

Effectiveness in Practice

What it Means and How it is Implemented by Four Development Agencies

BEATA CICHOCKA · SARA CASADEVALL BELLÉS · RACHAEL CALLEJA

Abstract

In this paper, we explore how development agencies understand their own effectiveness. Drawing on interviews with 48 individuals across Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), and New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), we probe the relevance of five key dimensions of effective agency practice, which align effectiveness with: 1) how and where budgets are allocated; 2) implementation of effectiveness norms; 3) cost-effectiveness of development programmes; 4) how agencies are structured; and 5) flexible and adaptive management practices. We delineate differences in the relative prioritization of effectiveness theories both across agencies and the dimensions themselves. Notably, we find that adaptability emerged as the most salient dimension today, while adherence to global effectiveness principles was the least cited. While interviews revealed some shared understandings, they also showed how bureaucratic and political contexts shape what agencies prioritize and can achieve, meaning that effective practice is bound by each agency's unique context. Our analysis also shows that the different dimensions of effectiveness were, in many cases, interdependent and mutually reinforcing, yet also involve important tensions, particularly when the interests of providers and partners are at odds. Such tensions may contribute to the gap between rhetorical commitments to internationally defined effectiveness norms and lacklustre implementation, suggesting that advancing effective practice requires engaging with the political constraints that mediate implementation.

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Center for Global Development

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Introduction

At a time of budget constraints and growing public scepticism of traditional development narratives, development agencies are under increasing pressure to justify their relevance and demonstrate their effectiveness to politicians and taxpayers. These pressures are compounded by changing development needs, including demands to respond to climate crises, pandemics, and conflict with official development assistance (ODA) resources, prompting renewed questions about what it means to be an effective development cooperation provider today.

Part of the challenge is that current understandings of effectiveness identify key “ingredients” for effective action, yet the particular “recipe” for effectiveness will vary according to each agency’s unique contexts and where, on what, how, and why they provide development cooperation. For instance, the prevailing international effectiveness commitments – as outlined in the 2011 Busan Agreement – have often faced challenges to implementation based on questions about how the principles should be applied when using different instruments, in different locales, or in the context of different organizational priorities.¹ This means that shared commitments for effective practice sit alongside a clear reality – that there is no single model of effective agency action that can be applied consistently across actors, as the specific priorities, tools, structures, and management practices that govern how agencies behave will differ.² As a result, effective practices need to be developed and adapted at the agency level in alignment with specific organizational and strategic factors, producing different interpretations of effective practice across actors.

In this paper, we explore how agencies understand their own effectiveness. Specifically, we probe the relevance of five key theories of effective agency practice that emerged over the last 25 years, which align effectiveness with: 1) how and where budgets are allocated; 2) implementation of effectiveness norms; 3) cost-effectiveness of development programmes; 4) how agencies are structured; and 5) flexible and adaptive management practices.³ In doing so, we delineate differences in the relative prioritization of different effectiveness theories across agencies and across the dimensions themselves, allowing us to probe the synergies and trade-offs that exist between different approaches. For agencies, this means that it will be difficult to maximize effective practice in relation to all dimensions at once, as tensions between approaches – particularly those that prioritize provider accountability or objectives over partner-led engagement – raise questions about how the different facets of effective practice can be combined. Indeed, such tensions likely

1 Rachael Calleja and Beata Cichocka, “Development Effectiveness in the ‘New Normal’: What Do the Changing Roles and Purposes of ODA Mean for the Effectiveness Agenda?” CGD Policy Paper 255 (London: Center for Global Development, 2022), <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/development-effectiveness-new-normal-what-do-changing-roles-and-purposes-oda-mean.pdf>.

2 For a full definition of agency effectiveness, please see: Rachael Calleja, Sara Casadevall Bellés, and Beata Cichocka, “What Does It Mean for Agencies to Be Effective in a Changing Development Landscape?” CGD Policy Paper 350 (London: Center for Global Development, 2025), <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/what-does-it-mean-agencies-be-effective-changing-development-landscape.pdf>.

3 *Ibid.*

form the gap between rhetorical commitments to internationally defined effectiveness norms and lacklustre implementation.⁴

To probe variation in agency understandings of effectiveness, this paper presents findings from case studies of four bilateral development agencies: the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (NZ MFAT) and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). These aimed to uncover their unique interpretations of effectiveness and explore how and why they differ. To do so, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 48 officials from the four agencies to hear how staff interpret and interact with effectiveness considerations as part of their daily work. Our aim with this research was not to evaluate the approach taken by provider agencies or assess their relative effectiveness, but rather to uncover how and why they prioritize different dimensions of effectiveness in their unique contexts and the challenges they face related to implementing effective practice.

As in our prior work, we use the term “development agencies” to refer to the primary official actor, or combination of actors, responsible for setting development cooperation policy and implementing programmes. This means that we use the term broadly, to cover the full range of institutional arrangements adopted by provider governments, regardless of whether responsibilities for development are managed within or outside of foreign ministries.⁵ While we focus on bilateral development agencies, we understand that their purposes, priorities, and actions are often constrained by the political contexts in which they operate. As a result, development agencies rarely have full autonomy over strategic priorities or government-wide processes that influence their operations and effectiveness.

This paper is the second in a three-part research series that explores the implications of the changing development landscape for the effectiveness of development agencies. Our first paper reviews the literature on agency effectiveness, identifying major understandings as a starting point for considering how the pressures facing development agencies are forcing changes to what it means to be effective.⁶ Our next paper will build on prior pieces by exploring the major challenges that agencies face and what it means for agencies to be effective in the years ahead.

4 OECD/UNDP, *Making Development Co-operation More Effective: 2019 Progress Report* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1787/26f2638f-en>.

5 For more on the range of organizational models used by provider governments, see: OECD, *Managing Aid: Practices of DAC Member Countries* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2009), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2009/05/managing-aid_g1gha97e/9789264062689-en.pdf; Nilima Gulrajani, “Merging Development Agencies: Making the Right Choice,” ODI Briefing Note (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2018), <https://media.odi.org/documents/11983.pdf>; Ranil Dissanayake and Rachael Calleja, “What Could the UK’s Future Development Structure Look Like?” CGD Policy Paper 319 (London: Center for Global Development, 2024), <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/what-could-uks-future-development-structure-look>.

6 Calleja, Casadevall Bellés, and Cichocka, “What Does It Mean for Agencies to Be Effective in a Changing Development Landscape?”

The remainder of this paper is organized into four sections. The first outlines our methodological approach, detailing how case studies were selected and how interviews were used to capture diverse perspectives on agency effectiveness. The second presents results by case study agency, examining how each interprets its own effectiveness and identifying the main enablers and constraints shaping effective implementation within unique national contexts. The third section explores trends in how each dimension of effectiveness is understood, how the meanings have evolved, and what structural or cultural barriers hinder their realization across the four cases. The fourth section provides a brief discussion reflecting on the broader implications of our findings, and a final section presents short overarching conclusions.

Five understandings of agency effectiveness

We understand *agency effectiveness* as the provider-level tools, resources, structures, and management practices that mediate how agencies operate, and which create an enabling environment that supports or undermines performance. In this way, agency effectiveness can be understood as one input into wider development effectiveness, to the degree that internal practices enable (or hinder) project outcomes. Agency effectiveness could also be strengthened by design, through aligning operational or organizational structures and processes to meet key objectives in the context of institutional constraints.

Using this understanding, our prior report mapped five major theories of agency effectiveness that have appeared over the last two decades, which often shift alongside the global context:

1. **Agency effectiveness as allocation** – Emerging in the early 2000s, this understanding was based on the idea that agencies could enhance their effectiveness by allocating resources to specific types of countries (e.g., notably poor and better-governed countries as per “selectivity”)⁷ or through focusing resources on key sectors or regions, to avoid fragmentation from spreading budgets too thin.⁸
2. **Agency effectiveness as implementation of global effectiveness principles** – Normative guidance on effectiveness best practice for cooperation similarly emerged in the early 2000s, culminating in a series of High-Level Forums on effectiveness.

7 Craig Burnside and David Dollar, “Aid, Policies, and Growth,” *American Economic Review* 90, no. 4 (2000): 847–868, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.90.4.847>; Paul Collier and David Dollar, “Aid Allocation and Poverty Reduction,” *European Economic Review* 46, no. 8 (2002): 1475–1500, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0014-2921\(01\)00187-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0014-2921(01)00187-8); David Dollar and Victoria Levin, “The Increasing Selectivity of Foreign Aid, 1984–2003,” *World Development* 34, no. 12 (2006): 2034–2046, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2006.06.002>.

8 Stephen Knack and Aminur Rahman, “Donor Fragmentation and Bureaucratic Quality in Aid Recipients,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3186 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004), <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/791171468140034190>; David Dollar and Lant Pritchett, *Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1998), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/612481468764422935>; Deborah Bräutigam, “Foreign Aid and the Politics of Participation in Economic Policy Reform,” *Public Administration and Development* 20, no. 3 (2000): 253–264, [https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-162X\(200008\)20:3%3C253::AID-PAD134%3E3.0.CO;2-V](https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-162X(200008)20:3%3C253::AID-PAD134%3E3.0.CO;2-V).

In this understanding, agencies' effectiveness is understood as the implementation of effectiveness principles such as those outlined in the 2005 Paris Declaration⁹ or the 2011 Busan Agreement.¹⁰

3. **Agency effectiveness as cost-effectiveness** – Following the global financial crisis in 2008, effectiveness was increasingly seen as maximizing results per dollar or strengthening the relationship between money spent and results achieved, often through “payment for results” programming¹¹ or aligning spending with value-for-money approaches or “best buys.”¹²
4. **Agency effectiveness as organizational design**¹³ – In the mid-2010s, major organizational changes in several DAC members – including the mergers of autonomous agencies – raised questions about relationships between structural choices and effectiveness, where the structural management of development policy and implementation was seen to enable or hinder effective and coordinated action.¹⁴ This includes issues related to both the internal setup and management of agencies, as well as their location and relationship to policy setting ministries or other ODA spending departments from the same government system.
5. **Agency effectiveness as flexibility and adaptability** – Most recently, effectiveness has come to emphasize flexibility and adaptability, where the ability to align programming with partner country contexts, and adapt projects in response to crises, is seen as a hallmark of effectiveness in times of uncertainty.¹⁵

Throughout this paper, we refer to these five understandings as “dimensions” of agency effectiveness, using them as a framing device rather than a definitive or exhaustive taxonomy for

9 OECD, *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264098084-en>.

10 OECD, *Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation: Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1787/54de7baa-en>.

11 USAID (Dalberg Consulting), *Mainstreaming Results-Based Finance: Actionable Recommendations for USAID* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2016), https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TK3C.pdf.

12 UK Department for International Development (DFID), *DFID's Approach to Value for Money (VfM)* (London: DFID, 2011), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a78a9ee40f0b632476992f1/DFID-approach-value-money.pdf>.

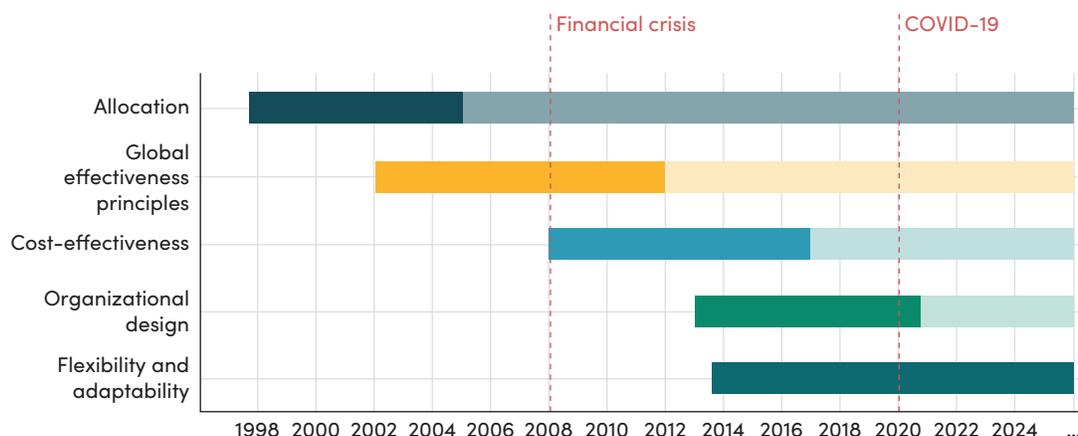
13 While the relationship between organizational choices and effective action had been probed as part of OECD peer reviews for decades, the dramatic changes of the period renewed interest in the role of structure in mediating effective action.

14 Nilima Gulrajani, “Bilateral Donors in the ‘Beyond Aid’ Agenda,” GEG Working Paper 106 (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2015), <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/196366/1/GEG-WP-106.pdf>; Nilima Gulrajani and Rachael Calleja, “Can We Better Manage Donor Institutions for Tackling Global Challenges?” ODI online publication (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2021), https://media.odi.org/documents/Can_we_better_manage_donor_institutions_for_tackling_global_challenges_september.pdf; Nilima Gulrajani, “Dilemmas in Donor Design: Organisational Reform and the Future of Foreign Aid Agencies,” *Public Administration and Development* 35, no. 2: 152–164, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.1713>.

15 Dan Honig and Nilima Gulrajani, “Making Good on Donors’ Desire to Do Development Differently,” *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2017): 68–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1369030>; Maria Gonzalez de Asis and Michael Woolcock, “Operationalizing the Science of Delivery Agenda to Enhance Development Results,” World Bank Working Paper (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2015), <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/270011467995372873>; Samuel Sharp, “Adaptive Bureaucracies? Enabling Adaptation in Public Bureaucracies,” Working Paper 604 (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2021), <https://media.odi.org/documents/odi-adaptivebureaucracies.pdf>.

effective agency action. The dimensions are not meant to be seen as mutually exclusive, and often overlap, reinforce, or sit in tension with one another (Figure 1). Finally, what counts as “most effective” even within any one dimension is often contested. We do not attempt to resolve these tensions here; rather, they underscore the importance of examining how agencies themselves interpret and navigate these dimensions in practice.

FIGURE 1. Timeline of major understandings of agency effectiveness since the early 2000s



Note: Darker colour depicts the period when each understanding was the most dominant, while the lighter shades show that each understanding continues to be relevant over time.

Source: Authors' own based on analysis presented in: Calleja, Casadevall Bellés, and Cichočka, "What Does It Mean for Agencies to Be Effective in a Changing Development Landscape?"

Methodology

To understand what it means for agencies to be effective, we conducted interviews with 48 officials from four development agencies that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC): AFD, KOICA, Norad, and NZ MFAT. We limited our case selection to OECD-DAC providers on the understanding that DAC members commit to similar standards and practices, including in relation to effectiveness. While many non-DAC countries now have agencies for managing outward cooperation,¹⁶ vast differences in how and why they cooperate means that their understanding of effective agency practice may not be meaningfully comparable.

