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Lessons learnt from impact-oriented accompanying research: potentials and limitations to rigorously assessing the impact of governance programmes

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Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute

Discussion Paper

28/2018

Lessons Learnt from Impact- Oriented Accompanying Research

Potentials and Limitations to
Rigorously Assessing the Impact of
Governance Programmes

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Preface

This Discussion Paper was written as part of the DIE research project “Wirkungsinitiative Afrika”, currently being implemented in cooperation with – and with the financial support of – the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). The project has two aims. First, it identifies preconditions and opportunities to apply rigorous methods of impact assessment more systematically in governance interventions. Second, it explores the benefits of the format of *impact-oriented accompanying research*, in which researchers and practitioners develop and implement the evaluation design in close cooperation. At the time of writing (2018), project researchers are working together with those of two programmes: “Programme d’appui à la Décentralisation et au Développement Communal” in Benin, and “Good Financial Governance” in Mozambique. Previously, similar projects have been implemented in Peru and Togo with GIZ and KfW (see Breuer et al., 2017; Camacho, 2017).

We would like to thank Anita Breuer and Sarah Holzapfel for their comments on previous versions of this Discussion Paper.

Abbreviations

BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development / Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung
DEval	German Development Evaluation Institute / Deutsches Evaluierungsinstitut
DIE	German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit
M&E	monitoring and evaluation

Executive summary

How to assess impact in governance programmes successfully? This publication documents some practical lessons learnt on how to conduct rigorous impact assessments, with a special focus on governance interventions. The project “Wirkungsinitiative Afrika” of the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) follows the approach of *impact-oriented accompanying research* when measuring impact. Impact-oriented accompanying research in the project combines two elements of impact assessments: a) the measurement of impact using (quasi-)experimental designs, and b) the investigation of causal mechanisms using theory-driven approaches. The combination allows for making statements about *how much* impact was achieved (quasi-experimental and experimental approaches) and *why* and *how* this impact came about in the given context (theory-based approaches). Such a mixed-method approach to impact assessment can provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of an intervention. In addition, impact-oriented accompanying research takes place over a long time frame of at least 18 months, and thus represents a particularly deep form of cooperation between research and practice. This allows for continuous exchange and advice by researchers on programme implementation and, thereby, leads to advice that the programme can use while the project is ongoing. We speak of a successful case of impact-oriented accompanying research when it realises its full potential in terms of operational and strategic learning, (impact) evaluation capacity development and a contribution to effective internal and external accountability.

The goal of the publication is to lay out what is needed for a successful impact assessment in governance interventions and to identify key aspects for each step of the process of impact-oriented accompanying research. It thereby seeks to provide in-depth guidance for anyone contemplating the idea of engaging in an impact-oriented accompanying research project.

Governance programmes are often depicted as being particularly challenging when it comes to assessing impact: They are dependent on broader political developments and take place in politicised environments. Furthermore, they are characterised as having long and complex causal chains and, in many cases, they follow multi-level and multi-stakeholder approaches aiming at goals that can only materialise in the long term. To get a grip on these challenges, the DIE team embarked on several projects involving impact-oriented accompanying research in collaboration with Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) governance programmes. This lessons-learnt publication is one of the results of this collaboration. One conclusion we would like to suggest is that, even though some of the challenges that are commonly ascribed to governance programmes may appear less problematic in other sectors, they are still similar in kind. There is thus the opportunity to apply these lessons learnt also to development interventions in other sectors. Our discussion touches on the advantages and disadvantages of different actor constellations, how to distribute the responsibility for working packages and how to use the knowledge generated by impact-oriented accompanying research for learning and other purposes.

For successful impact-oriented accompanying research to happen, we suggest following seven golden rules: 1) Carefully select topics and programmes that are useful for strategic

processes at an organisation-wide level. The decision about conducting multi-year, rigorous impact-oriented accompanying research should be taken with a view to decisions on programme strategy at the organisation level. 2) Integrate impact-oriented accompanying research at the programme level early on to ensure that the optimal research design can be applied and all learning opportunities can be used. 3) Clarify expectations between all collaborating partners at an early stage. Knowing the needs of all sides and knowing what can realistically be achieved will ensure a constructive and fruitful cooperation. 4) Define common goals, the methodological approach and the scope of the impact assessment in collaboration. Broad ownership of the impact-oriented accompanying research will contribute to the utilisation of results. 5) Communicate continuously and build teams with researchers, practitioners and partners. Impact-oriented accompanying research is a collaborative exercise that needs the engagement of everyone involved. 6) Use the impact assessment as an opportunity for learning. Opportunities to learn should be planned consciously as part of the collaboration. 7) Integrate “chip-in moments” for policy advice during the project cycle. This allows for preparing targeted policy advice when strategic or operational decisions need to be made in the programme.

1 Introduction

Measuring and explaining the impact of development interventions has become increasingly relevant for development organisations (Manning & White, 2014). Impact assessments are important to ensure transparency for taxpayers, increase accountability to donors and – most of all – improve the design of development programmes so that they can achieve their intended impact. For the reasons above, the topic of impact assessment has also gained visibility in Germany in recent years. In comparison to the United States and international organisations such as the World Bank, however, the discussion about and prominence of the impact agenda in general – and impact assessments in particular – are still underdeveloped in Germany. The demand, however, is on the rise, and German organisations in development cooperation must take more initiative to meet international standards in this regard.

There are still many prejudices that inhibit evaluative research on the impact of development programmes – for example, impact assessments are too costly, the impact of a programme cannot be measured or people feel they already have a good sense of a programme's impact. When it comes to programmes in the governance sector, there are even more reservations and concerns. Governance programmes are dependent on broader political developments and take place in politicised environments; they are characterised as having long and complex causal chains – in many cases, they follow multi-level and multi-stakeholder approaches and they aim at goals that can only materialise in the long term. How can the impact possibly be measured under such difficult conditions?

One way to leverage the topic of the impact agenda in general – and to generate a better knowledge base on the impact assessment of governance programmes – is to extend cooperation between research institutions and development organisations. To do so, when implementing impact assessments, most projects of the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) follow the approach of *impact-oriented accompanying research*. Impact-oriented accompanying research, as conceived by the DIE, includes two elements: the measurement of effects (*how much*) with (quasi-)experimental research approaches, and the investigation of causal mechanisms (*how* and *why*) with theory-based research approaches. To reach its goals, impact-oriented accompanying research requires medium- to long-term cooperation between researchers and a development organisation in the context of an intervention, usually over a time span of several years. This allows for an ongoing exchange of, and advice by, researchers on programme implementation, providing input that might be used even during the programme cycle, which is a weakness of many impact assessments.

This publication seeks to document some practical lessons learnt on how to conduct rigorous impact assessments, with a special focus on governance interventions using the approach of impact-oriented accompanying research of the DIE. We thereby draw on recent experiences of the DIE with impact-oriented accompanying research in the governance sector. The goal of these lessons learnt is, first of all, to explain what is needed for a successful impact-oriented accompanying research in governance interventions. Our aim is to disentangle the process of impact-oriented accompanying research and to carve out the key aspects for each step of the process. The publication draws a clear line between impact assessments that are conducted following the impact-oriented accompanying research approach on the one hand, and standard development evaluations on the other

hand. It seeks to provide in-depth guidance for anyone contemplating the idea of whether or not to engage in impact-oriented accompanying research. We also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different actor constellations as well as how to distribute the responsibility for working packages and how to use the knowledge generated by impact-oriented accompanying research for learning and other purposes.

Are the challenges cited above particularly true for impact assessments in the governance sector? Even though some of the challenges may appear less problematic in other sectors, they are still similar in kind. The lessons learnt, as presented in this publication, can thus also be applied to development interventions in other sectors. Moreover, since the lessons also deal with general topics such as how to organise cooperations between research and practice, they are relevant for anyone who is planning, or currently implementing, an impact assessment.

