



Review of Uptake of ODE Recommendations

Introduction

This review assesses the department's progress in implementing management responses to recent ODE evaluations. A similar review was carried out in 2014. The review has three objectives:

- To assess the extent to which actions proposed in management responses have been implemented by program areas.
- To determine if ODE evaluations have influenced aid program management and policy.
- To identify lessons to improve the impact of future ODE evaluations.

Scope

This review includes five of the six ODE evaluations in last year's uptake review. The Philippines country strategy evaluation was not included as the previous review found that all actions proposed in the management response had been fully implemented. The five evaluations being reviewed for a second time are:

- Working Beyond Government: Evaluation of AusAID's Engagement with Civil Society in Developing Countries (March 2012)
- From Seed to Scale Up: Lessons Learnt from Australia's Rural Development Assistance (April 2012)
- Responding to Crisis: Evaluation of the Australian Aid Program's Contribution to the National HIV Response in PNG (August 2012)
- Building on Local Strengths: Evaluation of Australian Law and Justice Assistance (December 2012) Countries
- An Evaluation of Policy Dialogue in AusAID (April 2013)

This review also includes five ODE evaluations completed after the last review and before September 2014:

- Evaluation of the Australian Volunteers for International Development Program (January 2014)
- Quality of Australian Aid Operational Evaluations (June 2014)
- Evaluation of Australia's Response to the Horn of Africa Humanitarian Crisis, 2011 (June 2014)
- Evaluation of Australian Aid to Timor-Leste (June 2014)
- Smart Economics: Evaluation of Australian Aid Support for Women's Economic Empowerment (August 2014)

Method

The process used was very similar to that used in the previous review. ODE provided a slightly revised template for responses and some guidance including a good practice example. Divisions were given up to four weeks to provide their response but some took considerably longer. A turnover of staff resulted in a loss of knowledge about some evaluations which contributed to delays.

ODE reviewed responses to ensure they were adequate and based on evidence. Some program areas asked ODE to provide feedback on drafts. All program areas provided extensive, detailed and thoughtful responses. The relevance of reviewing the uptake of recommendations for a second time was questioned for all but one evaluation, as evaluations were carried out some time ago.

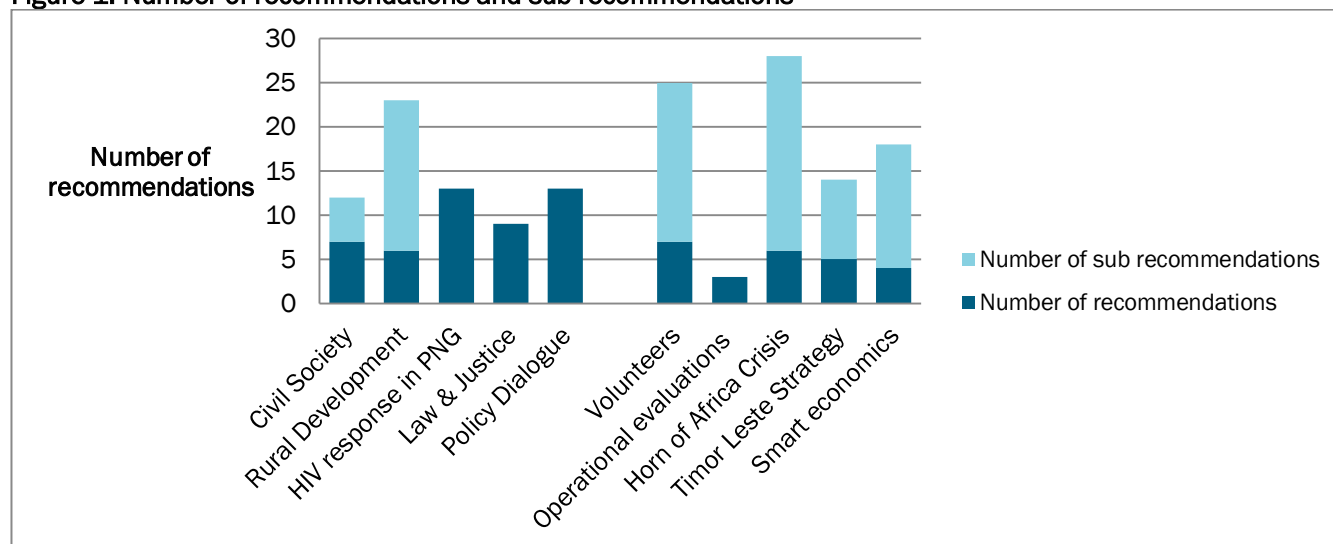
After updates were provided there was limited consultation with program areas to review ratings and seek further information or clarification. Judgements about the degree of implementation require deep knowledge of aid