To ensure that our cases were broadly representative of the population of OECD-DAC providers, we selected agencies to maximize variation on three key variables: budget size, organizational structure, and geographic representation (see Box 1).

16 Rachael Calleja, Beata Cichočka, and Sara Casadevall Bellés, "How Do Non-DAC Actors Cooperate on Development?" CGD Policy Paper 294 (London: Center for Global Development, 2023), <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/how-do-non-dac-actors-cooperate-development>.

BOX 1. Case selection approach

Our approach to case selection aimed to cover key differences that may impact what it means for agencies to be effective. These include:

1. **Budget size** – We included agencies with different sized budgets on the understanding that constraints to effective action differ based on resourcing, and by proxy, organizational size.¹⁷ For instance, smaller agencies may have less capacity and fewer instruments through which to engage than larger counterparts. This means that the practices, structures, or processes needed to support effective practice likely differs with budget size.
2. **Organizational structure** – OECD-DAC donors tend to either locate responsibility for development policy and implementation within the foreign ministry or use a separate agency for implementing policy set by a responsible ministry (typically the foreign ministry).¹⁸ On the understanding that each structure has its own strengths and weaknesses, we sought to include both major models to account for potential interactions between structural form and agency effectiveness.
3. **Geographic representation** – We sought to ensure that our case countries represented major donor geographies, to capture potential variation in terms of historical, cultural, and political backgrounds, which may affect how providers act and what they prioritize.¹⁹

Despite attempts to maximize variation, it was not possible to account for all provider types. We are notably missing a small Eastern European provider, as well as an actor from North America.

TABLE 1. Case selection summary

Agency	Budget Size	Organizational Structure	Geographic Region
AFD	Large	Implementing agency (development bank)	Europe (former colonial power); EU member state
KOICA	Medium	Implementing agency	East Asia
Norad	Medium	Implementing agency	Europe (Scandinavia); Non-EU member state
NZ MFAT	Small	Integrated in foreign ministry	Pacific

17 Lex Donaldson, *The Contingency Theory of Organizations*, Foundations for Organizational Science (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452229249>.

18 For more on the range of organizational models used by provider governments, see: OECD, *Managing Aid*; Gulrajani, "Merging Development Agencies"; Dissanayake and Calleja, "What Could the UK's Future Development Structure Look Like."

19 Consider, for instance, the social contract of Scandinavian countries, which has often been linked to their generosity as development cooperation providers. See for instance: Olav Stokke, "The Determinants of Aid Policies: General Introduction," in *Western Middle Powers and Global Poverty: The Determinants of the Aid Policies of Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden*, ed. Olav Stokke (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1989), 9–31.

For each case, we conducted 10–13 interviews with staff from across the development agency. In all cases, we sought to capture perspectives from staff at different levels (junior, mid-level, and senior management), with experience both at headquarters and in the field (for agencies with field offices) and from both thematic specialists and generalists. We engaged with contact points in each agency who helped identify potential interviewees; the interview team then connected with interviewees directly. For agencies where responsibility for development policy and implementation are split (AFD, KOICA, and Norad), we sought to include a small number of interviews from foreign ministries responsible for setting policy direction; however, despite repeated attempts, we were unable to interview anyone from the French foreign ministry.

We used semi-structured interviews to explore a uniform set of five research questions across the four cases. This approach ensured that we gathered consistent information, while allowing space to probe and explore potential questions that arose through the conversation. Interviews were held between April and June 2025 and were conducted solely by the Center for Global Development (CGD) staff to ensure confidentiality of responses and independence in the research findings. Interviewees were first asked about how they understood effectiveness in the context of their work. In a second question, interviewees were introduced to the keywords behind the dimensions identified in our framing paper – “allocation,” “global effectiveness norms and principles,” “cost-effectiveness,” “organizational design,” and “adaptability” – and asked which, if any, of these resonate or, indeed, conflict with how their agency sees its own effectiveness today. The dimensions were not explained in detail, allowing interviewees to discuss the value of these concepts in light of their own experiences – for instance, the interviewers did not explicitly mention the Paris or Busan principles as being a part of “global effectiveness norms,” allowing interviewees to come up with their own ideas of the norms or principles that guide effective action at their agency. Interviewees were also given a chance to highlight any other ideas beyond the five dimensions that guide how effectiveness is seen in their agency. A third question specifically probed interviewees’ familiarity with the Busan principles, and, once this was established, explored the tensions and challenges related to implementation. The final two interview questions – which will be the main focus of our forthcoming work – probed interviewees’ understandings of the main challenges to their agency’s effectiveness today and the types of characteristics that will define an effective and resilient agency in the future.

Data collected during our interviews was coded separately by two CGD researchers, who individually analyzed the data using primarily an inductive coding approach to identify key themes emerging from the discussions. One planned exception to this inductive approach concerned the five effectiveness dimensions, which served as a theoretical frame for interpreting and grouping responses related to the question of how agencies understand their effectiveness today. For these dimensions, the coding approach was abductive (hybrid): predefined categories and keywords identified by our previous literature review and framing paper guided initial coding, but the results presented in this paper reflect how interviewees themselves describe these themes in

their own contexts.²⁰ Once both researchers had coded the interview segments, discrepancies or differences in interpretation were discussed amongst the research team.

For all cases, we also conducted background research ahead of the interviews, reviewing major policy documents and the latest OECD-DAC Peer Reviews to understand current priorities, contexts, and recent institutional changes.

Scope and limitations

We acknowledge that our interview-based approach is necessarily imperfect. Specifically, we see two main limitations to our approach:

1. **Generalizability:** A key limitation of our case-based approaches concerns the generalizability of these results across other DAC members. While we attempted to counter this challenge as much as possible through including a diverse selection of DAC case agencies, we understand that our findings may only resonate with the four agencies interviewed.

To test the generalizability of our research, we presented our preliminary findings in several forums with mid-to-senior policymakers from a broader selection of DAC development agencies to gather feedback and sense-check whether the findings have relevance beyond our cases. We heard that our key findings match the broad experiences of other DAC providers. We also considered conducting a parallel exercise to explore interpretations of effectiveness across all OECD-DAC providers through a text-based assessment of public documents (i.e., strategies or annual reports). However, an initial scoping phase found that inconsistencies in the information presented across agencies made it difficult to develop a meaningful methodology for systematically analyzing diverse documentation.

2. **Agency interviewees only:** Our interview sample was limited primarily to agency officials, meaning that outside voices – such as those of partner countries, implementing partners, or civil society – are not captured as part of this analysis. While such actors could provide meaningful insights on how agencies act effectively (or ineffectively) in practice and would be critical voices in any assessment of agency action our focus on understanding the internal visions of effectiveness within agencies – rather than assessing performance – led to a narrower focus.

20 Calleja, Casadevall Bellés, and Cichocka, “What Does It Mean for Agencies to Be Effective in a Changing Development Landscape?”

Results by case: How do agencies understand their effectiveness today?

This section presents an overview of the key findings for the four case study agencies. Each case is divided into three main parts. We begin with a short overview of each agency's history, current priorities, responsibilities, structure, and any major recent organizational or managerial changes, particularly those raised by interviewees as being important for current understandings of effectiveness. We then present findings on our primary research question of how agencies understand their own effectiveness, based on interviewee responses. For each case, we provide a breakdown of the percentage of interviewees that mentioned each of the five dimensions, as well as any “other” interpretations of effectiveness identified by staff. A final section explores the main challenges to, or enablers of, effectiveness in each agency.

AFD

AFD is a public development bank that focuses on providing finance to the public sector and NGOs and supporting research and education in sustainable development.²¹ It sits within the AFD Group, which combines AFD's capabilities with Proparco (which provides private sector finance), and in 2022, was expanded to include Expertise France (which focuses on technical cooperation).²² The Group operates under the supervision of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Economy and Finance, which jointly oversee the implementation of French ODA. It has a relatively decentralized structure comprising 85 offices across five continents,²³ and since 2017, has set up 17 regional directorates to improve operational autonomy worldwide.²⁴ The AFD Group employs over 5,500 staff. Of these, 2,300 work directly for AFD,²⁵ 60 percent of whom are based at headquarters and 40 percent in country offices.⁷ In 2023, France's ODA totalled US\$17.7 billion in gross disbursements (US\$15 billion in grant equivalent), of which 39% was disbursed by AFD.²⁶ The AFD Group uses “considerable leverage to maximize the impact of public funding” reporting that

21 OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: France 2024* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/06/oecd-development-co-operation-peer-reviews-france-2024_caf7eef9/102d5469-en.pdf.

22 Expertise France, “About Us,” Who We Are, accessed November 28, 2025, <https://www.expertisefrance.fr/en/about-us>.

23 Agence Française de Développement (AFD), “Our Approach by Geographic Area,” accessed October 29, 2025, <https://www.afd.fr/en/our-approach-geographic-area>.

24 Cour des comptes, *The Agence Française de Développement Group: Changes and a New Ambition* (Paris: Cour des comptes, 2019), 20, <https://www.ccomptes.fr/sites/default/files/2023-10/Agence-Fran--aise-developpement-group-vol-2.pdf>.

25 The AFD Group employs over 4,500 employees. See: Agence Française de Développement (AFD) Group, *AFD Group Strategy 2025–2030: Synthesis* (Paris: AFD, 2025), <https://www.afd.fr/sites/default/files/2025-04-02-17-52/AFD%20Group%20Strategy%202025-2030%20-%20Synthesis.pdf>.

26 OECD, *Official Development Assistance (ODA) – DAC1: Flows by Donor (ODA+OOF+Private)*, OECD Data Explorer, accessed December 10, 2025, <https://oe.cd/dx/france23ODA>; OECD, *Development Co-operation Profiles: France* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), “Figure: Total ODA disbursed through government agencies in 2023,” https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/development-co-operation-profiles_04b376d7-en/france_b991b2e4-en.html#section-d1e999.

in 2024, appropriations of €2.9 billion from the French government and EU-delegated funds were used to increase the Group’s “financing capacity more than sixfold”.²⁷

The AFD Group’s most recent 2025–2030 strategy is focused on the dual objectives of reducing poverty and inequality and “preserving common goods,” through a differentiated approach and development offer for three groups of priority partners.²⁸ First, cooperation with least developed countries and small island developing states is based on supporting “sustainable and solidary-driven economic and social development” including through working in traditional development sectors such as health, education, food security. Second, in middle-income and emerging countries, the Group “supports transition” through technical dialogues and mobilizing private capital. Finally, in French overseas territories, activities prioritize sustainable development and regional integration.²⁹ Indeed, a key feature of the AFD Group’s structure is the ability to combine a wide range of financial instruments – including grants, loans, subsidies, guarantees, equity shareholdings, and technical exchange – in its offer to partners.

How does AFD understand its own effectiveness?

TABLE 2. Percentage of AFD interviews mentioning each effectiveness dimension

Allocation	Global Effectiveness Principles	Cost-Effectiveness	Organizational Design	Flexibility and Adaptability	Other
70%	10%	40%	30%	60%	70%

Note: Based on ten interviews (with 11 individuals).

Conversations with AFD underscored that staff understand **allocation** decisions as a key dimension of AFD’s effectiveness, noting the importance of strategic choices to align geographic and sectoral needs with financial instruments best suited to maximize impacts against strategic objectives.³⁰ AFD adopts a differentiated approach to “prioritization” based on partner country income level and the instruments best suited to meet their development needs, where tailoring the development offer to different partners becomes a way to ensure that increasingly scarce grant resources are spent where they are needed most. However, shifting political priorities mean that France’s allocation is motivated by multiple objectives, and increasingly their domestic interests.³¹ This includes focusing on sectors where France has domestic industrial or technical expertise such as transport and energy.³² While this sectoral prioritization represents opportunities for French industry,

27 AFD Group, *AFD Group’s 2024 Results: Dynamic Action for More Effectiveness and Impact in 2024* (Paris, AFD Group, 2025), https://www.afd.fr/sites/default/files/2025-06/afd-2pages_min_engp.pdf.

28 AFD Group, *AFD Group Strategy 2025–2030*.

29 *Ibid.*

30 AFD 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10.

31 Présidence de la République, “Relevé de décisions du Conseil présidentiel pour les partenariats internationaux,” Élysée (site officiel de la Présidence de la République française), April 6, 2025, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2025/04/06/releve-de-decisions-du-conseil-presidentiel-pour-les-partenariats-internationaux>.

32 AFD 4; Présidence de la République, “Relevé de décisions du Conseil présidentiel pour les partenariats internationaux.”

some respondents also noted “strong demand” for French and European expertise, and saw AFD’s ability to provide this as a unique “value added” of the agency opposite other, often larger, international financial institutions.³³

Flexibility and adaptability was also understood as a key dimension of AFD’s effectiveness, for two main reasons. First, some argued that AFD’s ability to allocate flexibly using the full range of instruments and approaches that the AFD Group can leverage – including non-sovereign loans and technical assistance – enables more context-specific development offers and provides more options for responding to partner country conditions.³⁴ Indeed, interviews highlighted AFD’s ability to combine multiple financial and technical resources, including flexible lending modalities and access to EU grants, as a key comparative advantage.³⁵ Second, several interviewees spoke about AFD’s proximity to local contexts and needs, arguing that AFD’s adaptability is enhanced by the creation of new “regional directorates” – situated between field offices and headquarters – which can enable more responsive decision-making while still utilizing cross-country contextual knowledge.³⁶

Less than half of interviewees mentioned **cost-effectiveness**, with some explicitly noting that the concept is less relevant given AFD’s status as a development bank – which mainly provides loans to support long-term public policies – with costs seen as secondary to project “quality and standards.”³⁷ While staff clearly noted the importance of making the best use of the funds available, especially when spending more limited grant finance, some noted that AFD values longer-term policy “impact” over shorter-term “results,” and thus de-prioritizes narrow “value-for-money” assessments in project appraisal.³⁸ Indeed, some interviewees mentioned that projects are evaluated in terms of the wider concept of “effectiveness, rather than cost-efficiency.”³⁹

On **organizational design**, recent changes to AFD’s setup – i.e., the creation of regional directorates and the formulation of the AFD Group – were mentioned as driven by effectiveness aims, whereby the new structures enhanced decision-making autonomy at the regional level, enabling AFD to respond more quickly to changing country contexts.⁴⁰ This change responded to concerns that AFD’s large size following its rapid growth, and increasingly complex activities, required more operational autonomy to remain effective (versus centralizing decision-making in Paris).⁴¹

For AFD, the **Busan principles on effective development cooperation** were only explicitly mentioned as important for defining AFD’s approach to “effectiveness” by one interviewee, and even so, they

.....
33 AFD 7.

