

What Will It Mean for Development Agencies to Be Effective in the Years Ahead?

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Abstract

Development agencies are being asked to deliver against a widening set of objectives with tighter budgets and more contested mandates. This paper uses an organizational, forward-looking lens to examine effectiveness, treating it as a question not only of what agencies aim to do but of what they are able to do under constraint and uncertainty. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with officials across four bilateral development agencies from OECD-DAC member countries, we show how external realities lead to contested mandates and tighter budgets, which increasingly set the terms of action, and how, downstream of these pressures, internal bottlenecks – capacity and skills gaps, siloed coordination, slow processes, and weak learning and results systems – frequently determine whether agencies can respond coherently at all. We synthesize the implications through four strategic questions that shape reform choices, asking how to clarify agency role and purpose, improve and scale impact under constrained budgets, strengthen responsiveness to partner needs as contexts shift (including faster, more locally informed decision pathways), and evidence and communicate value to sustain legitimacy with both domestic and partner audiences. We offer several recommendations for agencies based on our findings, and conclude that the next phase of the effectiveness agenda may hinge less on restating principles than on building organizational coherence and adaptive capacity that can translate contested mandates into credible action.

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Center for Global Development

The Center for Global Development is grateful for contributions from the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) in support of this work.

The authors would like to thank the interviewees and contact points from the four agencies included in this study for sharing their time and experience with us. We are also grateful to our peer reviewers for their time and valuable feedback.

Any omissions, errors, or misreports are unintentional and the authors' own.

Rachael Calleja, Beata Cichocka, and Sara Casadevall Bellés. 2026. "What Will It Mean for Development Agencies to Be Effective in the Years Ahead?" CGD Policy Paper 388. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/what-will-it-mean-development-agencies-be-effective-years-ahead>

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Center for Global Development. 2026.

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Introduction

Development co-operation – and the agencies responsible for its implementation – is under intense pressure. Not only have dramatic declines in official development assistance (ODA) budgets moved global conversations from “peak aid” to “post-aid” over a few years,¹ but geopolitical uncertainty and shifting political headwinds are seemingly sidelining the pursuit of development as a valued function of government. The closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2025 serves as a clear signal of the precariousness of the current operating environment for the future of development agencies and the mission they serve. Such pressures coalesce at a time when broader changes in the development landscape, such as the need to finance global public goods and the growing role of “emerging” co-operation providers, are forcing a broader rethink of the purposes and rules governing development co-operation as well as the form and function of the global development architecture. With several ongoing efforts aimed at “rethinking” development co-operation norms, standards, and institutions, the need for change is clear.²

For development agencies, global shifts in the operating environment raise critical questions about why and how they co-operate, and what they do. The substance of these shifts is already being felt, as the “decline of the donor-recipient model” has led providers to pursue development for a combination of purposes – including to advance domestic interests and tackle global challenges alongside solidaristic aims³ – while the instruments employed transition from grants to investment as governments focus on models that require less public funding⁴ and as partner countries increasingly seek to “do away with aid.”⁵ Under shifting conditions, agencies face critical questions not only about how, where, and on what to spend increasingly limited resources, but also how to maximize the impact of engagements targeted at different objectives. Put differently,

1 Nilima Gulrajani, “From Peak Aid to a Post-Aid World,” *Current History* 125, no. 867 (2026): 16–22, <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2026.125.867.16>

2 Future of Development Cooperation Coalition, “Future of Development Cooperation Coalition,” accessed February 4, 2026, <https://devoalition.org/>; Bodo Ellmers, “Development Assistance Committee Launches Review as the Sector is at a Crossroads,” *Global Policy Forum*, October 21, 2025, <https://www.globalpolicy.org/en/news/2025-10-21/development-assistance-committee-launches-review-sector-crossroads>; World Economic Forum, “Global Future Council on Reimagining Aid,” accessed February 4, 2026, <https://initiatives.weforum.org/global-future-council-on-reimagining-aid/home>

3 Nilima Gulrajani et al., “Crafting a New Rationale for Northern Donorship,” *Donors in a Post-Aid World Dialogue Series #1*, (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2024), https://media.odi.org/documents/Dialogue_1_-_Crafting_a_new_rationale_for_northern_donorship_uyd84sE.pdf; Masood Ahmed, “The End of Development Cooperation?” Speech, July 22, 2025 (Center for Global Development, 2025), <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/end-development-cooperation>; Michael Amoah, “How Is the ‘Ghana Beyond Aid’ Policy Addressing Inequality and Polarisation?” *Africa at LSE Blog*, May 17, 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2022/05/17/how-the-ghana-beyond-aid-policy-addressing-inequality-and-polarisation/>

4 Consider, for instance, the UK’s shift from “donor” to “investor” or the United States’ announcement that it would sizably increase the investment cap for the Development Finance Corporation in the same year it shuttered USAID. See: Baroness Chapman of Darlington, *Spending Review 2025: Official Development Assistance (ODA)*, letter to Sarah Champion MP, June 12, 2025, UK Parliament, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48472/documents/253894/default/>; Erin Collinson, “DFC Reauthorization: What’s New and What It Means,” *CGD Blog*, December 18, 2025, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/dfc-reauthorization-whats-new-and-what-it-means>

5 Nilima Gulrajani et al., “Crafting a New Rationale for Northern Donorship.”

as the demands facing development agencies shift, so do understandings of what it means to deliver co-operation effectively.

