

Addressing environmental sustainability through the OECD DAC Criteria for Evaluation of Development Assistance

Footprint Evaluation Initiative

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About Footprint Evaluation

The Footprint Evaluation Initiative is an international collaboration to support evaluators and evaluation managers to consider environmental sustainability in all evaluations, even when this is not a stated goal of the intervention.

Footprint evaluation approaches focus on the ‘footprint’ that human systems make on natural systems. This requires attention to the nexus of human and natural systems and addressing effects across both systems.

It is grounded in the premise that all evaluations should include consideration of environmental sustainability, even when this is not a stated goal of the intervention. This is so that decision-making can take into account the potential and actual impacts of planned interventions (projects, programs, policies) on the environment.

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Summary

This document discusses how the six evaluation criteria of the OECD DAC (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee) can be used to get environmental sustainability on the agenda for evaluations and monitoring. These criteria are widely used in international development organisations, and similar criteria are often used in other organisations. This document is based on existing guidance produced by OECD DAC (OECD, 2021) with additional commentary from the members of the Footprint Evaluation Initiative.

The OECD DAC evaluation criteria, and their one-line summaries, are (italics indicate added comments):

- ▶ **Relevance** – is the intervention doing the right things?
- ▶ **Coherence** – how well does the intervention fit?
- ▶ **Effectiveness** – is the intervention achieving its objectives? (*this refers to all effects in the shorter term*)
- ▶ **Efficiency** – how are resources being used?
- ▶ **Impact** – what difference does the intervention make? (*this refers to all effects in the longer term*)
- ▶ **Sustainability** – will the benefits last? (*this focuses on the durability of benefits, not specifically on environmental sustainability*)

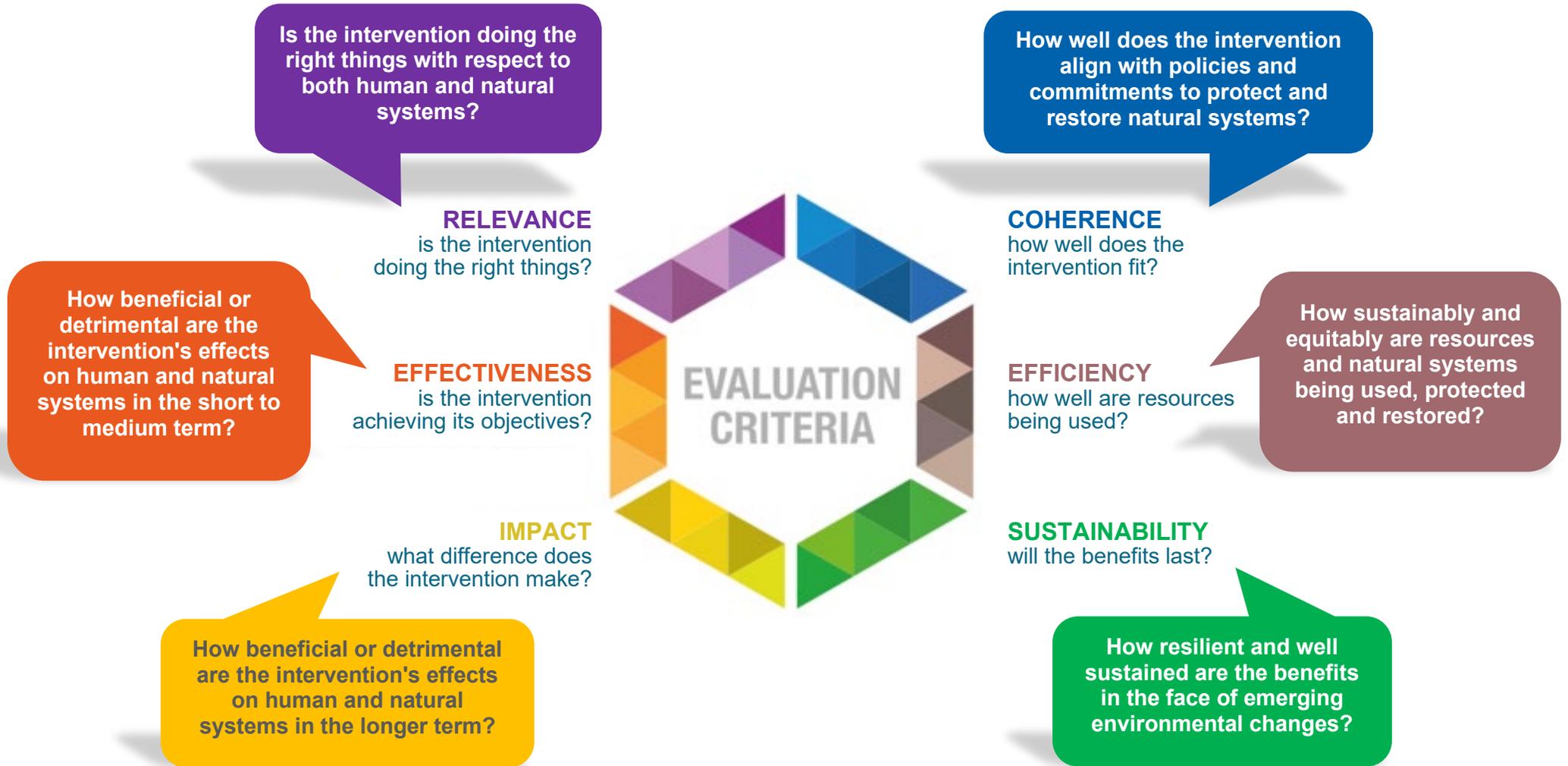
This document has been developed by the Footprint Evaluation initiative, an international collaboration which is working to embed consideration of environmental sustainability in all monitoring and evaluation. It draws on the original OECD DAC guidance to show how environmental sustainability is relevant to and can be incorporated across *all* criteria. It presents an elaboration of the criteria to make explicit how these can be used to include environmental sustainability in evaluations.