Table 1: Empirical base for our lessons learnt: Four cases of impact-oriented accompanying research in governance programmes	
Programme	Main characteristics
“Decentralization Support Programme” (Togo)	<i>Implementing agency:</i> GfA, contracted by KfW <i>Main focus:</i> Impact on citizen satisfaction with local governance through new technologies <i>Time frame of research:</i> 2014-2017 <i>Financial source for research:</i> BMZ <i>Local partner organisations:</i> Unité de Recherche Démographique (URD) and Laboratoire Dynamique Spatiale et Intégration Régionale (LaDySIR) from the University of Lomé
“Citizen Oriented State Reform Programme” (Peru)	<i>Implementing agency:</i> GIZ <i>Main focus:</i> Impact of administrative simplification measures at the local level on citizen satisfaction <i>Time frame of research:</i> 2015-2016 <i>Financial source for research:</i> Programme budget <i>Local partner organisations:</i> Local governments of Laredo, San Juan Bautista, Huamanga, Esperanze, Victor Larco Herrra, Trujillo
“Programme to Support the Decentralisation and Local Development of Municipalities (PDDC)” (Benin)	<i>Implementing agency:</i> GIZ <i>Main focus:</i> Promotion of citizen participation at local level <i>Time frame of research:</i> 2016-2017 <i>Financial source for research:</i> Programme budget <i>Local partner organisations:</i> Municipalities of Copargo, Dassa, Kérou, Lokossa, Natitingou, Toffo
“Good Financial Governance” (Mozambique)	<i>Implementing agency:</i> GIZ <i>Main focus:</i> Tax collection at municipal level <i>Time frame of research:</i> 2016-2018 <i>Financial source for research:</i> Programme budget + GIZ Sector Department Governance and Conflict <i>Local partner organisations:</i> Local governments of Dondo and Vilankulo
Source: Authors	

The lessons learnt are based on the experiences of DIE with a total of four impact assessments that were carried out between 2014 and 2018 in cooperation with, and through financing from, various development organisations, as depicted in Table 1. Three of the cooperations were carried out with Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), and one cooperation with KfW. The projects with the GIZ were part of a larger

initiative on impact assessments designed to explore the possibilities and limits of impact measurement in governance programmes. We would like to thank our cooperation partners for enabling the accompanying research through their financial contributions and active involvement in conceiving and implementing the assessments. In the following, we mostly avoid referring to specific research projects in order to provide for a more general discussion and analysis. Our lessons learnt are presented as follows. In Section 2, we present the idea of impact-oriented accompanying research as an approach for impact assessment. We explain its differences – with standard evaluations usually conducted in the context of development programmes – and discuss its benefits. In Section 3, we take a look at impact-oriented accompanying research as a particularly close form of cooperation between research and practice. In Section 4, we describe the different phases of impact-oriented accompanying research and discuss the key points to be considered in each phase. We cover the steps from matchmaking, cooperation negotiations, inception, data collection and generation, to analysing and making use of results. Finally, Section 5 summarises our take-away messages in the form of seven golden rules to improve the usefulness, effectiveness and efficiency of impact assessments and provides some more general policy recommendations.

2 The approach of impact-oriented accompanying research

The demand for, and supply of, rigorous impact assessments in German development cooperation are still on the rise. University institutes and their spin-offs, particularly those that are based within departments of economics, are increasingly providing resources and competencies to conduct rigorous impact evaluations for individual projects or programmes on development cooperation. Often, these evaluations are commissioned by international organisations. The German Development Evaluation Institute (DEval) includes different approaches to measuring and explaining impact in their flagship studies. These usually deal with questions of more general strategic importance and thereby go beyond the operative level of individual projects or programmes. Despite increasing capacities and demand, it is safe to say that, in Germany, the great majority of individual programme evaluations – traditionally conducted by a large number of for-profit consultancies and individual freelance evaluators – do not consistently study impact with particularly rigorous methods.

Against this mismatch of demand and supply in German development cooperation, and based on our experience with impact assessments in governance programmes and beyond, the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) has developed the approach of impact-oriented accompanying research.

Our definition of impact-oriented accompanying research implies a medium- to long-term cooperation between researchers and a development organisation in the context of an intervention, usually over a time span of several years. Impact-oriented accompanying research, as conceived at DIE, should always combine two elements: the measurement of impact using (quasi-)experimental designs, and the investigation of causal mechanisms using theory-driven approaches.

- *Measurement of impact*: (Quasi-)experimental approaches allow statements about the magnitude of impact (*how much*) of an intervention using counterfactual logic. The focus is on the attribution of effects: To what extent is the observed change due to the intervention? One important issue here is to determine whether the intervention has had an impact at all, and if yes, how much. The impact of an intervention needs to be analysed in an environment as isolated as possible, and it needs to exclude other influencing factors. To do so, an experimental research design is considered to be a particularly robust research approach; in addition, there are many other approaches (quasi-experiments, instrumental variable techniques and natural experiments) with which effects can be measured. Data analysis usually builds upon quantitative methods.
- *Analysis of causal mechanisms*: Theory-based approaches allow statements about the causal mechanisms (*how* and *why*) of interventions.¹ The emphasis is on the contribution of the intervention to an observed impact: Has the intervention contributed to an observable change, and if so, why? The main aim here is to understand the nature of the impact of an intervention and to identify the underlying causal mechanisms. The theory-based approaches include, but are not limited to, case studies, contribution analysis and process tracing.² These theory-based approaches investigate the causal steps along the chain of action: from input to outcome to impact levels. For data generation and analysis, qualitative methods are primarily used. Depending on the available data, qualitative and quantitative methods might be combined.

The goal of combining these two approaches is to be able to make scientifically reliable statements about the size of the impact as well as the causal link between the intervention and the outcome. The combination allows for making statements about *how much* impact was achieved (quasi-experimental and experimental approaches) and *why* and *how* this impact came about in the given context (theory-based approaches). This can provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of an intervention. The insights gained can then be used for the strategic and operational decisions of development agencies, for demonstrating effectiveness and accountability towards donors and the broader public, and to advance the scientific debate in academia.

2.1 Characteristics

Impact-oriented accompanying research has specific characteristics if compared to other forms of evaluation that are applied to assess development interventions. The differences result from the depth of cooperation between research and the development organisation, the level of scientific rigor on which conclusions are based, the strong focus on learning, and the investment in time, human resources and financial resources. Standard evaluations always take place under budget, time, data and political constraints – a challenge that

1 See Astbury and Leeuw (2010) for a detailed introduction to the concept of a causal “mechanism”.

2 A more detailed discussion of these approaches goes beyond the scope of this discussion paper. See Rossi, Freeman and Lipsey (1999) for an introduction to case studies; see the special issue of *Evaluation* (Mayne, 2012) for an introduction to contribution analysis, and Collier (2011) as well as Schmitt and Beach (2015) for a discussion of process tracing.

some approaches to evaluation take more into consideration than others.³ For instance, standard evaluations in regular programme cycles usually take place in a time frame of 5-10 days in the field and only several weeks from the terms of reference to the final report – a much shorter time frame than is needed for impact-oriented accompanying research. In essence, standard evaluations are given less time and have fewer human and financial resources to draw upon, which means that the depth of the analysis, the amount of data gathered and the amount of information processed will always be lower. In many cases, evaluators will miss part of the context in which the programme operates due to the lack of time given to engage with it. Also, the analysis will most often not hold up to scientific standards.

The *depth of cooperation* in impact-oriented accompanying research goes beyond the amount of cooperation known of in other development evaluations, in particular the short-term missions that are prevalent in the German development cooperation context. We speak of a partnership and joint project instead of a commissioner–contractor relationship. A partnership requires frequent dialogue between researchers and the development agency. This allows for ad hoc advice about the programme with regards to questions of operational and strategic decisions throughout the length of the cooperation, and not only when the final report is written. One advantage of this is that the development agency can continuously integrate the feedback of the researchers into the project implementation during the course of the accompanying research. This can also positively influence the project's impact. It also enables the researchers to appropriately react to changing conditions in complex programme settings. There is, however, a natural tension between proximity to the programme and independence in the research. In order to yield credible and legitimate results, it is important for the research institute to maintain a certain independence from the project implementation, as such.

If compared to other forms of evaluation, impact-oriented accompanying research promises *higher levels of validity and reliability of the results*. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs can detect changes by constructing the counterfactual. They reduce selection bias – one of the major obstacles to impact attribution – by carefully selecting treatment and non-treatment groups, or even by following a randomised approach. Theory-based approaches primarily use qualitative methods for data-generation, including, among others, document analysis and the analysis of interviews or focus group discussions. The strategy for selecting documents, interview partners or focus group participants is well-defined, and reliable statements are possible when saturation is reached (i.e. information repeats itself).

Another important characteristic of impact-oriented accompanying research is that it has a strong focus on *learning*. While this is true for many approaches to evaluation, accompanying research offers unique learning opportunities: The generated evidence can not only be used for operational decisions within the respective intervention, but also for strategic decisions on a broader level beyond individual programmes (see below). Also, results are not exclusively used for internal learning purposes. Through different forms of publication – including publications addressed to the scientific community – a broader public can be reached (see e.g. Breuer et al., 2018). Essentially, whereas many evaluations

3 See the “Realworld evaluation approach” by Bamberger, Rugh and Bambrly (2012) as an example of an approach that pays a high level of attention to the cited constraints.

tend to focus on the accountability dimension of evaluation and provide results after the programme is closed, impact-oriented accompanying research emphasises learning and tries to maximise the usefulness of results during the implementation of the programme itself as well as other benefits.

2.2 Benefits

Research and practice can both benefit from the robust analysis of an intervention's impact. The following points present the main benefits of impact-oriented accompanying research.

Table 2: Summary of key benefits
✓ Learning: Find out whether core assumptions of the programme theory hold and whether anticipated impact is achieved and why.
✓ Strategic learning: Find out whether anticipated impact is achieved and make strategic decisions on the basis of rigorous evidence at agency-wide level.
✓ Operational learning and steering: Find out whether core assumptions of the programme theory hold and why (or not) an intervention has a certain effect. Use insights of the ongoing research for important programme milestones and get ad hoc advice.
✓ Evaluation capacity-building: Strengthen hands-on knowledge on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and impact measurement through workshops and the ongoing exchange for development organisations and local partners.
✓ Internal and external accountability: Use rigorous results for internal communication and communication with the donor.
✓ Increased transparency: Contribute to the scientific debate and to the open data/open government movements.
Source: Authors

If implemented properly, impact-oriented accompanying research offers time for reflection about the daily business of programme activities and is an excellent opportunity for learning.

