



 Office of Internal Oversight

## Meta-Evaluation of Recurrent Findings in OIO Evaluations, 2010-2017



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## Introduction and Purpose

1. The OSCE Office of Internal Oversight (OIO) has been mandated to carry out evaluations since 2000. Initially the task of evaluation was assigned to OIO's inspection and audit functions, until in 2009 a dedicated evaluation function was created. In the beginning OIO mostly carried out accountability-focused evaluations. Over the years, however, the evaluation function evolved to one that complements this role with a strong emphasis on learning and programme-improvement. The adoption of an Evaluation Framework Instruction in 2013 has been one of the key milestones in this process.
2. Today, OIO's aim for its evaluation function is to contribute to policy making, planning, and programming, and to overall organizational learning by providing evidence-based findings and recommendations. To this end, OIO is committed to enhancing communication of the results of its evaluations so that they can inform key organizational processes. It is in this spirit that this meta-evaluation was undertaken.

## Scope

3. The purpose of the meta-evaluation is to identify and communicate recurrent and cross-organisational issues (challenges and shortcomings) pinpointed in OIO evaluations conducted over the period 2010-2017. The underlying premise is that if certain issues keep surfacing in evaluation exercises, it means that they are systemic and have not fully been addressed at the level of the organization.
4. This meta-evaluation is thus intended to point to those areas where, in OIO's view, organizational learning has yet to happen and management action is required.

## Methodology and Limitations

5. The meta-evaluation was undertaken in two phases. During the first phase a total of 46 evaluation reports from the period 2010 - 2017 were qualitatively reviewed in order to highlight the main recurring issues and related recommendations. These issues were then narrowed down to the five most recurring ones.
6. It is important to note, that these five categories of issues reflect those that surfaced during evaluations. They do not necessarily capture all challenges that need to be addressed. Most likely, other important challenges also exist, without having been discussed by any evaluation exercise.
7. Overall, the evaluations reviewed varied considerably thematically, as well as in structure, scope and quality. Because of the differences across evaluations, the individual evaluation reports were not always easy to compare. Nevertheless, evaluations were usually aligned with the six OECD DAC evaluation criteria of relevance, added-value, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. This common approach did create some degree of comparability in terms of key evaluation criteria and findings.

## Findings

1. The following five main categories of recurring issues emerged from the review of evaluation reports: co-ordination and collaboration within the OSCE; monitoring and evaluation; knowledge management, gender mainstreaming, and sustainability.

### I. Internal co-ordination and collaboration

2. Many evaluations identified room for improvement with regards to internal co-ordination and collaboration. In fact, over the years this has been one of the issues that has been raised most often. This concerns the relationships between the Secretariat and OSCE field operations, between OSCE field operations, between the Secretariat and the Institutions, between OSCE field operations and the Institutions, and within executive structures (including the Secretariat).
3. For instance, several evaluations identified challenges in the co-ordination and collaboration between OSCE field operations and the Secretariat, as well as between OSCE field operations. Both have the potential to improve implementation and results. The former type of co-ordination helps to assure consistency between OSCE strategic objectives and field-level activities, and thus helps to ensure that executive structures share the same goals and visions, and work in the same direction, and in a co-ordinated manner; while co-ordination between field operations helps to assure the creation of synergies at the regional level and sharing of best practices and lessons learned.
4. A recurrent finding is that the co-ordination between the Secretariat and field operations is often ad-hoc rather than planned and systematic. For instance, with regards to programmatic work, commonly no established mechanism for co-ordination between the Secretariat and field operations at the project planning stage exists, nor is there any regular and ongoing communication regarding project implementation. Shortcomings in co-ordination with field operations are cited as limiting the potential to bridge the gap between high-level political work and on-the-ground implementation and change.
5. OIO evaluations also point to a lack of strategic guidance provided by the Secretariat to field operations in some areas, as well as to the existence of differing views among staff members about the extent to which it was indeed the Secretariat's role to provide such guidance, given the highly decentralized structure of the OSCE, coupled with the formal independence of executive structures. OIO nevertheless often found an expressed interest in field operations for strategic guidance and technical advice from the Secretariat. Cases in point are the areas of Anti-Money Laundering and Gender Mainstreaming, which were recently evaluated by OIO.
6. Similarly, collaboration between field operations was found to be ad-hoc and reactive in many cases, rather than institutionalized, systematic and proactive. Extending upon this argument, there is overall limited exchange of information among the field operations regarding lessons learned and best practices, and often an expectation that this exchange should be facilitated by the Secretariat. Co-ordination among field operations is often cited to be constrained by limited staff and financial resources, and a lack of mechanisms for regular information exchanges.