In this paper, we take a forward-looking approach to issues of effectiveness, with the aim of exploring what it will mean for development agencies to be effective in the years ahead. In doing so, we focus on what effective practice requires organizationally, particularly under conditions of uncertainty. The logic driving our analysis is simple – as the operating environments in which development agencies exist undergo rapid transformation, remaining effective will require adapting internal capacities and ways of working to better match contextual shifts and, crucially, new objectives.⁶ Such adaptation is critical, not only to ensure that agencies are equipped with the knowledge, tools, and processes needed to operate efficiently in response to new challenges, demands, or crises, but to support the long-term resilience and relevance of their agencies as the traditional model of development co-operation becomes increasingly obsolete. In this context, the critical question is not *whether* change is necessary, but which types of capabilities, knowledge, or structures are the most critical for building effective action over the medium term – that is, *how* should agencies adapt, and which actions should be prioritized?

To answer these questions, we draw on interviews with officials from four bilateral development agencies: the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), and New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (NZ MFAT). The interviews aimed to capture staff perspectives on the challenges faced and the opportunities for strengthening agency effectiveness in the years ahead. We start from the understanding that there is no single model of effective agency action; mandates, tools, structures, and management practices vary, shaping how agencies translate strategy into impact.⁷ However, our findings show commonalities across agencies in terms of the challenges faced and the types of capacities deemed most essential for effective practice in the years ahead. Specifically, we find that the future effectiveness of development agencies depends on clear mandates, strategic partnerships, adaptability, and the ability to demonstrate impact, particularly in the face of uncertainty and constrained resources.

6 This is a foundational tenet of theories of organizational change, where shifting factors such as organizational size or the external environment threaten “optimal” performance by changing the contingencies that constrain agency function. As a result, to function most efficiently and effectively, organizations are expected to readjust their structures and processes to best “fit” new contingencies. See: Lex Donaldson, *The Contingency Theory of Organizations*, Foundations for Organizational Science (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452229249>

7 See: Beata Cichocka, Sara Casadevall Bellés, and Rachael Calleja, “Effectiveness in Practice: What It Means and How It Is Implemented by Four Development Agencies,” CGD Policy Paper 373 (London: Center for Global Development, 2025). <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/effectiveness-practice-what-it-means-and-how-it-implemented-four-development-agencies.pdf>

For the purpose of this paper, we take development agencies as our primary unit of analysis. We use the term “development agencies” to refer to the primary official actor, or combination of actors, responsible for setting development co-operation policy and implementing programmes. This means we use the term 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.⁸

This is the final paper in a research series that explores the implications of the changing development landscape for the effectiveness of development agencies. Our first paper reviewed the literature on agency effectiveness, identifying five major interpretations as a starting point for considering how the pressures facing development agencies are forcing changes to what it means to be effective.⁹ Our second paper explored how agencies understand their own effectiveness in a period of change, emphasising that agency staff often understand effectiveness in terms of being adaptive, allocating efficiently, and investing in cost-effective actions. Moreover, tensions between agency-specific demands for efficiency or accountability and calls to be partner led suggest that effective practice is often mediated by the provider-level incentives that drive behaviour at the individual and institutional level. This paper builds on our earlier work by shifting the analytical focus from *what development agencies understand effectiveness to be* towards *what effectiveness requires organizationally* under conditions of constraint and uncertainty.

This paper proceeds in six main parts. The next section briefly outlines our logic for taking an organizational lens to examine questions of effectiveness, which is followed by a short description of our interview methodology. We then report our results, highlighting interviewee perspectives on both the challenges to effective practice and the characteristics associated with effective agencies in the years ahead. A subsequent section draws out key findings, highlighting the critical issues and tensions relating to effective action in the current development landscape. The final sections offer recommendations for strengthening agency effectiveness in the years ahead, followed by a short conclusion.

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- 8 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>
- 9 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/publication/what-does-it-mean-agencies-be-effective-changing-development-landscape>

Why take an organizational approach to effectiveness?

At a moment when the future of development co-operation is being negotiated – including through parallel international exercises such as the Future of Development Cooperation Coalition,¹⁰ the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) Review,¹¹ and the World Economic Forum’s Global Future Council on Reimagining Aid,¹² or country-led initiatives such as Ghana’s Accra Reset,¹³ Germany’s North–South Commission,¹⁴ and the UK’s Global Partnerships Conference¹⁵ – there is uncertainty about the practices and principles associated with effective action under any new development vision. The prevailing principles of effective development co-operation, which were agreed during the Fourth High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held in Busan, South Korea, in 2011, are now more than a decade old and were formed at a time when ODA was the dominant source of development finance used to address the poverty-focused Millennium Development Goals. Our prior research showed that for many officials, these current principles are no longer top of mind when it comes to driving effective practice.¹⁶ While international commitment to the effectiveness principles was reaffirmed during the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development in 2025,¹⁷ the shifting demands of development co-operation in the lead-up to negotiations for the post-2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development creates momentum to rethink effectiveness norms to ensure that they remain suited to guiding effective practice in the years ahead.¹⁸

In this context, the benefit of an organizational approach to effectiveness is that it focuses on the agency-level practices that mediate the quality of development action and can be adjusted or improved by staff and leadership. Put differently, it allows us to focus on what agencies can control, and what they can do in the near term to address structural or procedural factors that limit