Learning in general: Impact-oriented accompanying research allows the programme to check whether the core assumptions of the programme logic hold, whether the expected impact is achieved and why, and if it is not, then what challenges need to be addressed in order to improve programme strategy and implementation.

Strategic learning: Impact-oriented accompanying research can generate reliable statements as to whether or not an intervention has produced an effect. It can also indicate how strong this effect is on average and give valuable information on the role that certain contextual factors play. This can help with strategic decisions about whether it is worth promoting a programme further to scale it up in the country context or even whether to extend it to other countries. Impact assessments can tap their full potential with regards to strategic decisions when headquarters are involved in the selection of a suitable programme (see Section 4.1).

Operational learning and steering: Impact-oriented accompanying research can also provide reliable information about why an intervention exerts an effect or not. That is, it

can explain the causal relationships behind an effect. This can be useful for the operational control of a programme, for example with regards to decisions about programme implementation. If the research project is well-timed with the programme cycle, researchers can support M&E efforts and consult on important milestones of the programme. This can be useful in the mid-term evaluation, the final evaluation or the planning of the subsequent phase. Smaller operational decisions can also be discussed with researchers ad hoc.

Evaluation capacity-building: The close cooperation between research and development cooperation organisations can also be used to strengthen knowledge about impact measurement as well as M&E in the implementing organisation and its local partners. This can be done through specific workshops for the project staff, as well as by commenting on the programme documents, in particular the impact chain, impact matrix and indicators. The close exchange about research design and method selection is also an important learning opportunity.⁴

Internal and external accountability: Impact-oriented accompanying research strengthens the internal and external accountability of the development agency. An impact assessment provides the programme with rigorous results on the impact of the programme, which can then be discussed within the organisation and with the donor. The communication of rigorous evidence is rather exceptional in the context of governance programmes, since many development organisations prefer to focus on sectors with results that can be quantified more easily when it comes to demonstrating accountability.

Increased transparency: By publishing the data and findings of rigorous impact assessments, the accompanying research can increase transparency. Thereby, contributions are made not only to the specific scientific debate, but also to the open data and open government movements in more general terms.

2.3 Resources

The depth of cooperation, the scientific rigor required by impact-oriented accompanying research as well as the strong focus on learning mean that more *time*, *financial resources* and *human resources* are needed than with the evaluations commonly applied by development organisations.

Regarding the *time* dimension of accompanying research, there are two things to consider. First, at the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), we believe that, in order to be meaningful, impact-oriented accompanying research requires a cooperation of at least 18 months (after finishing the formalisation phase. See Section 5). By contrast, the larger part of what we call “standard evaluations” often is conducted in a relatively short time frame, and only a couple of months (sometimes weeks) lie between a call for proposals and a final evaluation report. Second, timing is crucial. Project cycles and research phases should be coordinated in the most efficient way to make sure that preliminary results can be used throughout the cooperation and final results are available when they are needed.

4 See, for example, Gibbs, Napp, Jolly, Westover and Uhl (2002), King (2002) and McDonald, Rogers and Kefford (2003) for a more detailed discussion of experiences in evaluation capacity development.

Impact-oriented accompanying research requires more *financial resources* than standard evaluations, and all parties involved need to be aware of this. It requires an arrangement in which one or more researchers receive funding for months or years instead of calculating with a narrowly restricted number of working days, as is usually done in a regular evaluation contract. The costs are higher due to the depth of cooperation and the longer time period of cooperation needed to achieve robust results that conform to academic standards. In addition, many impact assessments require extensive data collection efforts that can be quite extensive. Funds for impact-oriented accompanying research can be provided by donors directly, by the implementing organisation itself (headquarters or country programmes) but also by third parties that support this exercise through research grants.

Finally, impact-oriented accompanying research is *human resource-intensive*, also for the development agency. The programme team needs to be aware that a close collaboration between researchers and programme staff requires extra time. For example, programme staff or the staff of partner organisations might need extra time to exchange ideas with the research team, discuss the research goals, provide and discuss available information, and accompany the research process. The research institution will need to allocate at least one researcher for the project and might need additional support from research assistants.

The resource issue is probably the most common concern that leads development organisations to hesitate in conducting impact assessments. While it is true, as described above, that impact assessments are resource-intensive, benefits can outweigh the costs. It is key to identify these promising cases based on a thorough assessment of their strategic role within the programme portfolio of the respective development organisation and the benefits for the M&E efforts of the programme itself.

2.4 Assessing impact in governance programmes

Impact-oriented accompanying research in governance needs to take into account the specific characteristics of governance programmes. The major challenges in rigorously assessing the impact of governance programmes are the multi-causality of governance processes, the dependency on the political environment, the additional complexity due to multi-level or multi-stakeholder approaches, difficulties in measuring abstract social concepts and the need for behavioural changes at the individual level.

At the systemic level, the *complexity* of governance processes complicates the attribution of observed changes to donor interventions. This complexity results from several factors. First, the implied *multi-causality* of governance processes poses a problem for impact assessments. Such multi-causality requires a research design that allows for carefully defining and isolating the impact of the donor intervention. Closely connected to the problem of multi-causality is the fact that governance programmes are highly *dependent on the political environment* as well as the political support for governance reforms. Governance reforms are political projects, and the success of governance reforms depends to a considerable extent on the political support for a reform agenda. This means that governance programmes are particularly vulnerable to the political environment, which is hard to influence from the outside. Impact assessments therefore always need to take into account the broader political context. Adding further complexity, governance programmes often take place on *multiple levels* in order to account for the systemic character of

governance reforms. This means that impact assessments need to take into account that an impact may occur at different levels of governance and that there are multiple interrelationships between these levels. Also, governance programmes often apply a *multi-stakeholder approach*. As significant change often depends on the cooperation of all actors within the system, donors tend to integrate actors with different interests in government, administration, civil society and the private sector, and work on gaining their support (Garcia, 2011; Groß, 2018a).

All the challenges that can be subsumed under the term “complexity” (multi-causality, context-dependency, multiple-level and multi-stakeholder approach) are not entirely unique to the governance sector, but consequences for impact assessments are more significant than in other policy fields. Impact measurements that use experimental or quasi-experimental approaches can help to reduce complexity by focussing on key parts of a programme theory and isolate their impact. Since these approaches are (for methodological reasons) not fit to assess the overall impact of a complex programme that adequately displays all of the abovementioned challenges, they should always be combined with theory-based approaches (see Section 2.1).

Besides the abovementioned challenge, one difficulty is that their goals are often *abstract*, and the concepts applied require *societal and systemic change* at high levels. Some goals or concepts thus cannot be satisfactorily translated into “measurable numbers”,⁵ nor is it a solution to simply aggregate information from an individual level. Impact assessments have to find solid ways to measure impact at these levels by integrating concepts and ideas that reflect state-of-the-art research of the relevant disciplines.

Lastly, the micro-level of individual behaviour and attitudes (capacity) plays an important role for the success of governance programmes. Old routines need to be broken and new routines learnt. The long impact chain – from individual behaviour and attitudes to changes at the system level – is thus a particular challenge for the impact measurement in governance interventions.

Even though the challenges discussed here require special attention, the different cases of impact-oriented accompanying research that form the basis of our lessons learnt have shown that they are not as unique to the governance sector as is sometimes depicted. This realisation is increasingly shared by donor agencies and academics alike.⁶

5 See Kumar (2013, pp. 31-56) for an important discussion on the use and misuse of democracy indicators that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

6 See Humphreys and Weinstein (2009) as well as Moehler (2010) for some examples of experimental and quasi-experimental approaches to measuring impact in governance programmes.

3 Impact assessment as a joint project between practitioners and researchers

Impact-oriented accompanying research represents a particularly close and intense form of cooperation between research and practice, which is otherwise rare. This means that different organisational cultures, priorities and logics of action characterise the accompanying research throughout the entire project period. Both sides should be aware of this fact before entering into a cooperation. After all, all parties involved need to have an interest in dealing with each other's perspectives and to engage in exchanges about the research project. This helps to avoid misunderstandings and facilitates a constructive and enriching cooperation.

The following section discusses cooperation constellations, expectations and communication as well as the learning issue in impact-oriented accompanying research. These topics will recur in different facets of the individual phases of impact-oriented accompanying research (see Section 4).

3.1 Cooperation constellations

Impact-oriented accompanying research can be carried out in different constellations and involve different levels of an organisation. Depending on the cooperation constellation, distinct dynamics might evolve during the process. The important questions are: Who finances whom? Who is researching? Who implements the programme? Who commissions the impact assessment? Which units of the organisation are involved – headquarters or programmes? Theoretically, several or all of the following actors can be involved in impact assessments: the researcher, the financier of the impact assessment, the financier of the development programme, the implementing organisation of the development programme and – in cases of larger and more decentralised development organisations – the country programme and/or its partner organisations. Practically, however, one organisation or unit often takes on several roles. For example, the financier of the impact assessment can also be the financier of the programme. Or a unit at headquarters can commission the impact assessment, but a unit in the field is responsible for the financing. In theory, many cooperation constellations are possible.

