

Task force report

# Next steps for knowledge-based aid: Fostering collaboration between NGOs and research institutions

October 2024

## Executive summary

Moving towards more knowledge-based aid demands increased investments in high-quality knowledge products and services with significant learning potential. This requires new ways of working within aid organisations as well as stronger collaboration between aid organisations and research institutions. Research institutions must also adapt to meet the knowledge needs of the aid sector, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Norad must put in place frameworks and structures which facilitate the required changes.

Crucial steps towards more knowledge-based aid have been taken recently by all these actors. This report recommends the following actions to support the next steps in this important endeavour:

### Recommendations to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and/or Norad

- 1. Put in place mechanisms that prevent underinvestment in knowledge for the common good.** Norad has significantly raised its expectations to grantees to make high-quality knowledge investments, but the responsibility for these investments now rests solely with individual organisations. This approach does not sufficiently account for the fact the knowledge is a public good, likely leading to underinvestment in knowledge for the common good. We recommend to:
  - 1.1. Further increase the expectations to – and funding opportunities for – high-quality knowledge production in grant applications.
  - 1.2. State clearly that knowledge production should improve the organisations' own programmes while also contributing to the common good by expanding the overall body of knowledge within the organisations' field of work.
  - 1.3. Establish a **funding scheme** that stimulates strategically important knowledge investments for the common good.
  - 1.4. Establish a **Knowledge Centre** responsible for producing knowledge reviews on demand from aid organizations, maintaining an up-to-date knowledge repository, and providing a helpdesk service that offers guidance on applying research-based knowledge in practice.
- 2. Further clarify expectations to the use and generation of high-quality knowledge.** Norad has made significant progress in articulating expectations regarding the use and generation of knowledge. Further clarifications in the following areas would be helpful:
  - 2.1. Clearly communicate that Norad expects aid organizations to define their own knowledge and learning needs, and to decide which types of high-quality knowledge products they wish to invest in for learning purposes.
  - 2.2. Specify what the organisations must do for accountability purposes.
  - 2.3. Ensure that the use of knowledge in the design of aid programmes and the quality of knowledge management plans significantly influence grant allocations.
  - 2.4. Highlight in allocation letters how Norad's assessment of knowledge use and knowledge management plans has influenced the allocation of funds.
  - 2.5. Formulate general principles for how organisations could assess knowledge investments vis-a-vis programme investments.
  - 2.6. Communicate clearly about the opportunities for including research institutions as partners in grant agreements, both from the start of the agreement period and at a later stage.
  - 2.7. Gather the experiences about the benefits of – and best practices in – knowledge investments from organisations that have invested consistently in high-quality knowledge over time. Share this information with Norwegian aid organisations.

## Recommendation to aid organisations

3. **Invest in knowledge of high quality and relevance.** Norad's new policy on knowledge use and knowledge capture, now integrated in its [Grants Handbook for Civil Society and Other Private Actors](#), is a great opportunity to work more systematically to improve aid effectiveness. We encourage organisations to:
  - 3.1. Fully utilise the opportunities that now exist to invest in knowledge products of high quality, designed to meet critical knowledge needs of the organisation.
  - 3.2. Prioritize fewer and more robust knowledge investments over a high number of lower-quality reviews/evaluations.
4. **Establish decision-making structures and -processes that facilitate investments in knowledge of high quality and relevance.** Aid organisations are not set up to make extensive knowledge investments. New ways of working are needed:

### *Within the organisation:*

- 4.1. Build in-house competence and organisational structures that facilitate strategic decisions about knowledge investments.
- 4.2. Ensure that internal budget structures and decision-making encourage knowledge investments, also with a view to a broader use beyond the individual programmes.

### *With implementing partners:*

- 4.3. Work systematically with implementing partners to identify knowledge gaps and to mobilise enthusiasm for knowledge-based programming.
- 4.4. Ensure early and continuous involvement of implementing partners in the planning and conduct of any research activities.

