



Fact Sheet

External Evaluation of Evaluation of SDC's Thematic Networks

1. Evaluations at SDC

The E+C Division is responsible for the execution of thematic and institutional evaluations, country strategy evaluations and reports on effectiveness. The division conducts this process on behalf of SDC's Directorate and according to an annual rolling plan.

2. Objectives of the Evaluation

SDC established its thematic networks in 2008 in the process of SDC's internal reorganization. The objective of the evaluation was to analyze to what extent the introduction of networks has improved the effectiveness of SDC's operational and policy work, the quality of its strategies and policies, as well as SDC's thematic competence and knowledge management. The evaluation does not make a comparison between the networks but focuses on the network structure as a whole. It covers the period 2009-2013.

3. Methodology

The Evaluation applied mixed methods and analysis tools. Data collection included review of existing documentation and the collection of new data through face-to-face and telephone interviews with network stakeholders at headquarters and in Swiss Country Offices (SCOs), a general online survey with the 12 existing Thematic Networks and a user survey among network members. The data collection also included case studies in three SCOs (Benin, Kyrgyzstan, and Nicaragua) and benchmarking studies of thematic networks in other donor agencies (particularly Sida and DFID). The analysis tools consisted of stakeholder analysis, network analysis, and an assumption and contribution analysis.

4. Tender Procedure

Breard & Associates, France conducted the evaluation with a team of 4 people. The mandate was subject to an international tendering procedure.

5. Main Results

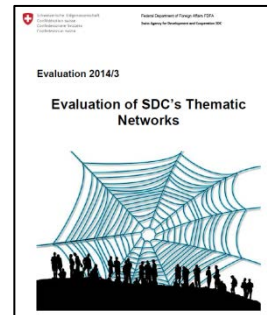
The evaluation found that overall, the established network structure has proven able to respond to the intended functions defined in the mandate of the thematic networks in terms of:

- promoting learning and passing on professional and methodological knowledge;
- providing theme-related operational advice to the organizational units within the network;
- and capitalizing on experience and identifying good practices.

Collectively, the thematic networks clearly provide added-value to SDC and its partners in a more collaborative, participatory format compared to the previous thematic organizational set-up. The networks have proven to be a strong tool for identifying, developing and mainstreaming norms and policies, which ultimately improves impact in the field.

However, thematic networks contribute to SDC's institutional learning primarily through ad hoc initiatives, rather than systematic mechanisms. While the general concept of the thematic network structure has been internalized throughout the organization, there are still uncertainties about how best to use the networks including clearly defined and lived roles and responsibilities. Network members are generally not claiming full ownership and engagement.

There are also challenges with regard to the perceived relevance of some of the network functions, such as technical advice and sharing of good practices where the SCO demand is often specific and requires adapted solutions rather than global advice. Moreover, the large



number of thematic networks combined with limited attention to joint planning and monitoring among the networks is counter-productive to Swiss Cooperation Office requirements. They would give preference for an integrated thematic approach.

Thus far, there are only limited structures put in place to ensure a common approach of the thematic networks. As a result, the general perception of SDC as a strong thematic organization has decreased in spite of the fact that staff directly involved in technical activities has increased through the network structure.

6. Recommendations of the Evaluation

Based on these results, the evaluation has given five recommendations to the SDC Directorate:

1. SDC should continue with thematic networks to strengthen thematic quality of its operations and policy. A steering group for the thematic network structure should be established to coordinate and monitor the structure, as well as ensure its optimization.
2. Each thematic network should implement a results-based management approach to clearly define their contributions to SDC operations.
3. Thematic networks should strengthen their efficiency with special focus on responding to needs of Swiss Cooperation Offices.
4. The thematic networks should strengthen the integrated thematic approach amongst themselves. Focal points of all thematic networks should ensure joint planning to maximize their complementarity in support to domains of Swiss Cooperation Offices.
5. SDC Senior Management should strengthen a learning culture that will embrace successes, failures and risk taking.

5. Impact of the Evaluation

The evaluation confirms the added value of the thematic networks structure while also identifying areas with need of improvement.

The SDC Senior Management agrees or partly agrees with most of the recommendations and is aware of the needs of improvement. In order to address these issues, a set of measures will be introduced, such as management of each thematic network on the basis of medium term

strategy papers (Leitdokument B) with outcomes and indicators relevant to SDC's priorities; more active involvement in the networks of Swiss Cooperation Offices and head of divisions responsible for thematic areas at HQ; stronger collaboration between thematic networks and thematic staff; active promotion of a learning culture through the networks. In order to improve thematic networks management, related issues will be addressed at Senior Management level at least once a year in relevant platforms such as retreats of SDC Directorate.

The evaluation has been published in various places including the Swiss federal administration's database of external studies. (<http://www.admin.ch/dokumentation/studien/suche/index.html?lang=en>). Publication helps to ensure accountability and allows lessons learned to be shared with other development actors.