The cooperation constellation can lead to different dynamics in the implementation of the impact assessment, and potential challenges should be addressed consciously and as early as possible. For example, when a programme at the country level finances the impact assessment – as was the case in Benin, Mozambique and Peru – the programme staff might already have concrete expectations with regards to research design or outcomes. This should be addressed already in the matchmaking phase, where both sides lay the grounds for a possible cooperation to avoid misunderstandings. At the same time, the financing of the impact assessment by the development programme means that the programme is heavily involved in the research project and, hopefully, also that it has strong ownership of this process. This can make it easier to have a more fluid exchange between researchers and the programme team in general, and, in particular, more proactive engagement by the programme team. If the impact assessment is financed by a third party, as was the case in Togo, a different dynamic might develop. In Togo, the development programme was financed by KfW and implemented by GfA Consulting Group, whereas

the impact assessment was financed through the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) funds. In such a constellation, the exchange of information about the individual steps of the research project might not be as intense because the financing partner of the impact assessment is not on site. As the implementing organisation is not formally involved in the impact assessment project, there might be less of a commitment for project support and interest from their side.

Different dynamics might also arise depending on the constellation between headquarters and programmes in the field. Headquarters might have a different interest in impact-oriented accompanying research than the programme in the field. Whereas headquarters have organisation-wide goals in mind and might be more interested in testing a particular research approach or a specific programme design for the entire organisation, programmes might be more interested in learning more about the impact and functioning of their concrete activities for operational steering. It will be useful to integrate both headquarters and programmes in an impact assessment to ensure that the impact assessment addresses the needs of both sides.

3.2 Expectations and communication

There can be many different expectations of practitioners within an organisation and of researchers and practitioners when entering a cooperation for impact-oriented accompanying research. To avoid misunderstandings, it is important to discuss everyone's expectations at the very beginning. This includes the interests of the different actors as well as a discussion on the limitations of an impact assessment that follow from methodological requirements and depend on the respective programme context. This should be done already in the match-making phase and before concluding any cooperation agreement (see Section 3.1).

There are many examples of expectations that might be worth checking beforehand. A main aspect to clarify expectations about is the scope of the impact assessment. Inevitably, the assessment must strike a balance between precision and width. In other words, the more broadly an impact is defined, the more difficult it is to attribute it to the respective programme in a scientifically sound and rigorous way. An open discussion about this is crucial. Similarly, the interests, capacities and time that the team of the programme in the field has at its disposal are also crucial. All expectations should be discussed openly before finalising a cooperation agreement.

As the points above show, continuous communication between researchers and practitioners is key to ensure the success of impact-oriented accompanying research. Communication not only needs to take place before the conclusion of a cooperation agreement over the roles and expectations of all parties involved, but also on a continuous basis so that all parties involved can keep each other informed of important developments. Researchers should provide updates if there are changes in the research design, the methods applied or the data collection strategy, as this might influence what kinds of results can be reported. Researchers should also communicate if they encounter problems during the field research, as this might again influence the course of the impact assessment. Programme teams should provide updates on the state of the project implementation, the context conditions that might change and affect the identification strategy, and on any changes in the programme strategy or the operation plan. It might be

advisable to communicate the milestones on each side and to agree to regularly updating each other on the state of the project implementation. This way, continuous communication allows for detecting potential challenges in the implementation of the research project early on and for finding solutions in time.

3.3 Prerequisites for learning

Impact-oriented accompanying research puts a strong focus on learning. Our experience shows that learning does not just happen accidentally but requires a purposeful approach that takes into account the various characteristics and political/organisational contexts of the respective programme. The approach to learning ideally should be pinned down at an early stage of a cooperation and consider two major issues – resources and timing – with regards to both strategic and operational learning.

To ensure learning on a more strategic level, one resource that is crucial is a functional network of relevant stakeholders in the development organisation. It is advised to identify these stakeholders at the early stages of the joint project and agree on adequate ways to inform them and allow for participation. One way to set up communication is through an institutional setup, that is, setting up a task force, review committee or steering group that convenes at regular intervals and is informed and asked for feedback at crucial milestones of the impact assessment. When information needs regarding strategic questions come up on short notice, and when there are no actual results yet from the impact assessment, the accompanying research can still be used to provide knowledge from other sources. To give one example, systematic reviews of existing rigorous research on a topic can relative easily be included into impact-oriented accompanying research and support strategic learning processes on shorter notice than the impact assessment itself can.

As regards resources for operational learning, first of all, a great deal of commitment and willingness to learn is required at the level of the researchers, the programme and also its local partners. This commitment is, on the one hand, in itself a prerequisite for joining a project involving impact-oriented accompanying research. On the other hand, it can be further increased if the project's formal beginning is accompanied by a demand-oriented kick-off workshop in which the specific questions and information needs of the operational level are discussed in detail. Also, the researcher must make sure that the logic of the assessment and its results are accessible and useful for the programme. It is about explaining the intuition and logic behind the assessment and fighting any prejudices implying that the impact assessment is something peripheral to the day-to-day work of the team. Secondly, to state the obvious, learning on the operational level requires time. The programme team should take this into account and support the learning process by setting respective work priorities. Time must be set aside for attending meetings and workshops, but also for additional communication efforts throughout the entire cooperation. Finally, a factor that should not be underestimated: Operational learning for the involved programme staff can greatly benefit from headquarters acknowledging and accrediting the exceptional efforts that are made to learn, thereby making a contribution to greater effectiveness. Also signalling to the programme that headquarters tolerates that some interventions fail and that it is open, even eager, to learn from those cases is key.

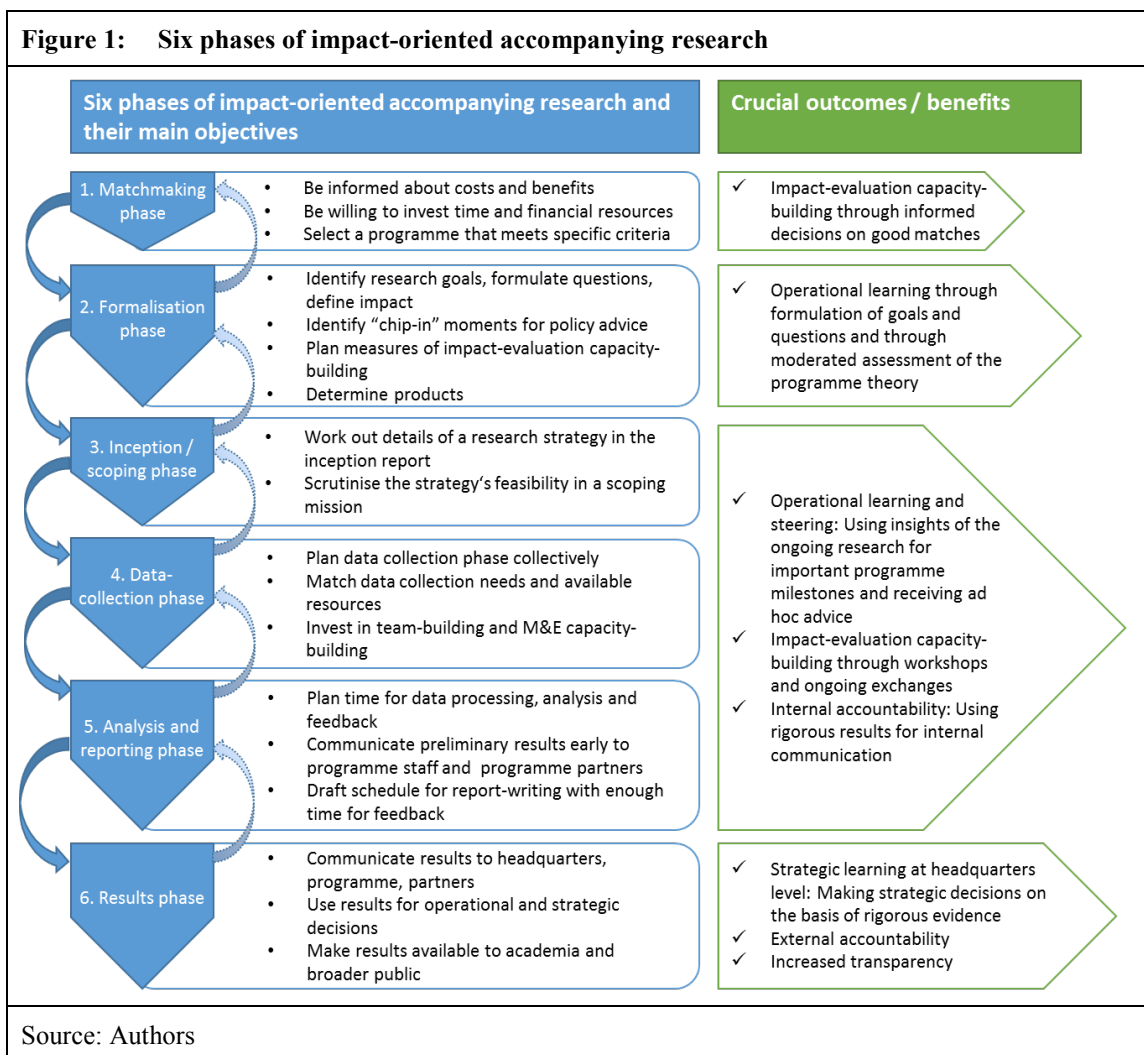
Learning on the strategic level also requires complex processes. For researchers, it demands taking up a more active role in communication at events that take place within the relevant networks. Key persons from headquarters who accompany the research project can again help to identify respective opportunities. Since results from the rigorous impact assessment are often of great interest to the strategic level, it may be efficient to target “chip-in moments” that occur towards the end of the partnership. In addition, learning opportunities for a more strategic level can also occur spontaneously when information needs come up without advance notice. In such a situation, strategic learning can only be realised when an effective network is in place to ensure that relevant stakeholders are aware of the accompanying research as a possible source of information and expertise.