investments and are, to some extent, inevitably subjective. Program areas were therefore considered to be better able to make judgements about implementation than ODE. ODE reviewed ratings provided and after consultation only a small number of changes were made.

Findings: Number of recommendations

The six ODE evaluations reviewed previously had a total of 54 recommendations, an average of 9 per evaluation (Figure 1). For the evaluations completed after the last review, there were a total of 24 recommendations, an average of about 5 per evaluation. While the more recent evaluations had fewer recommendations all of them, other than the Review of Operational Evaluations, had many sub-recommendations.

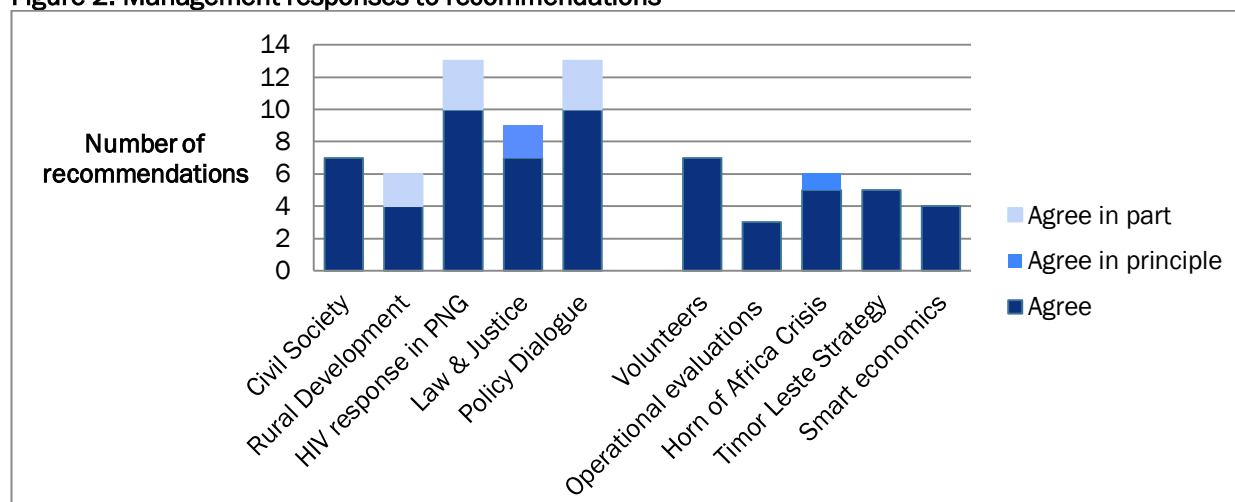
Figure 1. Number of recommendations and sub recommendations



Findings: Management responses to recommendations

For the evaluations in the previous review, management agreed to 44 (81 per cent) of the recommendations without qualification, agreed to a further two in principle, and partially agreed with eight (Figure 2). For the more recent evaluations management agreed to 23 (96 per cent) of the recommendations without qualification and agreed in principle to the single remaining recommendation.