Background

The OECD DAC (OECD, n.d.) is a unique international forum of many of the largest providers of aid, including 31 members (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, European Union, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Lithuania, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States), observers (Asian Development Bank, African Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations Development Programme, World Bank) and participants (Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Kuwait, Qatar, Romania, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates).

In 1991 the OECD DAC published definitions of five evaluation criteria, which were further adapted and expanded to six criteria in 2018-19, drawing on 30 years of experience using the original criteria and informed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). New definitions were published in December 2019, and detailed guidance was published in 2021 (OECD, 2021).

Figure 1. Using the OECD DAC criteria to address environmental sustainability



Relevance: Is the intervention doing the right things?

OECD DAC Criteria definition of 'relevance'	OECD DAC Notes on definitions and guidance (emphasis added)	Footprint Evaluation lens: implications for evaluating environmental sustainability
<p>“The extent to which the intervention objectives and design respond to beneficiaries, global, country, and partner/institution needs, policies, and priorities, and continue to do so if circumstances change.”</p>	<p>“Respond to’ means that the objectives and design of the intervention are sensitive to the economic, environmental, equity, social, political economy and capacity conditions in which it takes place. ‘Partner/institution’ includes government (national, regional, local), civil society organisations, private entities and international bodies involved in funding, implementing and/or overseeing the intervention. Relevance assessment involves looking at differences and trade-offs between different priorities or needs. It requires analysing any changes in the context to assess the extent to which the intervention can be (or has been) adapted to remain relevant.”</p>	<p>Is the intervention doing the right things with respect to natural and human systems?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Recognises that the accumulated harm we have done to natural systems threatens all life and that restoration of natural system function is a global responsibility.▶ Addresses any systemic or structural issues that have been causing environmental damage, especially in areas where human wellbeing is impacted and where natural functions are severely threatened.▶ Equitably addresses the issues in human and natural systems.

OECD, 2021, p.38

OECD, 2021, p.38

Coherence: How well does the intervention fit?

