Learning from evaluations

Processes and instruments used by GIZ as a
learning organisation and their contribution
to interorganisational learning

Contents

This strategy paper is based on the understanding that the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) is a learning organisation, which means that learning and further development are key factors for its success.

Against this backdrop, the publication describes the process of learning from evaluations within the framework of GIZ's evaluation system and explains the instruments used in this context. It explains how the findings of evaluations are incorporated into GIZ's corporate processes and used for organisational learning. It also demonstrates how GIZ shares its knowledge about conducting evaluations and the findings established in this context, in order to contribute to interorganisational learning.

This publication is primarily directed towards specialists who deal with the lessons learned from evaluations within the context of quality management systems in organisations and companies.

1. Learning from evaluations as part of GIZ's corporate strategy

GIZ's vision is to become the world's leading provider of international cooperation services for sustainable development. It faces the challenge of incorporating learning and knowledge into its strategies as key factors for promoting innovation and competitiveness, in order to support people and societies around the globe in shaping their future and sustainably improving their living conditions. It does this using an efficient, effective and partner-oriented approach. In order to achieve this goal, GIZ wants to utilise and build the learning potential and knowledge of its employees and of the organisation as a whole, in order to increase the company's performance capacity and effectiveness.

As a learning organisation, GIZ aims to use evaluation findings for the company-wide learning process. Evaluations are a key instrument for identifying evidence-based results of international cooperation, in order to meet accountability obligations towards commissioning parties and clients, partners and the general public. But that is not all. They also allow us to systematically reflect on lessons learned, in order to establish what works in the long term and what doesn't. With 100 evaluations each year, GIZ and its partners can leverage significant learning potential to continually improve its work. GIZ has developed special processes and instruments for channelling findings into the continuous improvement process.

2. Learning from evaluations as part of GIZ's management model

----

Capacity WORKS[1], GIZ's management model for sustainable development, is used to steer projects and programmes. Success factor ‚Learning and innovation' covers questions such as: What have we learned from evaluations? How do we communicate the lessons learned to our partners and channel them back into the company? How do we further enhance our effectiveness?

Figure 1:
The five Capacity WORKS success factors
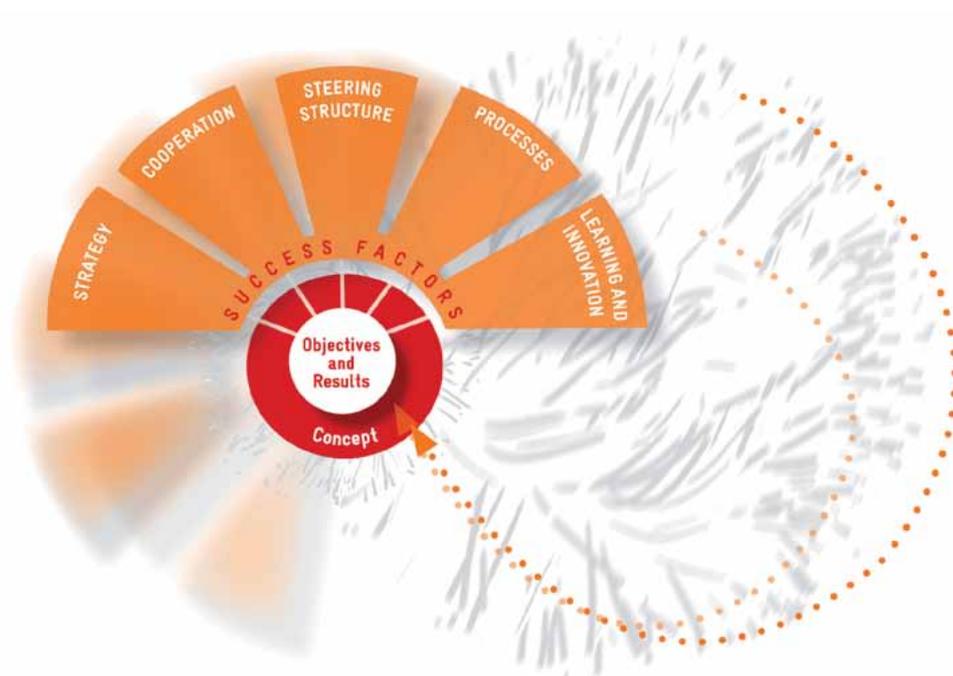
To answer these questions, GIZ also focuses on promoting learning skills through an effective knowledge management system. The aim of this system is to optimise the efficiency with which knowledge and lessons learned are exchanged in the management processes competence building and experience-based learning. This involves reflecting on, analysing and evaluating findings and systematically building our knowledge to equip ourselves better for future tasks.

