

Summary Report

DevCom Meeting: Working Group on Communicating Results

6 February 2009, Paris, OECD Headquarters

Opening remarks

The meeting participants were welcomed by Steffen Beitz, coordinator of the DevCom Network at the OECD Development Centre. Steffen Beitz briefly presented the activities in the DevCom Programme of Work and Budget 2009-2010.

Norway's Results Reports

Eva Bratholm, Head of Communication at Norad, presented Norway's results reporting. The results reports were created due to the difficulty to inform about aid. There is a very longstanding prejudice that aid does not work. Norad therefore decided to make a strategy that shows good and bad results. Good intentions are not enough to be credible towards the public. The report needed to stimulate debate and enhance the knowledge and visibility of the Norwegian aid programme.

The Norwegian results report highlights both good and bad results, in easy language, and needed to reach out beyond traditional 'friends' of development. One of the distribution tools was an independent newspaper, critical to MFA and Norad. The report was partly demand-driven by questions from parliamentarians.

The 2009 Norwegian results report is entitled: Norwegian aid works, but not good enough. The report was very well received: many critics said that this kind of honesty was finally what they wanted to hear. After the report was released there was an outdoor exposition in front of the concert hall, and coverage in different media. The conservative party expressed gratitude there results were finally available.

The report shows what kind of results are easy to measure and which ones are not. For example, results in availability of clean drinking water are relatively easy to measure, but promotion of good governance is much more difficult.

Conclusion: Being honest and transparent about results is the best way to stimulate debate, foster engagement, share knowledge and increase visibility for development cooperation in society.

Questions and Answers about the Norwegian Results Reports

How was the minister convinced in agreeing with this honest approach? This took courage, but it was clear that something needed to be done. Too much negative information about the aid programme was present.

How did Norway manage to implement this? Norad worked on the report with a communication team of 18 people, they organised a lot of workshops, and received great help from Danish colleagues that already had a great strategy.

How could the media impact be measured? The media impact could be measured by the number of reports distributed, and how often the report was used as a reference in debates and newspaper articles. The stock of reports was quickly exhausted, indicating large demand.

How did Norway manage to put the report out so quickly? Thanks to the success of the first report, staff became very enthusiastic about it and put in a lot of extra effort.

How did Norway attribute results to a time frame? The criticism of the first report is that it was too anecdotal. Therefore the second report only focused on a limited number of aid channels and countries (Mozambique, Nepal and Sudan). This allowed more focus on particular projects and programmes and their progress. The problem of attribution remained to some extent, but the deeper focus made it easier to draw conclusions.

How did Norway balance statistical and more anecdotal evidence? There is a separate report with more data about input and objectives. This report is targeted at specialists, not at the general public.

Presentation of the Accountability work stream in the DevCom Work Programme

Jean Marc Pradelle, responsible for relations with the parliament at the French Development Agency (AFD) , presented a proposal for the DevCom work stream on accountability, around the question: what is accountability for a donor agency?

AFD is operating in a changing context. The aid effectiveness agenda, and reforms in the French aid system are creating new stakeholders, with changing expectations. There are now more partnerships, on a national, bi- and multilateral level, and there is more openness towards information and communication, coupled by more demand from parliament. Simultaneously, there is a need for more mutual accountability with partner countries.

AFD has launched a transparency action plan to adapt to this new context, and is seeking to share experiences with other agencies and ministries inside the DevCom Network. Three concrete questions were asked to the Network:

- Are similar reflection exercises underway in other countries?
- Are countries prepared to participation in a study launched by AFD

- Are countries interested to participate in a DevCom seminar on accountability?

Update on the focus on Results Reporting in the OECD DAC Joint Venture on Managing for Development Results

Stefan Schmitz, coordinator of the DAC Joint Venture on Managing for Development Results (JV MfDR), announced that results reporting will be one of the future building blocks of the work of the JV MfDR.

The Joint Venture is aiming at developing guiding principles for results communication, based on Peter da Costa 's paper, taking into account comments from the JV and DevCom. Stefan Schmitz highlighted four points of importance:

1. Conceptual framework: What do we mean by development results, and what is the context in which we operate. Peter's paper is good first step in this direction.
2. What results? What kind of results do we mean? MDGs, human rights, etc?
3. Whose results? Who is the owner of the results? Donor or partner countries?
4. Mutual accountability: How can communication in donor countries be made consistent with needs and capacities in partner countries?