7. Regarding the collaboration within executive structures, several evaluations point to challenges to work across the three OSCE Dimensions, and this even applies to smaller field operations, where colleagues meet on a daily basis. As in many other organizations, this is to some extent a consequence of the way programmes are run in terms of management and funding structure, which often makes it difficult to enhance collaboration beyond the level of information sharing. It was also observed that in some cases not even information is shared, at least not consistently.
8. These findings suggest that the OSCE is not leveraging its significant in-house expertise and knowledge across all its executive structures. Several evaluations identified instances where the use of a more systematic approach could have been beneficial and cost-efficient. Other implications of limited coordination and collaboration are missed opportunities to share technical knowledge, information and best practices, as well as strategic guidance, which would ultimately promote efficiency and strengthen project implementation.

## II. Monitoring and Evaluation

9. A majority of OIO evaluations identified a lack of monitoring and evaluation systems to generate data on the implementation, progress and results of programmes and projects. This is one of the main impediments to successful results-based management, and a major obstacle in the way of organizational learning and development. It furthermore severely limits the ability of the OSCE to measure and report on the outcomes and impact of its work.
10. While activities and outputs are routinely tracked, recorded and reported on to some extent, outcomes, such as improvements in policies and legislation, progress in policy implementation through new practices and behavior, let alone impact, are not consistently followed up on. In the absence of good outcome data from the OSCE's activities and interventions, many evaluations struggle to provide robust assessments, too.
11. In this connection, some of the evaluations also identified inconsistency in the use of key project management terms, such as 'outputs', 'outcomes' and 'objectives.' For instance, 'outcomes' are sometimes described in ways that rather refer to 'outputs', or even to 'activities', and 'objectives' often are phrased as 'activities', too. This conceptual confusion further contributes to the shortage of outcome level data and lack of follow up, and to ambiguity regarding the objectives of the interventions. In a wider context, as paraphrased in one evaluation report<sup>1</sup>: 'At the heart of this is the lack of a common understanding as to precisely what constitutes "progress".'
12. The evaluations furthermore consistently pointed to the need for SMARTer<sup>2</sup> and more gender-sensitive indicators, especially at the outcome level, as well as for consistent data collection practices to measure progress against these indicators. This lack of indicators, in addition to the absence of data, undermines efforts to identify what works and what does not, and to draw conclusions of value

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<sup>1</sup> Independent Evaluation of the OSCE Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2014).

<sup>2</sup> SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound.

for policy and planning. It furthermore makes it difficult for the OSCE to demonstrate its achievements to participating States.