Quality management at GIZ is based on the premise that the objectives system is geared to the guiding principle of sustainable development. This means that evaluation is one of GIZ's quality features and is used to identify and leverage the potential for optimising results, in order to safeguard and enhance quality in the value GIZ's work generates[2].
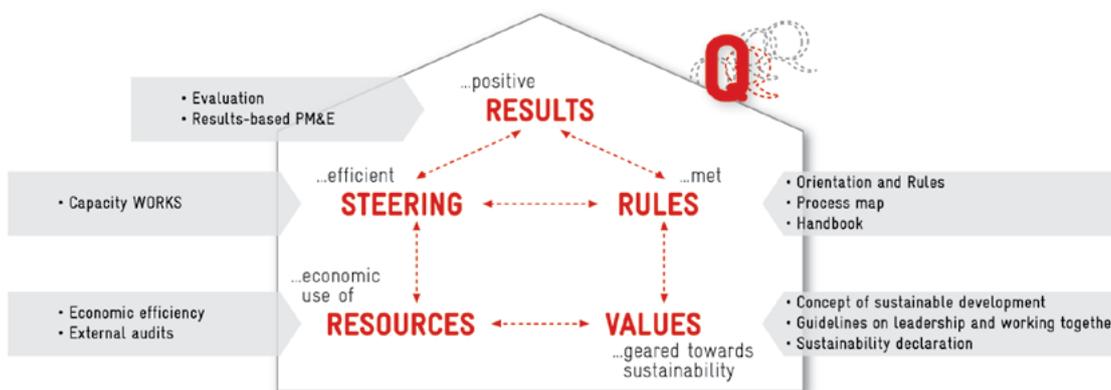
3. Learning from evaluations – so that they are effective – at all levels

...and help achieve sustainable development. It is not easy to optimise the potential of evaluations, as organisations tend to have fixed structures that are difficult to change. If individuals often find it hard to learn from experience, particularly from mistakes, it is small wonder that the obstacles to learning are even more difficult to overcome at the project or corporate level. This is exacerbated by the fact that evaluations are frequently perceived more as a monitoring instrument and as additional effort rather than as an opportunity for learning.

However, it is essential that a company such as GIZ – which has a decentralised organisational structure, a field structure and high staff turnover – learns from evaluations at all levels. This is the only way that GIZ can increase the quality and effectiveness of the services it provides and boost its competitiveness in the long term. In order to meet this challenge, it is vital that we understand the theory of organisational learning and apply it in the corporate context.

At GIZ, learning takes place in loops between three different levels:

1. At the individual project or programme level, staff members, external experts and national partners are involved in evaluations. At a later stage, these stakeholders act as multipliers for important findings.
2. At the level of the organisational units (usually the Sectoral Department and regional departments), evaluation findings are examined beyond the individual project or programme to improve sectoral and regional approaches.
3. At the institutional or corporate level, selected recommendations for action must be consistently integrated into ongoing business processes, in order to facilitate organisational learning to modify strategies, processes and instruments.

