



Punching Above its Weight: Finnish Development Policy Influencing Activities in Multilateral Organisations – Selected Highlights from the Evaluation

Background and Rationale

The 2019 Government Programme sets the strengthening of multilateral cooperation as one of its key objectives, **with a globally influential Finland** contributing to solving the complex challenges facing the world today.

Finland is a strong supporter of multilateralism as well as of UN reform processes, ultimately aimed at making the UN Development System much more effective, streamlined, efficient and relevant to the Agenda 2030. In 2019, Finland provided €473.5 million of core support to multilateral organisations (Multilaterals), including EU development cooperation and humanitarian assistance. This represented 47% of all official development assistance.

The development policy influencing plans for multilateral co-operation, the first ones compiled in 2012 and further developed since, present concrete steps towards results-based management through the introduction of influencing objectives, the related results framework and reporting system. They provide a framework for influencing and monitoring effectiveness and a more strategic approach to working with multilateral organisations.

Influencing plans were originally developed to serve the MFA in strategic planning and alignment of influencing activities towards the headquarters of the multilateral organisations.

Instead of focusing on the performance of the Multilaterals, the focus of the evaluation was on how they were being – and could potentially be – influenced by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) to advance the development agenda. This has not been evaluated until now. Through assessing the **relevance and effectiveness** of the different types of influencing activities by the MFA, it provides guidance to the MFA on **how to strengthen its influencing activities and mechanisms**. The evaluation covered the period 2012–2018.

The evaluation assessed Finnish influencing activities in relation to eight multilateral organisations specifically: **The World Bank Group, UN Women, WFP, IFAD, UNFPA, UNICEF, FAO and ITC**.

The main users of the evaluation are the MFA, Finnish Embassies and Permanent Missions. Other Finnish ministries collaborating with Multilaterals, the Parliament and its Foreign Affairs Committee, the Development Policy Committee, civil society organisations, multilateral partner organisations and other stakeholders may also benefit from this evaluation.

In this summary, the Development Evaluation Unit highlights interesting findings and conclusions reached by the Evaluation Team.

Finland was consistently perceived to be “punching above its weight”.

Relative to the share of financial contributions or voting power, Finland has been more influential in its engagement with the Multilateral than what its “size” might suggest. Finland has contributed to significant influencing effects in Multilaterals, often jointly with like-minded partners.

The MFA knows how to operate with the complex machinery of multilateralism effectively, applying a relevant and effective mix of influencing activities and channels in a coordinated way, over extended periods of time. This has been supported by informal interactions and relationships, and usually in collaboration with other actors.

Finland's effectiveness in influencing its multilateral partners **relies strongly on its good general and thematic reputation** in the multilateral arena, which also enables the creation of alliances and partnerships for influencing.

Finland's approach to multilateral influencing covers both issue-driven influencing and general engagement of multilateral organisations, with at times unclear relative priorities. Finland supports and invests in the multilateral system. It works to support institutions in the long term, and does not base its funding decisions solely on performance information.

Influencing facilitated changes in the policies, priorities and practices of multilateral organisations, and several of them can still contribute to further changes.

In addition to changes to multilateral policies, strategies, priorities, procedures and practices, Finland raised awareness and contributed to behaviour change among staff. Most influencing effects reflected changes in several of these dimensions. Influencing effects were found to represent the cumulative and collective result of many different activities and cooperation with partners – including informal and off-the-record interactions – that were implemented across different influencing channels and over extended periods of time.

Influencing effects have the potential to contribute to further development in the Multilaterals in line with Finland's development policy priorities. However, such changes are not automatic, nor necessarily driven by influencing activities or effects alone, but rather represent beginning or ongoing change processes. Some of the decisive factors for future developments in the Multilaterals include critical junctions or "nodes", where the direction of future change will be decided. Future developments also depend on the degree with which Multilaterals can translate policy and strategy-related decisions into practice, and on developments in the external operating environment.

Consistent messaging over time has been effective...

Finland's "influencing messages" were found remarkably consistent. One informant summarized this as "whoever I speak to from Finland, I hear the same message". This persistent and consistent pursuit of policy and

influencing priorities was an important ingredient for effective multilateral influencing, also in comparison with other countries.

...in areas where Finland is considered as a thematic leader and a country "walking the talk".

Finland is considered a credible advocate and has built a reputation as a thematic leader, especially in gender equality, the rights of persons with disabilities, education, technology and innovation. Influencing activities have likely contributed to this image, and also Finland's domestic policies and events. The current Prime Minister was mentioned as one example of Finland "walking the talk" in terms of young women's participation in leadership. Also the high scores of Finland's schools in PISA serves as a basis for credible Finnish advocacy for stronger attention to the quality of teachers in education.

Finland has advanced gender equality, education and the rights of persons with disabilities in humanitarian aid, with effects beyond single Multilaterals.

Alone and with others, Finland has contributed to effects at the global level on gender equality, the rights of persons with disabilities, and education. In addition, improvements in operational effectiveness and efficiency have been advanced, including supporting the UN reform process. Other thematic areas where Finland has successfully influenced, with significant changes, include the sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as climate change to some extent.

Finland fulfils its duties in the governing bodies of Multilaterals proactively, professionally, constructively and in a non-partisan manner.

Finland's responsibilities in the governing bodies of Multilaterals go beyond specific influencing activities and are primarily related to ensuring that these organisations achieve their mandates effectively and efficiently. These are important influencing channels for Finland, complemented by formal governing body work with formal and informal preparatory activities, by being a team player, and by adapting to the diverse governance arrangements of the multilateral partners.

Finland also used this channel effectively for more visible, issue-driven influencing.

