

Evaluation Policy for European Union External Action

This document¹ sets out the **Evaluation Policy for European Union (EU) External Action**, establishing the principles, roles, and processes that govern how the EU evaluates its engagement with partner countries and regions. The policy is an integral component of the EU's broader evaluation framework, complementing the **Better Regulation agenda** and aligning with key strategic and legal commitments, such as the 'evaluate first' principle and the OECD DAC Evaluation Criteria².

1. Why we evaluate: embedding accountability and learning in EU external action

Evaluation lies at the heart of the European Union's commitment to evidence-based policymaking, ensuring that its external action remains accountable, efficient, and strategically aligned. As one of the world's leading donors and a partner to third countries and regions, the EU recognises evaluation as a fundamental instrument to understand not only whether its interventions deliver results, but also to critically assess how and why those results emerge within varied and complex contexts and circumstances.

The primary objective of the EU's evaluation function is twofold: to reinforce accountability and to foster institutional learning.

Evaluations serve a critical accountability function. They offer transparent and objective assessments of the performance of EU interventions and deliver essential insights to a wide range of stakeholders – including the European Parliament and Council, EU Member States, the European Court of Auditors, European civil society and citizens more broadly, as well as partner countries. This transparency not only enhances stakeholder engagement but also supports democratic oversight and fosters trust in EU action, while creating pathways for dialogue and ownership with external partners.

At the same time, learning, as a central function, strengthens the EU's capacity to design more impactful interventions, refine its strategic approaches, and promote the uptake of best practices across the board. By generating robust and actionable knowledge, evaluations inform both the formulation of new initiatives, strategies and the adaptive management of ongoing actions. Moreover, the commitment to learning is embedded in the European Commission 'evaluate first' principle, ensuring that evidence and lessons learnt are systematically considered before new actions are proposed or existing policies reviewed.

Institutional learning deriving from evaluations allows the EU to remain responsive to emerging global challenges, accountable to its stakeholders, and committed to excellence in external action. Evaluations are crucial in ensuring that the EU remains responsive to lessons learnt and addresses necessary changes in the implementation of external policies and programmes.

Evaluation is a cornerstone of the EU's Better Regulation agenda. It ensures that new policies and interventions are informed by lessons from past and ongoing actions. By systematically

¹ For Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), it replaces the 2014 evaluation policy document "Evaluation matters - The Evaluation Policy for European Union Development Cooperation".

² With the exception of evaluations requested by legal acts taking the form of Staff Working Documents, evaluations performed by European Commission services implementing external action are not considered stricto sensu evaluations as per the Better Regulation guidelines. The choice is nevertheless made by these services to still refer to 'evaluations', in line with international standards.

integrating evaluation into the policy cycle, the EU supports strategic planning, organisational learning, and efficient resource allocation, thereby fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

Ultimately, evaluation empowers the EU to lead with knowledge, learn from experience, and act with purpose. In a world of increasing complexity, the EU's strategic use of evaluation stands as a testament to its values of good governance, evidence-based policymaking, and international solidarity.

2. Institutional responsibilities: a shared commitment to excellence in evaluation

The evaluation function of the EU's external action is shaped by clearly defined roles and responsibilities across different institutional actors. At the strategic level, senior management in the European Commission is responsible for steering evaluation policy, deciding on evaluation priorities, and ensuring both adherence to established principles³ and effective use of evaluation findings in guiding decisions and reforms. Its leadership guarantees that evaluation remains integral to corporate planning and operational processes. Finally, its role extends to defining the responsibilities and tasks of key actors involved.

Centralised Evaluation Services across the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST), Directorate-General for Middle East, North Africa and Gulf (DG MENA), the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), promote methodological rigour, evaluation standards and practices, and manage the strategic evaluations portfolio. These services are instrumental in strengthening evaluation capacity, promoting a culture of learning, evidence-based decision making and accountability through *inter alia* the provision of methodological guidance on the entire evaluation process. In addition, coordination both at EU and international level is promoted, particularly through the European Commissions' EU Member States' Heads of Evaluation Services group and the OECD-DAC evaluation network (EvalNet).