Figure 3:
Learning from evaluations
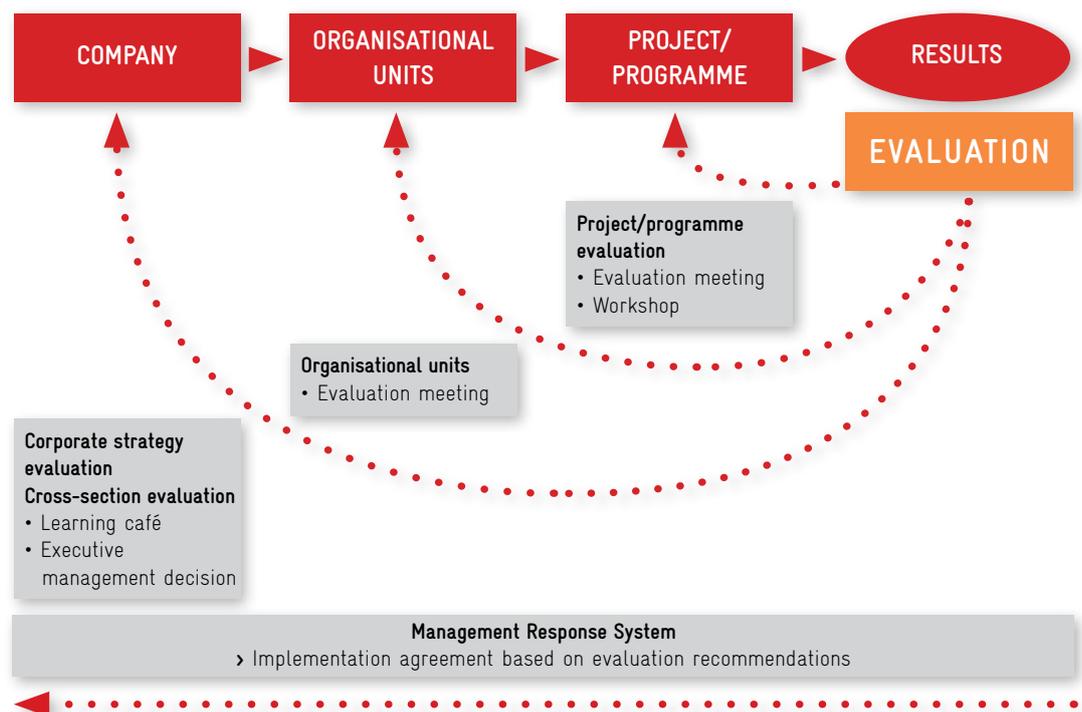
Adapted from Argyris and Schön's loop model (Ramalingam, B.: Organisational learning for aid, and learning aid organisations, in: Capacity.org, Issue 33 (2008), S.4)

Evaluations deliver evidence-based findings that enable action-oriented learning from experience within the company at the different levels of the triple-loop learning model. Initially, knowledge is acquired at the project level. In order for a company to benefit from this knowledge, it has to be integrated into further processes throughout the company. This requires exchange at different levels: horizontally between the different organisational units within a company, and vertically between the different hierarchical levels, from the management to the individual employees. The key task in this context involves processing experience so that different actors can learn from it through different processes.
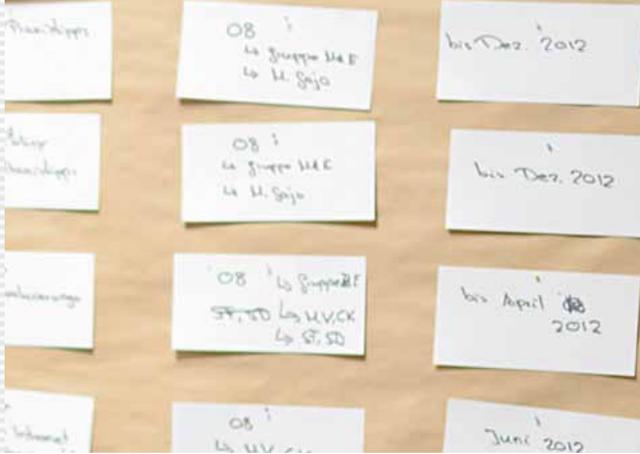
In order to channel evaluation findings beyond the individual project/programme and make them available for GIZ and its business processes, the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit has developed various evaluation and learning tools, which are described in greater detail in sections 5 and 7. These tools institutionalise learning from evaluations by feeding the findings from the three learning levels back into the process.