As regards the question of when the learning happens on the operational level, there are three aspects to consider. First, close cooperation and communication between programme staff and researchers can contribute to continuous learning. The more the project is set up in a participatory manner, the more that “process learning” can be expected to occur.⁷ Second, learning is enabled by following a demand-oriented approach and reacting to upcoming information needs at (planned or unplanned) programme milestones (chip-in moments). Third, workshops for impact-evaluation capacity development can be a valuable opportunity for learning to take place. To make sure that – beyond helping the implementation of the specific impact assessment – the workshop helps programme staff to consume rigorous evidence generated elsewhere, the content should not only cover (impact) assessment knowledge that is relevant for the planned assessment, but also cover more general impact-evaluation knowledge and sensitise for topics of M&E and impact-oriented development cooperation on a more general level.

4 Six phases of impact-oriented accompanying research

The following sections provide a detailed discussion of the key aspects to be considered in each phase of impact-oriented accompanying research. We start off with the matchmaking phase (4.1), where both sides lay the grounds for a possible cooperation. In the formalisation phase (4.2), the contract document for the cooperation is drawn up. The inception and scoping phase (4.3) is then about drawing up a research strategy and scrutinising its feasibility during a scoping mission to the programme. During the data collection phase (4.4), the empirical data is collected. The analysis and reporting phase (4.5) is about the steps necessary to draw up the final report, and the results phase (4.6) offers different options to make use of the results of the impact assessment. Even though the different phases ideally build on each other, there may always be situations that require iterative loops to preceding phases in order to make adjustments. In the following, each phase is discussed in detail to ensure that all important points are tackled.

⁷ See Patton (1997) for an introduction to the idea of process learning.



4.1 Matchmaking phase

As the name implies, the matchmaking phase is all about making a match between a programme and a team of researchers in order to begin a joint impact-oriented accompanying research project. The accuracy of the fit in this phase is decisive for the success of the cooperation that lies ahead. In a nutshell, two major conditions must be met. First, all parties involved **must be well-informed** about all the costs and benefits of impact-oriented accompanying research and **must be willing to invest** in a mid- to long-term cooperation. Second, the interventions implemented by the specific programme in question **should meet certain criteria** to ensure that a rigorous impact assessment is doable and that the most can be made from the accompanying research. We do not argue that the format used by the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) has to be implemented always for all programmes. Under some conditions, the format has more potential, and it is wise for everyone involved to check whether these conditions are in place early in the process.

Cooperation between a programme and a research institution can start through formal or informal channels. If impact assessments are institutionally required, institutional partnerships between practitioners and researchers may already be in place that enable impact-

oriented accompanying research to start off easily. Yet, research projects in applied and practice-oriented research often start in more informal ways, and informal contacts between research and practice are already there long before a cooperation is formalised. Conferences and other platforms and networks that focus on evidence-informed practice provide opportunities for an exchange about impact. Informal exchange then often turns into a cooperation idea at some point. In cases where the informal cooperation between research and practice is not as strong, interested parties can turn to platforms and networks that can help to find a match. Also, institutions such as the GIZ might consider offering matchmaking workshops in which a platform is explicitly offered to programmes and researchers to discuss opportunities to cooperate. This kind of model could be connected to capacity-building activities.

Box 1: From exchange to a joint project

As the practice of impact-oriented accompanying research is not yet well-established in the context of German development cooperation, there are no clear formal procedures on how to start such a cooperation. In the case of the GIZ-DIE impact initiative, individual DIE researchers and staff of both the Africa and Governance departments of the GIZ had been in touch to regularly discuss the effectiveness of governance programmes when the idea was raised to formalise the cooperation. The first meeting dedicated to discussing challenges and opportunities of impact assessment in the governance sector took place in mid-2013. It then took almost another year to identify programmes that were considered fit for the research ahead and that took an interest in a detailed assessment of their impact.

The first of the two conditions that must be met to make a match is that all parties involved must be informed about the characteristics of impact-oriented accompanying research and be willing to make an investment in the deep cooperation. Put differently, the matchmaking phase is the right time for expectation management.⁸

One key issue that should be addressed in this context is the **definition of impact**. The debate around impact is highly complex and sometimes controversial. Many different definitions of impact are used without always making them explicit. Within the academic research community, impact is commonly defined as a change caused by an intervention. This implies that we can only speak of an impact when an effect is causally attributed to a cause using a counter-factual approach. However, within the development community, the term “impact” is often used in a broader sense. Sometimes it refers to long-term results that are assessed in a non-rigorous way; sometimes it refers to aggregate data at the output level. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, for example, defines impact as “[p]ositive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). Agreeing on a shared definition of impact is crucial to the success of impact-oriented accompanying research. Questions to consider include:

- At which level of results does impact begin for the programme in question?
- Is the impact something aggregate, or does it consist of several items that need to be measured separately?

⁸ See Section 2 for a detailed description of the differences between impact-oriented accompanying research and other forms of evaluation.

- What part of the programme's overall impact should be measured, and which other parts need to be left out?

Another success factor of impact-oriented accompanying research is the right **timing**. Project cycle and research phases should be coordinated in the most efficient way to make sure that preliminary results can be used throughout the cooperation and final results are available when needed. The crucial questions that need to be answered in this context are:

- What are the next strategic milestones within the programme or within the development organisation that should be informed by results of the accompanying research?
- Are there any phases of current heavy workloads within the programme (i.e. caused by negotiations between Germany and its partner country) that must be coordinated with phases of heavy workloads that result from the research partnership?

Selecting a programme and intervention that meets specific criteria

Besides these rather practical considerations, the second major task that needs to be accomplished in the matchmaking phase is to make sure that the programme in question meets certain criteria, both from a research and from a practice perspective. Only if these criteria are met is a robust attribution of the effects of the respective governance programme possible.

First, there are **scientific criteria** that must be met to ensure that an impact assessment approach is applicable. Although programme staff can provide relevant information on the programme, it mainly remains the researchers' responsibility to make an informed assessment of its evaluability within the foreseen research design.

The main aspects to consider include:

- What kind of monitoring and baseline data is available? Does the quality of these data meet the standards of the data collection needed for impact assessment? To what extent is it possible to collect baseline data to reach a before–after comparison?
- Is it possible to randomly assign target groups to treatment (i.e. participation in the intervention) and non-treatment in order to be in a position to realise an experimental approach? If not, what are the options to define a comparison group? For instance, is it possible to delay the participation in the intervention for parts of the target group so that those who join later can serve as a comparison group to realise a pipeline approach?
- Does the programme already have reasonable and explicitly formulated expectations regarding attributable impact, or can they be reconstructed?
- Does the programme aim at impact on a large-n dimension, that is, on the level of individuals, households, villages, etc., or does it aim at small-n impact, that is, the establishment of a new law?⁹

9 There is plenty of literature that gives valuable guidance to the rather methodological aspects of the matchmaking phase. See, for example, Bamberger (2006), Garcia (2011) and Shadish, Cook and Campbell (2002).

Second, there are some *organisational considerations* that the practitioners' side needs to make, given the considerable investment that is required for accompanying research. These considerations include the following:

- At the headquarters level, what is the strategic interest in an impact assessment of the respective programme?
- What material and non-material support can headquarters give to the programme for the implementation of the impact-oriented accompanying research?
- How can the research partnership be harmonised with other planned or ongoing evaluations to reduce overlaps and inefficiencies?
- What are the capacities of the country office to actively participate in the impact assessment? Who can benefit from impact-evaluation capacity-building measures, and what are the country office's specific capacity-building needs?

4.2 Formalisation phase

The phase in which the cooperation is formalised should be entered only when the matchmaking phase is completed and its conditions are met: All relevant actors are informed about the specifics of impact-oriented accompanying research and willing to make a considerable investment, and the selected programme meets the criteria for an impact assessment (see above). The goal of the formalisation phase then is to generate an unambiguous contract document, often called "Terms of Reference", that defines the scope and limits of cooperation and serves as a point of reference and guidance throughout the entire process.