### *With research institutions:*

- 4.5. Collaborate with research institutions to stay updated about existing knowledge, to ensure that knowledge investments expand the overall body of knowledge.
  - 4.6. Discuss with researchers the potential for a broad range of knowledge investments, including those that may further strengthen existing monitoring systems, and share ideas across organisations, for instance through the MERLiN (Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning in Norway) network.
  - 4.7. Explore the interests of research institutions to engage in other activities than research and evaluations (e.g., knowledge advice, data management advice, methodological advice) and discuss the possibilities for involving PhD or master's students.
  - 4.8. Involve researchers early in the planning of research / evaluations. Discuss terms of references and build mutual understanding of knowledge needs and how to generate knowledge of high quality.
5. **Assume responsibility for generating knowledge with relevance beyond organisational boundaries.** Underinvestment in knowledge that is useful for also others can be reduced if organisations take a clear stand about contributing to the common good.
    - 5.1. State clearly that knowledge production should improve the organisation's own programmes while also contributing to the common good by expanding the overall body of knowledge within the organisation's field of work.

## Recommendations to research institutions

6. **Strengthen the culture for collaboration with aid organisations.** There is no widespread culture for collaboration between aid organisations and research institutions. Research institutions need to contribute to building trust. We recommend to:

- 6.1. Invest more in knowledge about development aid by learning from aid practitioners.
- 6.2. Develop a “code of conduct” for research collaborations with aid organisations to align expectations and build trust.

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## Task force mandate

The effectiveness of aid hinges on the use of high-quality evaluations and research, among other things. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Norad have recently increased its expectations to their partners to utilise such resources more systematically in the design of programmes, and to generate new knowledge where it can increase aid effectiveness.

To do so requires a set of competencies and skills that usually are not maintained within aid organisations, but which exist within research institutions. As collaborations between aid organisations and research institutions so far have been limited, it is now time to ask how organisations can benefit from closer collaboration with the research community. Which opportunities exist? Which barriers may prevent the use of and investments in high quality evaluations and research? And how can these barriers be addressed?

A task force, with members having experience from aid organisations and research institutions, was put together to discuss these issues. Specifically, the mandate was to

- Identify knowledge products and services, other than impact evaluations, that are essential for working as evidence-based aid organisations.
- Discuss how the identified needs can be met through collaborations between aid organisations and research institutions.
- Identify current barriers for such collaboration
- Propose measures to facilitate relevant collaborations.

Impact evaluations were not the focus of this task force, not because they are less important, but because impact evaluations were discussed at length by a [previous task force on evidence-based aid](#).

## Essential knowledge products and services

### Knowledge areas and sources

A knowledge-based aid organisation needs solid knowledge about, inter alia:

- The problem and the context
- The likely impacts and cost-effectiveness of alternative interventions
- Implementation effectiveness

The two first areas are crucial for program design and for developing a knowledge-based theory of change. Implementation effectiveness is arguably one of the determinants of overall impact and cost-effectiveness. We nevertheless highlight this as a separate knowledge area since this is an important area over which aid organisations have considerable influence.

Three sources of information are particularly important for meeting knowledge needs in these areas: Primary studies, knowledge reviews, and experience. *Primary studies* are studies that provide new evidence about a particular question. *Knowledge reviews* synthesize multiple primary studies, either as literature reviews or so-called meta-studies. *Experience* is the latent or manifest knowledge of persons involved, whether staff in the organisations or people consulted. Table 1 summarizes the three knowledge sources (columns) across the three knowledge areas (rows).

Table 1. Knowledge areas and knowledge sources. Grey cells were not part of the task force’s mandate.

	Primary studies	Knowledge reviews	Experience
<b>Contextual analysis</b> - What is the problem? - What are the drivers/barriers?			
<b>Impact</b> - What is the (likely) impact? - Cost-effectiveness			
<b>Implementation effectiveness</b>			

A knowledge-based aid organisation needs all the three sources of information. While experience is important for understanding the context and guiding implementation, it is usually less reliable for assessing impact. And while knowledge reviews serve a useful role in choosing between alternative interventions, there are many questions that cannot easily be answered from existing studies, implying that investment also must be made in new primary studies.

The task force has focused on the orange cells in the figure, i.e., on the generation and utilisation of research-based knowledge. Although this report does not pay particular attention to impact evaluations, many of our recommendations will be relevant for impact evaluations as well.