Operational services, both at headquarters and in EU Delegations, lead on the evaluations of individual interventions. They are tasked with the timely planning of evaluations and their management and make sure that findings inform future programming and implementation. In addition, they are responsible for the methodological rigour of the evaluations under their lead.

The work of central and operational services is supported by a network of Monitoring and Evaluation focal points, who act as champions of evaluation, helping to institutionalise knowledge use and facilitate the translation of findings into practice.

Moreover, the European External Action Service (EEAS) is a key stakeholder, facilitating coherence and coordination between EU external action policy and the evaluation function. It supports evaluation planning and uptake across geographical and thematic domains and fosters strategic alignment with EU external action policy priorities.

3. Types of evaluation: strategic framework for adaptive and responsive action

Evaluation activities within the EU's external action are structured in a way that offers both breadth and depth of insight. At the core of this framework are two main categories: strategic evaluations and intervention-level evaluations.

³ Better Regulation Guidelines, Chapter III, Section 2. November 2021.

Strategic evaluations are designed to address issues of broad relevance, such as policy priorities, impact of country or regional strategies, or the effectiveness of partnerships such as those under the Team Europe approach and Global Gateway. This type of evaluations may go beyond the operational portfolio and specific sector coverage of EU-funded interventions, and review/assess overarching strategic domains for the EU and the concerned countries/regions. Strategic evaluations are particularly relevant for senior management and policy planners, offering strategic guidance for decision-making and for steering the EU's global engagement. They may be required by an EU regulation or other legislative act. In addition, strategic evaluations can also assess implementation modalities or mechanisms. They are broadly categorised in geographic and thematic evaluations. Geographic evaluations focus on a partner country, group of countries or regions while thematic evaluations assess policies or sector specific strategies against their objectives.

In contrast, **intervention-level evaluations** focus on specific programmes, projects, or clusters of them within a given sector, country or region. Their aim is to provide operational services with evidence on what is working and what needs improvement in the delivery of EU external action. These evaluations are critical for refining implementation arrangements and ensuring that interventions remain aligned with intended outcomes.

The evaluation system also includes internal learning studies, synthesis and meta-evaluations, as well as assessments inspired by monitoring and rapid evaluation methods which draw together findings to provide comprehensive insights into recurring challenges, emerging trends, or cumulative impacts across various contexts. This approach enhances learning at a systemic level and supports evidence-informed adjustments to policy and programming. The EU's commitment to learning is further demonstrated through its encouragement of coordination and joint evaluations with key partners, fostering peer learning and shared lessons. Close coordination primarily with EU Member States but also with multilateral organisations, and partner countries not only reinforce collective understanding but also help align efforts and reduce duplication.

All these evaluations are conducted using methodologies that conform to international standards, particularly those of the OECD-DAC. Key criteria assessed include relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, impact and EU added value. The robustness and credibility of findings are further guaranteed through rigorous quality assurance processes at all stages – from the drafting of Terms of Reference to key reports, dissemination and use of final results.

4. Ensuring impact: dissemination, use, and knowledge integration

The value of an evaluation lies not merely in the findings it generates but in the extent to which those findings are used. The EU is committed to translating evaluation results into meaningful change. To this end, uptake and dissemination strategies are put in place thus ensuring that evaluation results and messages reach the relevant internal and external audiences at the right time and in accessible and user-friendly formats. Further, findings from evaluations are carried over into knowledge management systems that allow their linkage to upcoming programming exercises.

Key actors are expected to engage with evaluation findings and incorporate them into programming and in the design of future interventions. Follow-up mechanisms facilitate the use of recommendations and organisational learning. Evaluation managers, as well as Monitoring

and Evaluation focal points in Headquarters and EU Delegations, play a vital role in guiding the dissemination process and supporting services in operationalising recommendations.

Furthermore, evaluations are a major pillar of the broader performance measurement framework of the EU's external action, which also includes monitoring and corporate results reporting. Together, these elements form an integrated system for tracking performance and more broadly, for knowledge management and for enhancing the accountability of the EU's external engagement.

Finally, the EU is upholding its commitment to transparency and comprehensive use of evaluation results by publishing evaluation reports or evaluation key findings.