10 Future of Development Cooperation Coalition, <https://devcoalition.org/>

11 Ellmers, *Development Assistance Committee launches review as the sector is at a crossroads*.

12 World Economic Forum, “Global Future Council on Reimagining Aid.”

13 Accra Reset, “Resetting Global Development Cooperation for a Post-Dependency World,” (Accra: Accra Reset Initiative, 2025), <https://accrareset.org/>

14 Andy Sumner, Stephan Klingebiel and Arief Anshory Yusuf, “Rebuilding Legitimacy for Global Governance: The Case for a New Independent Commission,” *Debating Development Research*, June 20, 2025, <https://www.developmentresearch.eu/?p=2283>

15 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), The Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, and The Rt Hon Baroness Chapman of Darlington, “Global Partnerships Conference to Build New International Coalitions to Tackle Shared Challenges, February 20, 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/global-partnerships-conference-to-build-new-international-coalitions-to-tackle-shared-challenges>

16 Cichocka, Casadevall Bellés, and Calleja, “Effectiveness in Practice.”

17 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

18 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>

effective practice. In this way, organizational approaches sit alongside other understandings of effectiveness – including related to how agencies allocate development resources, how they apply the global effectiveness principles, the cost-effectiveness of their engagements, and their ability to adapt to shifting partner contexts or demands – and often impact the translation of these approaches in practice.¹⁹

Taking an organizational perspective means that we treat agencies as “effective” insofar as they reach their stated objectives. This means that the specific practices, capacities, or structures needed to improve organizational effectiveness will differ across agencies based on their mandates as well as other determining factors (e.g., size, use of field offices, etc.). It also implies that effectiveness must be revisited as strategies shift, so that internal practices stay aligned; as objectives change, so should agencies’ wider theories of change, including the inputs and actions used to achieve new goals. While this necessarily makes it difficult to identify prescriptions for specific reforms to improve organizational performance across agencies, the depth and scale of the shared challenges and transformation occurring in the development sector means that there are likely common gaps in agency practice.

Methodology

We use an interview-based approach to probe the challenges facing agency effectiveness and the opportunities for improving performance over the long term. Specifically, we spoke with 48 officials, primarily from the development agencies of four countries – France, New Zealand, Norway, and South Korea – which were selected to maximize variation across members of the OECD-DAC on three variables that could impact organizational effectiveness: (1) budget size, (2) structure of development system (where and how responsibilities for development policy and implementation are managed), and (3) geographic location (where cultural or bureaucratic factors could influence how agencies act).²⁰ By focusing on a limited number of cases, we were able to delve deeper into the organizational factors that influence and mediate effectiveness in the agencies covered, though we recognize that this approach prioritized depth of understanding over breadth. We limited our sample to DAC members, as these countries commit to similar standards and practices on development – including in relation to effectiveness – which may not be shared by non-DAC countries. Within each agency, we worked with a central contact point to identify interviewees, with the aim of maximizing diversity in terms of seniority, profile, and location (headquarters versus field offices). We spoke with between 10 and 13 individuals from each of the four agencies. Where agencies split the responsibility for development policy and implementation (AFD, KOICA, and Norad), we sought to include a small number of interviews from the foreign ministries

¹⁹ Cichocka, Casadevall Bellés, and Calleja, “Effectiveness in Practice.”

²⁰ For more information about the case study selection; see Box 1 in “Effectiveness in Practice,” p. 6.

responsible for setting policy direction; however, we were unable to interview anyone from the French foreign ministry.

We used semi-structured interviews to ensure that all respondents were asked the same overarching questions, while allowing space to probe points or issues specific to each case. Data collected during interviews was coded separately by two Center for Global Development (CGD) researchers, who analyzed the data using an inductive coding approach to identify key themes emerging from the discussions. Most interviews were held between April and June 2025 and were conducted solely by CGD staff to ensure confidentiality of responses and independence in the research findings. Interviewees were asked five questions in total,²¹ two of which are covered in this paper: (1) “In your opinion, what are the main challenges to your agency’s effectiveness today (and what are some potential solutions)?” and (2) “In your opinion, what characteristics would define an effective and resilient agency in the years ahead?”

A clear limitation of this approach pertains to the generalizability of findings derived from a small number of cases. To account for this issue, we presented early results in two virtual roundtables with officials from a wider set of provider agencies. The purpose of these meetings was to test whether our findings resonated with agencies beyond our sample; overwhelmingly, the response we heard was “yes.” Moreover, as our unit of analysis is the development agency, we did not interview stakeholders from partner countries or implementing agencies, though we recognize that their perspectives could provide useful insight into current operational challenges and the externally perceived effectiveness of the case agencies. Lastly, 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 the strategic priorities or government-wide processes that influence their operations and effectiveness. While we attempted to partially account for this issue by including representatives from policy-setting agencies (i.e., foreign ministries) in our interviews, we are unable to account for the broader array of political realities that determine an agency’s scope of action.