Figure 2. Management responses to recommendations

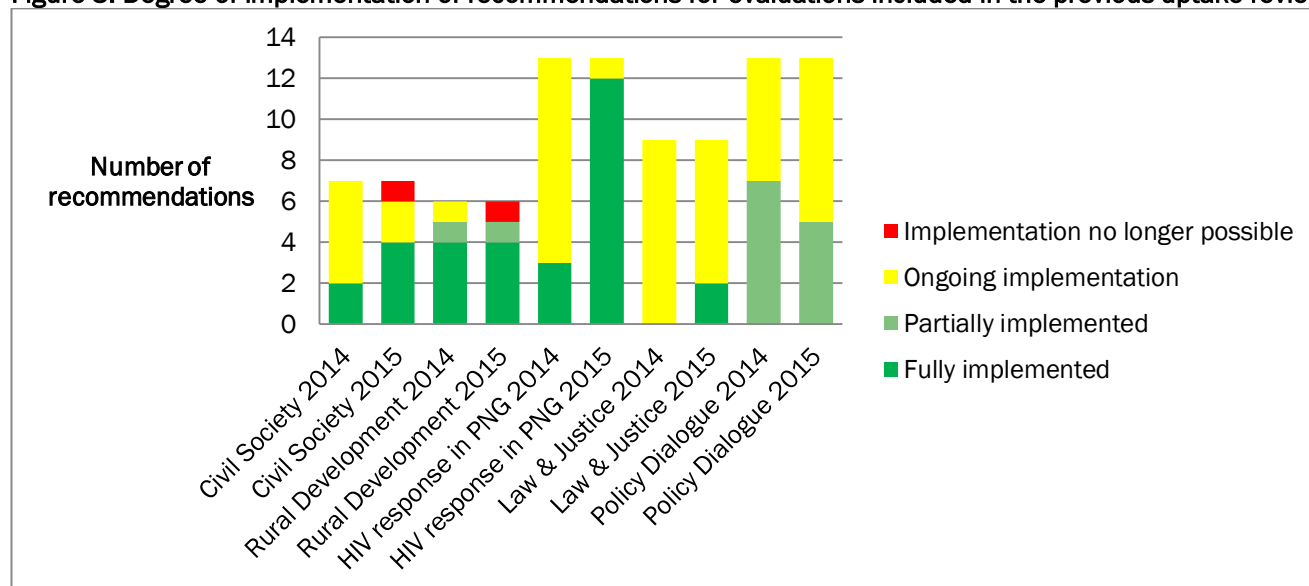


Findings: Uptake of Recommendations

All recommendations have been implemented to some extent. For the evaluations being reviewed for the second time, there are two recommendations which were being implemented but are no longer implementable because of policy changes that resulted from integration. One of these is the recommendation in the civil society evaluation to invest in appointing civil society advisers in Canberra and major country programs. The other recommendation not being implemented is from the rural development evaluation. This recommendation was that AusAID and ACIAR should strengthen rural development expertise by developing career paths, professional development opportunities and performance accountability measures for rural development specialists in their workforces.

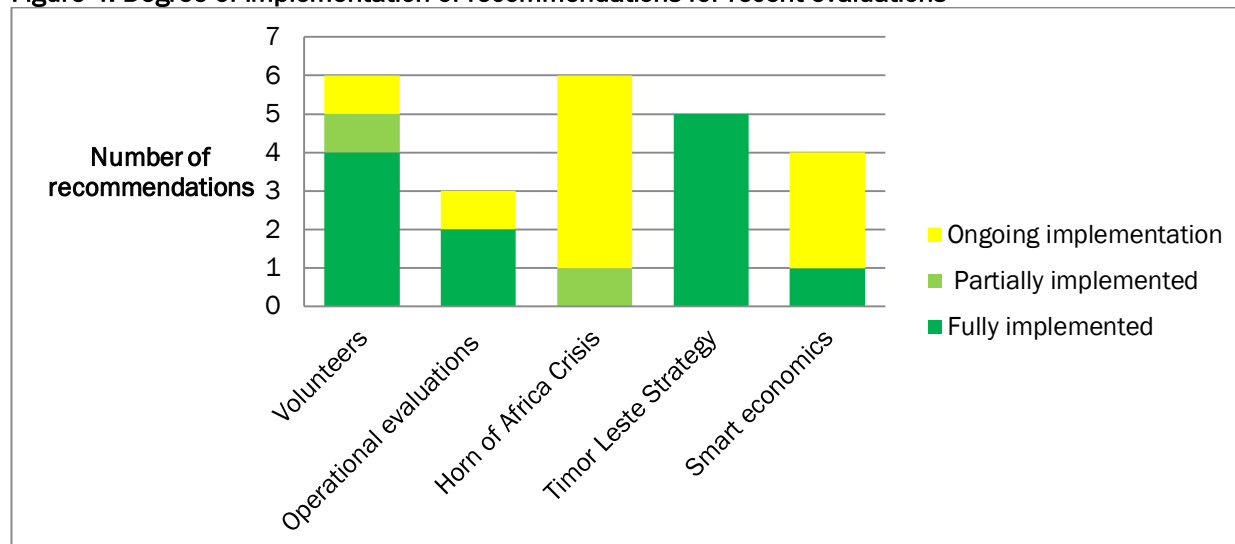
The degree of implementation varies between evaluations. For almost all evaluations being reviewed for a second time, implementation has progressed (Figure 3). The exception is the rural development evaluation due to the one recommendation which can no longer be implemented.