In influencing through fund allocation processes, Finland has profiled itself as a strong supporter of core funding but rationales for the use of the other funding types are not always clear.

Funding decisions and interactions on replenishments, core and earmarked budget allocations and multi-bilateral funding have contributed in about half of the influencing effects observed in this evaluation. During 2012–2018, the share of core funding has remained at around 60–70% of all multilateral disbursements, including EU development cooperation and humanitarian assistance. Finland’s relative level of (core) funding to Multilaterals affects Finland’s reputation and the quality of its relations with these organisations, and thereby its general ability to influence. Nevertheless, Finland has made strategic use of earmarked funding to promote specific thematic priorities, raise awareness and strengthening capacities of the Multilaterals in targeted areas. No clear principles for selecting earmarked over core funding were found. Multi-bilateral funding to country level has been used to strengthen the local operations of the organisations. It has offered a platform for influencing through other channels, but is unlikely to contribute to further changes in the global work of the organisations.

Staff placements can be effective for influencing when focused on the fields of Finland’s perceived areas of expertise and fill in capacity gaps, but they are not yet optimally used.

Staff placements are currently underutilised for facilitating access and providing information for other influencing activities. The goals for staff placements are unclear with respect to multilateral influencing. Finland does not engage in active interaction with Finns working in Multilaterals, unlike other countries, although the staff were generally interested to collaborate more. Staff placements were effective for influencing in non-competitive situations, providing capacity otherwise not available, in Finland’s areas of expertise.

Finland engaged in a range of other activities directly and indirectly, most frequently through coordination and relationship management.

Other channels for influencing included coordinating and managing relationships with Multilaterals at different levels as well as high-level advocacy for specific thematic issues. Coordination and relationship management was used in three quarters of all influencing effects examined, thematic advocacy and political support in more than half

of the cases, and sharing of knowledge and experience in about a third.

Existing good practices for influencing multilaterals at the MFA

1. Working consistently and over long periods of time towards strategic influencing goals;
2. Working through different channels and fora, coordinated, at the same time;
3. Engaging in informal interactions;
4. Building and maintaining personal relationships;
5. Working together with like-minded partners (especially the Nordic Group), and forging new alliances;
6. Building a profile and reputation;
7. Establishing a deep understanding of each of the Multilateral, its operations, and the global context it operates in; and
8. Engaging in effective information exchange and communication among MFA staff in Helsinki and abroad, including learning from relevant projects Finland funds at Multilaterals.

MFA staff are the key drivers for change but limited in numbers and affected by rotation.

One of the key determining factors for Finland’s successful influencing has been the skills, experiences and motivation of the MFA staff, with a cadre of effective “influencers”. The challenges include the limited number of staff and the time they have available for influencing activities, sometimes leading to lost opportunities. Moreover, staff rotations can cause major disruptions to influencing work. The 2015/16 budget cuts affected Finland’s access to Multilaterals, led to lost influencing opportunities but it did not (yet) impact Finland’s reputation and standing with its multilateral partners.

The MFA’s approach to managing influencing has been effective for organisational learning and reporting to Parliament but has not yet significantly impacted on how multilateral influencing is implemented in practice.

Influencing plans and reports between 2014 and 2017 reflect challenges with target setting and results reporting for multilateral influencing and have not significantly impacted how multilateral influencing is implemented in practice, including at country level. The perceptions on

their usefulness were mixed. The plans have increased clarity, transparency and learning. Planning with targets has increased cohesion and focus. For others, the plans and reports represented additional work without practical value-added for the actual influencing work. The “upside potential” of detailed influencing plans and related management seems limited in the context of already skilled and experienced staff.

However, the MFA has effectively used influencing reports for organisational learning over the years. This has resulted in good practices and has informed the development of the MFA’s management approach. The influencing plans and reports have also served accountability to the Finnish Parliament well. The 2020 influencing plans represent an improvement over earlier plans with more focused thematic objectives, relevant corporate performance tracking, more flexibility in reporting and a public summary. Recommendations to further develop the management mechanisms, including a system-level approach and engagement, were given.

Finland’s influencing activities are now holistically structured along four government development policy priority areas and the objective of improving the effectiveness and efficiency of Multilaterals. The rationale is that through adjusting thematic priorities and approaches as well as operational practices, the Multilaterals are better able to fulfil their mandates, and thus, contribute to sustainable development, including Finland’s priorities.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation drew evidence from across the corporate systems of the MFA, as well as the views from several Multilaterals both at headquarter and country levels. The evidence streams included a comprehensive desk review with institutional data and previous evaluations, 174 interviews, 8 agency cases, missions to New York, Washington DC and Rome as well as to Kenya and Nepal. The findings were triangulated against each other, against other relevant external sources and by using different methods. Potential biases were minimized. A workshop was held with MFA staff on preliminary findings, conclusions and areas of recommendation in March 2020.

Acknowledged limitations

The evaluation only covers how the MFA manages its multilateral influencing, not how it is managing multilateral partnerships or portfolios as a whole.

The identification of influencing effects by the MFA with the Multilaterals is not exhaustive.

With the MFA focus, other Finnish actors that have co-contributed to influencing effects were recognized but not assessed.

The evaluation did not assess causal attribution, i.e. how much Finland has contributed to observed influencing effects.

Access to MFA internal documentation on influencing activities, especially to informal one, was not equally consistent across the Multilaterals.

The Covid-19 pandemic restricted face-to-face interaction during the analysis phase.

For the full report: <https://um.fi/development-cooperation-evaluation-reports-comprehensive-evaluations>.



Ministry for Foreign
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