4. Learning orientation in the monitoring and evaluation system

GIZ has a number of monitoring and evaluation tools to help identify learning fields. It distinguishes between decentralised evaluations (which include project progress reviews and are conducted and steered by projects/ programmes on site) and central independent evaluations (which are conducted and steered by the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit). The different evaluation tools enable experience-based learning on at least one of three levels (project, organisational unit or corporate level). Independent corporate strategy and cross-section evaluations that take the form of meta-evaluations and evaluation syntheses play a special role in this context, because they focus on incorporating knowledge from outside GIZ and new knowledge, based on knowledge that is already available in the company, rather than on learning from experience.
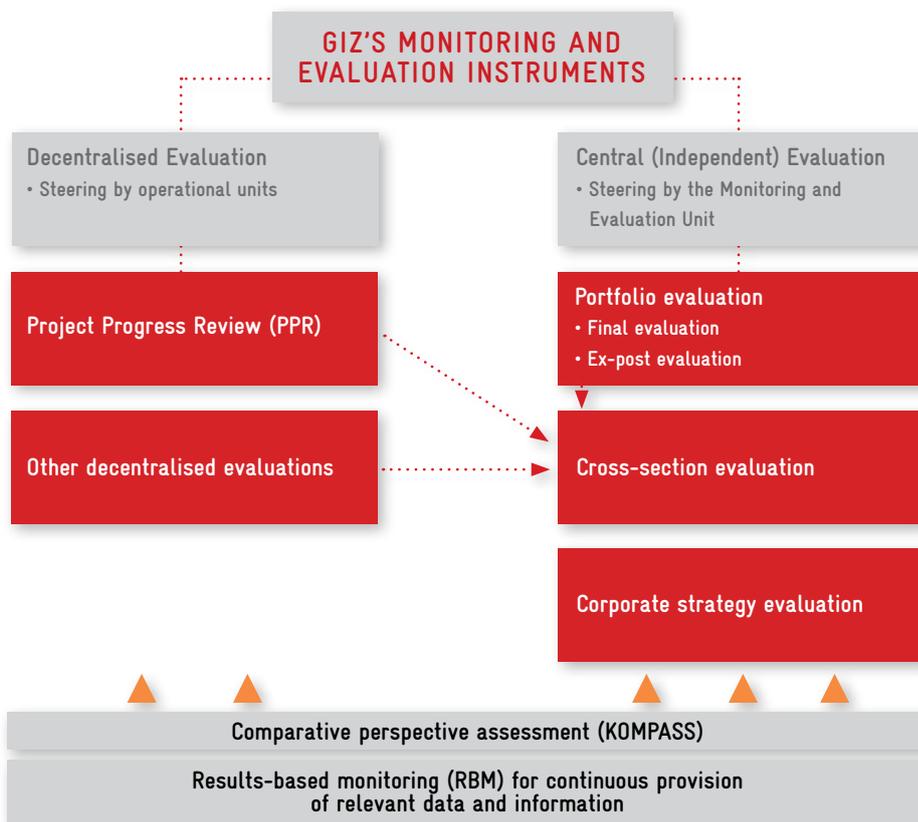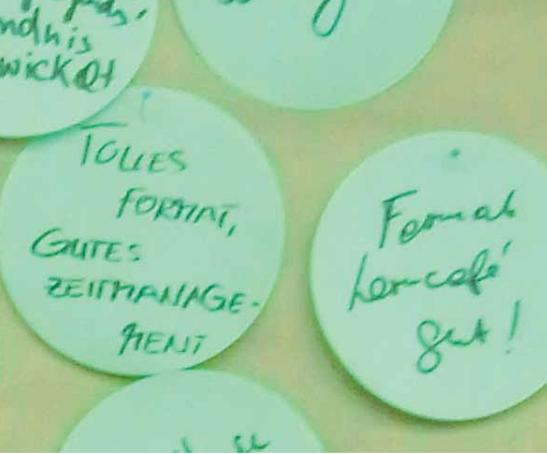

