Research to enhance the effectiveness of international crisis management

Evidence in transitional development assistance

The transitional development assistance provided by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) focuses on strengthening the resilience of people and local structures in crisis contexts in order to sustainably reduce humanitarian needs.

In crisis contexts, there is a higher risk of unintended negative consequences. It is therefore particularly important that decisions about support measures are always based on the best available information and evidence. This fact sheet supplements the BMZ Strategy on Transitional Development Assistance by describing how impact evaluations are conducted in this field and how the evidence obtained is ultimately incorporated into projects.

What do we mean by evidence?

Our understanding of evidence in transitional development assistance is derived directly from social science research. Evidence is a generic term for information that supports or disproves a results hypothesis (e.g. about the impact of

a development measure) using suitable methods and data.

A results hypothesis, in turn, describes the relationship between cause and effect, for example: 'School education has a positive impact on income in adulthood.'

Figure 1 shows the path from data to evidence, via information and knowledge, and illustrates the difference between the various terms. **Data** are raw values, such as individual figures on the school education and income of particular individuals. **Information** is generated when we place data in context, for example by comparing school education and income. **Knowledge** is generated when we identify patterns – for example, that better education often goes hand in hand with higher income. This knowledge allows us to make an initial assessment but is not yet verified. **Evidence** is generated when knowledge is confirmed using scientific methods. When many studies show that school education really does have a positive impact on income, this constitutes robust evidence that can be used to inform policy decisions.
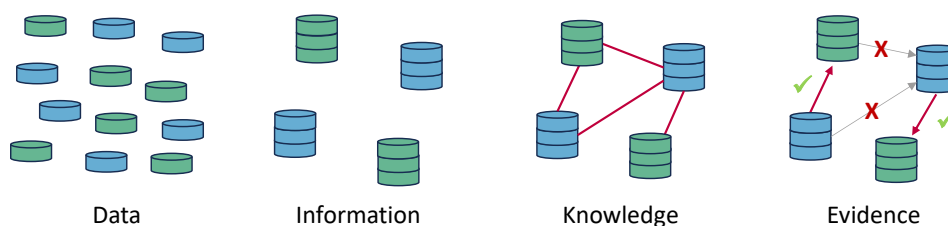

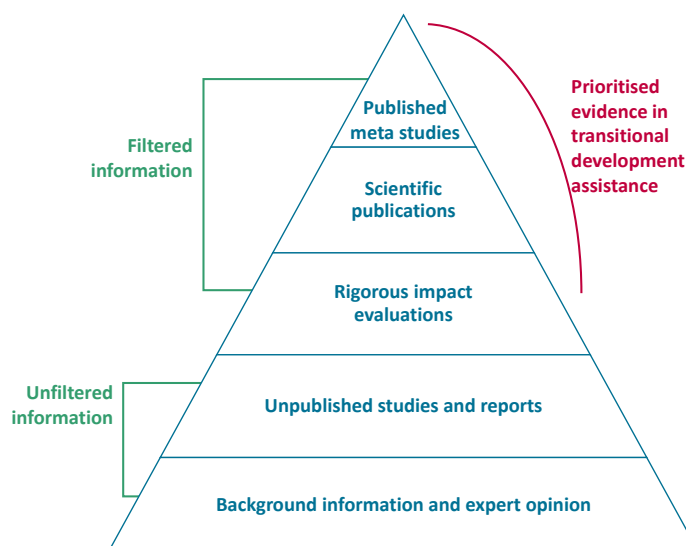| Data | Information | Knowledge | Evidence |

Figure 1: From data to evidence

Figure 2: Evidence hierarchy

In short, evidence helps us to understand what works and how. Transitional development assistance primarily draws on scientifically collected and systematically processed insights (see figure 2), as they are considered very reliable and meaningful.

In recent years, **rigorous evidence** has become increasingly important in international cooperation. Methods that make causal effects measurable using sophisticated research designs such as randomised controlled trials (see box) are regarded as **rigorous impact evaluations**. In other words, they answer the question: 'Did the measured impact occur *because* of a measure (causality), or did it merely occur *simultaneously* (correlation)?'

In focus: rigorous methods

Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) are the best-known example of rigorous impact evaluations. They originated in medical research and are regarded as one of the most reliable methods for investigating the causal relationship between a measure and its impact. RCTs are also being increasingly used in development cooperation. Transitional development assistance finances RCTs in crisis contexts through evaluation partnerships, for example (see section 'Use of evidence in practice' on page 3*).*

Key features of the method:

Control group: For the purpose of comparison, the method also captures data relating to individuals who do not benefit from the measure to be investigated.

Randomisation: Assignment to the group of recipients of the measure (treatment group) and to the control group occurs on a random basis. This ensures good comparability of both groups when the sample size is large enough.

Why is evidence important?