Presentation by Peter da Costa of the paper "Managing for and Communicating Results"

Peter's presentation (including PowerPoint slides) can be watched here:

http://www.slideshare.net/OECD_Development_Centre/managing-for-and-communicating-development-results

Following Peter da Costa 's presentation the meeting's participants discussed the paper. A summary of the different themes that were discussed is shown below.

Budget Support

The biggest difficulty in results communication remains Budget Support: the appetite for project communication creates a problem for talking about budget support and the question of attribution makes it all the more difficult to communicate effectively on Budget support. In some countries, all political attacks go to budget support. A challenge is how to develop positive tools and tactics for budget support that are not defensive.

Budget support results would need to have all donors involved in a given country participate in results reporting. Mainstreaming results communication as part of the in-country MfDR process might be a better way forward. In order to do this guidelines are needed on how to mainstream communication at the outset of Budget support or sector budget support projects and programmes.

In Sweden people were very happy to hear about poverty reduction, they find the who and how less important. This may be helpful when talking about budget support.

Communication as a tool for effective aid delivery

The African Development Bank congratulated DevCom on the work done so far, and indicated to look forward to future collaboration. The main interest of the AfDB lies in integrating communication as a tool for effective aid delivery.

Harmonised and aligned results reporting

There is a need for harmonised and aligned results reporting. This means that capacity for results reporting needs to be developed in partner countries. A participant from an aid receiving country noted that communication is a good thing, but that governments often have a bad reputation in partner countries. Therefore trust needs to be created, and communication capacity needs to be built.

Partner countries are expected to come up with results. Donors are expecting a lot, but can they fully rely on partner governments? Developing countries run the risk of being overwhelmed by multiple in-country donors who do not harmonise and align their support. While the idea of bringing partners on board is very seductive, the reality is that a country that achieves good development results will most likely want to communicate their own results, and will not want to applaud donor support. So realism is required about the degree of convergence between donor and partner countries as related to results. More dialogue between partner countries and donors is important when talking about communication.

It is important to replicate the spirit of Accra to reach greater harmonization and alignment. Ways need to be found to put partner countries in the driving seat. The agenda needs to be moved beyond donor circles. We need to follow-up on the Accra Agenda for Action imperative to be accountable for results. We need to upstream communication so that partner countries' capacity is strengthened. This means making sure that communicators are involved in the policy process from the beginning.

Although the AAA pushes country level implementation and country focus, there remains a lack of demand from citizens as to what to expect from their governments. Donors and partner countries need to agree on how best they can mutually support each other in advancing results communication. Incentives are key, particularly at the political level.

In partner countries, the finance ministry may be the best place to focus on results based management. Tapping into multi-stakeholder dialogue systems focused on accountability already in existence may also provide useful synergies.

Good evaluation measures need to be in place from the beginning. Communication still comes in a bit late in the paper, a good link needs to be ensured between communication ABOUT and FOR development results.

Stories or statistics?

A constant challenge is to move beyond statistics, and to do storytelling. Other participants noted that finding quantitative data is more of a challenge for them than finding stories. The first results report in the Netherlands had a lot of statistics. It was well received, but did not have much effect on public opinion. Enemies of aid in Netherlands always use anecdotes to attack aid. To respond to criticism you need a simple story, even though you need the evidence base also.

There is some confusion as to statistics. There are lots of types of statistics. The OECD Working Party on Statistics produces statistics on aid outflows. But this is a limited picture. What are needed are results in the field. Statisticians need to know from the donor side what results are achieved with the aid given. But to get results from the field, it is imperative to work with the partner countries.

Defining results

One of the bigger difficulties faced by aid agency communicators is defining what are the results they want to communicate. Communicating results data alone may not necessarily lead to development. Helping put a country on a sustainable path to development is not about counting schools and books, etc.

Beyond focusing narrowly on the MDGs, we should see development as a complex and risky process. As such, perhaps the focus should be on comparing the course of action of one agency to that of others, thereby promoting learning.

Development communicators in donor countries have difficulty defining what results they need. We need to stop making broader and broader definitions. Is any data ever going to be good enough? We need to accept that development is risky business. Assessment of ourselves according to our own objectives would already be a good first step.