Figure 4:
Monitoring
and evaluation tools

- **Results-based monitoring**

Results-based monitoring is an internal tool used to review project progress on an ongoing basis. It is therefore used for project/programme steering and for reporting. It provides the basis for evaluations and contributes to learning in a project or programme. Monitoring findings make it possible to communicate what works and where improvements need to be made, based on sound evidence. In so doing, they promote the learning process in a project or programme and are incorporated into knowledge management. The lessons learned are used to modify the project/programme design or to prepare a new project or programme.

- **KOMPASS – Comparative assessment of perspectives**

Within the context of GIZ's (advisory) work, the opinions and perceptions of the different project stakeholders involved have a direct bearing on the quality of service provision and the effectiveness of a project or programme. The views and experience of the partners and target groups are therefore openly and systematically documented at least once. Data are collected using a qualitative instrument such as the computer-based interview procedure e-VAL, in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a measure from the perspective of different actors. The findings are systematically assessed, discussed in the project team together with the partners and then incorporated into project/programme steering and design using a Management Response System.

- **Project progress reviews**

Project progress reviews (PPR) are used to steer and plan development projects and programmes. They combine a critical and analytical review of results with a strategic forecast of future developments in a project or programme. PPR results are used for steering in conjunction with partners and contribute to planning the continuation of a project or programme.

- **Other decentralised evaluations**

Decentralised evaluations are carried out at different stages (for example as an interim or final evaluation) and for a variety of reasons. The object of an evaluation (e.g. a project/programme, sector portfolio, country portfolio, instrument or product) depends on the information required, the areas of interest and on the expectations identified by the project team in conjunction with the partners before the evaluation. The clearer a picture stakeholders have of what information is required, the more useful the findings. The findings and recommendations of decentralised evaluations are shared with all stakeholders and beneficiaries to initiate a learning process.

- **Portfolio evaluations**

  Portfolio evaluations (independent evaluations) are final and ex-post evaluations that assess the effectiveness of development project/programmes retrospectively or at their conclusion. A different priority area is evaluated each year. By conducting evaluations in line with rigorous methodology, GIZ also responds to the challenge of substantiating and attributing results within the increasingly complex development cooperation setting. The findings are discussed in an evaluation meeting.

- **Cross-section evaluations**

  GIZ acquires information on cross-programme organisational learning and on the quality of evaluations from cross-section evaluations, which take the form of evaluation syntheses/synthesis reports and meta-evaluations or reviews. The findings of the different evaluations are analysed and summarised in the synthesis reports. Conducting another comparative assessment based on questions and criteria that have been specifically chosen by GIZ generates new knowledge that enables cross-programme success factors, potential for improvements and good practice to be identified. The findings of cross-section evaluations are presented to the management body, allowing it to monitor the implementation of any recommendations made and draw conclusions and recommendations for the company as a whole.

  The Monitoring and Evaluation Unit assesses portfolio evaluations centrally in a cross-section analysis together with decentralised evaluations of the portfolio. Cross-section evaluations of decentralised evaluations are also conducted on behalf of and by the relevant division of the Sectoral Department. For example, all project progress reviews conducted in recent years in a specific sector are evaluated, in order to aggregate sector-specific findings.

- **Corporate strategy evaluations**

  Corporate strategy evaluations address the implementation of policies and strategies throughout GIZ that relate to the delivery of services. They usually span different business sectors and instruments. Corporate strategy evaluations assess the implementation and application of GIZ's policies and strate-gies and also examine issues that will help develop them further. This tool aims to enable evidence-based learning and decision-making throughout the company, in order to boost the effectiveness, efficiency and quality of service provision at GIZ and (further) develop key policies and strategies.

