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BRIDGING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN PROJECT EVALUATIONS IN DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION CONTEXT

Violeta BULAT,
German Development Cooperation through GIZ

Stefan ELSING,
International Development Cooperation Strategy KONTOR,
International Development - Regional & Local Strategies

In the realm of development and international cooperation, projects often involve collaboration between various countries, organizations, and communities with distinct mentalities and cultural norms. Germany, as a major player in development assistance, engages in projects with diverse partner countries, each shaped by unique historical, social, and cultural backgrounds.

Cultural responsiveness in this context entails recognizing and adapting to different mentalities, communication styles, and decision-making approaches. German evaluators collaborating with stakeholders from partner countries, such as the Republic of Moldova, must exercise cultural humility and empathy to bridge potential gaps in understanding and foster effective communication. In the Republic of Moldova it is common practice to have teams of external and local evaluators. This gives local evaluators the opportunity to have unique collaborations with experts from different countries. In addition to learning and knowledge transfer, this is a very valuable opportunity for local experts to pick up new working approaches, understanding of different cultural mentalities and application of different techniques adjusted to the local context.

This research answers the question: What strategies address cultural responsiveness? What challenges do evaluators face in the project evaluation process when it comes to culturally responsive evaluation? And if such evaluations offer benefits to stakeholders involved in an evaluation process. In this context, Germany and the Republic of Moldova were analysed as case studies.

Keywords: *culturally responsive evaluations, project evaluations, culturally responsive principles.*

DEPĂȘIREA DIFERENȚELOR CULTURALE ÎN EVALUAREA PROIECTELOR DE DEZVOLTARE ȘI COOPERARE INTERNAȚIONALĂ

În domeniul dezvoltării și al cooperării internaționale, proiectele implică adesea colaborarea între diferite țări, organizații și comunități cu mentalități și norme culturale distincte. Germania, în calitate de actor major în domeniul asistenței pentru dezvoltare, se angajează în proiecte cu diverse țări partenere, fiecare dintre ele fiind modelată de un context istoric, social și cultural unic.

Receptivitatea culturală în acest context presupune recunoașterea și adaptarea la mentalități, stiluri de comunicare și abordări decizionale diferite. Evaluatorii germani care colaborează cu părțile interesate din țările partenere, cum ar fi și Republica Moldova, trebuie să dea dovadă de smerenie și empatie culturală pentru a reduce eventualele diferențe de înțelegere și pentru a promova o comunicare eficientă. În Republica Moldova, există practica de a implica în echipele de evaluare experți străini care lucrează împreună cu experții locali. Acest lucru le oferă evaluatorilor locali posibilitatea de a avea colaborări unice cu experți din diferite țări. Pe lângă procesul de învățare și transferul de cunoștințe, aceasta este o oportunitate foarte valoroasă pentru experții locali de a prelua noi abordări de lucru, de a înțelege diferite mentalități culturale și de a aplica diferite tehnici adaptate la contextul local.

Această cercetare răspunde la întrebarea: Care sunt strategiile care abordează receptivitatea culturală? Cu ce provocări se ciocnesc evaluatorii în procesul de evaluare a proiectelor când vine vorba de evaluări adaptate la specificul cultural? Și dacă astfel de evaluări oferă beneficii celor implicați într-un astfel de proces. În acest context, Germania și Republica Moldova au fost analizate ca studii de caz.

Cuvinte-cheie: *receptivitatea culturală, evaluarea proiectelor, principii de sensibilitate culturală.*

Introduction

In the context of development and international cooperation, project evaluations play a vital role in assessing the effectiveness and impact of initiatives aimed at fostering social and economic progress. Culturally responsive evaluation is an indispensable approach in this domain, as it acknowledges the diverse knowledge systems, perspectives, and ways of knowing within communities and societies. By recognizing the influence of evaluators' and target groups' backgrounds and cultural perspectives, this approach ensures that evaluations resonate with the social and cultural context of the projects implemented. This article points out the significance of integrating culturally responsive principles in the evaluation process, considering cultural differences in mentality, procedures, methods, challenges, and opportunities in the context of development and international cooperation.

The concept of culturally responsive evaluations in development cooperation

Culturally responsive evaluations in development cooperation refer to evaluation processes that align with the values, beliefs, and context of the project or program being evaluated. These evaluations aim to ensure that the evaluation results accurately reflect how the program's services and activities support the achievement of relevant outcomes for the intended population.

Culturally responsive evaluation is a theoretical and conceptual position that recognizes the centrality of culture in the theory and practice of evaluation. It acknowledges that demographic, sociopolitical, and contextual dimensions of culture fundamentally matter. Culturally responsive evaluations involves considering the cultural nuances and perspectives of the individuals and communities involved in the development cooperation program when conducting evaluations [1].