Figure 3. Degree of implementation of recommendations for evaluations included in the previous uptake review



The degree of implementation also varied greatly for the more recent evaluations (Figure 4). For the volunteer and Timor Leste evaluations most recommendations are already fully implemented whereas for the Horn of Africa and Smart Economics evaluations the implementation of most recommendations is ongoing. There are good reasons for this, some recommendations require actions that can be relatively easily implemented by DFAT but others require more complex action and involve other organisations. For example, streamlining in country management of volunteers would be expected to take less time than improving the reporting of UN agencies in humanitarian crises.

Figure 4. Degree of implementation of recommendations for recent evaluations



Implementation was found to have progressed for evaluations being reviewed a second time with the proportion of recommendations that had been fully implemented increasing from 19 to 49 percent (Figures 5 & 6). Implementation of recommendations for the more recent evaluations has been faster with half of the recommendations already fully implemented (Figure 7).

Figure 5. The percentage of recommendations for which implementation is complete, ongoing or partial for evaluations included in the previous uptake review as assessed in 2014

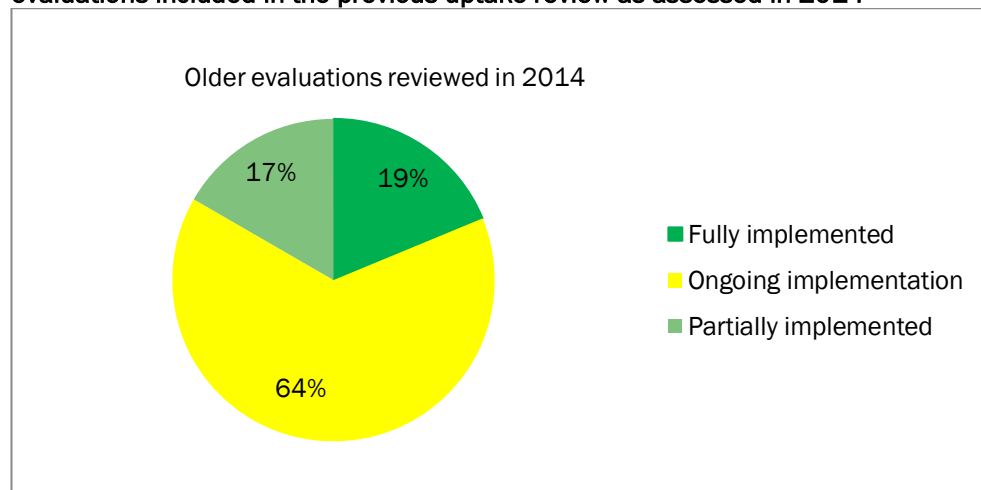


Figure 6. The percentage of recommendations for which implementation is complete, ongoing or partial for evaluations included in the previous uptake review as assessed in 2015