OECD DAC Criteria definition of 'coherence'	OECD DAC notes on definitions and guidance (emphasis added)	Footprint Evaluation lens: implications for evaluating environmental sustainability
<p>“The compatibility of the intervention with other interventions in a country, sector or institution.”</p>	<p>“The extent to which other interventions (particularly policies) support or undermine the intervention and vice versa. This includes internal coherence and external coherence. Internal coherence addresses the synergies and interlinkages between the intervention and other interventions carried out by the same institution/government, as well as the consistency of the intervention with the relevant international norms and standards to which that institution/government adheres. External coherence considers the consistency of the intervention with other actors’ interventions in the same context. This includes complementarity, harmonisation and co-ordination with others, and the extent to which the intervention is adding value while avoiding duplication of effort.”</p>	<p>How well does the intervention align with policies and commitments to protect and restore natural systems?</p> <p>Point to natural system-relevant policies or commitments that the initiative should logically be aligned with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ International environmental conventions and treaties▶ Local, sub-national or national government policies, regulations, treaties, and strategies▶ Organisational strategy, policy and/or value statements

Effectiveness: Is the intervention achieving its objectives?

OECD DAC Criteria definition of 'effectiveness'	OECD DAC notes on definitions and guidance (emphasis added)	Footprint Evaluation lens: implications for evaluating environmental sustainability
<p>“The extent to which the intervention achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives and its results, including any differential results across groups”</p> <p><i>OECD, 2021, p.52</i></p>	<p>“Analysis of effectiveness involves taking account of the relative importance of the objectives or results. The term effectiveness is also used as an aggregate measure of the extent to which an intervention has achieved or is expected to achieve relevant and sustainable impacts, efficiently and coherently.”</p> <p><i>OECD, 2021, p.52</i></p> <p>“The implementation of interventions always has the potential to cause unintended social, economic or environmental effects, or may cause effects that are not intended but could have been foreseen. Therefore, evaluations should be careful to consider effects that fall outside of those specified in the intervention objectives.”</p> <p><i>OECD, 2021, p.53</i></p>	<p>How beneficial or detrimental are the intervention's effects on human and natural systems in the short to medium term?</p> <p>What effects did the intervention have on natural systems?</p> <p>How has the intervention contributed to environmental sustainability?</p> <p>Within the OECD DAC criteria, the term ‘effect’ refers to shorter-term results more directly related to the intervention which might be more directly related to an intervention. It is important to note that ‘effects’ refers to all results, including those to which the intervention has contributed or caused indirectly. The OECD DAC criteria guidance is clear that evaluating effectiveness should include consideration of both intended and unintended effects, including unintended or ignored effects on natural systems such as pollution or over-extraction of resources. In terms of intended results, this criterion could also include any explicit organisational objectives related to environmental sustainability, such as procurement policies and targets.</p>

Efficiency: How well are resources being used?

OECD DAC Criteria definition of 'efficiency'	OECD DAC notes on definitions and guidance (emphasis added)	Footprint Evaluation lens: implications for evaluating environmental sustainability
<p>“The extent to which the intervention delivers, or is likely to deliver, results in an economic and timely way.”</p>	<p>“‘Economic’ is the conversion of inputs (funds, expertise, natural resources, time, etc.) into outputs, outcomes and impacts, in the most cost-effective way possible, as compared to feasible alternatives in the context. ‘Timely’ delivery is within the intended timeframe, or a timeframe reasonably adjusted to the demands of the evolving context. This may include assessing operational efficiency (how well the intervention was managed).”</p>	<p>How sustainably and equitably are natural systems being used, protected, and restored?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Efficiency needs to consider the resources being used – not only those paid directly by the implementing organisation, for example, the destruction or reduction of ecosystem elements such as water filtration or carbon sequestration.▶ Care must be taken not to only consider natural systems only as resources for human systems. The evaluation should consider the level of harm/restoration the intervention brings to the natural systems it touches.

Impact: What difference does the intervention make?