## Status and gaps

### *Call for knowledge-based aid*

During the past few years, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs has increased its expectations of knowledge-based aid. Knowledge generation, as well as the use of evidence about the likely impact of interventions, have received more emphasis in national budgets and in [Norad’s new mandate](#).

Norad is playing a key role in putting these expectations into action and has, inter alia, formulated new guidelines in the newly updated [Grants Handbook for Civil Society and Other Private Actors](#).

Aid organisations have welcomed the clear ambitions about knowledge-based aid of high quality, and many organisations have expressed a desire to find new ways of working that strengthen learning and impact.

Taking further practical steps towards knowledge-based aid requires due attention to remaining gaps:

### *Knowledge generation*

Aid organisations make significant investments in monitoring data and in project evaluations (mid-term reviews and end-of project evaluations). These investments have the potential, if well designed, to generate useful knowledge, in particular about project implementation.

However, data quality in regular project monitoring is highly variable, and a high share of mid-term and end reviews/evaluations are of [inadequate quality](#), in terms of their methodological rigour and analysis. These evaluations are rarely designed nor resourced to reliably answer the broad set of questions that is asked. This results in a high number of reviews and evaluations with limited value for learning and improvement.

Investments in more in-depth knowledge generation are rare. While large international NGOs conduct some high-quality studies through their central research departments, real time evaluations that follow the project from start to finish, thematic studies linked to implementation, or other types of implementation research are almost absent in Norwegian aid.

**In sum, current knowledge investments are concentrated on a limited range of knowledge products. Aid effectiveness can be enhanced by expanding investments to include a broader range of products, of higher quality, and designed to improve the relevance, impact and effective implementation of interventions.**

#### *Use of research-based knowledge*

Aid organisations often make extensive use of available knowledge to describe and understand the challenges their programmes address. The use of research-based knowledge is more limited when it comes to documenting the impact of proposed interventions.

Research-based knowledge about the impact of aid interventions is not available in all areas, and the generalizability of existing studies to other contexts can never be taken for granted. Nevertheless, the number of available studies and reviews have grown over the past decades. This existing body of knowledge is often scattered and unnecessarily impenetrable, barring aid organisations from utilizing the insights without considerable investments.

**In sum, there is considerable potential in synthesizing available knowledge and making it accessible and used by aid organisations in their programme design.**

## Collaboration between aid organisations and research institutions: Barriers and proposed actions.

This report takes as a basic premise that aid organisations want to maximise their impact for people on the ground. Organisations will then assumedly invest in knowledge whenever they expect that such investments will improve the impact of their work, taking into account that such investment will imply less resources for programmes, at least in the short run.

If this is the case, is there any reason to be concerned with apparently low investments in knowledge of high quality? Doesn't this only reflect that the perceived (or actual) returns on such investments are lower than the costs? Not necessarily. The task force has identified the following reasons why the current level and profile of knowledge investments probably are sub-optimal.

### **Knowledge investments are strongly influenced by expectations from Norad**

Most Norwegian aid organisations receive a large share of their budgets from Norad and put high emphasis on complying with Norad's expectations. Norad's standard expectations to grant recipients have been to collect extensive monitoring data and to conduct mid-term reviews and end-of-project evaluations. There is reason to believe that this is the main driver for the high investments in these knowledge products, rather than the organisations' own assessment of what knowledge investments may have the greatest value.

Norad's new guidelines on the use of knowledge encourage organisations to take a broader approach to knowledge generation. In fact, the new Grants Handbook state that applicants should be able to substantiate whether, how and why a project is likely to be successful and key underlying assumptions, that are critical for results achievement, must be outlined. These should either be justified by existing evidence (with links or explicit references to literature/documentation), or there should be a plan assessing these assumptions in the agreement period. Moreover, knowledge products (e.g. evaluations, reviews and/or research projects) should be clearly linked to specific elements in organizations' theory of change and/or knowledge gaps, programming or strategic objectives in the organisation. All planned



evaluations and/or research should be of high professional quality and be based on appropriate social science and evaluation methodology<sup>1</sup>.