34 AFD 1, 2, 3.

35 Thomas Mélonio, Jean-David Naudet, and Rémy Rioux, *Official Development Assistance at the Age of Consequences* (Paris: Éditions AFD, 2022), 1–43, <https://shs.cairn.info/journal-afd-policy-papers-2022-11-page-1?lang=en>.

36 ADF 2, 4, 5, 7, 10. See: Cour des comptes, *The Agence Française de Développement Group*, 20.

37 AFD 1, 5, 6, 7.

38 AFD 1, 3, 4, 5, 10.

39 AFD 1, 3, 10.

40 AFD 2, 4, 5, 7, 10.

41 AFD 2, 4, 5, 7, 10. See: Cour des comptes, *The Agence Française de Développement Group*, 20.

suggested that the principles are already mainstreamed in the agency's approach and do not need explicit discussion.⁴² Others suggested that the Group's financial model creates dynamics that render the effectiveness principles less relevant. Instead, AFD interviewees observed that lending operations, which form the vast majority of AFD's outflows, are seen as inherently aligned with the "ownership" principle, since they are demand-driven and partners must commit to borrow.⁴³ Still, interviewees also rarely, if ever, made reference to effectiveness commitments such as the Kampala Principles specific to private sector engagement.

Finally, a large proportion (70 percent) of AFD interviewees talked about "**other**" **components of agency effectiveness** that are beyond the five dimensions. First, some interviewees suggested that, for AFD, effectiveness is defined by their agency's alignment with global agendas like the SDGs, which, unlike the Busan principles, may not prescribe a particular vision of effective action, but suggest that effective action today must be "holistic," contributing to both global public goods and long-term systemic change in partner countries.⁴⁴ One interviewee suggested that an essential component of achieving systemic change effectively was for AFD operations to be "big enough" to have a real impact on public policies in partner countries.⁴⁵ In a similar vein, some saw AFD's effectiveness through the lens of its ability to balance providing quality assistance – which passes environmental, social, and governance safeguards and mainstreams various development concerns – with its ability to act at speed, disbursing quickly in line with partner country requests.⁴⁶ Finally, some interviewees highlighted the importance of **more tailored or sector-specific effectiveness principles** – such as standards or frameworks developed by the International Development Finance Club (IDFC) – which are tailored to the challenges and constraints facing development banks.⁴⁷

Enablers and barriers to AFD's effectiveness

AFD's effectiveness was primarily seen as enabled by its **broad financial toolbox**, which allows it to bring together various financial offers with technical expertise that matches the specific needs of partner countries. Indeed, as a public development bank, the AFD Group is set apart from other bilateral agencies by its use of a much broader range of instruments, with interviewees noting that the freedom to leverage different tools based on which may be most effective in a specific context also provides a strong basis for building credible and trust-based partnerships.⁴⁸ Moreover, the introduction of contingency clauses and new financial products has strengthened the flexibility of AFD's finance, improving its ability to respond to shocks.⁴⁹ Relatedly, the agency's relative financial

42 AFD 8, 10.

43 AFD 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8.

44 AFD 8, 10.

45 AFD 2.

46 AFD 4, 7.

47 AFD 1.

48 AFD 3, 7, 8.

49 AFD 1, 3, 5, 8.

independence, relying on market funding alongside state budgets, shields it from abrupt changes to ODA volumes.⁵⁰ Yet interviewees highlighted that the same financial structure introduces biases and trade-offs, where AFD's prioritization of large capital-intensive projects with secure repayment prospects was seen to sideline smaller, high-impact, or experimental initiatives,⁵¹ while its dependence on France's sovereign credit rating – and the interest rates AFD can offer – constrains cost-competitiveness against multilateral lenders.⁵²

AFD's **legal framework and organizational structure** were also seen to enable its ability to work flexibly. For instance, France's multiannual budgetary framework for development programming allows AFD to plan financing over a longer-term period, offering predictability as well as the ability to adapt medium-term plans in response to shocks (by virtue of having budgets over a longer-than-annual time horizon).⁵³ Similarly, the creation of regional directorates was seen as improving responsiveness and proximity to the field, allowing faster decision-making and better alignment with evolving partner priorities.⁵⁴ Yet some argued that AFD's adaptability was undermined by its large size, while others noted that flexibility needs to be balanced with maintaining long-term monitoring capacities to ensure that programming changes do not undermine AFD's strategic priorities.⁵⁵ Similarly, while the integration of Expertise France into the AFD Group was largely seen as positive, interviewees highlighted ongoing frictions related to unclear or overlapping roles between AFD and Expertise France, and incompatible IT and security systems.⁵⁶

A few interviewees also emphasized the importance of internal **processes and safeguards** – such as the Sustainable Development Opinion mechanism – which screens each operation for expected impacts at project identification stage to AFD's wider effectiveness in aligning with the SDGs.⁵⁷ Indeed, the agency's trust-based relationships with local partners was seen as being facilitated by strong due diligence processes, where procurement or environmental and social safeguards provide both partners with assurances that good practice is followed.⁵⁸ Yet some also noted that AFD's focus on longer-term projects with more rigid processes can limit its agility, creating tensions between

50 AFD 3.

51 AFD 4; OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: France 2024*, 41.

52 *Ibid.*, 27.

53 AFD 6, 8; Loi n° 2021-1031 du 4 août 2021 de programmation relative au développement solidaire et à la lutte contre les inégalités mondiales, *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000043898536>.

54 AFD 4, 7.

55 AFD 8.

56 AFD 2, 3, 5, 7, 9; Élise Dufief, *Donors, implementing agencies and DFI/PDB cooperation – The case of France: AFD and Proparco* (Brussels: ETTG, 2022), <https://ettg.eu/donors-implementing-agencies-and-dfi-pdb-cooperation-the-case-of-france-afd-and-proparco/>.

57 AFD 3, 6, 8, 10; OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: France 2024*, 34, https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/06/oecd-development-co-operation-peer-reviews-france-2024_caf7eef9102d5469-en.pdf.

58 AFD 4, 5, 7.

adaptability and due diligence procedures, which generate administrative heaviness, slow decision cycles, and could be perceived by clients as bureaucratic and time-consuming.⁵⁹

KOICA

KOICA was established in 1991 as a government-funded body under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), with responsibility for implementing and coordinating ODA grants (including technical cooperation).⁶⁰ Its institutionalization followed decades of rapid economic expansion, which facilitated its transition from a net ODA recipient to provider by the early 1990s. Over the next decade, the scale of Korea's outward cooperation tripled alongside its admission to the OECD (1996), continuing to grow throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century as part of a concerted effort to position Korea as a responsible global actor in line with its ambitions to join the DAC, which it achieved in 2010.⁶¹

Korea's development cooperation system is notoriously fragmented and complex, with over 45 official actors responsible for policy or implementation.⁶² This architecture is coordinated by the Committee for International Development Cooperation (CIDC) under the Prime Minister's Office.⁶³ In 2023, KOICA managed the second largest share of Korea's ODA (21 percent), following the Export-Import Bank's Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF), which managed 32 percent of the budget as concessional loans.⁶⁴ While KOICA's budget grew by over 60 percent to a high of US\$3.9 billion in 2024 (in grant equivalent terms),⁶⁵ sharp cuts are planned in the 2026 ODA budget, with KOICA's budget expected to fall by 11 percent from 2025.⁶⁶

59 AFD 4, 9.

60 Rachael Calleja and Annalisa Prizzon, "Moving Away from Aid: The Experience of the Republic of Korea," ODI Research Report (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2019), <https://odi.org/en/publications/moving-away-from-aid-the-experience-of-the-republic-of-korea/>.

61 Beata Cichocka et al., "Mind the Gap: Bridging the Divide between Cooperation Providers," CGD Policy Paper 322 (London: Center for Global Development, 2024), <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/mind-gap-bridging-divide-between-cooperation-providers.pdf>; Calleja and Prizzon, "Moving Away from Aid."

62 OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Korea 2024* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1787/889c6564-en>.

63 *Ibid.*, 28.

64 The percent disbursed by agency is calculated using gross disbursements as the basis. For comparability across the case studies, we mainly rely on 2023 data from OECD-DAC Development Co-operation Profiles. OECD, *Development Co-operation Profiles: Korea* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/development-co-operation-profiles_04b376d7-en/korea_d358baed-en.html#section-d1e134. However, KOICA's 2024 leaflet states that KOICA implements 32 percent of total Korean ODA (or 65 percent of grants). See: Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), *2024 KOICA Leaflet* (Seoul: KOICA, 2024), https://www.koica.go.kr/koica_en/3499/subview.do?

65 OECD, *Official Development Assistance (ODA) – DAC1: Flows by Donor (ODA+OOF+Private)*, OECD Data Explorer, accessed December 10, 2025, <https://oe.cd/dx/6il>. Figures are preliminary and reported in current prices.

66 KOICA 10; Andrew Yeo, "South Korea as a Global Pivotal State," Brookings (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2023), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/south-korea-as-a-global-pivotal-state/>; Ji Da-gyum, "Seoul plans sharp cuts to overseas aid in 2026 budget," *The Korea Herald*, August 29, 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10564716>.

In line with Korea's 3rd Mid-term Strategy for International Development Cooperation for 2021–25,⁶⁷ which sets the policy direction for Korea's ODA, KOICA's mission is to “promote common prosperity of humankind and world peace through inclusive development cooperation.”⁶⁸ Geographically, in 2023 Asia-Pacific and Africa received the largest share of KOICA's ODA (at 30 percent and 28 percent, respectively), reflecting both Korea's regional identity and commitment to least developed countries.⁶⁹ KOICA maintains a broad country-office network with 47 global outposts. As of 2022, KOICA had roughly 500 employees,⁷⁰ with about 30 percent based in the field.⁷¹

How does KOICA see its effectiveness?

TABLE 3. Percentage of KOICA interviews mentioning each effectiveness dimension

Allocation	Global Effectiveness Principles	Cost-Effectiveness	Organizational Design	Flexibility and Adaptability	Other
36%	73%	36%	18%	27%	0%

Note: Based on 13 interviews.

Interviewees from KOICA demonstrated a remarkably consistent understanding of effectiveness, with 73 percent seeing effectiveness as rooted in their agency's ability to align with international effectiveness norms and principles. The emphasis on **principles-based effectiveness** partly reflects MOFA's historical role as a “champion” of the effectiveness agenda after hosting the Fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan in 2011, as well as its institutional commitment to pursuing greater legitimacy through adherence to international standards following its 2010 OECD-DAC accession.⁷² Still, some interviewees revealed gaps between rhetorical commitment to the principles and KOICA's operational and bureaucratic realities. Political pressures to balance partner country priorities with Korea's foreign policy objectives were seen as constraining the ownership principle.⁷³ One interviewee pointed to KOICA's procurement requirements, which follow Korean systems rather than partner country procedures, as a specific example of this tension.⁷⁴ Others highlighted challenges in applying the “focus on results” principle to programmes with intangible or long-term outcomes – such as governance or institutional reform – and noted that KOICA is considering internal adjustments, including the greater use of qualitative indicators, to better reflect these complexities within its effectiveness standards.⁷⁵

67 Office for Government Policy Coordination (Republic of Korea), *The 3rd Basic Plan for International Development Cooperation (2021–2025)* (2021) [https://www.erd.gov.lk/2023/KOICA%20Strategic%20Plan\(2021-2025\).pdf](https://www.erd.gov.lk/2023/KOICA%20Strategic%20Plan(2021-2025).pdf).

68 KOICA, *2024 KOICA Leaflet*.

69 KOICA, *2023 KOICA Annual Statistical Report* (Seoul: KOICA, 2024), 2, https://www.koica.go.kr/koica_en/3492/subview.do.

70 KOICA 3; “Company Information – Korea International Cooperation Agency,” CATCH, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.catch.co.kr/Comp/CompSummary/185458>.

71 KOICA 4.

72 KOICA 4, 11; Cichocka et al., “Mind the Gap”; Calleja and Prizzon, “Moving Away from Aid,” 44.

73 KOICA 7, 8, 9.

74 KOICA 3.

75 KOICA 8.

Over a third of interviewees also mentioned **cost-effectiveness** (36 percent) and **allocation** (36 percent) of ODA programmes as part of KOICA's understanding of effectiveness. On cost-effectiveness, interviewees noted that value-for-money analysis became mandatory for all projects above a certain financial threshold.⁷⁶ On allocation, some noted that KOICA was under increasing pressure to be more “strategically selective” about its partners to align with diplomatic and commercial interests;⁷⁷ indeed, the 2024 OECD Peer Review of Korea noted that while its programmes do engage in sectors that support poverty reduction, it is rarely cited as a strategic objective.⁷⁸ Others described efforts to improve KOICA's sectoral specialization or introduce larger “Signature Programs” to scale up successful interventions and reduce fragmentation.⁷⁹

Although some officials acknowledged that **flexibility and adaptability** is important – and highlighted the agency's swift response and operational resilience during COVID-19 as a key example of KOICA's effectiveness⁸⁰ – this was only mentioned by 27 percent of interviewees overall. **Organizational design** was mentioned the least frequently – by just 17 percent of KOICA interviewees – as there have been few major organizational changes in recent years. When mentioned, it was primarily discussed in relation to the challenges from persistent institutional fragmentation in the Korean development landscape. Interviewees from KOICA did not highlight effectiveness dimensions beyond our original five.