21 See method section, Cichocka, Casadevall Bellés, and Calleja, “Effectiveness in Practice,” pp. 5–8.

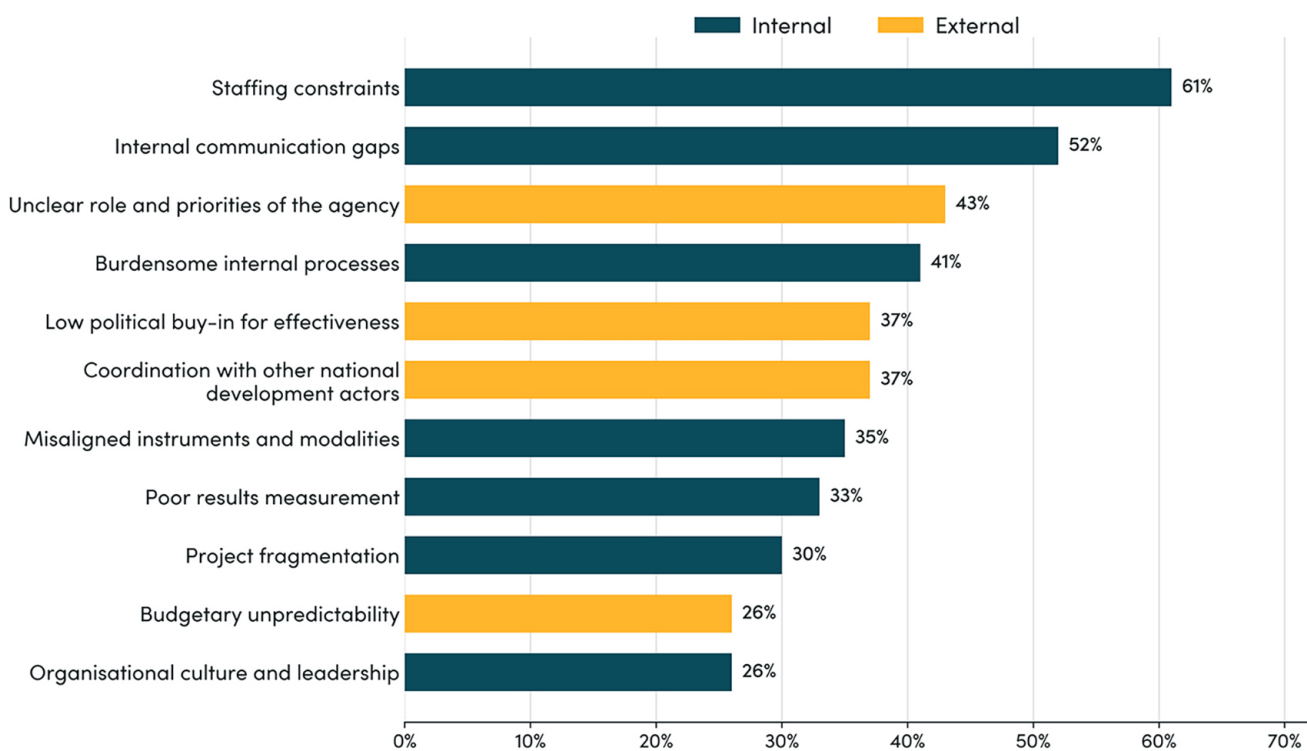
Results

This section presents findings from our interviews, which are grouped according to the research questions addressed in this study (noted above).

What are the main challenges to agency effectiveness today?

Responses to this question generally fell into two categories – *internal challenges* related to the capacities, resources, and processes that mediate day-to-day functions, and *external challenges* related to political, legal, or partner-country factors that influence agency action but remain outside of their direct control (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. What are the largest challenges for your agency’s continued effectiveness?



Notes: Only challenges mentioned by 25% of interviewees or more are included in the figure. Other internal challenges mentioned by fewer than 25% of respondents included operational and IT challenges (24%) and pressures to balance speed with quality (15%); other notable external challenges mentioned by fewer than 25% of respondents included domestic accountability pressures and communication gaps (22%) and partner-country factors such as low capacities or political turbulence (11%).

Internal challenges

Overall, interviewees highlighted internal challenges more often than external issues, suggesting that internal constraints – particularly **staffing levels and capacities** (61 percent) and **internal communication gaps** (52 percent) – were most commonly seen to limit effective practice.

In terms of staffing, interviewees often described their teams as persistently overstretched, with time for learning and course correction to improve project outcomes crowded out by core delivery and compliance demands.²² At the same time, recruitment bottlenecks caused by budget volatility and hiring freezes slowed alignment between skill profiles and changing priorities, as well as limiting opportunities for career advancement.²³ In other cases, frequent rotation of staff (particularly when development is integrated in foreign ministries) undermined institutional memory and, in some cases, awareness of effectiveness best practices.²⁴ On internal communication, interviewees noted that silos between units (including those working on common themes or regions) prevented strategic engagement towards shared objectives, while centralized decision making in headquarters hindered responsiveness and adaptability to local contexts.²⁵ Some also noted that such coherence issues could be exacerbated by frequent organizational reshuffles, even when structural changes were undertaken with the aim of improving effectiveness.²⁶

To a lesser degree, interviewees identified **burdensome internal processes** (41 percent), **inadequate results measurement** (33 percent), and **organizational culture or leadership-related issues** (26 percent) as hindering effective practice. Staff capacity challenges were often amplified by layered approvals or extensive reporting, which limited flexibility and adaptability when partner contexts changed.²⁷ Such friction was compounded by **insufficient operational systems** (24 percent) – including information management tools, archives, and reporting architectures – which made it difficult for staff to find, share, and use knowledge efficiently.²⁸ Challenges in achieving consistent and comparable results measurement also constrained the translation of programme results into organizational learning. These constraints were often reinforced by risk-averse cultures and limited managerial attention to knowledge and learning, which together inhibited adaptive action. Interviewees additionally noted a recurring tension between measurement for accountability and communication (which is often driven by immediate pressures) and measurement for learning and adaptive management (which requires longer-term investment and is often deprioritized in the face of political pressures).