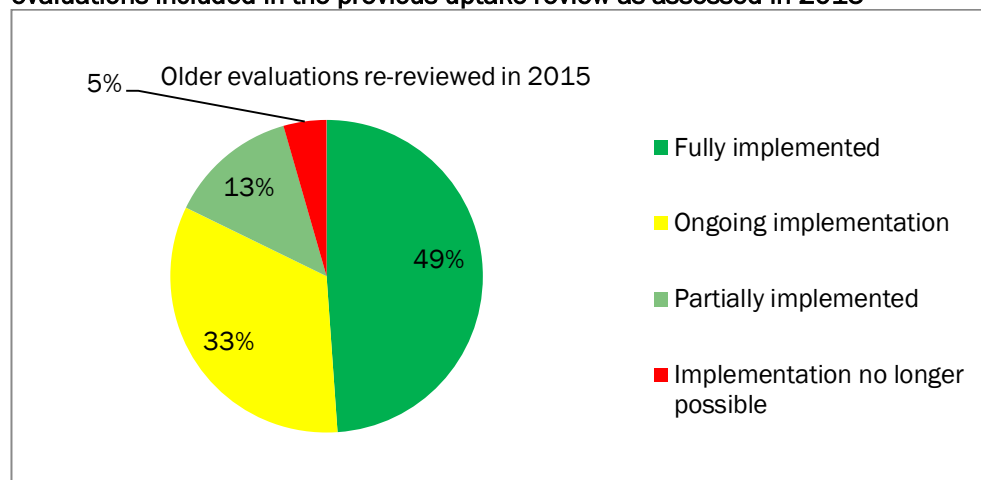
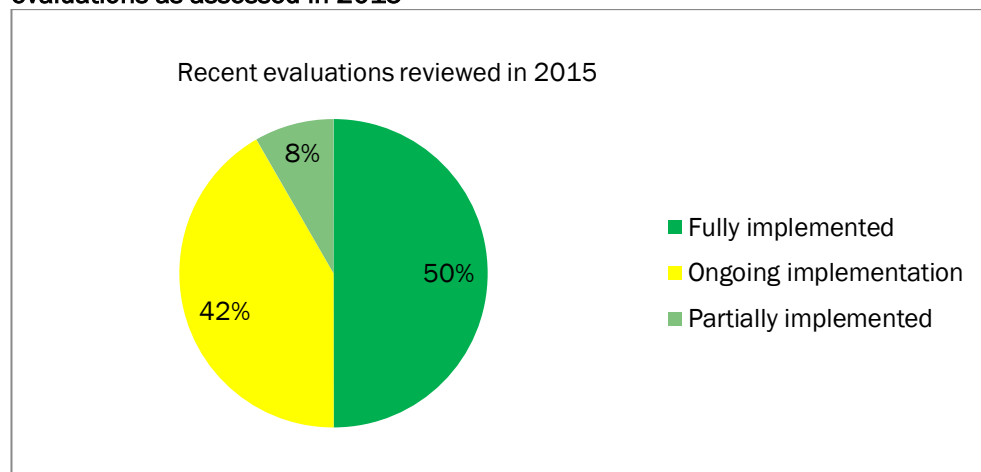


Figure 7. The percentage of recommendations for which implementation is complete, ongoing or partial for recent evaluations as assessed in 2015



Findings: Impact of ODE evaluations on aid program management and policy

A precise assessment of the impact of ODE evaluations on the aid program is beyond the scope of this review as:

- ODE has found much of the influence of some evaluations comes about during the evaluation process. Engagement with program areas both during field work and in reviewing draft reports can result in changes in line with recommendations being made before evaluation reports are published.
- It is difficult to attribute actions outlined in updates provided for this review to ODE evaluations. Program areas typically identify all areas of work that relate to either the original recommendation or management response to it. Actions listed by management may have happened in the absence of the evaluation especially because integration led to extensive changes across the aid program.
- Although the descriptions of actions are detailed and include evidence, the information provided is not sufficient to accurately determine what has happened to date and whether the approaches being adopted are appropriate and adequate to address the recommendations. Consultation with program areas found that extensive work would be needed to do this analysis. The resources required to do such work are well beyond the scope of this review and the value of this work is unlikely to be sufficient to justify resources needed.

Overall though, ODE evaluations do appear to be influential. Almost all recommendations have been fully agreed to. All updates were able to list many actions currently underway which have a capacity to help bring about the changes identified in recommendations. This indicates that program areas see recommendations from ODE evaluations to be relevant and valuable.

There are also specific examples where ODE evaluations have been highly influential. Examples from the most recent evaluations are described below.