Enablers and barriers to KOICA's effectiveness

Interviewees mentioned two key enablers of effectiveness in KOICA. First, KOICA's **extensive field presence**, which provides operational advantages by enabling direct partner government engagement and contextual programming that some agencies lack.⁸¹ While field offices were said to facilitate real-time project monitoring and relationship building that enhance programme quality and responsiveness to local conditions, Korea's “hierarchical” organizational culture creates systematic barriers to adaptive management and field-based decision-making.⁸² For instance, bureaucratic procurement requirements following Korean systems rather than partner country procedures create additional administrative burdens and conflicts with country ownership principles.⁸³ Second, Korea's **unique transition from aid recipient to donor country** allows it to share developmental experiences that resonate with partner countries facing similar challenges.⁸⁴ Indeed, Korea's developmental experience is often credited with driving relatively high public support

76 KOICA 4.

77 KOICA 3, 11.

78 OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Korea 2024*, 25.

79 KOICA 8, 10.

80 KOICA 8.

81 KOICA 3, 6.

82 OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Korea 2024*, 39.

83 KOICA 7.

84 KOICA 5, 10.

for development, particularly with older generations, who remember being ODA recipients and value the economic and social benefits of cooperation.⁸⁵

Interviewees also highlighted several barriers to effectiveness, the most significant of which relates to Korea's **fragmented ODA architecture**.⁸⁶ While the CIDC coordinates development activities across more than 40 ODA spending agencies, interviewees pointed to significant practical gaps, with multiple government actors operating with minimal coordination, particularly in-country, diminishing opportunities for more efficiency, strategic coherence, and visibility for the Korean Government as a whole.⁸⁷ Different ministries maintain separate project approval, procurement, and reporting requirements, preventing comprehensive programming approaches. The system's complexity is compounded by competing bureaucratic interests, whereby other ministries view ODA expansion as an opportunity for increasing their own budget and personnel allocations.⁸⁸

Other barriers include **stretched staff capacity**, as staff numbers have not grown alongside budget increases, leading to shortages of expertise in key thematic areas (climate and digital)⁸⁹ and creating bottlenecks to implementation and project oversight,⁹⁰ and **political pressures** related to changing priorities and strict accountability requirements. In particular, interviewees noted that political considerations directly influence project selection, with new initiatives emerging under each new KOICA president – appointed for a term of three years – that must be accommodated, creating pressure to abandon or modify existing programmes in favour of new priorities⁹¹ and constraining the ability to undertake long-term programming over multiple political cycles.⁹² At the same time, some argued that KOICA's lengthy budgeting processes, which require approval at least two years in advance, create structural rigidity that conflicts with adaptive management principles.⁹³ While some felt that Korea's audit culture – which makes reallocation or project cancellation difficult – creates strong disincentives for flexibility and limits risk appetite,⁹⁴ others recognized KOICA's comprehensive evaluation culture as an effectiveness enabler.⁹⁵

85 KOICA 4. A recent poll found that almost 84 percent of respondents said that providing ODA was important, with 60 percent of that group saying that ODA is important for supporting economic and social development; see: Lee Dasom, "3 out of 4 nationals back ODA program for developing countries: survey," *Korea.net*, January 23, 2025, <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=265560>.

86 KOICA 3, 4, 9; OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Korea 2024*, 30.

87 KOICA 7.

88 KOICA 1, 11.

89 KOICA 3.

90 KOICA 3, 7, 10; *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Korea 2024*, 40.

91 KOICA 2, 5.

92 KOICA 11.

93 KOICA 9.

94 KOICA 2, 3, 6, 9, 10.

95 KOICA 1, 4.

Norad

Norad is Norway's professional development agency, which is responsible for administering Norway's ODA. It operates under the strategic oversight of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which is responsible for Norway's development policy, and reports to the Ministry of Climate and Environment on climate and forest-related investments, including Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative.⁹⁶ Operationally, Norad functions through a model characterized by strategic partnerships – with approximately 300 staff based in Oslo, and no country offices, the agency executes its mandate through close collaboration with Norwegian embassies and an extensive network of implementing partners.⁹⁷ A series of institutional reforms between 2016 and 2020 aimed to clarify roles and responsibilities between Norad and the MFA and functionally expanded Norad's remit to cover half of Norway's ODA budget.⁹⁸ In 2021, Norad adopted a new strategy that prioritized knowledge-management and strategic partnerships and aligned its work with the SDGs. In parallel, Norad underwent an internal reorganization to match the new strategic vision by creating a new Knowledge Department and structuring a significant portion of Norad's activities under thematic portfolios that align with specific SDGs.⁹⁹ In 2024, Norad's responsibilities were further expanded to include the management of humanitarian assistance.¹⁰⁰

In 2024, Norway's ODA was valued at US\$5.18 billion in grant equivalent terms, making it the most generous DAC cooperation provider relative to the size of its economy, providing the equivalent of 1.02 percent of gross national income (GNI).¹⁰¹ According to OECD's latest available complete data Norad disbursed 50.4 percent of Norway's total ODA budget in 2023.¹⁰² The thematic priorities for Norway's development cooperation – as outlined by the MFA – include education; health; climate change, the environment, and oceans; private sector development, agriculture, and renewable

96 OECD, *Development Co-operation Profiles: Norway* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/development-co-operation-profiles_04b376d7-en/norway_08191fd9-en.html; "About Norad," Norad, accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.norad.no/en/about-norad/about-norad/about-us/>.

97 OECD, *Development Co-operation Profiles: Norway*.

98 OECD, *Mid-term Review of Norway* (Paris: OECD Publications, 2024), <https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/AR%282024%293/14/en/pdf>; according to the OECD, in 2023 the rest of the ODA budget was managed by the following government agencies: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (39.8 percent); Ministry of Public Justice and Public Security (6.7 percent); Ministry of Climate and Environment (1.1 percent); and other agencies (2.0 percent); Elling Tjønneland, "Norwegian Development Aid: A Paradigm Shift in the Making?" *Forum for Development Studies* 49, no. 3 (2022): 373–397, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08039410.2022.2096480>.

99 Itad Ltd. and Chr. Michelsen Institute, "Evaluation of Norad's Use of Knowledge in Portfolio Management," Evaluation Report 4/2024 (Oslo: Norad Department for Evaluation, September 2024), <https://www.norad.no/en/publications/2024/evaluation-of-norads-use-of-knowledge-in-portfolio-management/>; OECD, *Mid-term Review of Norway*.

100 Norad, "Administration of Norwegian aid centralised in Norad," News, August 19, 2024, <https://www.norad.no/en/news/news/20242/administration-of-norwegian-aid-centralised-in-norad/#:~:text=Greater%20responsibility%20for%20human%20rights,on%20trust%20in%20our%20partners>; Government of Norway, "Tydeligere arbeidsdeling mellom UD og Norad," accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/tydeligere-arbeidsdeling-mellom-ud-og-norad/id2992248/>.

101 OECD, *Official Development Assistance (ODA) – DAC1: Flows by Donor (ODA+OOF+Private)*, OECD Data Explorer, accessed December 10, 2025, <https://oe.cd/dx/6il>. Figures are preliminary and reported in current prices.

102 The OECD calculates the percent disbursed by agency using gross disbursements as the basis. See: OECD, *Development Co-operation Profiles: Norway*.

energy; and humanitarian aid.¹⁰³ In 2024, Ukraine was Norway’s largest recipient, followed by Palestine, Indonesia, Brazil, and Ethiopia, with a relative drop in the share of spending allocated to low-income countries over prior years.¹⁰⁴ Support toward Ukraine has become a priority for Norway since the conflict began, with Norad responsible for implementing civil and humanitarian assistance as part of the Norwegian Government’s Nansen Support Programme for Ukraine.¹⁰⁵

How does Norad understand its own effectiveness?

TABLE 4. Percentage of Norad interviews mentioning each effectiveness dimension

Allocation	Global Effectiveness Principles	Cost-Effectiveness	Organizational Design	Flexibility and Adaptability	Other
31%	23%	69%	46%	69%	7%

Note: Based on 13 interviews (with 14 individuals).

Interviewees from Norad most frequently associate their effectiveness with **flexibility and adaptability**, and **cost-effectiveness**, each mentioned in over two-thirds (69 percent) of interviews. Many noted that Norad’s ability to act as an “adaptable” partner is a key facet of its effectiveness, highlighting the agency’s “flexibility” – in terms of funding and willingness to adjust projects in response to changing country conditions – as an organizational strength, contributing to its comparative advantage relative to other providers.¹⁰⁶ In line with the localization agenda, Norad prioritizes responsiveness to local needs through trust-based relationships and close dialogue with implementing partners,¹⁰⁷ with some citing crisis modifiers that enable rapid adjustments as a key example of adaptive processes.¹⁰⁸ Some noted efforts to further deepen Norad’s flexibility through the 2024 Plusspartner initiative, which provides pre-qualified strategic civil society partners with greater budgetary flexibility, simplified allocation processes, and more trust-based follow-up arrangements designed to free up resources for strategic dialogue on what delivers the

103 Norad, “Development policy and humanitarian efforts,” accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.norway.no/en/central-content/en/values-priorities/dev-policy-hum-efforts/>.

104 Norad, “Historic Decline in International Aid,” News, May 13, 2025, <https://www.norad.no/en/news/news/2025/historic-decline-in-international-aid/#:~:text=Europe%20gets%20the%20most,the%20list%20of%20recipient%20countries.>

105 Norad, “The Nansen Support Programme for Ukraine,” accessed October 27, 2025, <https://www.norad.no/en/thematic-areas/humanitarian-assistance-and-comprehensive-response-and-the-nansen-programme-for-ukraine/the-nansen-support-programme-for-ukraine/>.

106 Norad 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12; notably, for the description of Norad as a “flexible” partner is long-standing, with a 2010 study finding flexible practice as a key organizational norm, see: Nilima Gulrajani, “Re-imagining Canadian Development Cooperation: A Comparative Examination of Norway and the UK,” London School of Economics and Political Science Working Paper (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2010), [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/30036/1/Reimagining_Canadian_development_cooperation_\(publisher_version\).pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/30036/1/Reimagining_Canadian_development_cooperation_(publisher_version).pdf).

107 Norad, “Norwegian Aid and Adaptive Programming,” Evaluation Department Report 10/2016 (Oslo: Norad, 2016), <https://www.norad.no/contentassets/acefbfaad32400bafde470d626545c0/evaluation-brief---norwegian-aidand-and-adaptive-programming?>

108 Norad 2, 5.

best impact.¹⁰⁹ Despite clear strengths, one interviewee noted that flexibility can have drawbacks for both efficiency and effectiveness if low thresholds for project extensions delay exit from underperforming initiatives (i.e., if used without an exit strategy).¹¹⁰

Cost-effectiveness was also raised frequently by interviewees as an increasingly important dimension of effectiveness for Norad, responding to strategic efforts to improve the efficiency of development resources (as outlined in the 2021 strategy) alongside Norad’s growing responsibilities vis-à-vis the foreign ministry and some concerns related to potential budgetary pressures.¹¹¹ Norad’s understanding of using development resources efficiently – especially within its portfolio-approach reforms – prioritizes the use of evidence-based decision-making to fund activities that are likely to result in the greatest development impact.¹¹² Efforts to strengthen Norad’s cost-effectiveness were seen as being enabled by the new portfolio management system, which encourages portfolio teams to allocate funds more strategically based on evidence of “what works” at the portfolio level, with the aim of maximizing outcomes towards objectives.¹¹³

Organizational design was mentioned by almost half of interviewees (46 percent), with many reflecting on the recent reforms – both regarding the introduction of the portfolio management system and the external relationship between Norad and the MFA – as efforts to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of ODA management. On external reforms, interviewees lamented that while recent changes had improved effectiveness through clarifying the division of responsibilities between Norad and the MFA, Norad’s expanding role had not been accompanied by a commensurate increase in staffing capacity.¹¹⁴ On internal reforms, while interviewees generally agreed that the reorganization – particularly around portfolios – had enabled more efficient and effective practice, some mentioned that the thematic structure can leave gaps at the country level if sectoral knowledge is not coordinated across portfolios,¹¹⁵ while others expressed fatigue with the persistent nature of organizational changes, suggesting that it takes capacity away from getting the job done.¹¹⁶

Interviewees mentioned **allocation** and implementation of the **global effectiveness principles** less frequently – 31 percent and 23 percent, respectively. On allocation, several interviewees noted that major strategic decisions on priority areas are driven by the foreign ministry, where Norad’s role in determining allocation was more focused on the specific types of interventions – or “what” – could be effective for key themes or contexts.¹¹⁷ On the global effectiveness principles, interviewees often

109 “Norad’s strategic partnership with civil society organisations (Plusspartner),” For Partners, Norad, May 26, 2024, <https://www.norad.no/en/for-partners/partner/strategic-civil-society-partners/>.

110 Norad 10.

111 Norad 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12.

112 Norad 3, 8, 12, 13.

113 Norad 11, 12, 13.

114 Norad 3, 13; Itad Ltd. and Chr. Michelsen Institute, *Evaluation of Norad’s Use of Knowledge in Portfolio Management*.

115 Norad 6, 7, 8, 11.

116 Norad 6, 10.

117 Norad 8, 9, 11, 12, 13.

suggested that key principles – such as ownership and results management – were embedded in Norad’s daily practice, though some also observed that the effectiveness agenda had lost political traction.¹¹⁸

Finally, one interviewee (coded under “other”) observed that perspectives on effectiveness vary widely across sectors and themes, reflecting differing priorities and approaches within Norad, and resulting in an absence of a shared or unified understanding of what Norad’s effectiveness means in practice.¹¹⁹

Enablers and barriers to Norad’s effectiveness

Norad’s ability to act as a flexible partner is often considered to be enabled by **strong public and political support for development**,¹²⁰ alongside a culture of trust in public institutions and open conversations about development, which provides a mandate for action focused on the pursuit of development outcomes, including through adapting to changing demands and contexts.¹²¹ Some interviewees noted that Norad’s openness with the public, and willingness to engage in public outreach and debate, likely helps build support for development with taxpayers.¹²² Indeed, recent polling shows that 60 percent of Norwegians support current or higher levels of ODA spending, with most viewing development as a moral imperative or “opportunity to help people in need or poverty,”¹²³ giving Norad space to pursue this objective through flexible and adaptable partnerships that prioritize transformational change over measurable targets.

Perhaps critically, Norad’s **organizational design** appears to act as both an enabler and barrier to effective action. On the one hand, the portfolio approach was mentioned across interviewees, with many suggesting that the new structure had fostered more meaningful and strategic discussions about effectiveness than under the prior model.¹²⁴ Underpinned by Norad’s strategic emphasis on knowledge – with *fakta har makta*, or “facts have power,” appearing as an unofficial slogan – some suggested that a clearer culture of effectiveness is taking hold.¹²⁵ On the other hand, the absence of country offices can make it challenging for Norad to engage more locally, partly due to capacity constraints¹²⁶ and Norad’s reliance on others for project execution, which can raise effectiveness challenges, especially when working through multilaterals.¹²⁷ Perceptions of the thematic internal

118 Norad 1, 8, 9, 12, 13.

119 Norad 6.

120 OECD, *Mid-term Review of Norway*.

121 Norad 12, 13; Gulrajani, “Re-imagining Canadian Development Cooperation”; Fiona Zublin, “Citizens of the World’s Most Generous Donor Favor Its Aid Expenditures,” *Devex*, October 21, 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/citizens-of-the-world-s-most-generous-donor-favor-its-aid-expenditures-111136?>

122 Norad 2, 7, 8, 13.

123 Zublin, “Citizens of the World’s Most Generous Donor Favor Its Aid Expenditure.”

124 Norad 8; OECD, *Mid-term Review of Norway*.

125 Norad 8, 12; OECD, *Mid-term Review of Norway*. Norad 8, 12; Ibid.

126 Norad 9, 11.

127 Norad 9, 12, 13.

structure are also mixed, with recognition that the absence of country offices makes geographic or matrix structures difficult,¹²⁸ sitting alongside calls for more cross-thematic portfolio coordination when funding initiatives in the same partner country.¹²⁹

New Zealand's MFAT

New Zealand's aid programme is delivered through MFAT, specifically through its Pacific and Development Group (PDG).¹³⁰ This structure emerged from a significant reorganization beginning in 2009, when the government integrated the previously semi-autonomous New Zealand Agency for International Development back into MFAT. As of 2022, MFAT employed 241 staff on development, of which just under half (110) are based in field offices (i.e., High Commissions or Embassies).¹³¹ As a foreign ministry, MFAT maintains a rotational staffing structure within PDG, with roughly a quarter of current development staff expected to stay in their roles for just two to three years.