A third cluster of internal challenges related to **misaligned instruments** (35 percent) and the ways in which modality choices contribute to **project fragmentation** (30 percent). Roughly a third of interviewees questioned whether the tools available – particularly grant-only approaches – were sufficient for agendas that increasingly emphasize mobilization, scale, and longer-term change.²⁹

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

23 AFD 6; Norad 4, 9; NZ MFAT 5; KOICA 1, 2.

24 KOICA 2; NZ MFAT 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12; OECD, *Development Co-operation Peer Review: New Zealand 2023* (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

25 AFD 10; KOICA 8; Norad 3, 11; NZ MFAT 4, 5, 10, 11.

26 Norad 4, 6.

27 AFD 9, 10; Norad 6, 7, 8; NZ MFAT 5, 6, 10, 11.

28 AFD 1, 3, 9, 10; KOICA 3, 4, 6, 8, 9; Norad 6, 7, 9, 10; NZ MFAT 5, 6, 10, 11.

29 AFD 2, 5, 6; KOICA 1; Norad 7, 9.

Others highlighted tensions between the need for programmatic or joined-up funding – including through budget support, co-financing modalities, or multilateral channels – and the effectiveness and reputational risks that limit uptake of such instruments.³⁰ In this context, project fragmentation, where agencies prioritize small, project-style activities, was seen as increasing transaction costs for partner countries, limiting scalable impact, and contributing to staff capacity constraints.³¹ At the same time, interviewees cautioned that “small” projects are not automatically ineffective and noted that external coordination challenges and political incentives – both within agencies and across partners – can make consolidating activities to reduce fragmentation difficult in practice.³²

External challenges

Of the external factors influencing agency effectiveness, interviewees most commonly argued that **uncertainty about their agency’s role and priorities** (43 percent) made it difficult to deliver programming effectively,³³ while **low political prioritization of effectiveness** (37 percent) resulted in an enabling context that failed to provide the incentives for agencies to experiment, adapt, or partner to improve impact.³⁴ In the context of a changing development landscape, interviewees (particularly from AFD, though this appeared as a common issue across agencies) emphasized that unclear mandates – particularly relative to other foreign policy objectives, global challenges, and shifting partner-country priorities – create pressure on core agency functions and undermine consistent practice.³⁵ At the same time, confusion about agency roles extended beyond financing development projects, with some interviewees questioning whether their mandate should also encompass convening national stakeholders, facilitating technical exchanges, leading global dialogues, or bridging development norms with newer actors.³⁶ Such challenges were compounded by **budgetary unpredictability** (26 percent), which limited long-term planning and made it difficult to prioritize interventions or pursue “doing more with less” without clear guidance on strategic objectives.³⁷

Other external barriers to effective practice included **poor coordination** with other national development actors and with external partners, including implementing partners and other providers (37 percent).³⁸ Interviewees noted that fragmented engagement increases transaction

30 AFD 2, 5, 6; Norad 7, 9.

31 AFD 5; Norad 1; NZ MFAT 5, 12. Some interviewees noted that small initiatives can be impactful, but the challenge is ensuring that they are strategically chosen, coordinated, and scalable (NZ MFAT 5, 12).

32 AFD 5; NZ 9, 12; KOICA 11.

33 AFD 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10; KOICA 1, 5, 8, 11; Norad: 4, 5, 6, 11, 13; NZ MFAT 2, 3, 9, 11.

34 KOICA 4, 11.

35 AFD 8; KOICA 11; Norad 10; NZ MFAT 4, 6.

36 KOICA 11; Norad 4, 7; NZ MFAT 12. See also: Beata Cichocka, Rachael Calleja, Sara Casadevall Bellés, and Emma Mawdsley, “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>

37 AFD 6, 8; KOICA 9; Norad 4, 6.

38 AFD 1, 4, 10; KOICA 1, 3, 7; Norad 5, 7, 8; NZ MFAT 6, 12.

costs for partner countries and limits opportunities to leverage comparative advantages within and across development actors.³⁹ At the national level, overlapping mandates and differing institutional incentives often restrict coherent action towards shared goals. Across other external partners, coordination was seen as time-consuming, costly, and politically difficult in competitive landscapes that value visibility.⁴⁰ Indeed, poor political incentives for effectiveness further hamper coordination, reflecting a broader dynamic in which strengthening the coherence of the national development system is not always aligned with competing departmental or political objectives.

Across case agencies, the relative importance of key internal and external challenges varied along with specific internal pressures linked to organizational structures and operating models. While many of the primary challenges are shared across the cases (notably staffing pressures and internal coordination frictions), others appear more prominently in particular contexts, reflecting how differences in mandates, institutional positioning, financing models, and domestic political incentives can challenge effectiveness efforts. Box 1 highlights the main challenges raised by each agency.