This new policy signals increased expectations to knowledge-based programming and seems to give organisations the space they need to invest in knowledge they need to strengthen their programmes.

However, there is still some uncertainty in the organisations about the new policy. Are organisations free to skip the standard ex-post evaluations if resources are better spent elsewhere? Or are (some of) these evaluations still needed for accountability purposes? And to what extent will the strength of the knowledge base matter for grant allocations?

The fact that knowledge generation now can be a sub-objective in the grant agreements implies that research institutions can be partners and sub-grantees in those agreements. Such partnerships facilitate early involvement of research partners, which is crucial for the design of high-quality evaluations. However, there is still limited knowledge about these opportunities and uncertainty both in the organisations and in parts of Norad about how this can be done in practice.

#### **Recommendation to aid organisations:**

- Fully utilise the opportunities that now exist to invest in knowledge products of high quality, designed to meet critical knowledge needs of the organisation (3.1).
- Prioritize fewer and more robust knowledge investments over a high number of lower-quality reviews/evaluations (3.2).

#### **Recommendations to Norad:**

- Clearly communicate that Norad expects aid organizations to define their own knowledge and learning needs, and to decide which types of high-quality knowledge products they wish to invest in for learning purposes (2.1).
- Specify what the organisations must do for accountability purposes (2.2).
- Ensure that the use of knowledge in the design of aid programmes and the quality of knowledge management plans significantly influence grant allocations (2.3).
- Highlight in allocation letters how Norad’s assessment of knowledge use and knowledge management plans has influenced the allocation of funds (2.4).
- Formulate general principles for how organisations could assess knowledge investments vis-a-vis programme investments (2.5).
- Ensure that the use of knowledge in the design of aid programmes matters for grant allocations (2.6).
- Communicate clearly about the opportunities for including research institutions as partners in grant agreements, both from the start of the agreement period and at a later stage.

To facilitate knowledge investments, it is also important that Norad makes clear that “negative” findings, followed by learning and appropriate course correction, will be rewarded, not punished.

### **Aid organisations are not set up for making knowledge investments**

Aid organisations are set up for implementing programmes, not for making extensive investments in knowledge. Strategic knowledge investments may require changes in both organisational structures and organisational culture. It is not uncommon that MEL (monitoring,

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<sup>1</sup> [Grants Handbook, Section 4.](#)

evaluation and learning) staff work quite separately from programme staff. Strategic investments in knowledge generation require a more integrated approach and elevation of the status and influence of MEL functions in the organisations.

Moreover, the programmes of many organisations are fragmented in the sense that they consist of many relatively small projects in a number of countries. While each organisation as a whole may have a sizeable budget, each of their country-level projects may be too small to justify investments in any high-quality research or evaluations. A coordinated approach to knowledge investments within each organisation is therefore needed, considering the benefits that such investments may bring to other parts of the organisation.

**Recommendation to aid organisations:**

- Build in-house competence and organisational structures that facilitate strategic decisions about knowledge investments (4.1).
- Ensure that internal budget structures and decision-making encourage knowledge investments, also with a view to a broader use beyond the individual programmes (4.2).
- Collaborate with research institutions to stay updated about existing knowledge, to ensure that knowledge investments expand the overall body of knowledge (4.5).

Norwegian aid organisations that consider making new types of knowledge investment may benefit from lessons learnt in organisations with more experience in making such investments. What benefits do various types of knowledge investments bring? What are best practices for making sure that new knowledge is relevant and gets used? While each organisation certainly can gather this information by themselves, it would be more efficient to coordinate these efforts.

**Recommendation to Norad:**

- Gather the experiences about the benefits of – and best practices in – knowledge investments from organisations that have invested consistently in high-quality knowledge over time. Share this information with Norwegian aid organisations and/or facilitate and encourage sharing between organisations about best practices (2.7).<sup>2</sup>

One reason why it may be difficult to make well-founded knowledge decisions is that head office staff may have insufficient information about actual implementation and knowledge needs on the ground. Furthermore, research initiatives that originate in donor countries risk alienating local staff and develop plans based on incorrect perceptions of how projects are actually carried out. Implementing partners therefore need to play a central role in identifying knowledge needs and in the planning and execution of research activities. However, implementing partners face similar lack of incentives for knowledge investments as their donors, and perhaps even more so since knowledge investments directly may reduce their budget for programme implementation.