MFAT manages nearly the entirety of New Zealand's total development budget, which amounted to a total of US\$780.8 million – all in grants – in 2024.¹³² New Zealand's development programme maintains a clear geographic focus, especially since the launch of its 2018 "Pacific Reset" – which morphed into the Pacific "Resilience"¹³³ policy in 2021, and was updated by the current Government's 2024 Foreign Policy Reset, committed to "sustaining our deep and comprehensive focus on the Pacific"¹³⁴ – with at least 60 percent of resources directed to the region.¹³⁵ New Zealand's secondary geographic focus is Southeast Asia. New Zealand also maintains limited development functions in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia.¹³⁶ Bilateral, regional, and thematic priorities are set in MFAT's PDG Plans, which guide funding allocation.¹³⁷

128 Norad 5.

129 Norad 6, 7, 8, 11.

130 OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: New Zealand* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2023/05/oecd-development-co-operation-peer-reviews-new-zealand-2023_2de03039/10883ac5-en.pdf.

131 OECD, *Review of the development co-operation policies and programmes of New Zealand: A Snapshot of New Zealand's Development Co-operation* (Paris: OECD Publications, 2023), Table 1, 6, [https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/AR\(2023\)4/24/FINAL/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD/DAC/AR(2023)4/24/FINAL/en/pdf).

132 OECD, *Official Development Assistance (ODA) – DAC1: Flows by Donor (ODA+OOF+Private)*, OECD Data Explorer, accessed December 10, 2025, <https://oe.cd/dx/6i1>. Figures are preliminary and reported in current prices; OECD, *Development Co-operation Profiles: New Zealand*.

133 New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), "New Zealand's Pacific Engagement: From Reset to Resilience," Cabinet paper (Wellington: MFAT, 2021), <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Cabinet-papers/Cab-Paper-NZ-Pacific-Engagement-From-Reset-to-Resilience.pdf>.

134 New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), "Resetting New Zealand's Foreign Policy," Cabinet Paper (Wellington: MFAT, 2024), <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/OIA/OIA-2024/Cabinet-Paper-Resetting-New-Zealands-Foreign-Policy.pdf>.

135 "Our Development Cooperation Partnerships in the Pacific," Aid and Development, New Zealand MFAT, accessed October 20 2025, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/aid-and-development/our-development-cooperation-partnerships-in-the-pacific>.

136 NZ MFAT 4.

137 NZ MFAT 3; OECD, *Review of the development co-operation policies and programmes of New Zealand* (see point 23).

How does MFAT understand its own effectiveness?

TABLE 5. Percentage of MFAT interviews mentioning each effectiveness dimension

Allocation	Global Effectiveness Principles	Cost-Effectiveness	Organizational Design	Flexibility and Adaptability	Other
50%	17%	17%	75%	58%	33%

Note: Based on 12 interviews.

Interviewees from MFAT primarily understood effectiveness through the lens of **organizational design** (mentioned by 75 percent of interviewees). Staff stressed that being effective requires structures capable of managing complex relationships, integrating diverse expertise, and maintaining strategic focus while adapting to changing circumstances. Many linked MFAT’s ability to deliver effectively as being mediated by structures that enable efficient delivery toward defined objectives – often in relation to the agency’s “merged” model – whereby responsibilities for foreign policy, trade, and development are housed within one organization.¹³⁸ Several interviewees noted benefits associated with integration, including stronger visibility and more coherent alignment between diplomacy and development efforts.¹³⁹ At the same time, some questioned whether the 2009 merger had achieved its intended aims, flagging risks such as the possibility that merged structures may encourage more geopolitically driven allocations¹⁴⁰ or that specialized development expertise can be diluted.¹⁴¹

What’s more, in recent years, MFAT has undergone a series of reviews – especially since the formation of the PDG in 2016 – motivated at least in part by effectiveness concerns.¹⁴² A key organizational reform arising from these processes was the introduction of new “Governance Groups” in 2024, designed to strengthen oversight and reduce the proliferation of small or disconnected projects identified in earlier reviews. The new structure establishes a pan-programme view through the Pacific and Development Leadership Team Strategy and Policy Group, which holds responsibility for outcomes and performance across the entire International Development Cooperation programme. Beneath this sit three sub-allocation governance groups – Pacific, Global, and Humanitarian and Multilateral – each responsible for the direction, outcomes, and performance of its respective component of the budget. This restructuring aims to consolidate governance, create

138 NZ MFAT 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11.

139 NZ MFAT 4, 6, 10.

140 NZ MFAT 2, 3, 4.

141 NZ MFAT 5.

142 E.g., New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), *New Zealand’s International Development Cooperation Programme: Activity-Based Review* (Wellington: MFAT, 2024), <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Media-and-resources/Ministry-statements-and-speeches/Activity-based-review-of-the-IDC-Programme-report-on-findings.pdf>. Governance groups were discussed in NZ’s response to 2023 DAC peer review; see: New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), *OECD DAC Peer Review of New Zealand 2023 – Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade Management Response* (Wellington: MFAT, 2023), <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/OECD-DAC-Peer-Review-Management-Response.pdf?>

clearer lines of strategic responsibility, and drive joint prioritization across thematic and geographic teams, thereby reducing duplication.¹⁴³

MFAT staff also strongly linked effectiveness to their **flexibility and adaptability** (64 percent), particularly in designing processes that enable rapid response when “everything goes sideways,” rather than optimizing only for procedural efficiency.¹⁴⁴ In line with this view, MFAT recently introduced risk-based quality assurance, enabling “low risk business cases” to move through more streamlined processes.¹⁴⁵ MFAT has also developed adaptive instruments including “fiscal crisis support” (quick-disbursing budget support used during COVID-19) and “flexible climate finance” (budget support for climate activities), enabling rapid response while building on partner government systems.¹⁴⁶ More widely, MFAT staff link adaptability to being genuinely “partner-led” – New Zealand sees itself as being “in and of” the Pacific and therefore sees relationship building with Pacific country governments as important for both diplomatic and development aims.¹⁴⁷ Country teams described being able to reallocate when partner needs and priorities shift,¹⁴⁸ while others described how co-creating result frameworks with partners increases ownership and gives MFAT confidence to adapt mid-course.¹⁴⁹

Allocation was mentioned by just less than half of interviewees, with most noting that MFAT’s effectiveness is strengthened by its focus on the Pacific, which leverages New Zealand’s proximity, long-standing relationships and comparative advantage in the region. Staff argued that regional concentration improves partner ownership, reduces transaction costs, and allows MFAT to move resources quickly when local priorities shift.¹⁵⁰ Further, a recent Activity Based Review represents a significant attempt to achieve effectiveness through evaluating the alignment of MFAT’s allocations with its broader priorities.¹⁵¹ This revealed that MFAT had been spreading itself “too thin,” with staff discussing the need to be “more focused” and do “bigger, fewer, deeper, and longer” interventions.¹⁵² Especially since COVID-19, MFAT has focused on providing more flexible and “higher-order” funding modalities, to support a more consolidated, flexible way of allocating resources.¹⁵³

While **cost-effectiveness** and **alignment with global effectiveness principles** were mentioned far less frequently than “other” dimensions, several interviewees **highlighted New Zealand’s own effectiveness framework** – outlined in the 2019 International Cooperation for Effective Sustainable

143 NZ MFAT 2, 5, 8, 11.

144 NZ MFAT 5.

145 NZ MFAT 8.

146 NZ MFAT 1, 2.

147 NZ MFAT 1, 4, 11.

148 NZ MFAT 1, 3, 6.

149 NZ MFAT 11.

150 NZ MFAT 6, 9.

151 NZ MFAT 2, 10; See also: New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), *New Zealand’s International Development Cooperation Programme: Activity-based review*.

152 NZ MFAT 2, 5, 7.

153 NZ MFAT 1, 2, 5.

Development (ICESD) Policy – as an internal guide for effective practice. The ICESD policy framework defines effective development as “values driven, partnership focused, adaptive, outcomes-focused, and evidence-based”¹⁵⁴ – with some viewing the ICESD principles as a translation of the Busan principles to New Zealand’s national context.¹⁵⁵

What are the key barriers or enablers to MFAT’s effectiveness?

MFAT staff see their **location and history in the Pacific** as one of the strongest enablers of their effectiveness: proximity and long-standing relationships allow genuinely partner-led programming,¹⁵⁶ frequent in-person coordination, and faster pivots when government priorities change as posts integrate Wellington-managed and bilateral activities under unified country plans. Still, staff also mention that the Pacific is increasingly a very “crowded” space, with heightened geopolitical competition demanding stronger harmonization at country level.¹⁵⁷

The relatively **small size** of MFAT – both in terms of budget and staff – is seen as both an enabler of greater effectiveness and a challenge. On the one hand, being a smaller agency encourages greater adaptability and flexibility, with staff being able to communicate with each other more easily. On the other hand, the complexity of processes such as project approvals, as well as complying with multiple international and domestic accountability standards and principles, is particularly burdensome when low numbers of staff are expected to manage multiple projects.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, some interviewees argued that the agency’s small size – and high costs of locating staff abroad – limits decentralization despite acknowledging that additional field capacity could enable more localized decision-making (with most decisions currently taken in Wellington).¹⁵⁹

Finally, MFAT’s **integrated model** – whereby the development function sits within the foreign ministry – also represents both advantages and challenges for its effectiveness. On the one hand, integration helps present a single New Zealand “face” in-country, which can help to streamline engagement and align tools across diplomacy and development.¹⁶⁰ Yet political pressures can skew choices, risking a tilt from development priorities toward foreign policy imperatives. What is more, rotational staffing of foreign policy “generalists” in development posts also constrains technical depth and continuity.¹⁶¹

154 New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), *New Zealand’s International Development Principles*, accessed October 2025, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/Policy/New-Zealands-International-Development-Principles.pdf>.

155 NZ MFAT 10.

156 OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: New Zealand*.

157 NZ MFAT 4, 12; OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: New Zealand*.

158 NZ MFAT 7, 9.

159 NZ MFAT 4, 6, 7, 9.

160 NZ MFAT 9, 12; OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: New Zealand*, 16.

161 NZ MFAT 2, 5, 6, 11; OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: New Zealand*, 22.

Results across dimensions

This section provides thematic analysis across all four organizations, exploring how interviewees understood and operationalized the five dimensions of effectiveness (Table 6). Our interviews revealed diverse interpretations of each dimension, often adding nuance to – or expanding beyond – the original framework outlined in earlier work,¹⁶² as well as evolving conceptualizations reflecting today’s development landscape. For each dimension, we describe what the concept meant to interviewees themselves, why it has gained, or lost, salience in recent years, and what barriers agencies face in putting these ideas into practice.

TABLE 6. Strength of resonance of each dimension by agency

	Allocation	Global Effectiveness Principles	Cost-Effectiveness	Organizational Design	Flexibility and Adaptability	Other
AFD	70%	10%	40%	30%	60%	70%
KOICA	36%	73%	36%	18%	27%	0%
Norad	31%	23%	69%	46%	69%	8%
New Zealand MFAT	50%	17%	17%	75%	58%	33%
<i>Average across the four agencies</i>	47%	31%	41%	42%	54%	28%

Note: Based on 46 interviews with 48 individuals.

Flexibility and adaptability

Across the four cases (Table 6), flexibility and adaptability was most consistently associated with agency effectiveness today, gaining prominence amid frequent crises and shocks, including COVID-19.¹⁶³ Still, agencies grapple with how to be flexible while maintaining strategic coherence and predictability.

Taken together, responses from across the four cases pointed to different aspects of adaptability and flexibility – including responsiveness to local needs, willingness to fill unexpected funding shortfalls, speed of action, and capacity for institutionalizing learning from previous experience. These understandings indicate that, for interviewees, adaptability was seen not only in terms of **adaptive management practices** during project implementation, but also in the presence of upstream provisions – such as **flexible budgeting and procedural scope to reallocate resources** – that enable agencies to adjust course as contexts change.

Flexibility and adaptability was seen as particularly important in today’s context for several reasons. First, many saw flexibility and adaptability as responding quickly to local needs in a fast-changing

¹⁶² Calleja, Casadevall Bellés, and Cichocka, “What Does It Mean for Agencies to Be Effective in a Changing Development Landscape?”

¹⁶³ AFD 9; NZ MFAT 2, 10; KOICA 10.

landscape. While “doing development” has always involved complexity,¹⁶⁴ recent shocks – including COVID-19, war in Ukraine, and climate-related disasters – have intensified the push for more agile and responsive approaches.¹⁶⁵ In particular, many mentioned that COVID-19 marked a turning point, forcing agencies to rapidly pivot programmes, shift modalities, and reallocate budgets at unprecedented speed and scale, leading to more strategic discussions about how to enhance preparedness to future shocks.¹⁶⁶ Second, interviewees noted that volatile funding environments and fiscal constraints have reinforced the need for budgetary flexibility. Fiscal pressures at home have prompted agencies to manage portfolios more strategically, including by selecting modalities such as budget support that could be more resilient to unforeseen circumstances and potentially discontinuing weaker programmes.¹⁶⁷ Externally, cuts from other providers and the closure of USAID has created disruptions – especially for co-financed projects – that force remaining agencies to consider how, where, and *whether* they should pivot resources to fill the gaps.¹⁶⁸ Some interviewees suggested that, in this context, flexibility can enhance cost-efficiency, as sticking to rigid agreements can block course corrections, while designing flexibility into agreements – through crisis modifiers, contingency clauses, or simplifying procedures for no-cost extensions – can allow programmes to continue as circumstances on the ground change.¹⁶⁹ Finally, some suggested that being flexible meant being more responsive to local realities and was key to advancing local ownership, trust and credibility, and contributing to more sustainable development outcomes.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, adaptive management methodologies underscore that projects should be “locally driven” and co-designed with local stakeholders to best fit needs and contexts.¹⁷¹

Yet interviewees also noted a series of challenges to being adaptive in practice, which are rooted in tensions between having the flexibility to respond to changing contexts and the structure needed to remain accountable, predictable, and able to learn from experience. At the crux of the issue is finding balance between being partner-led, responsive, and adaptable while ensuring that there are processes in place to monitor impacts through change, reporting on outcomes, and learning from practice.¹⁷² On striking this balance, interviewees often highlighted varied

164 NZ MFAT 1; Norad 12; Ben Ramalingam, *Aid on the Edge of Chaos: Rethinking International Cooperation in a Complex World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

165 On COVID-19: NZ MFAT 2, 10; KOICA 8, 10; Norad 1, 12. On Ukraine: Norad 9; KOICA 2. On climate change: NZ MFAT 1.

166 For instance, MFAT was able to disburse more flexible finance quickly, in the form of budget support (NZ MFAT 1, 2). KOICA staff moved their training programmes online and shifted project components quickly (KOICA 8, 10). AFD also reorganized teams and reallocated resources to address the dual health and economic emergencies (AFD 8, 10).