Procedures and methods in culturally responsive evaluation

In the domain of development cooperation, culturally responsive evaluation requires both: a thoughtful and adaptable approach to account for cultural diversity as well as evaluators to have a deep understanding of the cultural context in which the program operates and to be sensitive to power dynamics and cultural biases that may influence the evaluation process. To conduct culturally responsive evaluations, evaluators may use strategies that address cultural responsiveness, containing the following eight essential elements:

1. *Cross-cultural awareness*: Evaluators must invest time in understanding the cultural context of the project's partner country, its historical background, local customs, and beliefs that may influence project implementation and evaluation.

2. *Engaging stakeholders*: Actively involving stakeholders from diverse cultural backgrounds in the evaluation process to ensure their perspectives and experiences are considered [6].

3. *Incorporating diverse voices*: Ensuring that the evaluation process includes the voices and perspectives of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, including marginalized and underrepresented groups [6].

4. *Contextualized data collection*: Employing a mix of methods that resonate with the local culture, such as focus group discussions, participatory approaches, and storytelling techniques to gain insights from project participants.

5. *Adapting evaluation methods*: Tailoring evaluation methods to be culturally appropriate and sensitive, taking into account cultural norms, values, and communication styles. In some contexts, this is referred to as „Localization of Evaluation Instruments": Developing evaluation tools that are culturally appropriate, using local languages and incorporating culturally relevant indicators to capture the project's impact accurately.

6. *Use culturally relevant indicators*: Selecting evaluation indicators that are meaningful and relevant to the cultural context of the program and its participants [6].

7. *Collaborative Partnerships*: Culturally responsive evaluation calls for inclusive partnerships with local stakeholders, governments, and community representatives, ensuring they have a meaningful role in shaping the evaluation process.

8. *Building trust and rapport*: Establishing trusting relationships with program participants and stakeholders by demonstrating respect for their cultural values and practices [6].

By conducting evaluations along these recommendations, development cooperation programs can gain a more comprehensive understanding of their impact and effectiveness in diverse cultural settings.

Challenges of culturally responsive evaluation in development cooperation

Integrating culturally responsive principles into project evaluations within development cooperation settings can be challenging due to several factors:

1. *Resistance to change*: Implementing culturally responsive evaluations may require changes to existing evaluation practices and procedures [8]. Some stakeholders may resist these changes, leading to challenges in implementing culturally responsive evaluations.

2. *Time and resource constraints*: Conducting culturally responsive evaluations can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Evaluators may need to spend more time building relationships with program participants and stakeholders, adapting evaluation methods to be culturally appropriate, and selecting culturally relevant indicators. This can result in evaluations that are more expensive and take longer to complete. Thus, conducting culturally responsive evaluations may require additional funding to support the adaptation of evaluation methods and the inclusion of diverse voices. If funding is not available, it may be challenging to implement culturally responsive evaluations.

3. *Power imbalances*: The inherent power dynamics between donor countries and partner countries can influence the evaluation process, potentially suppressing authentic voices and perspectives from the partner country. Moreover, power dynamics between evaluators and program participants can influence the evaluation process. This can result in program participants being less willing to share their perspectives and experiences, leading to incomplete or biased evaluation results.

4. *Differing evaluation norms*: Different cultures may have varying expectations and norms around evaluation processes, which can create misunderstandings and misaligned objectives.

5. *Ethical considerations*: Evaluators must navigate ethical challenges related to data collection, informed consent, and the potential exploitation of vulnerable communities while adhering to culturally sensitive practices.

6. *Language and communication barriers*: Effective communication is critical for understanding project impacts. Language differences and translation complexities can hinder meaningful engagement with stakeholders.

By addressing these challenges, evaluators can conduct evaluations that are more accurate, meaningful, and relevant to the cultural context of the program and its participants.

Opportunities and benefits

Despite the above-listed challenges, implementing culturally responsive evaluations in development cooperation is essential for ensuring that evaluation results accurately reflect how the program’s services and activities support the achievement of relevant outcomes for the intended population. Culturally responsive evaluation in development cooperation settings offers significant opportunities and benefits:

1. *Sustainable impact*: By considering cultural context and local knowledge, evaluations can identify approaches that are more likely to lead to sustainable and contextually relevant project outcomes.

2. *Empowerment of local communities*: Culturally responsive evaluation empowers local communities, fostering ownership and involvement in the development process, leading to more impactful interventions.

3. *Strengthened partnerships*: Emphasizing cultural responsiveness builds trust and respect between donor and partner countries, fostering stronger and more equitable partnerships.

4. *Enhanced learning and adaptation*: Valuing diverse perspectives enhances learning and the adaptive capacity of projects, allowing for course corrections based on culturally informed insights.

