



DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION TIPS TOOLS INSIGHTS PRACTICES

In practice

THE NETHERLANDS' STREAMLINED DEVELOPMENT CO OPERATION PORTFOLIO FOR GREATER IMPACT

Key messages

To tackle dispersion in its development co-operation portfolio the Netherlands has launched a dedicated initiative to do less, but better and more flexibly. Through clear targets and regular review, project numbers have decreased substantially. In parallel, improved career paths and recruitments have strengthened staff capacity, while continuous learning supports long-term approaches. The strategic focus on greater impact, rather than only numerical targets was critical to steer efforts and engage staff.

● Keywords

[Human resources](#) | [Learning and knowledge management](#) | [Management systems](#) | [Official development assistance allocations](#)

● Key partner

[Netherlands](#)

Challenge

Dispersion has long been recognised as a challenge to the effectiveness and impact of Dutch development co-operation. For instance, an independent evaluation in the security and rule of law sector highlighted that many small projects spread across many countries could restrict the resources available to achieve systemic change and sustainable impact. Fragmentation also puts pressure on staff capacity, affecting in-depth engagement and learning. However, tackling dispersion is not easy. A broad portfolio brings several short-term benefits: the government can showcase activities in many regions and on a broad range of issues, more easily accommodate new political priorities, and positively respond to funding requests from many partners.

Approach

The Directorate General for International Co-operation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) launched a dedicated initiative to do less, but better and more flexibly (*Minder, Beter, Flexibeler* [MBF]). Key features of the initiative include:

- **Ambitious targets and strong leadership commitment to reduce dispersion:** Management set a goal of reducing the number of projects by 25% from 2019 to 2022. Focus on “impact and what works” was highlighted as an objective in the Dutch development co-operation policy *Do what we do best*.
- **Aligning resources towards a streamlined portfolio:** Substantial allocations for 10-year programmes, increased flexibility in tenders and availability of additional resources for upscaling proposals from embassies were important enablers for staff to focus efforts.
- **Regular review and broad exchange on implementation:** Management regularly exchanged with portfolio managers on progress, monitored by dedicated staff. Working groups and consultations reflected on portfolio management as well as scaling of programmes.
- **Dedicated attention to human resource capacity:** A working group developed recommendations for strengthening development expertise within the MFA, also anticipating challenges from upcoming retirements. These were then approved by the MFA management board.
- **Greater focus on learning and impact:** The MFA created additional capacity for monitoring, evaluation and learning across departments. It updated guidance to identify operational learning needs and committed resources to integrating learning into programmes.

Results

The initiative has succeeded in substantially reducing the number of activities. At headquarters, the number of activities decreased from 600 to 400 from the beginning of 2019 to 2023, exceeding the initially set target of 25%. Project size and duration has increased, although dispersion remains a concern with limited amounts being spent by each programme in a given country. The share of funding allocated to priority countries has not yet increased.

Development co-operation capacity has been strengthened. The MFA has recognised development co-operation as a specific career track. Recruitments at junior and senior level have reinforced the ministry's development expertise. Staff have appreciated changes, in particular the improved availability of permanent contracts. Although new staff survey data is not yet available, preliminary feedback indicates appreciation for efforts to reduce project management workload.

Learning is increasingly integrated into portfolio management. Thematic theories of change and new country strategies have identified learning needs.

Lessons learnt

- Based on regular consultation and an internal review process, the MFA has drawn a number of lessons that will inform MBF 2.0. This will place greater emphasis on the “better” and “more flexibly” workstreams with the goal of strengthening adaptive programming and scaling successful approaches.
- **Strategic focus should be on achieving greater impact rather than just reaching targets.** This helps manage tensions, such as the risk that larger programmes could impede stronger collaboration with local implementing partners. It also facilitates engagement with oversight bodies

and political steer, focusing discussions on the strategic direction. Staff are motivated more by a clear commitment to achieving development impact rather than simply managing fewer projects.

- **Streamlining efforts should be quickly integrated into existing management processes.** Adopting a more focused approach should be part of country strategy design, annual planning and regular consultation in management and staff networks. It is important that embassies are systematically included in consultations.
- **The number of projects is not the only source of fragmentation.** The broad range of thematic areas covered in each country and many different funding instruments also increase workload, affect efficiency and make achieving impact more challenging.
- **Anticipate how to respond to future pressure:** Consolidating achievements and concentrating the spread of projects over fewer countries, with larger country disbursements will be a key objective for the coming years. Tracking the impact and implications of streamlining will be important to achieve and maintain focus.
- **A skills development programme could boost the new co-operation career track.** This would build on an assessment of necessary qualifications for different functional profiles and the identification of existing gaps. Staff have already expressed a willingness to deepen their practical skills and experience.

Further information

Government of the Netherlands (2022), Policy Document "Do what we do best", <https://www.government.nl/documents/policy-notes/2022/10/10/policy-document-for-foreign-trade-and-development-cooperation-do-what-we-do-best>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Development Cooperation Portal, <https://www.nlontwikkelingssamenwerking.nl/en/#>.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB; 2019), IOB evaluation, [Less Pretension, More Realism](#).

Court of Audit (2023), Accountability Audit 2022 Foreign Trade and Development Co-operation (in Dutch), <https://www.rekenkamer.nl/onderwerpen/verantwoordingsonderzoek/documenten/rapporten/2023/05/17/resultaten-verantwoordingsonderzoek-2022-buitenlandse-handel-en-ontwikkelingssamenwerking>

OECD resources

OECD (2023), *OECD-DAC Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Netherlands 2023*, [upcoming]

To learn more about the Netherlands' development co-operation see:

OECD (2022), "Netherlands", in Development Co-operation Profiles, <https://doi.org/10.1787/2faea623-en>.

See more *In Practice* examples from the Netherlands here: <https://www.oecd.org/development-cooperation-learning?tag-key+partner=netherlands>

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