167 NZ MFAT 2, 11; Norad 12.

168 Norad 12.

169 Norad 2; KOICA 2, 3; NZ MFAT 10.

170 Norad 9, 12; NZ MFAT 3, 11; AFD 4, 5.

171 Katherine Cooke, *How to Set Up and Manage an Adaptive Programme* (Oxford: Oxford Policy Management, 2017), <https://www.opml.co.uk/files/Publications/8617-action-on-climate-today-act/act-adaptive-programme-management.pdf?noredirect=1>; Jamelia Harris and Andrew Lawson, “PFM Reform Through PDIA: What Works and When It Works,” *IMF Public Financial Management Blog*, January 31, 2022, <https://blog-pfm.imf.org/en/pfmblog/2022/01/pfm-reform-through-pdia-what-works-and-when-it-works>.

172 Particip GmbH, “Norwegian Flexibility vs. Structure: A Balancing Act,” Policy Brief (Oslo: Norad, 2015), <https://www.norad.no/contentassets/343b9b94e2d8454a8bcac450b0b06b0b/policy-brief--norwegian-flexibility-vs.-structure-a-balancing-act--lessons-from-haiti.pdf>.

experiences that are seemingly driven by broader political contexts and internal cultures of risk tolerance. KOICA interviewees, for instance, explained that Korea's risk-averse audit culture and strict budgetary earmarking disincentivizes adaptation, where changes to programmes are often viewed as evidence of poor planning.¹⁷³ To a lesser degree, MFAT interviewees explained that their accountability and reporting processes are not conducive to enabling flexibility and adaptability, with financial targets and rules on reporting that promote predictable spend undermining adaptive approaches.¹⁷⁴ By contrast, AFD staff highlighted that France's multiannual budgetary law supports AFD's organizational resilience by allowing for more strategic planning and reducing short-term reporting pressures.¹⁷⁵

Even beyond financial planning, adaptability risks undermining accountability to, and delivery of, long-term strategic objectives, particularly if rapid pivots threaten overall outcomes, including through breaking trust with partners.¹⁷⁶ In such cases, maintaining strategic monitoring capacities was seen as critical, to ensure that responsiveness remains focused on long-term goals, especially in complex situations where results take time to materialize and "strategic patience" on the part of providers may be required.¹⁷⁷ Monitoring adaptations effectively can provide a knowledge base for organizational learning, allowing agencies to both understand what works in specific contexts as well as to get better at correcting, or closing, projects that are not achieving desired outcomes.¹⁷⁸ To the degree that adaptability is seen as a risk by deviating from established plans, learning provides a path to accountability, by reporting on, and sharing, what worked. Some noted that learning is limited by insufficient feedback loops between knowledge and evidence units and programming departments at their agencies, making it difficult to use lessons to justify adaptations¹⁷⁹ or inform efforts on strategic foresight to prepare for future shocks.¹⁸⁰ In a context where the need for adaptation is increasing alongside uncertainty, there is space for agencies to consider whether their processes provide a balance between enabling responsiveness to changing conditions while remaining accountable to strategic objectives.

Allocation

Alongside budgetary and political pressures, understandings of effective allocation increasingly prioritize focusing on agencies' comparative advantages and aligning resources with strategic objectives, raising questions about what it means to be "effective" when pursuing multiple goals.

173 KOICA 3, 4, 7, 10, 11.

174 Nick Leffler et al., *Towards More Adaptive Approaches to Managing the New Zealand Aid Programme* (Wellington: MFAT, 2020), <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/Research/Adaptive-Management-Project-Phase-1-Report.pdf>; NZ MFAT 7.

175 AFD 8.

176 Norad 5.

177 AFD 8; Norad 2.

178 AFD 3; KOICA 8; Norad 4.

179 NZ MFAT 10; Norad 4, 6.

180 AFD 8; Norad 8; NZ MFAT 2.

Interviewees reflected two main understandings of effective allocation. First, effective allocation was often seen as part of approaches that prioritize agencies' **specialization** in key sectors or regions. More selective or specialized allocation mechanisms were seen as holding the potential to enhance agencies' effectiveness, through reducing fragmentation by concentrating resources on fewer and deeper partnerships, and playing to each agency's **comparative advantage** to reduce duplication across other actors working in the same space.¹⁸¹ While the risks of fragmentation have long been discussed in OECD-DAC peer reviews and effectiveness debates, this issue has regained prominence amid a more crowded and complex provider landscape. Recent global commitments – including those reaffirmed at the 2025 Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) – have similarly underscored the need to improve coherence and reduce fragmentation as part of strengthening the quality and impact of development cooperation.¹⁸² Second, effective allocation was also defined by the **potential for “transformational impact,”**¹⁸³ using a “multidimensional” understanding of partners' vulnerability as a proxy for understanding where support is most needed, and linking with ongoing debates about countries' “graduation” from ODA eligibility.¹⁸⁴

Across the cases, a common theme was that pressures to do “more with less” were forcing agencies to make difficult choices about how to allocate increasingly scarce resources across competing priorities. For some, this provided a new imperative to strategically focus remaining budgets, with interviewees noting that their agencies were thinking about how to better leverage their comparative advantages to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of declining budgets, as well as to differentiate their offer in a competitive development landscape. This was clearest at MFAT, with staff noting that their relatively small budget required focusing the resources available, prioritizing the Pacific as an area where New Zealand has a comparative advantage due to proximity, cultural ties, long-term partnerships, and contextual familiarity.¹⁸⁵ For others, domestic political realities mean that some agencies face stronger pressures to align allocations with strategic – security, commercial, or diplomatic – interests.¹⁸⁶ In France, for instance, the most recent decisions of the Presidential Council for International Partnerships defines development cooperation as a strategic investment aligned with national and European interests, establishing clear requirements to include the fight against irregular immigration in country strategies while also reinforcing domestic industries.¹⁸⁷ Some interviewees from KOICA also noted pressures to balance partner interests

181 AFD 3, 4, 6; NZ MFAT 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11; Norad 7, 8, 10, 11; KOICA 9.

182 United Nations, *Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development*, Sevilla, Spain, 30 June–3 July 2025: Adoption of the Outcome Document of the Conference, A/CONF.227/2025/L.1 (2025), https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/aconf227-2025-l1_en.pdf.

183 OECD, *Using the New UN MVI to Identify and Fill In Vulnerability Financing Gaps in SIDS*, DCD(2024)16 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), [https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD\(2024\)16/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD(2024)16/en/pdf); Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, *Small Island Developing States: Vulnerability Note* (UK: FCDO, 2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/small-island-developing-states-vulnerability-note-2025/small-island-developing-states-vulnerability-note>.

184 AFD 8.

185 NZ MFAT 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8.

186 AFD 4, 6, 8; NZ MFAT 4; KOICA 6, 8; Norad 10.

187 Présidence de la République, “Relevé de décisions du Conseil présidentiel pour les partenariats internationaux.”

with domestic priorities, with one suggesting a shift in the domestic tone of development discourse towards prioritizing short-term national interests more strongly.¹⁸⁸ While the use of development resources to advance domestic interests is not new, pressures to more explicitly align allocation to strategic objectives functionally reorients the goal of effective allocation from supporting the poorest to deepen development impact towards an approach where being “effective” may mean achieving domestic gains alongside development outcomes.

For development agencies, pressures to allocate resources in alignment with national interests raise real questions about what it means to do this well. Part of the challenge is linked to the types of domestic results agencies seek to achieve – while agencies have long allocated spending to neighbouring regions, including as part of broader strategies aimed at regional stabilization,¹⁸⁹ uses of development resources to stem migration¹⁹⁰ or support domestic industries¹⁹¹ are far more specific and risk overtly driving allocation towards domestic interests over partner needs. This is further complicated by the absence of clear methods for interrogating assumptions about “win-win” outcomes and how domestic interests feature in allocation criteria or approaches in the first instance.¹⁹² Indeed, interviewees noted challenges in balancing the tension between domestic and developmental interests from an effectiveness perspective.¹⁹³ Some suggested that it was important to more “openly acknowledge” their domestic interests when working with partners or be clearer about where they are prioritizing different objectives.¹⁹⁴

Cost-effectiveness

Cost-effectiveness has become a more salient – yet also highly contested – dimension of effectiveness. Resistance and scepticism to cost-effectiveness stem from technical, strategic, and political concerns.

While interviewees commonly linked the rising salience of cost-effectiveness to domestic fiscal pressures, political accountability, and reputational risk if development resources cannot demonstrate results, our conversations revealed at least four different interpretations of how cost-effectiveness is understood by agencies. First, for some, cost-effectiveness was about maximizing the social return-on-investment of their overall pool of resources through cross-comparative

188 KOICA 6, 8, 11.

189 Sarah Blodgett Bermeo, *Targeted Development: Industrialized Country Strategy in a Globalizing World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

190 Frey Lindsay, “Sweden Announces Development Aid Linked to Irregular Migration Control,” *Forbes*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/freylindsay/2024/10/25/sweden-announces-development-aid-linked-to-irregular-migration-control>.

191 Présidence de la République, “Relevé de décisions du Conseil présidentiel pour les partenariats internationaux.”

192 Niels Keijzer and Erik Lundsgaarde, “When ‘Unintended Effects’ Reveal Hidden Intentions: Implications of ‘Mutual Benefit’ Discourses for Evaluating Development Cooperation,” *Evaluation and Program Planning* 68 (2018): 210–217, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2017.09.003>.

193 AFD 7, 8; NZ MFAT 2, 4; KOICA 6.

194 AFD 8; Norad 10.

benchmarking. In this view, portfolio-level cost-effectiveness can be achieved by privileging the types of interventions with the strongest evidence of results and allocating resources to maximize outcomes per dollar spent.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, global evidence suggests that the most cost-effective interventions can be several orders of magnitude more efficient at saving lives or educating children than other “good” interventions.¹⁹⁶ Second, some interviewees linked cost-effectiveness to due diligence processes that can ensure the financial efficiency of individual projects. In this view, cost-efficiency is not so much about comparing and selecting the most promising interventions, but rather – within the scope of any given project – avoiding waste, controlling fraud, and keeping inputs-to-outputs ratios tight and within agreed budgets.¹⁹⁷ Third, particularly for AFD – the only agency in our sample which is also a bank – cost-effectiveness was related to financial indicators such as the ratio of additional finance leveraged or mobilized.¹⁹⁸ Finally, some interviewees equated cost-effectiveness with organizational or administrative efficiency in delivery, especially through keeping overheads and transaction or administrative costs low. In addition to having implications for how agencies choose to compensate and locate their staff, this also has important implications for choices of modality and channel for development finance. For instance, interviewees pointed to tensions between focusing more on instruments that require fewer staff resources and oversight at headquarters level (e.g., budget support or pooled funds) on the one hand and, on the other, delivering in more “innovative” and “scalable,” or “localized,” ways, which can be more resource intensive but may deliver other important and cost-effective benefits.¹⁹⁹

Despite broad uptake across agencies, interviewees acknowledged scepticism around the cost-effectiveness agenda due to technical, strategic, and political concerns. At the **technical level**, interviewees highlighted challenges in accessing and using high-quality data to inform decisions, finding appropriate benchmarks, and attributing results to specific actions.²⁰⁰ The complexity of development projects complicates efforts to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of individual components or attribute specific results to a single agency’s funding,²⁰¹ with systematic collection of comparable data further complicated by often low capacities of partner organizations and

195 Norad 3, 4, 10; AFD 10.

196 Toby Ord, *The Moral Imperative toward Cost-Effectiveness in Global Health* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2013), <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/moral-imperative-toward-cost-effectiveness-global-health>; Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, *Cost-Effective Approaches to Improve Global Learning: What Does Recent Evidence Tell Us Are “Smart Buys” for Improving Learning in Low- and Middle-Income Countries* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023), <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/231d98251cf326922518be0cbe306fdc-0200022023/related/GEEAP-Report-Smart-Buys-2023-final.pdf>; Rachel Glennerster, “Lessons from a Year at Department for International Development,” *DFID Research Blog (Medium)*, February 1, 2019, https://medium.com/@DFID_Research/lessons-from-a-year-at-dfid-d11d9947f90.

197 NZ MFAT 3; KOICA 1, 3.

198 AFD 6.

199 NZ MFAT 1 on cost-effectiveness of budget support and “higher order modalities”; Norad 6 on prioritizing more “scalable” and innovative interventions; Norad 1, 9; KOICA 4 on the tension between the amount of resources that reach the local level and contributing more through multilateral organizations; see also: Ranil Dissanayake, “Localization in Theory and Practice,” CGD Policy Paper 346 (London: Center for Global Development, 2024), <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/localization-theory-and-practice.pdf>.