BOX 1. Main challenges per agency

AFD

AFD respondents emphasized unclear mandates as a main effectiveness challenge (70 percent), often referring to the uncertainty over the role of ODA and growing scrutiny of how AFD balances development impact with national priorities.⁴¹ This tension has become more salient as shifting political priorities mean that France's allocations are motivated by multiple objectives – and increasingly domestic interests – in alignment with calls to focus on sectors in which France has domestic industrial or technical expertise.⁴² Internally, staffing levels and capacities (50 percent) and communication gaps (50 percent) were frequently mentioned,⁴³ with these challenges often explained by the recent integration of AFD, Proparco, and Expertise France under the “AFD Group” umbrella. This integration expanded the range of tools available but also raised questions about the capacities needed to work increasingly with non-grant finance and introduced coordination challenges, overlapping roles, and cultural friction across entities.

39 AFD 2, 8; KOICA 7, 9; Norad 6, 11; NZ MFAT 2, 4, 9.

40 KOICA 4, 7, 9; Norad 4, 6, 9, 10; NZ MFAT 12.

41 AFD 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10.

42 Cichocka, Casadevall Bellés, and Calleja, “Effectiveness in Practice.”; 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>

43 AFD 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10.

KOICA

KOICA interviewees highlighted staffing pressures (64 percent) as a key constraint on effectiveness, noting that workloads had grown alongside the recent expansion of Korea's ODA budget.⁴⁴ Political buy-in and authority concerns (55 percent) were likewise salient,⁴⁵ with KOICA facing shifting priorities across administrations and strong expectations to demonstrate domestic benefit from spending taxpayer money. Coordination challenges with other national development actors (55 percent) further complicate effective action,⁴⁶ reflecting Korea's highly fragmented ODA architecture in which numerous public-sector entities manage separate approval, procurement, and reporting systems.⁴⁷

Norad

For Norad, the main effectiveness challenges raised by interviewees related to communication gaps (69 percent)⁴⁸ and coordination barriers (69 percent)⁴⁹ resulting from recent reorganizations. Internally, while a reorganization that structured a significant portion of Norad's activities in "thematic portfolios" aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals to improve project coherence was seen to enable more efficient and effective practice, some noted that the thematic structure can leave gaps at the country level if sectoral knowledge is not coordinated across portfolios. At the system level, while a series of reforms have clarified the roles and responsibilities of Norad vis-à-vis the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, some interviewees mentioned coordination challenges – particularly with embassies – due in part to poor guidance on how Norad and embassies should coordinate, as well as to operating on separate IT systems.⁵⁰

NZ MFAT

For interviewees from NZ MFAT, effectiveness challenges primarily stem from pressures to "do more with less," with staffing constraints (67 percent)⁵¹ and process burdens (58 percent)⁵² highlighted as key issues. On staffing, interviewees mentioned that frequent staff rotations mean

44 KOICA 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8.

45 KOICA 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 11.

46 KOICA 1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 11.

47 Nilima Gulrajani and Rachael Calleja, "Can We Better Manage Donor Institutions for Tackling Global Challenges?" (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2021), <https://odi.org/en/publications/managing-donor-institutions-to-tackle-global-challenges/>

48 Norad 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12.

49 Norad 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13.

50 Norad 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 13.

51 NZ MFAT 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11.

52 NZ MFAT 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12.

internal continuity and learning can be disrupted, particularly if foreign policy “generalists” in development posts have limited technical depth or time to internalize understandings of effectiveness.⁵³ On process burdens, staff noted that complex project approval and domestic accountability standards can be particularly burdensome when small numbers of staff are required to manage multiple projects.⁵⁴ Indeed, process burdens are amplified by project fragmentation (58 percent), with small teams overseeing large numbers of activities.⁵⁵

How are agencies responding to these challenges?

Throughout the conversations, interviewees described a range of practical adaptations underway or in design to address the challenges identified. These responses cluster into six broad types of reforms (Table 1).

First, agencies are shifting towards **more programmatic, longer-term approaches** to counter portfolio fragmentation, reduce transaction costs on staff time, and make strategic coherence and results aggregation more feasible. Second, they are **rebalancing skills and staffing** (especially by strengthening expertise in areas such as finance, climate, partnership, and measurement, and rethinking knowledge retention models) to respond to more complex mandates and instruments alongside tighter headroom. Third, they are reducing **operational friction** and addressing the constraints created by slow procedures, outdated operational systems, and stretched management bandwidth through process and system simplification, the piloting of new digital tools and innovative uses of artificial intelligence (AI), and clearer internal coordination and governance mechanisms. Fourth, agencies are **upgrading their monitoring, evaluation, results, and learning (MERL) frameworks** to respond to heightened accountability and communication pressures, and to make learning more decision-relevant rather than purely compliance-oriented. Fifth, they are **deepening and streamlining partnership arrangements** to navigate a more crowded provider landscape, both by working more efficiently with trusted implementers and by clarifying how they can best work together with actors such as philanthropies and multilateral institutions to exert influence and reduce duplication. Finally, agencies are adjusting their **financial toolkits** to meet shifting partner needs and manage fiscal volatility and shocks, including through greater use of non-grant instruments, risk-sensitive disbursement mechanisms, and special budgetary windows.