13. These findings indicate the need for standardized monitoring and information systems. The publication “Project Management in the OSCE. A Manual for Programme and Project Managers.” is a step in this direction. OIO Evaluations also point to the need to update and simplify existing project management guidelines, particularly the project proposal and self-evaluation templates, so that information on results at all levels can be easier captured, including those related to gender mainstreaming. Some executive structures have amended these formats for that purpose, and lessons could be learned from these efforts. Evaluations also highlight the demand for hands-on guidance materials for, *inter alia*, how to establish baseline data, monitor and evaluate projects, conduct gender analyses, formulate (gender-sensitive and) SMART indicators, and manage external evaluations.
14. With regards to evaluation practices in general, OIO observed (but did not necessarily highlight this in its evaluations) that the overall evaluation culture in the OSCE has made some progress but remains weak. Some executive structures find value in external evaluations, and they commission them for specific thematic areas, and usually also make good use of their findings. However, not all of executive structures have established an evaluation practice (other than self-evaluations), or at least not on a regular basis.
15. OIO noticed also that external evaluations varied in quality. This points not only to the need to hire better external evaluators, but also to limitations in the way these evaluations are planned and managed. An underlying challenge in this regard is the lack of specific policy guidance that provides clear direction as to the required frequency, scope and quality of external evaluations, related budgetary requirements, and information on how such evaluations should be managed. Hands-on tools are also missing, which is an issue that OIO is committed to addressing.
16. Last but not least, reports reviewed for this meta-evaluation also acknowledge that overall the OSCE context is not necessarily conducive for the establishment of a results-based management culture, including the introduction of more systematic and harmonized monitoring and evaluation practices. Complicating factors are the OSCE’s annual Unified Budget cycle, the dominance of political considerations as compared to programmatic priorities in some areas, high staff turnover, as well as the nature of the organization’s overall accountability framework. The latter features a highly decentralized organigram, with a set-up, where individual executive structures are primarily responsible to the OSCE’s Chairmanship, which rotates on an annual basis. This makes it very difficult to harmonize monitoring and evaluation standards across the organization, to follow up on results achieved and lessons learned across executive structures, and to ensure that these inform policy making and planning and contribute to organizational learning.
17. As a consequence, more efforts are needed to introduce what would be considered the norm in most other international organizations: an organization-wide monitoring and evaluation system that collects results-based information across programmes, projects and activities, which in turn is synthesized, analyzed, shared and used to inform policy making and planning, and to demonstrate that the work and investment of resources has made a difference.

### **III. Knowledge Management**

18. Many evaluations established that there is a challenge with knowledge management in the OSCE. To some extent, this is the consequence of its weak monitoring and evaluation culture, resulting in a shortage of good quality data on results achieved, and of limitations in terms of internal co-ordination as discussed earlier in this report. On the other hand, evaluations observed that many staff members have a limited understanding of knowledge management. More than often it is considered to be similar to information sharing, without appreciating complementary dimensions of knowledge management, such as those related to the creation of knowledge, its management and its use for the benefit of advancing organizational objectives.
19. It was also observed that existing initiatives to transfer information and to share good practices are often ad-hoc, limited in scale and depth, and not fully institutionalized. In this regard, some evaluations noted that even though information and good practices were exchanged in the context of co-ordination meetings or regional conferences, these efforts often remained ad hoc, and did not necessarily lead to any more permanent exchanges of practices or insights.
20. A consequence of the limited level of knowledge management, compounded by staff turnover, is that programme and project managers keep reinventing practices rather than learning from and building on what has already been achieved. Indeed, OIO observed several instances where staff members lacked knowledge of significant initiatives carried out by their predecessors or peers. To the concern of OIO, it was also noted that ever so often staff are not aware of OIO evaluations relevant to their particular work area. There is hence also a need for OIO to better communicate and share evaluation findings.
21. Positive initiatives to advance the creation, analysis, sharing and use of knowledge within the organization also exist. These include a number of information sharing platforms, focal point networks, newsletters, capacity building activities, publications etc. Many of these ought to be better promoted and regularly updated, though.

#### **IV. Gender mainstreaming**

22. OIO evaluations show that over the years there has been some progress with regards to gender mainstreaming in the work of the organization. It was also established that many good gender-specific interventions exist. A recent evaluation observed that gender perspectives are increasingly considered in important policy meetings and other events (such as the 2017 Annual Security Review Conference).
23. Progress was also observed with regards to strengthening the institutional structures and mechanisms to support gender mainstreaming in the organization. The network of gender focal points spans the entire organization, a majority of field operations have established internal networks/working groups of gender liaison points from various units/departments, and a large number of them have developed gender action plans and roadmaps. A number of executive structures now have dedicated gender advisors/experts, who work exclusively on supporting gender mainstreaming.
24. However, progress across the organization remains uneven. For instance, misunderstandings still exist with regards to the potential nature and focus of the work for 'gender equality', which is often understood to be exclusively about women. 'Gender mainstreaming' is seen by many to be mostly about enhancing 'women's participation', which is often considered as the end goal, rather than as

one way to remove barriers to equality or to address discrimination in order to have more effective interventions.