200 Norad 4.

201 Norad 2 (saying sometimes it is like trying to compare “apples and oranges”), 10; AFD 3.

implementing agencies.²⁰² Cost-effectiveness tools also vary across sectors, limiting their usefulness for guiding allocation at the portfolio level.²⁰³ When comparable benchmarks do exist, knowledge departments are often too strained or insufficiently integrated into decision-making to inform more cost-effective project selection and design.²⁰⁴ Indeed, evidence from the World Bank shows how reliance on apparently precise quantitative value-for-money checks can, in practice, still mask subjective assumptions and be used as a post hoc rationalization rather than a genuine decision-making tool.²⁰⁵ At the **strategic level**, applying a cost-effectiveness lens in isolation risks privileging interventions with short-term, countable outputs over those intended to instigate the “transformational” changes that some agencies see as their comparative advantage.²⁰⁶ In this view, a reliance on lists of cost-effective interventions risks fragmented activities that may be individually cost-effective yet lack systemic coherence.²⁰⁷ Evidence reviews from other areas show that an excessive value-for-money focus can also risk neglecting the hardest-to-reach populations.²⁰⁸ At the **political level**, cost-effectiveness faces two challenges. First, results frameworks that currently focus solely on development impacts fail to account for other provider objectives, limiting a holistic assessment of value achieved relative to costs.²⁰⁹ Second, the desire to uphold the “ownership” principle by responding to partner demands can conflict with donor-driven cost-efficiency and

202 NZ MFAT 11.

203 AFD 3; Norad 4. For instance, in education, the unit of measurement is cost per LAYS (Life Adjusted Year of Schooling), in health one can look at cost per averted DALY (disability adjusted life year), and in climate change mitigation cost per tonne of emissions averted. See also: Rachel Glennerster and Siddhartha Haria, “Radical Simplification: A Practical Way to Get More Out of Limited Foreign Assistance Budgets,” *CGD Blog*, April 21, 2025, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/radical-simplification-practical-way-get-more-out-limited-foreign-assistance-budgets>; Rachel Glennerster and Lee Crawford, “Four Criteria for Prioritizing Education Funds,” *CGD Blog*, May 29, 2025, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/four-criteria-prioritizing-education-funds?>; Victoria Y. Fan, Brian Webster, and Venkatesh Subramanian, “How Cost-Effective Is Global Health Aid?” *CGD Blog*, August 26, 2024, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/how-cost-effective-global-health-aid>; World Health Organization, *Tackling NCDs: Best Buys and Other Recommended Interventions for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases*, 2nd ed. (Geneva: WHO, 2024), <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240091078>.

204 Norad 8; AFD 10; NZ MFAT 10 (talks about aggregation challenges stemming from different country teams working differently); NZ MFAT 4; AFD 4 also talks about not just technical issues with disseminating data and evidence but also organizational/cultural resistance to “learning” from previous failures and the available evidence.

205 World Bank, *Value-for-Money Analysis: Practices and Challenges* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022), <https://ppp.worldbank.org/public-private-partnership/sites/default/files/2022-05/VFM.pdf>.

206 Norad 5; AFD 3, 5, 7; KOICA 11; also noted in wider literature. See: Oxfam, “Value for Money in UK Aid: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,” *From Poverty to Power Blog*, May 11, 2018, <https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/value-for-money-in-uk-aid-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/>; Dani Bahar, “Cost-Effectiveness Is Not Enough. Aid Must Be Transformational,” *CGD Blog*, May 28, 2025, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/cost-effectiveness-not-enough-aid-must-be-transformational>; Stefan Dercon, “Rethinking Aid in a Contested World,” Kiel Working Paper No. 2301 (Kiel: Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2025), <https://www.kielinstitut.de/publications/rethinking-aid-in-a-contested-world-18884/>.

207 Keith M. Lewin, “Smart buys, great sales and special offers: cost-effective approaches to improve global learning,” UKFIET, November 16, 2020, <https://www.ukfiet.org/2020/smart-buys-great-sales-and-special-offers-cost-effective-approaches-to-improve-global-learning/>.

208 Bond, *Assessing and Managing Value for Money: Lessons for NGOs*, October 2016, <https://www.bond.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/assessing-and-managing-vfm-main-report-oct16.pdf>.

209 Noted in both interviews and wider literature: NZ MFAT 4, 7; AFD 3; Tobias Heidland, Maximilian Michael, Moritz Schularick, and Rainer Thiele, “Identifying Mutual Interests: How Donor Countries Benefit from Foreign Aid,” Kiel Working Paper No. 2291 (Kiel: Kiel Institute for the World Economy, June 2025), <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/identifying-mutual-interests-how-donor-countries-benefit-from-foreign-aid-34308/>.

allocation criteria,²¹⁰ particularly when providing loans.²¹¹ While cost-effectiveness is likely to remain high on agencies' agenda alongside budgetary pressures, there are questions about how cost-effectiveness should be integrated into decision-making to ensure resources are well spent without losing sight of longer-term transformations or partner ownership.²¹²

Organizational design

Organizational structures shape agencies' capacity for effective practice across multiple dimensions, with most case study agencies undergoing recent structural changes aimed at strengthening internal coordination and responsiveness. Yet these reforms can also be costly and time-consuming, detracting from other urgent priorities in the short term.

More than other dimensions, understandings of effectiveness in relation to structure are particularly unique to the political and bureaucratic contexts of each agency. Across interviewed agencies, most had undergone recent organizational changes designed to strengthen the strategic coherence of development offers in response to calls to work more flexibly and efficiently in a complex and uncertain landscape. At the agency level, recent structural changes have primarily focused on establishing mechanisms to enable coordinated and strategic oversight of activities across the range of geographic, thematic, and operational units. New Zealand's introduction of Governance Groups aggregates decisions across foreign and development policy as well as thematic and bilateral priorities to strengthen strategic coherence, while Norad's portfolio approach organizes work thematically to enable more strategic resource allocation. Yet some mentioned that decision-making within these structures is often limited by knowledge gaps related to project monitoring and results²¹³ or poor coordination across different portfolios of work (e.g., Norad's thematic portfolios working in the same country).²¹⁴ Relatedly, the creation of the AFD Group – through the consolidation of AFD, Proparco, and Expertise France – was seen by interviewees as helpful for bringing together multiple instruments (financial and technical) to allow a more holistic offer to partner countries.²¹⁵ While some mentioned that the full benefits of consolidation were not yet being reaped, pointing to the need to continue rationalizing systems and processes across the various parts to reduce transactions costs, full integration of organizational cultures and systems often takes several years.²¹⁶

210 NZ MFAT 4, 10; AFD 4. See also Fan, Webster, and Subramanian, "How Cost-Effective Is Global Health Aid?" for a further discussion of how ownership can conflict with cost-effective allocation in health.

211 AFD 3, 4, 5.

212 Stefan Dercon, "Rethinking Aid in a Contested World."

213 NZ MFAT 9, 11.

214 Norad 6, 7, 8, 11.

215 AFD 5, 7, 8.

216 AFD 9, 10; Anne White and Patrick Dunleavy, *Making and Breaking Whitehall Departments: A Guide to Machinery of Government Changes* (London: Institute for Government, 2010), https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/making_and_breaking_whitehall_departments.pdf.

Organizational choices appeared to mediate other forms of effective development action, particularly in relation to adaptive management and cost-effectiveness. On adaptive management, the ease of and ability for agencies to be responsive to local contexts is clearly linked to the decentralization of staff and decision-making authority to the field. AFD interviewees reported that creating regional directorates with decision-making authority improved responsiveness to partner country contexts.²¹⁷ By contrast, despite KOICA's recent efforts to decentralize staff to field offices, decision-making authority reportedly remains centralized in headquarters.²¹⁸ Perhaps notably, some interviewees from MFAT argued that the agency's small size – and high costs of locating staff abroad – limits decentralization despite acknowledging that additional field capacity could enable more localized decision-making (with most decisions currently taken in Wellington).²¹⁹

On cost-effectiveness, the link between efficiency and structure depends on the particular understanding of what makes agencies “cost-effective.” In cases where cost-effectiveness is understood as maximizing outcomes from a fixed budget, then utilizing knowledge to inform programming is enabled by structures that incentivize organizational learning. Most notably, Norad's portfolio management system encourages knowledge utilization through fostering more strategic discussions – and decisions – related to effectiveness at the portfolio level; the approach is also buttressed by a culture that values the generation and integration of knowledge. By contrast, to the degree that cost-effectiveness is understood as administrative efficiency and keeping transaction costs low, cost-effectiveness is also mediated by organizational choices – including whether to have field offices and how internal structures are organized to foster coordinated action. While differences across agencies – and the political contexts that inform their structures in the first instance – make it difficult to draw strong links between structure and effectiveness, the prevalence of structural change in conversations with all agencies clearly demonstrates the importance of structure for enabling desired actions and the reality that changing demands on development agencies will require rethinking current structural forms.

Even as recent reforms in case study countries aimed at improving agencies' effectiveness, they also created **new frictions and challenges**. Our findings suggest that reform processes can generate short-term confusion and moments of incoherence because they disrupt established structures, roles, and professional identities before new systems and cultures have time to take root.²²⁰ Some interviewees also highlighted how frequent reorganizations can hinder motivation and focus.

217 AFD 5, 7, 10.

218 KOICA 1, 3, 6, 7.

219 NZ MFAT 4, 6, 7, 9.

220 AFD 2, 3, 5, 7, 9; Norad 1, 3, 6, 9, 10, 13.

In the case of the AFD Group, interviewees acknowledged tensions between different professional backgrounds – financial, technical, and diplomatic – co-located within the Group, while incomplete integration of tools, procedures, and incentives across the different divisions of the Group hindered smooth collaboration.²²¹

Implementation of global effectiveness norms and principles

Global development effectiveness principles remain theoretically legitimate but face persistent implementation challenges and fail to generate much new enthusiasm.

Effectiveness as defined by alignment with the international effectiveness principles was the least mentioned dimension overall (Table 6). Perhaps the most consistent theme across relevant responses was a sense that **the effectiveness principles are simply “old news”** and no longer generate enthusiasm or active discussion. Multiple interviewees observed that the principles commanded greater attention in the past, and there was a sense of “fatigue” when talking about global effectiveness norms today.²²² While interviewees suggested that the principles still represent what constitutes good development practice, the agenda lacks novelty, with momentum only manifesting in limited areas such as the reinterpretation of the localization agenda or nexus thinking.²²³ At best, this lack of momentum reflects successful internalization and integration of the principles into agency practice – suggesting that the principles no longer require explicit articulation and discourse and can simply operate as background assumptions rather than active discussion points.²²⁴ At worst, it could suggest that awareness of the principles is slipping; indeed, when asked about familiarity with effectiveness principles, half were “vaguely” or “not” familiar with the principles, especially those newer to the development field (Figure 2). To the degree that political leadership on effectiveness provides critical institutional and individual incentives for staff to prioritize effectiveness commitments,²²⁵ seemingly low familiarity could indicate slipping prioritization alongside other demands. Moreover, for some interviewees, principles that were specific to individual agencies (e.g., New Zealand’s ICESD principles) or types of providers (e.g., IDFC principles for development banks) were more often top of mind for staff than global effectiveness standards.

221 AFD 2, 3, 5, 7, 9.

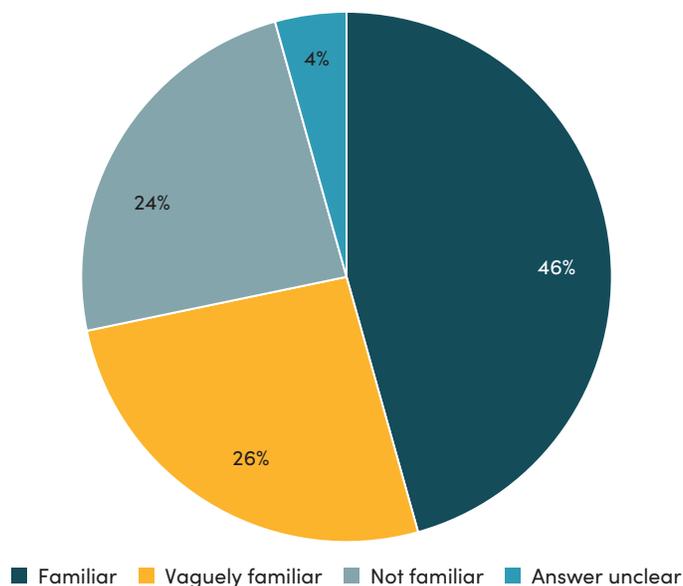
222 Norad 2, 7, 13; NZ MFAT 1, 6; AFD 4; KOICA 9.

223 Norad 13.

224 Norad 2; AFD 4; KOICA 3, 9; NZ MFAT 6.

225 Calleja and Cichocka, “Development Effectiveness in the ‘New Normal’.”

FIGURE 2. Familiarity with the Busan principles



Note: Based on 46 interviews with 48 individuals across four case studies.

For some interviewees, **the principles feel less relevant today because ODA itself represents a shrinking proportion of total development flows** – and although the Busan principles were intended to expand effectiveness commitments to new types of actors and flows, the principles remain conceptually tied to ODA.²²⁶ Interviewees highlighted the significance of the move from “aid” to “development” effectiveness inherent in the transition from Paris to Busan and acknowledged that working together with other development actors was crucial as agencies cannot be effective alone.²²⁷ Yet the principles struggle to “speak the language” of the private sector and have not been consistently applied or discussed in the context of ODA spent on purposes that are rising in importance, such as climate finance.

Beyond political indifference and applicability to non-ODA modalities, interviewees noted several practical challenges that limit implementation of effectiveness principles. For instance, while **ownership** was frequently described as fundamental to effective development cooperation, some interviewees acknowledged that achieving genuine ownership requires sustained local engagement and cultural awareness, which can be difficult to achieve in highly centralized bureaucracies.²²⁸ Indeed, interviewees – especially from Norad – often combined ownership with the more recent

226 We note that interviews were conducted prior to the 2025 FfD4 meeting, which includes commitments to effectiveness, including in relation to non-ODA activities like South-South cooperation. See: United Nations, “Sevilla Commitment, Outcome Document adopted at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development,” *Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development* (Sevilla: UN, 2025), https://financing.desa.un.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/FFD4%20Outcome%20Booklet%20v4_EN%20-%20spread.pdf.

227 KOICA 1; NZ MFAT 5, 11; AFD 8.

228 KOICA 4, 5; NZ MFAT 3, 5; Norad 2, 3, 11; AFD 2.

localization agenda, treating these as overlapping concepts,²²⁹ even as they acknowledged differences between “government” or “country” ownership and “local” ownership.²³⁰ From this perspective, part of the challenge concerns the choice of implementing partner and the degree of “intermediation” between providers and beneficiaries, with some interviewees highlighting that multilateral or civil society organizations may be more effective in reaching marginalized populations when partner country government capacity is low.²³¹ Yet such choices potentially undermine the long-term institution-building work that creates sustainable development capacity.²³² For **transparency and mutual accountability**, interviewees noted pressures on time, and while many expressed confidence in their agencies’ reporting practice,²³³ they also stressed that responding to multiple parallel accountability systems, including OECD statistical reporting, International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), and other national and international standards, created burdens without necessarily adding value for either taxpayers or partner countries.²³⁴ Moreover, several interviewees referenced the Paris Declaration rather than the more recent Busan Agreement, with **harmonization** frequently mentioned as an ongoing challenge due to limitations on partner government capacities and alongside growing fragmentation in the development system.²³⁵ Indeed, interviewees highlighted that forming partnerships and coordinating with other actors – whether that is the private sector or “emerging” providers such as China – can present reputational and fiduciary risks and is time-intensive.²³⁶ While none of these challenges undermine the relevance of the principles themselves, they do highlight a critical point – that delivering on effectiveness commitments is ultimately mediated by the agency-level structures or practices that inform how agencies work.