5. Learning from evaluations – the process

Learning from evaluations is a process that is broken down into several steps. The evaluation process receives the strongest support and achieves the best results when learning – both inside and outside GIZ – links into existing processes and is included as an integral element of project management.

After all, such experience-based knowledge can only be used effectively if it is fully integrated into the strategies and processes of projects/programmes and of the company as a whole. GIZ promotes the following learning process from evaluations:

- We ensure that the terms of reference for evaluations are geared towards learning needs.
- When compiling the evaluation report, we make recommendations that are action-based and user-centred.
- We assess evaluations across different sectors, regions, instruments and quality criteria, for example, to ensure that findings reflect the situation across programmes.
- We use systematic conclusions drawn from the discussion of evaluation findings in
  – evaluation meetings with participating organisational units and with evaluators,
  – learning cafés or learning workshops with participating organisational units, the evaluators and other organisational units that can use the findings and recommendations,
  – sector networks in presentations in plenary and working groups.
- We agree within the scope of the Management Response System that evaluation findings and recommendations be taken into account in
  – follow-on phases/new projects and programmes,
  – sector strategies, approaches and concepts,
  – product development.
- The key findings and implementation agreements from cross-section evaluations are presented to GIZ's management bodies.
- We present a summary of these findings to corporate management and the Management Board, along with any related recommendations.
- We document the findings, recommendations and agreements in the Knowledge Base and other search engines that can be accessed throughout GIZ.
- We communicate the findings, recommendations and agreements using an existing format that is appropriate for the specific recipient.

.

6. Instruments for learning from evaluations

GIZ has developed the following learning instruments to promote learning from evaluations:

- **Learning and user-oriented terms of reference**
  The process of learning from evaluations starts with the terms of reference. The recipients of the evaluation findings and recommendations help identify the issues to be examined in the evaluation. In particular, colleagues from the relevant divisions within GIZ's Sectoral Department (interested in technical and sectoral issues) and from the responsible regional departments (interested in cultural and country-specific issues) are asked to outline what information they need so that this can be included in the terms of reference, along with the interests of managers (concerned with cross-sector issues related to corporate policy and development policy) and of experts from the fields of evaluation and knowledge management, who are mainly concerned with methodology.

- **Learning and benefits-oriented reporting grid**
  Evaluation reports deliver evidence-based, action-oriented recommendations that help optimise learning outcomes. Ideally, these recommendations should be broken down into different categories, based on the recipients who are intended to learn from them. An annotated or agreed structure is used to ensure that reports are of uniform quality and that they meet the learning expectations of users.

- **Evaluation meetings**
  The findings are discussed in evaluation meetings, in order to promote learning outcomes among individual experts and members of project staff.

- **Learning workshops**
  Learning workshops are suitable for all forms of evaluation. They can be conducted following an individual evaluation, or an evaluation of a specific sector or theme, for example. The evaluation findings and recommendations are discussed with a limited number of representatives of the evaluation's commissioning parties, participants, project staff members and relevant managers. The number of people involved in this discussion should be kept to a minimum, and everyone involved should be familiar with the object of the evaluation. Learning workshops focus on sharing and examining the evaluation findings. They bring together the people who are directly affected by the evaluation, enabling them to decide on specific implementation agreements. The aim is to provide a safe space to create an open learning culture and to learn from mistakes. These workshops are therefore particularly suitable for learning from projects/programmes that have received a poor evaluation rating.

- **Learning cafés**

A learning café is a form of dialogue and workshop that is particularly suited to larger groups. It aims to enable the interactive exchange of knowledge, in order to develop new strategic orientations. Here, evaluation findings are discussed in a dialogue forum that spans several organisational units. The evaluators and experts directly involved in and responsible for an evaluation as well as all beneficiaries of the evaluation findings attend learning cafés. These beneficiaries include representatives of the regional divisions and divisions in the Sectoral Departments as well as managers from the relevant divisions. Based on the evaluation findings, the representatives of different organisational units pool their expertise on a topic and examine it from different perspectives. This exchange between all recipients who will learn from the evaluation findings ensures that the lessons learned will be used beyond the evaluated project or programme, allowing structural deficits in corporate processes to be identified and approaches and procedures to be improved. The effectiveness of strategies is examined and assessed and exemplary approaches (best practices) are identified.