OECD DAC Criteria definition of 'impact'	OECD DAC notes on definitions and guidance (emphasis added)	Footprint Evaluation lens: implications for evaluating environmental sustainability
<p>“The extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects.”</p> <p><i>OECD, 2021, p.64</i></p>	<p>“Impact addresses the ultimate significance and potentially transformative effects of the intervention. It seeks to identify the social, environmental and economic effects of the intervention that are longer term or broader in scope than those already captured under the effectiveness criterion. Beyond the immediate results, this criterion seeks to capture the indirect, secondary and potential consequences of the intervention. It does so by examining the holistic and enduring changes in systems or norms, and potential effects on people’s wellbeing, human rights, gender equality, and the environment.” <i>(OECD, 2021, p.64)</i>.</p> <p>The OECD DAC criteria guidance identifies two ways we should incorporate natural system impacts: “Evaluators should pay particular attention to negative impacts, particularly those that are likely to be significant including – but not limited to – environmental impacts” and “Transformational change can be thought of as addressing root causes, or systemic drivers of ... environmental damage.”</p> <p><i>OECD, 2021, p.65</i></p>	<p>How beneficial or detrimental are the intervention's effects on human and natural systems in the longer term?</p> <p>What effects did the intervention cause to natural systems?</p> <p>How has the intervention contributed to environmental sustainability?</p> <p>Within the OECD DAC criteria, the term ‘impact’ refers to longer-term, broader results than outputs and outcomes, which are shorter-term, and more directly related to the intervention. It is important to note that ‘impacts’ refers to all long-term results, including those to which the intervention has contributed or caused indirectly. The assessment of Impact is not limited to results that can be attributed to the intervention through an experimental or quasi-experimental impact evaluation. Given the long-term nature of some impacts it is likely that the methodology for describing these changes and analysing the causal links with an intervention will draw on a range of research designs and evidence, including extrapolation and projection of estimated results.</p> <p>The OECD DAC criteria guidance is clear that evaluating impact should include consideration of both intended and unintended effects, including unintended or ignored effects on natural systems such as pollution or over-extraction of resources. In terms of intended results, this criterion could also include the impacts of any explicit organisational objectives related to environmental sustainability, such as procurement policies and targets.</p>

Sustainability: Will the benefits last?

OECD DAC Criteria definition of 'sustainability'	OECD DAC notes on definitions and guidance (emphasis added)	Footprint Evaluation lens: implications for evaluating environmental sustainability
<p data-bbox="114 464 741 600">“The extent to which the net benefits of the intervention continue or are likely to continue.”</p> <p data-bbox="533 639 741 671"><i>OECD, 2021, p.71</i></p>	<p data-bbox="763 464 1384 783">“Includes an examination of the financial, economic, social, environmental and institutional capacities of the systems needed to sustain net benefits over time. Involves analyses of resilience, risks and potential trade-offs. Depending on the timing of the evaluation, this may involve analysing the actual flow of net benefits or estimating the likelihood of net benefits continuing over the medium and long term.”</p> <p data-bbox="1178 791 1384 823"><i>OECD, 2021, p.71</i></p>	<p data-bbox="1406 464 2031 568">How resilient and well sustained are the benefits likely to be in the face of emerging environmental changes?</p> <p data-bbox="1406 608 2031 711">How well will the human system benefits last without adversely impacting the natural system further?</p> <ul data-bbox="1420 751 2031 1206" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="1420 751 2031 855">▶ Worthwhile solutions are durable, and their impacts are sustained over time without any problematic unintended impacts.<li data-bbox="1420 895 2031 1206">▶ To maximise durability and lasting impact, strategies need to be in place to make it likely that positive impacts are resilient and sustained, especially in the face of emerging environmental change. It also includes explicit attention to the capacity of natural systems to continue supporting the identified benefits and, where needed, restoring seriously impaired natural systems.

References

OECD (2021), *Applying Evaluation Criteria Thoughtfully*, OECD Publishing, Paris. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1787/543e84ed-en>

OECD (n.d.) OECD DAC website. Retrieved from: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/development-assistance-committee/>