Identifying goals, formulating questions and defining impact

At this point, staff of the development agency and the researchers probably already have a joint understanding of their research cooperation's goals. Setting these goals out in writing helps to identify and resolve discrepancies.

Since goals are often formulated in a rather broad and less-specific way, it is important to also formulate concrete questions that will guide the cooperation. By following certain rules for the formulation of questions, as is also done in other evaluation approaches, the course can be set to a well-focussed process. Researchers who play a crucial role here need to have good knowledge of the programme to ensure that the questions are, in fact, solvable/answerable.

Besides goals and questions, it is recommended to write down the shared definition of impact that has been agreed on during the matchmaking phase.

Identifying chip-in moments for policy advice

The traditional perspective on the use of evaluation puts a focus on "learning from results". Although the relevance of reports remains undeniable, impact-oriented accompanying

research has a great potential to generate insights that can – and should be – used as they arise during the implementation of the impact assessment (and well before they are put into writing). One strategy to exploit this potential is to determine chip-in moments for policy advice from the outset of the research cooperation.

Typical chip-in moments are often closely linked with milestones of the project cycle. For instance, researchers may provide input to strategic documents such as the programme proposal. One point in time to do so is at the very beginning of the programme, when the programme is setting up its strategy and monitoring system. Impact-oriented accompanying research will help the programme staff to think more thoroughly and carefully about the theory of change guiding their activities and the choice of indicators measuring their performance as well as choice of approaches. In addition, adding an impact assessment perspective helps when discussing all approaches and activities in terms of their evaluability. The indicators might be an important data source for the research project. At the same time, if demanded, the researchers might help the programme to choose and formulate indicators. Another chip-in moment are mid-term reviews, where researchers can be asked to provide input based on their insights from the research project for follow-up proposals.

Box 2: Policy advice and valuable spill-over effect from impact-oriented accompanying research

In the case of the GIZ-DIE impact initiative, one chip-in opportunity arose when one of the partner programmes contracted a consultancy to conduct a representative survey to measure one of the indicators of the programme at the impact level. DIE researchers provided input to the text of the offer, terms of reference, consulted on the sampling procedure and commented on the questionnaire to make sure that all relevant indicators were covered and questions were categorised correctly. A close exchange with GIZ staff ensured that capacities in the planning and implementation of surveys were built and are available to the programme in similar future processes.

Planning measures of impact-evaluation capacity-building

The joint implementation itself, as well as the exposure to the logic of an impact assessment, offers another great learning potential: Staff of the implementing organisation and involved partners beyond can use the opportunity and strengthen their impact-evaluation capacities. It is advisable to have this in mind during the formalisation phase to ensure that this transfer of knowledge is actually realised. Also, the logic of the design should be clear to everyone involved from the outset in order to reach shared ownership and avoid the impression of the “research team” doing something that is parallel and disconnected from the programme.

Capacity-building workshops can be planned so that they complement field visits of the researchers. The main advantage of this setting is that training content can be closely connected to the actual phase of the research process, and that the illustration of the content discussion can be based on the programme itself. Typical topics for workshops on impact evaluation include the theory of change and drafting indicators as well as discussions about impact contribution vs. impact attribution.

Overall, through the common exercise, all actors involved should develop a better understanding of evaluation practice. Certainly, it will not lead to everyone being an evaluation expert, but it will certainly increase the staff’s capacity to understand the

intuition, potential and limitations of rigorous impact assessment as well as to more effectively and responsibly use existing evidence.

Determining outputs

Realistic planning requires that the major outputs of the research cooperation are determined from the outset. These considerations should be based on the goals of the impact assessment (see above). Whereas in other forms of evaluation detailed results are often only communicated internally and publication to a broader public is restricted to the main findings, impact-oriented accompanying research is characterised by more publication activity. Since data is explicitly collected and generated for both internal learning and research purposes, there are more opportunities to add to ongoing debates.

As discussed above in more detail in Section 2, accompanying research is a research relationship as opposed to a contractor–evaluation relationship. This should be reflected in the contract documents. The independence of the researcher should never be compromised. Provisions should ensure that their research can be *conducted* and *perceived* as being independent from the programme. In addition, it is good practice to set out in writing that all data that is generated within the research cooperation can be used beyond this specific context, given that rules of data security are followed. Also, the researcher will aim, if possible, to produce academic publications from this cooperation. It should be established as to how the cooperation will be acknowledged in that setup.

Typical outputs that can be defined in the contract documents are:

1. Inception report: A guiding document that specifies the details of the research design before the actual data collection and analysis take place (see inception phase for details).
2. Final report: A detailed account of the entire research cooperation for internal use, including background and context information, a methodological description of the research design, a description of all data that are used in the research and, of course, an in-depth analysis of results as well as conclusions and policy recommendations (see reporting phase for details).
3. Policy brief: A short discussion of certain aspects of the programme that are relevant for policy-makers beyond the programme and the agency itself.
4. Besides the typical written outputs, it should also be considered to organise presentations and workshops throughout the partnership and to plan for participation in exchange and networking events at headquarters and in partner countries. Also, making all or part of the collected data available to the public might be a relevant contribution.

To avoid ambiguities, the contract document should specify for each of the outputs which stakeholder groups are addressed, define the publication language(s) and give rough estimations of envisioned length.

Since accompanying research has a mid- or even long-term time frame, the contract document should also leave space for ad hoc advice and respective outputs, if applicable.

Experience shows that there is always a need for flexibility on both sides in order to make the most from the cooperation, and there should be room to allow for that.

Box 3: Examples from Benin

Here are some examples of outputs from the impact-oriented accompanying research for the decentralisation programme in Benin:

- Policy brief to analyse more general topics such as the contribution of the GIZ’s multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach to the success of decentralisation reforms (4 pages).
- Discussion paper to present the results of the impact assessment to a broader audience (50 pages).
- Final report to present the results of the impact assessment to a GIZ internal audience, including a more detailed discussion of context, challenges and ways forward (60 pages).
- Two workshops for programme staff and partners to disseminate results and discuss strategies for how to improve citizen participation in decentralisation for the follow-up phase.

Source: Groß (2018a; 2018b)

4.3 Inception and scoping phase

The inception and scoping phase builds upon an extensive exchange in the matchmaking phase and a written agreement (terms of reference) that subsumes the results of the cooperation negotiations in the formalisation phase. The two main goals of this phase are to work out the details of a research strategy and to scrutinise practical issues and logistics during a scoping mission to the programme. Results should be written down in an inception report that will serve as a guiding document throughout the following phases of the cooperation process.

Working out the details of a research strategy in the inception report

At this point, crucial cornerstones of the research strategy have already been set in the terms of reference: the general goal(s) of the research, falsifiable research questions and a shared definition of impact. It is now mainly the researchers’ responsibility to deduce a detailed research strategy from these cornerstones. This requires an in-depth analysis of the programme as a whole, including its theory of change and its specific context in consideration of political, economic and social factors.

One important prerequisite for this is that the programme provides relevant programme documents and the programme staff is open to discussing them in detail. Researchers can – to a certain extent, and to the best of their knowledge – specify what kind of information they need; programme staff can provide an orientation of what is available. Although the researchers should try to cover as much as possible and then ask about specifics, it is not advisable to just pass on documentation without putting the different pieces into context. The most relevant pieces of information are, for example, the date and purpose of publication; how much the documents represent a general consensus within the programme and with the local partners; and, in some cases, whether it is the most current version of the document. Sometimes getting previous versions are helpful to discuss and reconstruct why the programme staff decided to change the strategies, but it is key to make sure that one

knows as much as possible about the current strategy of the programme and about how the implementation of the interventions is working.

Scrutinising the research strategy's feasibility in a scoping mission

In a mid- to long-term cooperation involving impact-oriented accompanying research, it is highly advisable to invest greatly in a scoping mission to scrutinise the research strategy's feasibility. Feasibility refers to two major aspects:

1. *The availability and quality of existing data.* This involves baseline and/or monitoring data more generally. The key is to know what information exists and how much it can be trusted.
2. *Feasibility to collect own data collection.* This is determined by the specific country- and policy contexts. It involves questions of access to target groups and interview partners, potential costs and realistic planning, and the strength of local partners in terms of the data collection. The key is to know how difficult and costly – in terms of time and money – it will be to collect own generated data.

For both aspects, hands-on knowledge by the programme staff in the field is crucial. They can answer questions on what is doable in the country context best, and if they do not already know, they tend to have contacts that can answer the questions thoroughly.

At the heart of the scoping mission lies a joint workshop between all partners of the research cooperation. In this workshop, participants discuss the programme's theory of change in depth in order to reach a joint understanding of its pathways to impact and which parts of that will be addressed and covered by which parts of the planned research. Finally, and probably most importantly, reservations about evaluation that are still widespread should be addressed, and all actors involved should be enabled to develop ownership for the joint project.