- **Management Response System**

The Management Response System helps projects and programmes to improve quality and increase effectiveness in a more targeted manner by fostering learning from evaluation findings. It provides a structure for working on evaluation findings, including two tables that allow evaluation recommendations to be documented clearly and succinctly. The first step is to take a look at the recommendations made by the evaluators: Are these useful? Are they based on the analyses of the evaluation? Can they be put into practice? A decision is then made on whether they will be accepted and in what form. If they are accepted, a plan of action is drafted that defines how and in what time frame they will be implemented. Responsibilities are defined. Progress on implementing recommendations is monitored after one year.

- **Sector networks**

Sector networks provide a platform for the organised exchange of expertise and for cooperation between GIZ staff members in projects and programmes in partner countries and at Head Office. The networks have a regional and sectoral focus and aim to promote joint experienced-based learning beyond the borders of individual countries. Sector networks identify, discuss and assess the findings of evaluations, above all in relation to cross-cutting issues. The knowledge gained in this context is then processed into best-practice examples, developed into products or stored in GIZ's Knowledge Base.

The following table outlines the learning instruments used in the different evaluation tools, in order to support the process of learning from evaluation findings.
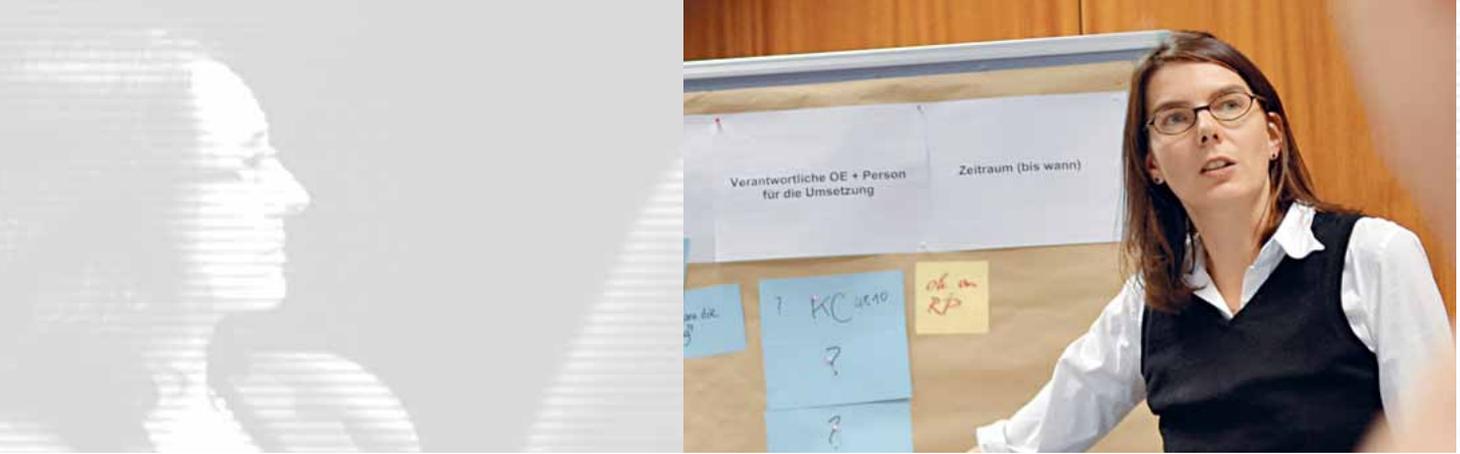
Evaluation tool	Other decentralised evaluation	Project progress review	KOMPASS	Inde-pendent evaluation	Cross-section evaluation	Corporate strategy evaluation
Instruments for learning from evaluations						
Terms of reference	●	●	●	●	●	●
Reporting grids	●	●	●	●	●	●
Evaluation meetings	●	●	●	●	●	●
Learning workshops	●	●		●		
Learning cafés					●	●
Management Response System	●	●	●		●	●
Sector networks		●			●	