Some evaluations appear to have succeeded in influencing policies:

- The Smart Economics evaluation recommendation for a target of 80% of aid investments having a satisfactory gender rating has been adopted.
- The Horn of Africa evaluation has been credited with informing subsequent humanitarian responses and aid programing more broadly.

ODE evaluations have also influenced budgets and expenditure:

- Costs of managing the volunteer program have been considerably reduced through consolidating in country management as recommended in the ODE evaluation.
- A recently developed proposal for a strategic approach to allocating funding to protracted crises has drawn strongly on the findings of the Horn of Africa evaluation.

ODE evaluations also appear to have led to better management of programs and investments:

- The volunteers evaluation is a good example of this as it has resulted in major and broad ranging changes. Notably there is no longer a volunteer scheme specifically for younger people. Other changes that can, to some extent, be attributed to the evaluation include more active management by posts to align placements with development priorities and the introduction of improved formal support mechanisms for both volunteers and core organisations.
- Following the Quality of Australian Aid operational evaluations, evaluation guidance has been revised to emphasise the need for evaluations to be fit for purpose. Additionally, ODE is now monitoring publication rates for evaluations and supporting an audit of evaluation publication.
- Largely as a result of the evaluation of Australia's response to the Horn of Africa humanitarian crisis funding agreements with some partners including the World Food Programme now have stronger reporting requirements including disaggregation of data.

- Findings of the Timor Leste evaluation have helped inform the development of better business planning, aid management and reporting systems.

Increasing the influence of ODE evaluations

- **Nature and wording of recommendations.** The previous uptake review suggested that some recommendations were too lengthy while others lacked specificity and were overly descriptive. This was not the case for the more recent evaluations. The recommendations were clearly and concisely written and action oriented. The previous update review also suggested that actions in management responses should have an agreed completion timeframe. Results of the current review suggest that this is both unnecessary and impractical. For the recent evaluations half of the management responses to recommendations are already fully implemented and implementation has continued to improve for evaluations revisited for a second time. Where recommendations have not been fully implemented this appears to reflect the time needed for, and difficulty of bringing about, substantive change rather than the nature of recommendations.

- **Number of recommendations.** The previous update review suggested that each evaluation should have no more than eight recommendations. It was thought that this would help ensure that findings of the most strategic importance are acted on. Any benefit stemming from reducing the number of recommendations may be lost if there are concomitant increases in the number of sub-recommendations. Management responses need to specifically address each sub-recommendation particularly where there is only partial agreement to the over-riding recommendation. As this may not always happen it is not helpful to be prescriptive about the number of recommendations if the result is increased numbers of sub-recommendations.

Recommendation 1: The optimal number of recommendations and sub-recommendations need be determined for each evaluation.

- **Recommendation workshops.** Recommendations workshops with key stakeholders are now a part of ODE evaluations and have proved to be useful in identifying and formulating key recommendations. The increased use of such workshops may have been a factor contributing to increases in the proportion of recommendations that were fully agreed to and high degree of implementation for the recent evaluations.

Recommendation 2: Recommendation workshops should continue to be a component of all ODE strategic evaluations.

- **Uptake review.** The process of reviewing the uptake of recommendations makes program areas re-engage with the evaluation findings and review work done to address the recommendations. As program areas are inevitably responding to competing demands and have changes in staff, the uptake review appears to be an effective way to increase the profile, and therefore possibly also impact, of ODE evaluations. However, repeated review of the uptake of recommendations is burdensome which led some program areas to question the value of repeated review. Furthermore, over time priorities change making recommendations less relevant. Even with the much shorter time it is now taking to complete strategic evaluations, a second cycle of review of uptake of recommendations is likely to take place about three and a half years to four years after evaluations commenced. Therefore, ODE recommends no more than two cycles of review of uptake.

Recommendation 3: There should be no more than two cycles of review of uptake of recommendations.

- **Assessing influence.** As much of the influence of evaluations happens during conduct of the evaluation, stakeholders should be surveyed in the later stages of evaluations to identify what influence evaluations have had and what could be done to make ODE evaluations more influential.

Recommendation 4: Stakeholders should be surveyed when evaluations are nearing completion to help assess the quality and influence of evaluations.