

How relevant is relevance? (Part 1)

I have just read Mark Lowcock's *The Rise and Fall of the Department for International Development*. As an architect of the International Development Targets, and being instrumental in their transition to the Millennium Development Goals, he was critical of the proliferation of goals and targets with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals. If everything is a priority then nothing is a priority.

This comment reminded me of an incident when I worked in the Central Planning and Development Office in Lesotho in the mid-80s. We didn't actually plan much, which is just as well as the whole capital budget was funded by donor agencies. Our main role was donor liaison. An EU delegation came to negotiate a new aid package. Whilst they wanted to fund priority development areas, we had compiled a list of projects from every sector. When the EU delegation complained that they wanted to fund priority sectors, our Permanent Secretary replied "Everything is a priority".

Why is this relevant to relevance?

By relevance I am referring to the DAC evaluation criteria, summarised as "is the intervention doing the right things?". The full definition is "Relevance entails examining the extent to which the intervention's objectives and design respond to beneficiaries' needs and priorities, as well as alignment with national, global and partner/institutional policies and priorities. Understanding gendered power dynamics and reflecting on the commitment to "leave no one behind" are crucial in understanding relevance. If circumstances change, evaluations should also look at whether interventions remain relevant."

I have read a lot of evaluations, and am left with the impression that relevance is often a very low bar. Evaluations assess relevance as being named as a policy priority by the government, or sometimes the donor agency, though the latter is not part of the DAC definition. But since everything is a priority then everything is relevant.

A few years ago I supported the World Bank Results and Performance report, the first one to assess performance at the country level. We found this issue in the Country Policy Frameworks. Lack of selectivity in World Bank country programmes ("everything's a priority") undermined relevance.

Another example – the EU's Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) in Scotland - shows the need to raise the bar for relevance.

The Scottish government had identified providing entrepreneurship skills as a part of all tertiary education course. But the EU replied that tertiary education was not eligible. Next the government proposed supporting a youth wage subsidy, but the EU replied that national schemes were not eligible, they had to be focused in high unemployment areas. So, the government proposed instead an intervention for young people at risk of dropping out of school, who have high risk of not entering employment. But the EU said funds had to be used for young people who were already unemployed, not those who might become so. So simply observing that youth unemployment was high, and a priority for government, was not enough to make YEI relevant, since it was not allowed to fund the strategies the government wished to adopt to tackle the problem. And, as an aside, the evaluation noted that it would be better if the EU just set the high-level outcomes for the programme, allowing governments to decide how to spend the money.

These examples raise two questions about how relevance is assessed: (i) relevant to whom?, and (ii) how specific is the assessment of relevance – that is just a general alignment with policy, or does it relate the specifics of what was actually supported? If the latter, is evidence provided that this is what the government and beneficiaries wanted?

We are taking a look at these questions through a review of how relevance has been assessed in over one hundred evaluations: forty from each of ILO, UNDP, UNICEF, and the World Bank. We are assessing 20 from 2013 for each agency and 20 from 2023 so that we can also examine if the way in which relevance is assessed has changed over time.

We will be presenting our findings at a [Research and Evaluation Centre](#) online event on 2nd June, 2025, as part of the global evaluation week, glocal. [Register here](#) for the event.

A follow up blog will present the findings and discussion.

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