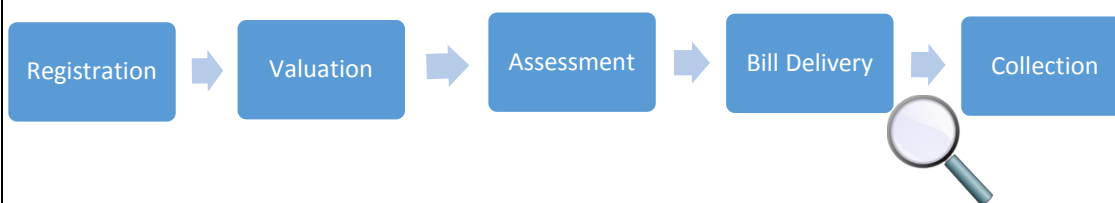
The scoping mission should be planned jointly by researchers and programme staff. Both sides should propose relevant interview partners and destinations. It is key that, although the programme can certainly use its dense network in the respective countries, the researchers' contribution might be valuable in terms of making sure that the scoping mission does not merely get a perspective that is already biased by relying too heavily on existing networks of the programme. At this point, it is key for the joint project to show and signal to all local partners that there is a strong cooperation between the researchers and the programme staff, but that the analysis represents an independent impact assessment, and that in implementing this assessment, a diverse range of perspectives on – and accounts of – the intervention will be taken into consideration. Also, it is important to consider that the scoping mission (as well as the analysis that follows) might require going to destinations where the programme is not active. Coordinating (at least informing) other donors active in these destinations is important, and in many cases they will be very helpful in gaining access to networks to which the programme does not already belong. The perspectives of other donors most commonly are also relevant in themselves.

Box 4: Scope and overall causal link: The example of Mozambique

Overall, a rigorous impact assessment does not cover all activities of the project and programme. In the context of accompanying research, the key is finding an element that is suitable for a rigorous impact assessment but that is also meaningful for a project – in terms of the learning potential and for gaining insights into the effectiveness of a broader array of the activities related to the programme.

In the case of Mozambique, after several exchanges, DIE and GIZ staff agreed to focus on the effects of different tax bills on tax compliance, in general, and the differential effects of diverse messages to taxpayers, in particular. This certainly does not cover all the activities of the GIZ “Good Financial Governance” programme in Mozambique. Still, considering that one goal of the project is to increase local revenue collection in the municipalities, picking this aspect offers a high potential for meaningful results and insights that go beyond the bill delivery process itself.

Revenue collection involves many steps; the GIZ is active in all of them. The steps are so interconnected that failure or lack of capacity in one step of the process would lead to significant decreases in the effectiveness and efficiency of the entire revenue generation system.¹⁰



The scope of the analysis allowed for rigorously assessing the effects of the letters. But the insights on the research process were much broader. The implementation and generation of data for the analysis of that final step implied the correct functioning of the other steps. By implementing the impact assessment design, a lot was learnt about problems and challenges in the other steps; indirectly, it was learnt how much the GIZ project had contributed to the revenue capacities of the municipalities. In essence, implementing the design of the impact assessment indirectly represented a hard test for the contributions that the GIZ had made. Moreover, focussing on this area meant that the additional work for implementing the impact assessment was reduced and aligned, as it relied mostly on information that the partner was planning and supposed to collect (administrative data) in any case. Also, this close alignment helped to improve ownership and use of the results as well as provide indirect benefits (discussing the monitoring system of the municipality more generally).

Source: Authors

4.4 Data collection phase

In the data collection phase, the empirical data for the impact assessment is collected, as outlined in the evaluation design. Unlike in other evaluation formats, where programme staff do not play a role in data collection, the data collection phase in accompanying research is characterised by a particularly close collaboration between the programme staff and the research team, as it often implies longer research stays and intense exchanges over the data gathered.

¹⁰ Ahmad (2015) discusses the process of revenue generation and the several steps involved. In his discussion, he includes additional steps that are not so relevant for the discussion here. For a discussion of these steps and the relevance of taking into account the systemic nature of the processes involved in revenue generation – applied specifically to the case of Mozambique – see Bunk et al. (2017).

Plan the data collection phase collectively

The programme staff and research teams should have discussed collectively the type, strategy and scope of the data collection as early as possible in the research process. The research strategy should have been agreed on no later than at the end of the inception phase, with all details being written down in the inception report. It might be necessary to make changes to the research design during the data collection phase if conditions on the ground have changed, thereby making the original data collection strategy impossible. Such changes need to be planned and agreed on collectively by researchers and programme staff. The types of data collection can vary, depending on the research design, just like in other forms of evaluation research. Data collection can include interviews, surveys, focus groups, dataset generation, participant observation or document collection. Each method has its own rules and procedures during data collection. Last but not least, the timing of the data collection needs to be carefully coordinated with the programme cycle. Depending on the scope of the data collection, research stays can vary from a few weeks to several months and can take place at several points in time. Depending on the research design, the timing of research stays might need to take place before, during or after programme activities in order to collect adequate data.

Plan data collection needs, resources and infrastructure together

For a smooth data collection phase, the data collection needs, resources and infrastructure should be planned together. Data collection does not necessarily need to be done by the research team alone. It is recommended for the strategy to also involve the programme, programme partners and domestic research institutions. Ideally, the cooperation with domestic research partners will also extend to joint scientific publications. Researchers should communicate early on the data collection needs that they have. Programme staff should clarify whether and how they can provide support in gathering or generating these data and how much time they will be able to invest. Regarding data collection, programmes and their networks can be important resources for the identification of – and access to – interview partners, survey respondents, datasets and/or documents. Programme staff can also facilitate the activities considerably if they are able to support the research team by providing (or helping to gain access to) office space, internet, cars, drivers and/or translators. Given the many options for collaboration in this phase, responsibilities should be defined early on. The agreement should be clearly communicated between all parties involved in the data collection.

There are also infrastructural questions to consider when planning the research stay. Internet access might be limited in some areas; copy machines and printers might be available only in larger cities; batteries for recording devices might be scarce. Having accessibility to areas by road and the availability of accommodations are further points to consider. Researchers should reflect on all of these aspects to avoid problems once research has started.

Invest in team-building and M&E capacity-building

Impact-oriented accompanying research is a research collaboration in which both sides are involved in the research process. It makes sense to invest in team-building. Stays in the field can also be used as opportunities for capacity development regarding the M&E of

programme staff. It is thus advised to plan time for capacity-building workshops on a topic of choice. The depth of involvement required for programmes can vary depending on the research design, specifics of the programme and, last but not least, available time and human resources.

4.5 Analysis and reporting phase

The main bulk of work during the analysis and reporting phase is done by the research team. This phase comprises data processing, data analysis, results consolidation, the writing of the final report using the findings of the research project and, in some cases, further publications. It can be a lengthy process – certainly if compared to other formats of evaluation – and it requires some patience and comprehension from all actors involved.

Plan enough time for data processing, analysis and feedback

It is important to plan enough time for data processing and related tasks. Databases need to be cleaned, interview records need to be transcribed, etc. This phase alone can take several weeks, depending on the amount of data gathered and the effort needed for data processing. Typical challenges in this context are, for example, a high number of missing values in a database or bad recording quality of an interview.

During data analysis, researchers should ensure a solid documentation of the process to be able to reconstruct how the results came about. This can be a time-consuming endeavour, but it is part of the quality management of any given research project and reflects good scientific practice.

Also, researchers might need feedback from the programme team because they have come across missing pieces of information or contradictory statements that need further corroboration during data analysis. This often requires further input from the programme team – for example, by providing additional documents or information – so they can offer their own evaluations of a situation or check the accuracy of an assessment. Both sides should be aware that this kind of support might be needed during the analysis and reporting phase.

Communicate preliminary results early to programme staff and programme partners

Researchers should communicate their preliminary results to the programme team in an early phase and – if agreed on with the programme staff – also to the local programme partners. Early communication allows for checking the plausibility of findings with the programme team and the partners. If deemed reasonable by the research team, the analysis can be refined based on the feedback received. The programme team can then use the results for programme steering and other strategic or operative decisions. Communicating results early leaves time for the programme team to draw their own conclusions and study the lessons learnt: It can be done in a workshop during a field visit or just by sharing a draft version of the final report.

Organise writing of the final report with enough time for feedback

The writing of the final report itself should be carefully planned in terms of time management. Usually, several researchers are involved in drafting the final report of the impact-oriented accompanying research, and different stakeholders in the development agency are also invited to comment. The schedule for the writing phase should allow enough time to integrate all necessary feedback. Again, it is important to agree upon a schedule that works for all involved parties.

4.6 Dissemination and use of results

The final report marks only the beginning of a long list of opportunities to make use of the results from the impact-oriented accompanying research. As already discussed in the section on benefits for impact assessments (Section 2.2), the results of the research project can be used by research institutions and development agencies for different purposes and audiences.

Communicate results to headquarters, the programme team and local partners

The communication of results starts with those who are directly involved in the project: the programme team, the headquarters units and the programme's partners. Different strategies of communication should be applied to each of these groups.

First, it makes sense to organise a workshop for the programme team in a confidential setting. Here, researchers present and explain their findings, and the programme team can ask for clarification or provide feedback. Such a workshop offers the opportunity for an open exchange on the strengths and weaknesses of the programme and might lay the groundwork for strategic or operative adaptations by the programme staff. It also offers the opportunity to reflect on the impact-oriented accompanying research and start a dialogue between researchers and the programme team on how to follow up on the findings.

