsidiarity
 - 6.7. Innovations
7. Monitoring and Evaluation
 - 7.1. Monitoring and reporting system, milestones
 - 7.2. Reviews/evaluations (lessons learned and recommendations)
8. Other Aspects
9. Conclusions and Proposals