

Citizens' Summary: Mid-term evaluation of the support to strengthened bilateral relations under the EEA and Norway Grants

BACKGROUND

Strengthening the political, economic and cultural ties between Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, and each of the 16 beneficiary countries, is a key objective of the EEA and Norway Grants. Cooperation between people and institutions at administrative and political levels and in the private sector, academia and civil society is a prerequisite for strengthened bilateral relations. Such cooperation is facilitated and supported in programmes, projects and through bilateral funds.

This summary draws on the mid-term evaluation of the support to strengthened bilateral relations under the EEA and Norway Grants.

KEY FINDINGS

The mid-term evaluation found that the EEA and Norway Grants are successful in strengthening bilateral relations between the donor and beneficiary countries. This is facilitated by the establishment of donor programme partnerships – partnerships between institutions in the donor countries – Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway - and the 16 beneficiary countries.

Tools such as networking, professional exchanges, study tours, conferences and seminars, cooperation committees and bilateral funds support the programmes and projects in establishing bilateral partnerships; developing shared project results; sharing knowledge and increasing understanding, and ensuring the wider effects of the work, such as continued partnerships and expansion of bilateral or international networks.

Yet, the evaluation points to the lack of available partners in the donor countries as a main barrier in developing bilateral relations in addition to cumbersome administrative procedures. The definition of what is considered to be “improvement in bilateral relations” has not been easy to articulate, which has resulted in a need for improvement in the way the bilateral objective is defined and measured in the future.

Effectiveness

- **Extent of cooperation:** In the five countries and four sectors evaluated in depth in this report, it was found that 28% of the projects had bilateral partners. This is an increase from the previous programming period, where an estimated 25% of all projects had donor country partners.

- Knowledge and understanding: Programmes and projects contribute to awareness raising, changed attitudes and building trust between cooperating organisations. Several strategic stakeholders state that both programmes and projects open doors at the political level. Stakeholders in both donor and beneficiary countries have increased their knowledge and mutual understanding of the partners' culture and institutions as a result of the programmes and projects. 73% of survey respondents strongly agreed that awareness, attitudes and trust had increased through the EEA and Norway Grants 2009-14.
- Shared results: Stakeholders at both programme and project level confirm the positive experience of working towards common results. Such mutual experiences have a more positive effect on bilateral relations than more traditional ways of providing external support, e.g. technical or expert assistance.
- Wider effects: Continued cooperation and development of networks are significant, with widespread results reported from the research programmes. The development of international and EU networks are supported by the EEA and Norway Grants where the grant funding is an important facilitator for the first international cooperation for both parties. However, networks and cooperation cannot always continue when external funding is no longer available.

Efficiency

- Roles and responsibilities of the different partners and actors are well understood. One of the roles of the donor programme partner is to facilitate and identify donor project partners. These donor programme partners are greatly appreciated and a key to the success of improved bilateral relations under the Grants.
- Beneficiary country stakeholders highlighted the need for additional donor programme partners.
- The top five tools identified for increasing bilateral partnerships were: networking and exchange of experience; study tours between partners; donor programme partnerships; bilateral funds; and programme cooperation committees.
- Despite the high level of appreciation of funding for bilateral activities, the evaluation identified weaknesses in the efficiency of use of the funds. Some of the key issues identified by the donor project partners were: Complicated financial rules in the use of the funds, coupled with complex rules and procedures for procurement, posed time constraints and delays in implementation. Bilateral funding was available via two sources, both at the national level and at the programme level. While this intended to provide flexibility and ease in the use of funds, this was not necessarily the result, particularly in light of the onerous rules and procedures encountered.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation provided 14 key recommendations that is summarised in the table below:

ID	Recommendation and rationale
I	Definition and measurement of the bilateral objective
1	Define and operationalise the bilateral objective Currently, the concept of "the bilateral objective" is abstract and difficult to operationalise for many stakeholders. To enable stakeholders to focus their programme and project activities on the bilateral objectives, more targeted communication, training and capacity building are required.
2	Introduce a bilateral objective at programme level To help programmes and in turn projects to select appropriate indicators and set targets, a programme-specific objective for "bilateral relations" should be formulated to facilitate a consistent and mutual understanding across stakeholders. The objective should be SMART.
3	Reorganise and tailor the bilateral indicators to the programmes In cooperation with programme operators and DPPs, a set of sector-relevant bilateral indicators should be developed for each of the programmes or programme types, which should be communicated in due time to the programme operators.
4	Target setting for indicators In the current programme phase, programmes often set targets by accumulating the targets set by projects. Project targets are often set very low, and programmes thus often have an overachievement of more than 100% above target. Programme operators should use target-setting more strategically (and not be afraid to adjust expectations).
5	Introduce result indicators at priority sector level There are no indicators (results) at priority sector level. This makes it difficult to measure whether the bilateral objective has been achieved overall. It is recommended to establish result indicators (and possibly also a more specific bilateral objective) at priority sector level.
6	Clarify reporting requirements for the bilateral objective It is recommended to be more instructive on reporting requirements for the bilateral objective in order to avoid the current large variation in reporting, as well as the non-informative focus on bilateral activities. It is suggested to look to Estonia for inspiration.
II	Bilateral tools
7	Continue the current programme model, including existing tools and structures. Generally, the tools and models developed for the EEA and Norway Grants are regarded as useful, and it is recommended to continue with the existing programme model.
8	Ensure timely availability of bilateral funds at programme level It should be ensured that bilateral funds supporting the identification of partners (Measure A) are made available well in advance before the

ID	Recommendation and rationale
	mainstream programmes begin. It is recommended to make funds for supporting networking and the sharing of knowledge, technology, experience and best practice (Measure B) available also after project closure.
9	<p>Focus on predefined projects under the bilateral national funds</p> <p>The predefined projects provide an interesting opportunity for strategic level cooperation. Therefore, it is recommended that such calls are differentiated, either in terms of topic or timing, from the bilateral funds at programme level.</p>
10	<p>Expand the use of DPPs and improve the matching of DPPs and Programme Operators (POs)</p> <p>It is recommended that more donor state institutions and international organisations are encouraged to engage as Donor Programme Partners (DPP), and that the matching of DPP and the PO is improved by ensuring alignment between the DPP and PO organisations. It is also recommended to ensure that a DPP is not overburdened by having to cover too many programmes.</p>
11	<p>Increase the availability of donor project partners</p> <p>For the EEA and Norway Grants to be able to focus on the bilateral relations objective, it is a prerequisite that more donor project partners are involved in the implementation of the projects. It is therefore recommended to assess whether more potential partners are available.</p>
III	General Grants implementation issues
12	<p>Simplify procurement rules and approval of expenditures</p> <p>Complicated implementation procedures, procurement rules and approval of expenditures, differentiated across countries, constitute a key barrier. It is therefore recommended to look at ways in which partnership obstacles can be removed e.g. by simplifying implementation procedures, aligning systems of donor and beneficiary countries or simplifying procedures.</p>
13	<p>Standardise implementation between countries</p> <p>Likewise, it is recommended to standardise implementation systems and rules so that each programme does not have to establish its own system.</p>
14	<p>Standardise general reporting requirements</p> <p>Reporting (of all types) is of very uneven length, quality and content, which makes it difficult to use the reports for comparative studies and to extract qualitative or quantitative data. Reporting requirements should be standardised and clearly communicated to all relevant stakeholders (i.e. what content is expected under which heading).</p>

The report contains more details on the findings, lessons learned and recommendations that will be followed up and inform the development of future programmes.

Download the complete report here: <http://eeagrants.org/Results-data/Documents/Evaluations-and-reviews/Mid-term-evaluation-of-the-support-to-strengthened-bilateral-relations-under-the-EEA-and-Norway-Grants-final-report>

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

The evaluation was commissioned by the Financial Mechanism Office – the secretariat of the EEA and Norway Grants. It was conducted by COWI A/S, Denmark. The assessment was carried out from the second half of 2015 to May 2016.

Purpose of the evaluation

- Assess **effectiveness** in terms of progress and perceived results towards strengthening bilateral relations.
- Assess the extent to which current models and tools are **efficient** to the strengthening of bilateral relations.

Methodology

The evaluation covered four out of the ten priority sectors of the EEA and Norway Grants: '*Protecting cultural heritage*', '*Research and scholarships*', and capacity building in '*Human and social development*' and '*Justice and home affairs*' (the last two priority sectors are jointly addressed). These sectors account for just over 50% of the allocated total from the EEA and Norway Grants.

In addition, 5 of the 16 beneficiary countries were covered: Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Romania and the Slovak Republic, representing 19.4% of the allocated total of €1.8 billion.