Second, results should be communicated to the headquarters level as well. This should be done in close collaboration with the programme team. It allows units at headquarters to use the insights from the impact assessment for their own strategic work. Ideally, communication at the headquarters level should be planned in close cooperation with contact persons who are in touch with the relevant networks and can identify good chip-in moments. Access to these networks will be more effective if existing structures and occasions are used to communicate results as opposed to creating additional events (see also Section 3.3).

Third, findings should be presented to all programme partners and, if feasible, other donor agencies that are working on the same issues, both in writing and in workshops or similar dissemination events.¹¹ Such a workshop offers the chance to discuss the practical implications of the results for the programme with a broader audience. It also provides an opportunity to reflect on some basic challenges of the programme and start a discussion on

11 See Torres, Preskill and Piontek (2005) as well as Torres (2009) for effective strategies for communication and reporting in the evaluation context.

how all involved parties can better contribute to reaching the programme goals. Most of all, a workshop with all stakeholders offers the chance for programme partners to participate in solving problems and might increase the ownership of the programme goals. Also, in many cases, it provides a platform to start a strategic discussion among donors and at the country level about how to approach an issue of common interest based on solid empirical evidence. Beyond workshops, other formats, such as policy briefs as well as short videos explaining the main results, can help to increase the number of actors reached.

Use results for operational and strategic decisions and to increase accountability

There are many opportunities to use the results of impact-oriented accompanying research for a development agency. The programme can use the results for learning purposes: Insights from the impact assessment can be used for operational programme steering or for planning the follow-up phase. Findings should also be used agency-wide for strategic decisions on programme design within specific sectors. Strategic decisions can include the roll-out or termination of programmes, or a recalibration of the programme strategy. This requires that impact assessments are planned based on an agency-wide strategy for impact assessments in development programmes. Results can also be used for accountability purposes towards headquarters, donors such as the BMZ and taxpayers.

Make results available to academia and the broader public

For the research institution, the results can be transformed into policy publications and academic publications. These publications can be closely tied to the thematic focus of the impact assessment, but data analysis might also generate new publication ideas. Impact assessments also feed into policy publications and policy advice. Impact-oriented accompanying research enables researchers to engage more closely with the research community on impact assessment or specific thematic issues. Also, the communications department of the donor agency can use the results of impact-oriented accompanying research to develop communication outputs that promote the agency's impact by drawing on well-founded research findings.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

Even though impact assessments have gained visibility in recent years and demand is on the rise, they are certainly not a panacea that should replace other approaches to evaluation. Also, impact assessment can be done in diverse formats. As discussed in Section 2, impact-oriented accompanying research, as a subset of impact assessments, has very specific characteristics that result from the depth of cooperation between the researchers and the development organisation and the level of scientific rigor on which conclusions are based. This offers a number of great benefits for both the programme and the development organisation as a whole, especially with regards to learning. On the other hand, impact assessments, based on any format of accompanying research or not, require certain investments.

This publication is making a contribution to the debate by discussing exactly what is needed for this specific format to work and offers practical guidance for the process of

implementation. Based on our experiences, in the following we propose seven golden rules concerning the process of impact-oriented accompanying research in governance programmes and offer a number of policy recommendations that go beyond the actual process of implementing an impact assessment.

5.1 Golden rules for impact-oriented accompanying research projects

Based on other studies as well as on our own experiences, we propose seven golden rules to navigate the process of impact-oriented accompanying research in governance programmes more easily.

1. Carefully select topics and programmes that are useful for strategic processes at an organisation-wide level.

The thematic focus of impact assessments should be carefully selected to ensure that the development organisation invests its resources in topics that are strategically important for them. The decision about conducting multi-year, rigorous impact-oriented accompanying research should be taken with a view to decisions on programme strategy at the organisation level. For example, it might be useful to assess a pilot governance project or other innovative approaches with which the agency has no prior experience in order to decide on its roll-out or to assess particularly costly programmes.

2. Integrate impact-oriented accompanying research at the programme level early on.

Impact assessment projects should be integrated as early as possible in the programme design. An early kick-off and a selection of appropriate programme activities creates opportunities for the implementation of more rigorous impact assessment designs.

3. Clarify expectations early.

The expectations towards the impact assessment should be clarified as early as possible between all collaborating partners. In the matchmaking phase, a discussion about the term “impact” and what may be included in that term in the respective governance intervention will help to find a common language. Knowing the needs of all sides and knowing what can realistically be achieved will clear the way for a constructive and fruitful cooperation.

4. Define common goals, the methodological approach and the scope of the impact assessment.

All collaborating partners should be involved in the elaboration of the goals, methodological approach and scope of the impact assessment during the formalisation and scoping phases. For example, this can be done in a joint kick-off workshop with all collaborating partners present. It is key to develop a common vision and ensure that everyone is on the same page regarding the overall goal and strategy of the project. Broad ownership of the impact-oriented accompanying research will contribute to the utilisation of results.

5. Communicate continuously and build teams with researchers, practitioners and local partners.

Continuous communication and efforts at team-building are necessary throughout the collaboration, particularly before and during stays in the field. Researchers, practitioners and partners need to communicate to coordinate their activities and stay informed about changes in planned activities. That way they can adjust their own work accordingly. Impact-oriented accompanying research is a collaborative exercise that needs the engagement of everyone involved. It thus makes sense to think of all collaborating partners as one team and to invest in team-building. Local research institutions should be included in the partnership to provide for a better local grounding, thereby enhancing the validity of the results.

6. Use the impact-oriented accompanying research as an opportunity for learning.

Impact assessments, especially if implemented in the form of impact-oriented accompanying research, are important opportunities for learning. Opportunities to learn should be planned consciously as part of the collaboration. The findings of the impact assessment can be used for strategic decisions at the headquarters level or for operational decisions at the programme level, if planned accordingly. Also, capacity-building components for M&E can be an opportunity for project staff to learn.

7. Integrate chip-in moments for policy advice during the project cycle.

Chip-in moments for policy advice by researchers should be carefully planned at the start of the cooperation. This allows for preparing targeted policy advice when strategic or operational decisions need to be made in the governance programme. That way, programmes can make use of the discussions and preliminary results throughout the collaboration, not only after the presentation of final results.

We are confident that these golden rules will help to make rigorous impact-oriented accompanying research more effective and more useful for development organisations.

5.2 Policy recommendations

In general terms, development organisations are called upon to increase activities in the realm of impact assessment but also to think carefully about what they want to be used for. Rigorous impact assessments and thoughts on how to provide evidence for impact should be on any development organisation's agenda. Any organisation that promotes evidence-based policy-making should therefore include the implementation of impact assessments of strategically selected interventions in its M&E portfolio. The relevance of the topic will continue to grow in policy and academic circles in the coming years. This is particularly true for Germany, which is, to some extent, lagging behind the movement. Implementing organisations should be prepared for growing demands for rigorous impact assessments by donors. There are many formats to implement impact assessment, but we consider that impact assessments implemented in the format of impact-oriented accompanying research have many merits and benefits that make them particularly attractive, especially when the focus is on learning.

Second, and more concretely, development organisations are called upon to build an organisational culture for assessing impact. The implementation of an impact assessment is more than just the inclusion of yet another approach to evaluation. Impact assessments can tap their full potential when they are realised in an organisational context that has a constructive approach towards learning and an incentive structure that rewards critical views.

Third, development organisations should increase knowledge about impact assessments across all levels of management and implementation. Knowledge of the key principles of rigorous impact assessments across the organisation will enhance the effectiveness and usefulness of impact assessments. This means that development organisations should continue to invest in capacity-building for impact assessment. Since senior officials are ultimately making the strategic decisions on impact-oriented accompanying research, they should be equipped with the necessary knowledge about impact and how it can be assessed in the governance sector. In this sense, increased exposure to the methods of impact assessment within the organisation will reduce resistance to these and increase how much the evidence generated by them – regardless of whether it is in-house or not – is used in planning and management activities.

Fourth, development organisations are called upon to improve their systems of knowledge management with regards to impact assessments. Impact assessments offer great benefits, particularly with regards to strategic questions that go beyond individual programmes. Full potential can be achieved when an organisation is prepared to ensure that lessons learnt reach the right units.

Fifth, development organisations, including ministries, should set organisation-wide rules to allow for strategic decisions to be made on impact assessments. There need to be clear organisation-wide rules on the decision-making process about whether or not an impact assessment should be conducted. They need to include the headquarters units as well as the concerned programmes. If impact assessments are to be of strategic use for the entire organisation, those who make strategic programme decisions need to be involved.

Sixth, development organisations are invited to strengthen the institutional framework for impact assessments at an organisation-wide level. The efficiency of impact-oriented accompanying research can be enhanced if there are organisational structures, financial resources and procedures in place that guide the collaboration. Since impact assessments offer great learning opportunities for different levels of the development organisation, it can be helpful to share the costs generated between the respective units. Increased ownership by everyone involved, more openness towards the assessment results and, consequently, more opportunities to make use of the findings are positive side effects of such an institutional framework.

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