Key takeaway: While the effectiveness dimensions are interdependent and can be mutually reinforcing, strategic tensions make it difficult to prioritize all at once

Our findings show that choices in one dimension often enable more effective practice in others. Most notably, organizational design appears as a key enabler of different types of effective practice. Consider, for instance, how choices related to decentralization of staff and decision-making power can enable local ownership and adaptability through faster, more contextually informed

229 Norad 1, 5, 7, 8, 9; AFD 1. See also: OECD, *Framing DAC Member Approaches to Enabling Locally Led Development*, DCD(2023)47 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), [https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD\(2023\)47/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/DCD(2023)47/en/pdf).

230 Norad 6; see also: Niels Keijzer, Stephan Klingebiel, Charlotte Örnemark, and Fabian Scholtes, “Seeking Balanced Ownership in Changing Development Cooperation Relationships,” EBA Report 2018:08 (Stockholm: Expert Group for Aid Studies [EBA], 2018), <https://eba.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ownership.pdf>.

231 Norad 6, 9; NZ MFAT 5, 10; David Black, “Development Co-operation and the Partnership–Ownership Nexus: Lessons from the Canada–Ghana Experience,” *Development Policy Review* 38, no. 1 (2020): 0112–0132, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12476>.

232 NZ MFAT 5, 10.

233 AFD 3, 7; KOICA 3, 8; Norad 11, 12; NZ MFAT 7.

234 NZ MFAT 7.

235 AFD 6; KOICA 3, 7; Niels Keijzer, Stephan Klingebiel, and Fabian Scholtes, “Promoting Ownership in a ‘Post-Aid Effectiveness’ World: Evidence from Rwanda and Liberia,” *Development Policy Review* 38, no. S1 (2020): 032–049, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12469>.

236 Norad 3, 6 on risks; KOICA 3 on time.

decision-making, while improving agencies' abilities to follow up on projects. Similarly, investing in organizational knowledge systems could reinforce strategic allocation, a focus on results, and cost-effectiveness simultaneously, as demonstrated in Norad's experience with portfolio management. Indeed, broader evidence also notes the importance of organizational structures to monitor, report, and learn as critical to ensuring accountability even within more adaptive management contexts.²³⁷

At the same time, the dimensions of effectiveness can pull in different directions, especially when delivering on internal priorities – through allocations designed to support provider goals, for instance – sit in tension with approaches that advance international commitments on ownership, partner leadership, localization, and adaptability. Consider the examples below:

- **Global principles (especially country ownership) vs. cost-effectiveness:** Emphasising “value for money” as cross-programme benchmarking to maximise outcomes per dollar spent can undercut recipient ownership when the interventions deemed most cost-effective do not match partner country priorities. In these cases, using cost-effectiveness as the primary allocation criterion narrows the space to co-construct results frameworks and indicators around a shared understanding of which results matter most and how they should be measured. While cost-effectiveness does not inherently conflict with beneficiary ownership – and often aims to maximise the number of people reached per unit of funding – tensions emerge when optimising for aggregate impacts pushes providers toward a narrow set of “best-buy” interventions, while partner governments must balance multiple, sometimes less easily quantifiable objectives such as institution-building, equity, and political feasibility within their own short- and long-term strategies.
- **Cost-effectiveness vs. adaptability:** Calls for greater adaptability, including as part of commitments to advancing locally-led development, can conflict with domestic accountability requirements or narrow “value-for-money” agendas when flexibility is framed as a “risk” to achieving predefined outcomes rather than an opportunity to course-correct as contexts change. In the same way, adaptability could introduce uncertainty about the cross-comparative cost-effectiveness of interventions if responsiveness alters the conditions under which evidence suggests that results are most likely to be achieved.
- **Adaptability vs. organizational structure (decentralisation and strategic coherence):** Efforts to centralise staffing and decision-making can improve upward accountability, reduce perceived risks, and – when they contribute to creating leaner organisations – lower operating costs. However, when authority and risk management sit predominantly at headquarters, procedures often become heavier and field-level discretion more constrained, undermining the ability to adapt quickly and appropriately to evolving contexts or partner needs. More broadly, systems that require agencies to apply and stick

237 Particip GmbH, “Norwegian Flexibility vs. Structure: A Balancing Act.”

closely to pre-set strategies and policies can enhance strategic coherence and guard against ad hoc engagements that drift away from a core vision of effectiveness, but if they cannot be flexed in times of crisis, agencies have limited scope to judge whether rapid responses genuinely fit with their long-term priorities and comparative advantage.

- **Strategic allocation vs. global principles (ownership):** Pressures to allocate development resources in alignment with providers' national interests or to concentrate resources in line with agencies' specializations or "comparative advantages" can stand in tension with principles of ownership and locally led development. This tension may arise even when allocations reflect genuinely "shared" global priorities between providers and partners, such as in the creation or protection of global public goods, especially if decisions are optimised for *transnational* outcomes rather than *national* development plans. For instance, in projects where the expected benefits (e.g., reduced global emissions or lower cross-border disease risks) are expected to accrue predominantly outside the partner country receiving development finance, this may make it harder for partner governments to justify or prioritise such investments relative to other domestic needs. In short, when allocation decisions are driven primarily by donor strategic priorities rather than partner country demand, the space for co-construction of development agendas shrinks, and partner governments face constraints in shaping which sectors, instruments, or results frameworks matter most to their own strategies.

In each case, the risk is that prioritizing effectiveness from the perspective of providers' strategic interests could limit opportunities for alignment with partner priorities, undermining long-standing best practice related to ownership and locally driven action. In a period of more heightened and explicit focus on the provider interest alongside shifting political and public support for development as an objective in itself, this risk is becoming more acute. Going forward, providers will need to consider how to balance their internal demands – for accountability, attributable results, and domestic benefits – with their international commitments to effective practice from a development impact perspective. Furthermore, the implication of these interdependencies and trade-offs is that agency effectiveness is multifaceted, complex, and dynamic, meaning that no singular understanding can or, perhaps, *should* emerge. Different contexts, mandates, and organizational configurations mean agencies must make different choices about which dimensions to prioritize and which tensions to navigate.

Implications for the future of effective practice

Taken together, our findings highlight two main facets of agency effectiveness. The first is that bureaucratic and political contexts play a key role in informing visions of agency effectiveness and shaping implementation. These factors shape not only what agencies can do, but what they can do *well*, further underscoring the reality that effective practice must be grounded in each agency's distinctive priorities and structures. On one hand, the specific dimensions of effectiveness that

agencies prioritize are themselves driven by political considerations. For instance, the attention given to allocation priorities by interviewees from AFD highlights a vision of agency effectiveness seemingly based on the achievement of strategic priorities, which are necessarily both development and domestically focused. Indeed, the 2025 decision of the Presidential Council for International Partnerships is clear that France's "international partnerships policy aims to combine our values and interests with those of our allies," with an explicit commitment to provide opportunities for French companies via AFD Group finance.²³⁸ Similarly, in KOICA, prioritization of international effectiveness principles is underscored by MOFA's championing of the effectiveness agenda. On the other hand, broader political contexts provide the enabling environment that fosters different types of effectiveness practice and understandings of effectiveness at the agency level. In Norad, for instance, its comparative advantage as a flexible agency is enabled by a relatively stable and long-standing political consensus on development, which provides political cover to focus on outcomes. Indeed, as one commentator notes, Norway's political context historically "fostered discretion with limited regard for the cost of discretion,"²³⁹ with more recent reforms aiming to *strengthen* processes designed to support learning and accountability.²⁴⁰ This stands in contrast to KOICA, where Korea's strong "audit culture," risk aversion, and rigid upward accountability requirements disincentivize adaptive practice and seemingly limit KOICA's space for swift action. Indeed, the KOICA example perhaps highlights the reality that the broader range of national development actors – including responsible ministries – share in the responsibility for enabling effective action, where political leadership for effectiveness becomes critical for creating the space to adapt processes in search of better outcomes.

The second is that differing incentives across the dimensions highlight a tension between features of "effectiveness" that appeal to provider interests versus those designed to prioritize partner-led development. This tension may be particularly acute in relation to international effectiveness commitments, where the implementation of individual principles is often mediated by provider interests. Ownership, for instance, requires providers to cede control over partnership priorities, while "results" – particularly when viewed through a lens of simplistic cost-effectiveness – could steer towards interventions that offer "value for money" for providers, yet fail to match individual partner priorities.²⁴¹ A similar tension exists with allocations, where the prioritization of domestic interests and incentives to focus resources on national comparative advantages means that development offers could increasingly reflect provider priorities over partner countries. As a result, rhetorical commitments for effectiveness may be difficult to match with provider action, particularly

238 Présidence de la République, "Relevé de décisions du Conseil présidentiel pour les partenariats internationaux."

239 Gulrajani, "Re-imagining Canadian Development Cooperation," 53.

240 OECD, *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Norway 2019* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/05/oecd-development-co-operation-peer-reviews-norway-2019_beb04761/75084277-en.pdf.

241 Daniel E. Esser and Heiner Janus, "Everything, everywhere, all at once? Donor Bureaucrats Struggle with Four Dimensions of Development Effectiveness," *World Development* 191 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2025.107017>.

if agencies (and staff) lack the institutional and individual incentives to prioritize the implementation of international commitments vis-à-vis other priorities.²⁴² Indeed, the challenge of politically bound effective development action is obvious – in the absence of political impetus, there are few incentives for agencies to prioritize effective practices that may be seen to distract from, or be in tension with, other organizational goals. While dimensions *can* be mutually reinforcing, the potential for misalignment between visions of effectiveness that advance different interests may increase alongside political pressure to justify development spending to sceptical publics.

In this context, there are real questions about the direction of travel for the future of the effectiveness agenda. In part, future visions of effective development cooperation – including those being considered as part of the 2030 Pact on Effective Development Co-operation²⁴³ – must be politically smart and conscious of the domestic constraints that will mediate implementation. The point is not to reduce the ambition of what it means to act effectively, but rather to ensure that future visions of effectiveness are able to capture leaders' attention by being both compelling and implementable. This could mean considering whether a single unifying framework of effectiveness is out of reach, and whether a more feasible approach could focus on key groups of stakeholders to clarify visions of effectiveness for different modalities or types of partnerships. For instance, South-South cooperation may face unique effectiveness challenges – and agency level constraints – which could benefit from discussions between providers and partners engaged in this modality. This approach could allow for political agreement across like-minded partners providing energy to different aspects of effective practice without the challenge of working across system-wide interests.

In the aftermath of the FfD4, there is perhaps a moment to utilize renewed commitments for effectiveness to revitalize and rethink the quality narrative needed to drive impactful development partnerships to 2030 and beyond. This will require engaging critically and strategically with the effectiveness challenges facing agencies today – including around cost-effectiveness, key thematic priorities, or the effectiveness challenges facing mutual interest directives (where the reintroduction of tied aid no longer appears farfetched) – as a starting place to better align effective practice with current realities. Doing so is essential for bridging the long-standing gap between rhetorical support for effectiveness commitments and the political contexts that inform development action and constrain its implementation. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the agenda moves forward without acknowledging agency priorities and attempting to find common ground. In the years ahead, there is scope for more honest exchange about the interactions between agency visions of effectiveness based on institutional incentives and the broader goal of advancing effective development action, to ensure that future effectiveness narratives are adopted both in principle and, crucially, in practice.

242 AFD 9; Calleja and Cichocka, "Development Effectiveness in the 'New Normal'."

243 A Seville Platform for Action Initiative launched at the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development FfD4. For more information, see here: "The 2030 Pact on Effective Development Co-operation," Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation, accessed November 20, 2025. <https://www.effectivecooperation.org/book-page/2030-pact-effective-development-co-operation>.

Conclusion

Our findings show that for development agencies, effectiveness is achieved via a combination of structures and processes – at various levels – that incentivize action in alignment with organizational goals. From this perspective, all dimensions of effectiveness are relevant to varying degrees, with different agencies prioritizing varied understandings based on their structures, priorities, tools, and, ultimately, the political and bureaucratic contexts that inform their scope for action. Such factors shape what agencies can do well and highlight the reality that effective practice must be negotiated within agencies based on their distinctive priorities and offer.

Despite such differences, similarities exist across our cases, with most interviewees pointing to the importance of pursuing effectiveness through adaptability in the context of a rapidly changing development landscape. By contrast, the international effectiveness principles appeared as the least prioritized for most agencies, although for some, this was driven by the long-term integration of the principles into agency practice. While the challenge of declining political interest in the international effectiveness agenda is not new, it raises questions about how to balance the need for a common vision of effective practice with the agency-specific realities that necessarily inform implementation.

Our findings also highlighted several tensions and trade-offs between effectiveness dimensions based on how they align with provider versus partner interest, which must be accounted for in any future vision of effectiveness. At a time when donor publics are increasingly sceptical of the value of development engagement, recognizing the mediating role of national interests on effective practice will be critical to bridging the gap between provider commitments to effectiveness standards and the domestic realities that drive daily action. Indeed, meaningful progress towards both renewed political uptake of effectiveness and a new narrative on what it means to be effective in a drastically different development landscape will be limited if agencies lack the incentives to prioritize effective action over other objectives.

In the years ahead, there will be a critical need to rethink what it means for development agencies to be effective, especially as the international community looks to redefine the development paradigm and architecture in the lead-up to 2030 and beyond. This means there will be opportunities to think more strategically about effective practice – driven both by political pressures to make the best use of increasingly limited development resources and international momentum to rethink development cooperation in the aftermath of FfD4 and alongside changes to the development landscape. At the agency level, this will mean refining approaches and structures that enable effective actions in alignment with shifting priorities, budgets, and tools. There is significant work to be done, for instance, in thinking through the conditions under which development partnerships can support “win-wins,” where providers and partners achieve outcomes in their mutual interests. At the global level, efforts to redefine development cooperation – and what effectiveness means in this context – need to be politically smart, avoiding the trap of more principles in a context where development is being deprioritized. Instead, future effectiveness likely means engaging more consistently with

different groups of stakeholders to clarify what it means to act effectively when using different modalities or types of actions. This includes working with development agencies to consider what works, learn from what doesn't, and explore opportunities to deliver better outcomes in the context of the pressures they face.

To support these efforts, the next paper in our research series will explore the challenges agencies face to effective action and probe understandings of what will be needed to ensure agencies remain effective – and resilient – in the years ahead. In doing so, we hope to provide practical guidance for agencies as they navigate an uncertain future and think deeply about how they can work more effectively in the context of a new development paradigm to 2030 and beyond.

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