53 NZ MFAT 1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 11.

54 NZ MFAT 2, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12.

55 NZ MFAT 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12.

TABLE 1. Illustrative agency examples of responses to current effectiveness challenges

Trend	Illustrative Examples
Shifting towards more programme-based approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid budget-support-style responses for specific purposes (e.g., pilots of new modalities for rapid COVID-19 response and New Zealand’s “country flexible finance”)⁵⁶ • Strategic intent towards portfolio consolidation: plans or commitments to undertake fewer, larger, or more long-term contracts (e.g., New Zealand’s “Fewer, Bigger, Better” focus)⁵⁷
Investing in skills and capacities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalizing development career pathways and skills (including monitoring and evaluation/ specialist capabilities)⁵⁸ • Revising staff planning and competency frameworks, including human resources foresight work to strengthen strategic, analytical, and partnership skills for managing uncertainty and evolving partner needs⁵⁹ • Rethinking staff rotation/continuity amid concerns on how to retain knowledge with turnover (e.g., Canada’s International Assistance Foreign Service stream)⁶⁰
Reducing operational friction and enhancing internal coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization-wide transformation road maps to streamline processes and systems (such as AFD’s CAP27)⁶¹ • Using AI/digital tools to lower transaction costs (e.g., chatbots/large language model assistants for internal staff guidance on human resources, procurement, or policy, or AI tools that make evidence more accessible, such as KfW’s external chatbot)⁶² • Simplifying and aggregating governance structures and introducing internal coordination mechanisms for clearer cross-team governance, oversight, and prioritization (e.g., New Zealand’s “governance groups” and Norad’s portfolio approach–related structural reforms)⁶³
Reviewing MERL results frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge-based portfolio management: setting portfolio-level theories of change, evidence routines, and oversight to strengthen strategic decision making⁶⁴ • Rationalizing and simplifying indicators: shifting to a smaller set of sector-level indicators to improve the strategic focus and manageability of performance monitoring, often combined with an explicit attempt to make MERL more decision-relevant⁶⁵

(Continued)

56 OECD, *Using Budget Support to Respond Rapidly to COVID-19 in Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS)*, Development Co-operation TIPs (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/03/development-co-operation-tips-tools-insights->

57 KOICA 4, 7; NZ 1, 6; see also: Christine Rovoi, “NZ’s Foreign Aid Reset to Focus on ‘Fewer, Bigger, Better’ Projects,” *Pacific Media Network*, 21 February, 2025, <https://pmn.co.nz/read/pacific-region/what-s-shaping-nz-s-international-cooperation>.

58 KOICA 10; see also: New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *OECD DAC Peer Review of New Zealand 2023 – Management Response* (Wellington: MFAT, 2023), <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/OECD-DAC-Peer-Review-Management-Response.pdf>.

59 AFD 8.

60 Global Affairs Canada, *Minister of International Development Appearance before the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade (AEFA) on the Study on the Canadian Foreign Service and Elements of the Foreign Policy Machinery within Global Affairs Canada, and on Other Related Matters*, November 3, 2022, <https://international.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/corporate/transparency/briefing-documents/parliamentary-committee/2022-11-03-aeffa>.

61 Agence Française de Développement (AFD) Group, *AFD Group Strategy 2025–2030* (Paris: AFD Group, 2025): 63. <https://www.afd.fr/sites/default/files/2025-07/afd-group-strategy-2025-2030.pdf>

62 Norad 3; AFD 7; KOICA 10. See also: AFD chatbots case: “Client Testimonial: The French Development Agency Looks Back at the Implementation of Their Chatbots,” client story, product/techno, April 10, 2022, <https://www.dydu.ai/en/client-testimonial-the-french-development-agency-looks-back-at-the-implementation-of-their-chatbots/>

63 NZ MFAT 2, 5, 8, 11; Norad 3, 8, 12, 13.

64 Rob Lloyd et al., *Evaluation of Norad’s Use of Knowledge in Portfolio Management*, Itad Ltd. and Chr. Michelsen Institute, Evaluation Report 4/2024 (Oslo: Norad, 2024), <https://www.norad.no/en/publications/2024/evaluation-of-norads-use-of-knowledge-in-portfolio-management>

65 KOICA 8; AFD 5.

TABLE 1. (Continued)

Trend	Illustrative Examples
Deepening or revising partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delegated co-operation/mutual recognition models: recognizing partner procedures and assigning lead roles in co-financed operations (e.g., the Mutual Reliance Initiative between the European Investment Bank, AFD, and KfW)⁶⁶ • Simplification of internal procedures needed to undertake or continue partnerships with trusted implementing partners or entities⁶⁷ • Strengthening collaboration with philanthropies by building networks, sharing knowledge, and mobilizing philanthropic funding⁶⁸ • Revisiting multilateral strategies: considering how to use the agency’s influence through the boards of multilateral entities, redirecting and consolidating funding through specific channels, or reducing “intermediation” to enhance direct access⁶⁹
Adjusting financial toolkits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing guarantees and risk-sharing instruments to mobilise capital, including by setting up thematic windows (e.g., Norad’s Sovereign Guarantee Scheme for renewable energy), bilateral instruments used alongside technical assistance (e.g., Sida’s guarantee instrument), or pooled platforms combining blended finance with delivery (e.g., the EU’s European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus)⁷⁰ • Modification of debt instruments and their use (e.g., the introduction of climate-resilient debt clauses in the UK and rethinking the allocation of grants versus loans in AFD’s portfolio)⁷¹ • Preparing for unexpected crises through unallocated rapid-response windows or the use of contingency clauses⁷²

66 EIB, "Mutual Reliance Initiative," *Mandates and Partnerships*, accessed March 23, 2026, <https://www.eib.org/en/products/mandates-partnerships/mri/index>

67 For example, see: "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/>; New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Partnering for Impact: FAQs* (Wellington: MFAT, 2019) <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/Partnerships/Partnering-for-Impact-FAQs-December-2019.pdf>

68 Norad, "Hvordan kan stiftelser bidra til internasjonal utvikling, gjennom filantropi og investeringer?," seminar held, April 8, 2025. <https://www.norad.no/aktuelt/arrangementskalender/2025/hvordan-kan-stiftelser-bidra-til-internasjonalt-utvikling-gjennom-filantropi-og-investeringer/>

69 Norad 9, 12, 13; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Policy Framework Global Multilateralism: Defining the Kingdom of the Netherlands' Position in a Changing Multilateral Global Order*, June 8, 2023, <https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2023/06/08/policy-framework-global-multilateralism>.