7. Sharing knowledge as a contribution to interorganisational learning

Through its transparency and information policy[4], GIZ aims to strengthen the exchange of knowledge and information. The objective is not just to provide the general public with data and documents on GIZ's work and results, but also to engage in an intensive exchange of information with local partners, with commissioning parties and clients and with cooperation partners. GIZ aims to shape interaction between people with diverse events and dialogue forums, to enable sharing of knowledge and experience with others.

By communicating and publishing information from and about evaluations, GIZ also promotes the exchange of knowledge and experience with other international cooperation institutions, universities and research institutions as well as with private sector and civil society organisations (companies, business associations, NGOs, political foundations etc.). This benefits not only GIZ's cooperation partners, but also GIZ itself. On the one hand this is how we disseminate our approaches, topics, lessons learned and attitudes, and in so doing further enhance our reputation in the international debate. On the other hand we also learn from the experiences of others. This helps us avoid mistakes, innovate and further strengthen the effectiveness of our projects and programmes.

Cooperation activities are especially important as a means of transferring knowledge and expertise, accessing new knowledge and closing knowledge gaps. When cooperating, GIZ uses personal contact to share its knowledge with the actors concerned directly and in great detail. To date, GIZ has cooperated primarily with the Center for Evaluation at Saarland University and with Wageningen University.

GIZ regularly plays an active part in international forums (e.g. evaluation conferences), and publishes most of the results of its work in appropriate publications or online. It is actively involved in networks and invites third parties (evaluators, academics, organisations and companies) to participate in events on evaluation findings and methodologies.

8. Challenges

In order to increase the effectiveness of its work, GIZ must learn from evaluation findings and channel this expertise into its day-to-day activities. Existing evaluation tools play a key role in supporting learning at all levels throughout the entire company. However, learning loops are only really completed when the assessment of evaluation findings has succeeded in bringing about change. There are still a number of challenges to be met, in order to fully institutionalise learning from evaluations at GIZ.

Learning takes place when the focus of an evaluation shifts from the expected to the unexpected and explores new territory – rather than justifying why something did or did not happen, examining the findings, conclusions and recommendations, and the changes that need to be implemented on this basis.

The greater the degree to which findings and recommendations are geared to the information needs identified by a project or programme, the more open the process to assess evaluation findings will be. Evaluations should concentrate on the issues most relevant to a project or programme.

Furthermore, the learning potential from evaluations will be optimised when all stakeholders are prepared to translate new findings into action, and to learn from mistakes. In particular, an open corporate culture is vital if we are to learn from our mistakes. Consequently, the creation of an atmosphere of trust is mainstreamed in GIZ's Guiding Principles for Managers.

The Management Response System documents implementation agreements that are binding, and tracks the implementation of evaluation recommendations. One challenge that is faced in this context, however, is the targeted use of evaluation findings when planning new projects and programmes in GIZ's field structure.

The partner institutions of projects and programmes are involved in all evaluations from the outset. This process starts when the evaluators' terms of reference are drafted and usually ends with their debriefing and the submission of the report.

To give rise to ownership, a methodological understanding of the procedures involved in evaluation is an advantage. This will also help ensure that evaluation findings are dealt with constructively and support learning. For this reason, capacity development in the field of evaluation is one of the challenges that needs to be met within the scope of involving partners and training GIZ staff members. All staff members who deal with commission management should therefore receive appropriate training as part of GIZ's internal training programme. The Evaluation Capacity Development Programme implemented by GIZ also aims to strengthen evaluation capacities in partner countries.

**Learning from evaluations is worthwhile!
We are not there yet, but we are getting there.
We are happy to share know-how with you
about how to proceed, and look forward
to our further exchange of ideas and experience.**