Transitional development assistance attaches great importance to carrying out activities in accordance with the BMZ guidelines Evaluating German Development Cooperation, which were published in 2021. Robust, evidence-based insights into causal relationships should be used early on in the project planning phase to achieve the best possible positive effect for the target group. This forward-looking approach ensures that resources are used as efficiently and effectively as possible. In combination with systematically conducted evaluations, it also forms the basis for continuous learning, the identification of proven practices and the ongoing development of the portfolio of measures.

Especially in times of limited financial resources, the use of evidence-based approaches is vital to respond effectively to the numerous crises that are becoming increasingly complex in nature. Not least, it also promotes widespread confidence in the effectiveness of German development cooperation by providing greater transparency.

BMZ's transitional development assistance plays a pioneering role in the systematic generation and use of evidence. The following diagram shows the steps involved in this process (see figure 3).
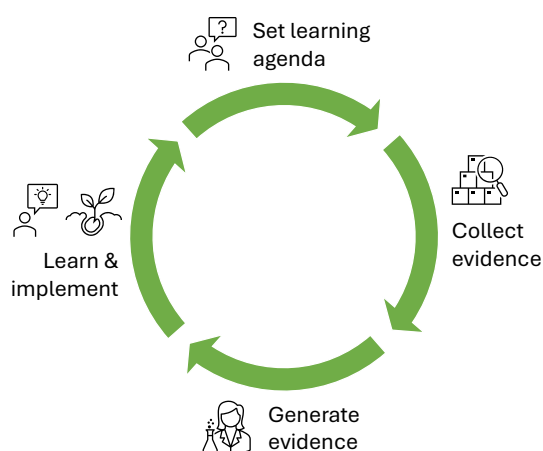

E-learning course by UNICEF for girls in Sudan

Set learning agenda

Collect evidence

Generate evidence

Learn & implement

Figure 3: The evidence-based approach in transitional development assistance

Use of evidence in practice

The evidence collected or produced in crisis contexts is discussed with both researchers and practitioners. Specific recommendations based on the insights are shared in international strategic dialogues and forums.

Germany presents its recommendations on the Executive Board of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), for example, or in the dialogue forum with international non-governmental organisations. Products are also developed to support implementing organisations in designing effective programmes. These include an orientation framework for monitoring and evaluation and an evidence checklist.

In practice, one way of implementing the evidence-based approach is through evaluation partnerships. They combine the four steps shown in figure 3 and produce evidence on previously identified strategic learning agendas. They are designed as multi-year projects and aim to further the development of specific programme areas. Evaluation partnerships are currently in place with the WFP on climate resilience and with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on social protection.

In focus: partnering with UNICEF for social protection

The evaluation partnership 'Adaptive Social Protection – Evidence for Child Outcomes' (ASPECT) with UNICEF aims to enhance the effectiveness of social protection systems and strengthen national capacities in order to achieve better and more sustainable outcomes for children and families in crisis contexts.

Specifically, it aims to increase evidence-based knowledge on social protection programmes and systems while enabling the development of capacities and synergies between the various departments within UNICEF. The evaluation partnership ASPECT was commissioned in December 2022. Impact evaluations are carried out in various countries.

Systematic reviews and further information

Transitional development assistance has already commissioned numerous (meta-) studies (systematic reviews and evidence gap maps). Each of these studies analyses and prepares the available evidence on various topics in order to provide knowledge and recommendations for practical action. In addition, podcasts offer fascinating insights into current research findings and their uses in crisis contexts.

What is a systematic review?

The term '*systematic review*' refers to an established method of meta-analysis used in numerous research disciplines. Researchers systematically analyse the scientific literature to identify relevant and methodologically rigorous impact evaluations related to a particular development measure. In doing so, they follow clearly defined search, selection and evaluation procedures in order to avoid misinterpretations or biased conclusions. Finally, they summarise the results in a meta-analysis – if possible – with a view to identifying overarching patterns and general trends, for example in the impact of development measures.

→ *Systematic Review* - Food Security, Nutrition and Climate Resilience: The study by the Development Innovation Lab at the University of Chicago consolidates findings from over 600 existing studies for more than 40 development measures being carried out in crisis contexts in the field of nutrition security.

→ *Systematic Review* - Strengthening intergroup social cohesion in crisis situations: Guided by the question 'What positively influences intergroup social cohesion in crisis contexts?', the research

institute International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) conducted an extensive review of studies and consequently analysed 24 rigorous impact evaluations that were of relevance.

Promotion of gender equality in Lebanon

→ *Systematic Review* - Strengthening women's participation and gender equality in crisis contexts in the pursuit of peaceful and integrative societies: Which measures strengthen women as agents of change in crisis contexts? 3ie conducted a systematic review, analysing and comparing 14 gender-sensitive and gender-transformative forms of intervention in 104 rigorous impact evaluations.

→ *Podcasts* - Listen to evidence: In cooperation with the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), podcast episodes for the platform VoxDev were produced on various topics such as nutrition security, resilience to shocks, peace consolidation and climate change adaptation. The podcasts feature discussions with leading researchers in the field of international development cooperation.