Examples of culturally responsive evaluation practices by german development cooperation organizations

Evaluations in the field of German Development Cooperation are mostly conducted in line with international and national quality standards, as set out by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and

Development (OECD)/Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Quality Standards for Development Evaluation [2]. In addition, there are guidelines of the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ; Evaluating German Development Cooperation [3]). Moreover, there are standards set by the DeGEval – the German Evaluation Society, which are applied by nearly all German Development Cooperation organizations [9]. In addition to these standards, the German Development Cooperation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit - GIZ) aims that the principles of the 2030 Agenda are taken into account consistently in the design, monitoring and evaluation of GIZ's projects and programs. A key demand of the 2030 Agenda is that the corresponding goals and targets must be met for all sections of society – and first and foremost for those groups who have hitherto been 'left farthest behind'. It describes a global, inclusive approach in which policies and program focus explicitly on disadvantaged groups such as children and young people, people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, people with HIV/AIDS, the elderly, refugees, IDPs and migrants, with a view to counteracting their marginalization. This can be achieved only when those affected by (multiple) discrimination are included in both planning and implementation by means of context- specific target group analyses and disaggregated data - and when existing inequalities are systematically measured and analyzed. This enables the corroboration of the effectiveness of new methodological approaches to combat structural disadvantages and strengthens participation opportunities for marginalized groups [5]. GIZ actively engages in building inclusive partnerships with local stakeholders and communities in their development projects. GIZ collaborates with local nongovernmental organizations and community leaders to ensure that the evaluation process is culturally sensitive and aligned with the needs and aspirations of the local population.

Non-governmental development cooperation organizations in Germany, like Welthungerhilfe, in general follow the approach of GIZ. In particular, they often employ local experts and consultants to conduct evaluations in partner countries. These local evaluators possess a deep understanding of the cultural context, facilitating more meaningful and culturally relevant data collection and analysis. Some organizations provide cross-cultural training to its evaluators and staff before embarking on projects in partner countries. This training helps sensitize staff to cultural differences and ensures that evaluations are conducted with empathy and respect for local customs and beliefs.

DW Akademie [4] is the international media development organization of Deutsche Welle, Germany's international broadcaster. DW Akademie is known for its work in media development, journalism training, and capacity development in various countries, particularly in regions where media freedom and pluralism are critical issues – playing a leading role in the development of free media systems, creating access to information, setting standards for education and independent journalism. Media development and journalism training programs often involve working with diverse communities and cultural contexts, making it crucial for DW Akademie to consider and adapt to cultural differences during their evaluation processes. DW Akademie employs culturally responsive evaluation principles by involving local stakeholders, journalists, and media practitioners in the evaluation process to ensure that their perspectives and cultural insights are incorporated. For the evaluations, evaluation teams consisting of evaluators and/or co-evaluators from the partner country or region are set up. In the evaluation design the data collection methods are tailored to align with the cultural norms and communication styles of the communities DW Akademie work with, ensuring that responses are more reflective of the local context.

Example of culturally adapted evaluation of implementing organisations in the Republic of Moldova

In the Republic of Moldova, projects are evaluated according to international standards, adjusting the evaluation methodology according to the socio-economic, cultural and organisational context, the nature of the intervention, the available budget, the research capacity and a number of other factors. Recently, evaluators from Moldova have started to focus more on ways of using criteria that better reflect the principles of the 2030 Agenda, such as participatory evaluations and evaluations that apply a human rights-based approach, evaluations of complex change processes, culturally sensitive evaluations and evaluations that capture synergies and alternatives in a holistic way.

At the national level, in the project evaluation process, culturally responsive evaluation principles are

used by encouraging implementing organisations to respect the competence standard for the external evaluator, where it is stipulated that one of the basic competences of the evaluator is cultural competence [10]. In most of the evaluations carried out in Moldova the six internationally agreed OECD/DAC criteria are used [2]. In addition to these criteria, each donor may suggest focusing on certain aspects in the project evaluation process. Donors often have developed guidelines for evaluators that should be taken into consideration. Joint teams created from local and international experts are very common practice. This offers various benefits and an added value for the final product.

Conclusion

Culturally responsive evaluation is indispensable in the context of development and international cooperation, where projects involve collaboration between diverse cultures and communities. In Germany, as a significant player in development assistance, integrating culturally responsive principles in project evaluations is vital for ensuring meaningful, relevant, and impactful outcomes. Emphasizing cross-cultural awareness, localizing evaluation instruments, and fostering collaborative partnerships, evaluators can bridge cultural divides and create evaluations that resonate with the diverse cultural contexts in which projects operate. Examples of how German organisations implement culturally responsive evaluation practices highlight the practical application of these principles in the context of real-world projects and initiatives. The example of Germany is very relevant for the Republic of Moldova, and Moldovan's organizations should fosters more equitable and inclusive development in culturally diverse environments.

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Data about authors:
Violeta BULAT, Advisor the German Development Cooperation through GIZ.
E-mail: violeta_bulat@yahoo.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-6261-445X

Stefan ELSING, Dipl. Ing, Consultant and Evaluator, International Development Cooperation Strategy KONTOR, International Development - Regional & Local Strategies.
E-mail: stefan@strategiekontor.de
Web: strategieKONTOR.de

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