**Recommendations to aid organisations:**

- Work systematically with implementing partners to identify knowledge gaps and to mobilise enthusiasm for knowledge-based programming (4.3).
- Ensure early and continuous involvement of implementing partners in the planning and conduct of any research activities (4.4).

Aid organisations may also have limited knowledge about the investment “universe”. What types of knowledge investments can be made? Impact evaluations have received a lot of attention in

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<sup>2</sup> Potential organisations include BRAC, IRC (International Rescue Committee), DIME (Development Impact Group at the World Bank), and others.

the public discussion in Norway, but much less attention has been paid to issues like designing indicators and monitoring systems with a view to conduct good evaluations, doing research to improve the effectiveness of implementation, utilizing existing data to better understand the local contexts, needs and priorities, using existing research to strengthen theories of change, to mention a few other opportunities.

#### **Recommendations to aid organisations:**

- Discuss with researchers the potential for a broad range of knowledge investments, including those that may further strengthen existing monitoring systems, and share ideas across organisations, for instance through the MERLiN (Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning in Norway) network (4.6).
- Explore the interests of research institutions to engage in other activities than research and evaluations (e.g., knowledge advice, data management advice, methodological advice) and discuss the possibilities for involving PhD or master's students (4.7).

#### **Knowledge is a public good. Incentives to invest are too weak**

Norad has left all decisions about knowledge investments to individual organisations. This approach does not sufficiently account for the fact the knowledge is a public good, and the likely result is underinvestment in knowledge for the common good.

Even if aid organisations are well aware of the benefits and costs of knowledge investments, they do not necessarily have sufficient incentives to invest in ways that maximize benefit to the broader aid- and development community, beyond their own programmes. Knowledge is a public good, because everyone can use the knowledge once it is produced and published, including other organisations implementing similar programs. Assessment of benefits and costs only from an organisational point of view will fail to consider these external benefits and will therefore typically lead to too low investments, both in new knowledge and in reviews of existing knowledge.

The organisations' missions and mandates may require them to invest primarily in knowledge that can improve their own programmes. It may not be obvious to its staff and managers whether they have the mandate to invest in knowledge that also serve the common good by improving aid provided by other agencies, and whether their contracts with donors allow them to spend resources this way.

#### **Recommendation to aid organisations and to Norad:**

- State clearly that knowledge production should improve the organisation's own programmes while also contributing to the common good by expanding the overall body of knowledge within the organisation's field of work (1.2 and 5.1).

#### **Investments in new knowledge as a public good**

Norad's current arrangement appears, at least in theory, to provide organisations with some indirect incentives to invest in knowledge for the public good. Grant applicants are supposed to describe the knowledge base for their theory of change, and they must submit a plan for how to develop and use knowledge. This is supposed to affect the evaluation of the application and in turn the size of the grant received.

The effectiveness of this approach in addressing the public goods problem hinges on whether organisations believe that the extra costs of investing in knowledge for the public good are offset by a sufficient increase in the grant received. It is not clear that this is the case, both because the knowledge part is only one among a number of criteria to be assessed, the opportunities for

increasing the resource envelope are limited, and the evaluation process as a whole is not very transparent.

**Recommendation to Norad:**

- Further increase the expectations to – and funding opportunities for – high-quality knowledge production in grant applications (1.1).

The task force has also discussed alternative arrangements, which we believe will be more effective than the current one. Our recommendation is to establish a mechanism which offers funding for strategically important knowledge investments for the common good. The funding will compensate for the costs of making knowledge investments that carry benefits beyond organisational boundaries. In addition, the funding can be used to enable evaluations that extend beyond the duration of the project period (a measure [recommended](#) by Norad’s Evaluation Department).

**Recommendation to Norad:**

- Establish a funding scheme that stimulates strategically important knowledge investments for the common good (1.3).