25. OIO evaluations also established that the majority of project proposals still do not, or only to a limited extent, include gender considerations. In general (and with the exception of gender-specific projects), gender equality concerns are not given due consideration at the project planning stage, as evidenced by the lack of gender analysis and contextual information in proposals. Indicators are almost never gender sensitive, nor do they include sex-disaggregated measures. Gender concerns also tend to “evaporate” during the project cycle, with little monitoring, reporting, and analysis in self-evaluations, resulting in limited information about achievements. This finding mirrors more general monitoring-related evaluation findings discussed earlier in this report.
26. OIO evaluations also observed only very few examples of really transformative work that aims to challenge and significantly alter female and male stereotypes, involve men and boys, impact power relations, and induce a real cultural change in any specific area. Overall within the organization there is also still a limited understanding of how gender inequalities constitute a security risk, and vice versa, of how gender mainstreaming contributes to achieving the mandate of the OSCE. In other words, there is lack of a shared theory of change and (evidence-based) narrative about how the advancement of gender equality will help the OSCE achieve its mission. This might be one of the main reasons why progress in this area has been slow.

## V. Sustainability

27. Lastly, and perhaps importantly, is the topic of sustainability, which refers to whether gains and benefits from the OSCE's assistance can be sustained in the absence of any further support. OIO evaluations presented very mixed findings regarding this issue.
28. Many of them highlight the lack of long-term strategies and clear guidelines for planning for sustainability on the side of the OSCE. The consequence of this is that ensuring sustainability of the organization's interventions is often not given much attention by programme managers in the first place. This in turn leads to a lack of follow up on mid- and long-term outcomes and the absence of exit strategies. Cases in point are interventions to strengthen Government capacities without monitoring subsequent changes in behavior, and consistency in implementation of new practices.
29. On the positive side, OIO evaluations also observed that the OSCE has contributed substantively to participating States' efforts to strengthen policies, strategies and legislation in the areas related to the OSCE's mandate. There is quite some evidence that demonstrates substantial achievements in this area, which shows a high level of sustainability at the policy level, since policies are usually bound to remain in place even if external assistance ceases to exist.
30. Ensuring sustainability in terms of the consistent implementation of strengthened policies, strategies and legislation, is more challenging, especially since implementation is ultimately the responsibility of participating States and therefore beyond the control of the OSCE. For instance, whereas the OSCE may have contributed to revised legislation, their implementation may face challenges. There are nevertheless a number of measures that can be taken by the OSCE to increase the likelihood that the benefits of its work will be sustained. These include the conduct of proper needs assessments (involving different types of stakeholders), gender analyses, regular monitoring including at the outcome level, continued engagement of counterparts beyond individual capacity building events, including by supporting the development of training programmes in participating States, and transition strategies.
31. Evaluations observe, however, that staff members often have little capacity to plan for sustainability. In many cases, awareness that this is part of their responsibility is lacking, others are under a lot of pressure to deliver activities, which in turn reduces the time available for longer-term considerations. Moreover, there are contexts within the OSCE's area of operations that make long-term planning and continuous engagement difficult.
32. OIO evaluations also show a mixed picture in terms of sustainability at the level of human resources of Government institutions and civil society organizations in participating States. The OSCE's capacity building activities were found to have led to knowledge gains and new skills of participants that benefit participating States in many ways. However, the extent to which these gains are translated into new practices and behaviors is not always clear. Evidence suggests that change has indeed happened at the level of policy and legislation, as well as participating States' compliance with international commitments. Beyond this, however, international data and statistics often show that impact in terms of comprehensive security (and increased gender equality) has yet to be generated.



33. OIO evaluation findings also suggest that efforts to ensure sustainability were not always supported by national capacities and resources. As a result, counterparts remain dependent on outside assistance, rather than in a position to carry the work forward on their own. Financial sustainability of the OSCE's support is often challenging as well. OIO evaluation reports generally underline that for a long-term strategy to be realistic and meaningful, the funding level should be predictable. To this end, sustainability requires diverse sources of funding and implementation of a coherent long-term fundraising strategy, which should be part of the overall programme strategy.
34. For the OSCE, ensuring the sustainability of its work remains one of the organization's major challenges. This issue can be addressed more effectively through long-term strategic planning, enhanced internal co-operation, regular monitoring of progress, exchange of lessons and good practices, improved gender mainstreaming and increased fund-raising efforts. This means that the findings and challenges identified in this review are interdependent, and would ideally be addressed hand in hand.

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