The World Bank's Global Poll shows that donor publics are more sceptical about World bank results than publics in partner countries. Donors and partners see results differently. Do we know what people define as results? Should we not ask them?

Aid has an incredibly long memory, much longer than any other policy field. People remember development disasters from a long time ago. We need to modernise the idea of development communication. Today is about bringing tax experts to countries so they can raise taxes on companies. Who owns the results? Present partnerships.

Communication for development

The UN round table on communication for development has been focusing on monitoring and evaluation, showing that C4D works and is worth the investment. However, much effort is required to advocate C4D internally.

The challenge is to find ways to bring up data from partner countries to donor countries. We need

a virtuous circle between communication for and about development. In an ideal system you can always tap into the results chain.

Target groups

Is communicating about results about raising public support? Awareness may rise, but maybe not support. There is a risk in lower support, and we need to manage that risk. That is the additional step communicators have to take. Results data will protect you from attacks, without them you are very vulnerable. You need them as a backup. You cannot afford not to be interested in results, there is a cost of doing nothing.

Partnering up with CSOs can be useful as a division of labour. Different publics need to be convinced with different types of information: internal staff, management, parliamentarians and the general public. We need to know what these different target groups think, know and expect to be able to target communications effectively.

Governments in all OECD countries have credibility problems. So there's a need to look beyond a narrow focus of those generating development results being solely responsible for reporting them.

Ways forward

Efforts to improve statistical capacity and information systems post-Accra (such as the Paris21 Facility) provide an important entry point for results communicators, who should be involved early in the process. This will increase the likelihood that results-friendly data will be produced that can be communicated

Having a results reporting facility as a JV MfDR work stream constitutes another important entry point to embed the communicating results agenda, and formal collaboration needs to be established between JV MfDR/DevCom and the project.

A short presentation by Reinout Van Vaerenbergh/MfA, Belgium: How to improve cooperation between communicators and results managers?

DevCom made an important breakthrough by getting an explicit reference to communicating results in the AAA, but this means the work has only just started.

Strengthening MfDR country systems implies that statistical capacity and information systems are improved (§23 Accra Agenda for Action, AAA). Would it be possible to conceive them in such a way that they can provide data suitable to communicate results? (cf. ARIES data collection program of DFID). What role can the JV MfDR play in this?

Advocating the implementation of MfDR seems to go hand in hand with advocating the need of communicating results and vice versa. Are there any win-wins for the JV and the DevCom Working Group on Communicating Results? If so, how should things be organised?

The AAA refers more or less explicitly to the need for communication about development results. As decisions are being taken by the Working Party on Aid Effectiveness (WP-EFF) in developing the right structures to implement the AAA, the Working Group on Communicating Results should consider which structure would be the most appropriate to take this issue further. If it's the JV that would be a good partner.

As accountability for results is a joint effort by donor and partner countries, partner countries will be involved in gathering, disseminating and communicating the results and impact of aid. The JV has built considerable experience in working with partner countries through its Communities of Practice (CoPs) The Working Group on Communicating Results has the experience of the pilot in Mozambique. There might be some common ground to discover.

Update on the DevCom pilot projects on communicating results in programme aid

The pilot projects aim to integrate the communication dimension in a sector programme in a partner county. A communication person would participate in all stages of the programme, enabling communication to both donor countries and the beneficiaries. This should lead to methods on how to communicate about results.

The Joint Venture on Managing for Development Results and DevCom can work together on results reporting. Ideally, the pilot process would be part of a JV process so that all donors can be included.

A member of the COP noted that community of practice members are on the ground, that they represent half of the countries in Africa, and that they are willing to push the MfDR agenda. In Africa, they are in the process of publishing a regional MfDR sourcebook. COP members would be very interested to engage in a DevCom pilot process, and work with communicators to bring the MfDR message forward to parliamentarians, and government in partner countries.

The Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs realises that relying on the moral argument for aid is not enough. There is also self-interest in development. We need to admit in that there is some form of self-interest in donors' development policy.

Discussion of the DevCom Programme of Work and Budget

The proposed activity on "Better communicating multilateral aid and budget support" received much appreciation. However, participants proposed to treat the two topics separately. Rather than a theoretical study, participants favoured a more practical approach with hands-on advice.

The secretariat confirmed that the comments expressed during the meeting, as well as any written comments received before 1 March, would be considered by Peter da Costa when revising the background paper as a draft for guidelines.