One way of doing so is to have a separate call for proposals.<sup>3</sup> An alternative, and perhaps administratively easier way, of implementing such a funding scheme is to earmark a certain share of grant budgets each year (e.g., 2 per cent) and invite current and past grantees to suggest top-up funding for strategically important knowledge investments. Norad can then top-up the grant to selected grantees that plan to produce knowledge with high relevance to others. The standard top-up ratio can be, say, half the cost of the knowledge investments, but the top-up can also be substantially higher when the investment to a larger extent has the character of a public good.

**Knowledge reviews as a public good**

Knowledge reviews are also public goods. Many aid organisations are working on similar topics, and the costs of investing in knowledge reviews may be significantly reduced if these investments are coordinated across the organisations. It is however not realistic to expect such coordination to emerge organically, because the organisations need updated knowledge reviews at different points in time, typically when they are in the process of applying for new grant agreements. This takes place sequentially.

Coordination on the supply side will also reduce costs. To update a knowledge review is relatively straightforward for someone who produced the original review. Furthermore, research institutions and aid organisations have very different pace in their work. Researchers are seldom available on the short notice for which aid organisations will need their cooperation. It is therefore efficient that both production and updating of a knowledge review are assigned to a single institution with dedicated resources and mandate.

It is not necessarily straightforward to put knowledge reviews to practical use. The quality of the evidence varies, as does its relevance to the contexts where aid organisations work. The value of knowledge reviews is therefore considerably enhanced if they come with opportunities for direct dialogue with researchers with in-depth knowledge of the evidence.

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<sup>3</sup> Further ideas on how this can be done can be gathered at the Fund for Innovation in Development (FID, France) and Development Innovation Ventures (DIV, USA).

### **Recommendation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs / Norad:**

- Establish a Knowledge Centre responsible for producing knowledge reviews on demand from aid organizations, maintaining an up-to-date knowledge repository, and providing a helpdesk service that offers guidance on applying research-based knowledge in practice (1.4).

This can be done by locating the Knowledge Centre at one or several research institutions, with a mandate to engage researchers both at the host institution(s) and at other institutions in its work. The Knowledge Centre should collaborate closely with international initiatives with a similar role, to maximise its added value both nationally and internationally.<sup>4</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs / Norad should provide core funding of the Knowledge Centre, but a limited co-payment from the NGOs should also be expected.

### **Weak culture for cooperation between aid organisations and research institutions**

Knowledge investments often require close cooperation between aid organisations and researchers over time (e.g., real time evaluations of all sorts, including impact evaluations). While such long-term collaborations are facilitated by high levels of mutual understanding and trust, there is currently not a widespread culture for such cooperation.

Researchers and practitioners may have differing objectives, and their organisations have different mandates, working modalities, and success criteria. Organisations sometimes claim that researchers appear more focused on advancing their academic interests than on generating evidence pertinent to the organisations and their programmes, while researchers may claim that aid organisations are not genuinely interested in knowledge if it does not fit their immediate practical needs.

Many researchers who work on development issues have limited knowledge about development aid and aid management. They may also have limited experience with research collaborations where they do not themselves define the research agenda and where it is essential to provide rapid feedback about findings that are operationally relevant.

At the same time, aid organisations may have limited understanding of what it takes to generate knowledge of high quality. Over-ambitious terms of references with limited opportunities for researchers to apply those methods that are required to generate reliable evidence may cause researchers to lose interest.

Involving researchers at an early stage considerably enhances the possibilities for developing high quality research and evaluations – way too often researchers are invited in after a program design has come too far.

### **Recommendations to research institutions:**

- Invest more in knowledge about development aid by learning from aid practitioners (6.1).
- Develop a “code of conduct” for research collaborations with aid organisations to align expectations and build trust (6.2).

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<sup>4</sup> Examples include the [Development Evidence Portal](#) at the International Initiative on Impact Evaluation (3ie), the [Outcomes and Evidence Framework](#) of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and the [Living Literature Reviews](#) of VoxDev.

**Recommendations to aid organisations:**

- Involve researchers early in the planning of research / evaluations. Discuss terms of references and build mutual understanding of knowledge needs and how to generate knowledge of high quality (4.8).

## Members of the task force

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