70 See: "Sovereign Guarantee Scheme for Renewable Energy," published November 15, 2024, updated January 12, 2026, <https://www.norad.no/en/for-partners/private-sector/call-for-proposals-guarantees-for-renewable-energy-investments-in-low-and-middle-income-countries/>; OECD, *Sweden's Guarantee Instrument: Mobilising Capital for Sustainable Development*, Development Co-operation TIPs (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023) https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/development-co-operation-tips-tools-insights-practices_be69e0cf-en/sweden-s-guarantee-instrument-mobilising-capital-for-sustainable-development_f332e44d-en.html; European Commission, "European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+)," International Partnerships, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/funding-instruments/european-fund-sustainable-development-plus_en

71 AFD 5: HM Treasury, "COP27 Finance Day: Building Resilience for Countries Hit by Natural Disasters," news story, November 9, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cop27-finance-day-building-resilience-for-countries-hit-by-natural-disasters>

72 AFD 1, 3, 5, 8; KOICA 2, 3; Norad 2; NZ MFAT 10.

In the years ahead, what characteristics will define an effective and resilient development agency?

Interviewees highlighted four organizational traits that they saw as critical for future agency effectiveness and resilience: strategic clarity, being equipped for partnership, flexibility and adaptability, and ability to demonstrate impact and value. Each characteristic is explained below.

Strategic clarity

In response to challenges related to poor clarity on agency roles and purposes, interviewees stated that effective agencies have clearly defined mandates (33 percent) that set strategic direction, outline desired results, and set out agency responsibilities alongside other actors in the national development ecosystem. This clarity not only enables workforce planning to map capacities and skills to priorities but also provides a basis for investing in the instruments, tools, or approaches needed to achieve the desired aims, and for enabling cross-government coherence for development goals.⁷³ As many agencies face pressures on development budgets, interviewees noted that being clear about what agencies are expected to deliver is critical to prioritizing the allocations and engagements that are best suited to achieving the desired results.⁷⁴ Some interviewees also highlighted the importance of using or developing foresight capacity to ensure that strategic plans not only reflect current priorities but keep an eye on the longer-term organizational transformations that may be needed for the agency to remain effective and relevant in the years ahead.⁷⁵

Being equipped for partnerships

With development agencies increasingly expected to deliver on an expanding array of priorities – including global challenges – as budgets decline, interviewees noted that partnerships capable of combining resources to advance shared goals will become increasingly important for delivering scalable results (37 percent). Being equipped for partnership means having the incentives to invest in shared systems or platforms that enable better coordination at the country level, or to accept the opacity risks and limited visibility associated with pooled or co-financing ventures. Interviewees noted that such openness to partnering could support a more efficient division of labour in countries and more predictable and scalable results through pooling the resources available.⁷⁶ At the same time – and in alignment with effectiveness-related commitments to localization – interviewees also highlighted that partnerships are critical for enabling local dialogue, adaptation, and trusted relationships with partner countries.⁷⁷

73 Norad 7, 10; NZ MFAT 12.

74 AFD 8; KOICA 9; NZ MFAT 5, 6.

75 AFD 8.

76 AFD 7; NZ MFAT 4, 8, 12.

77 NZ MFAT 3, 11.

Flexibility and adaptability

Given the frequency of urgent crises – whether natural or man-made – interviewees (39 percent) placed a premium on the processes and practices that enable quick adjustments and programme delivery in response to changing context, priorities, or needs in partner countries. Many stressed the importance of strong local relationships as an enabler of flexibility, which provides a foundation for building the trust needed for honest conversations about challenges and setbacks and allows for timely adaptation and course correction.⁷⁸ Such relationships are facilitated by experienced staff with strong contextual knowledge and the ability to interpret, relay, and respond to local political signals.⁷⁹ Some interviewees emphasized the importance of budgetary flexibility that provides room for manoeuvre in response to crises (such as multiyear budget cycles or crisis modifiers) without needing to compensate through in-year cuts.⁸⁰ For others, adaptability also requires access to a broader range of policy and financial instruments to support partner countries as their needs evolve with economic growth and graduation to higher income levels.⁸¹

Ability to demonstrate impact and value

With development co-operation facing increased public scrutiny in many provider countries, interviewees (37 percent) stressed that clearly communicating the impact and value of the work of development agencies will be critical for their resilience, relevance, and survival. For some, this meant moving away from current communication approaches, which often focus on technical issues or spending levels, towards highlighting real-world impact targeted to nonspecialist audiences alongside domestic accountability and transparency requirements.⁸² Proactive communication or outreach efforts dedicated to building better public and political awareness of the value of development co-operation – both at headquarters and when political leaders visit partner countries – were highlighted as a potential way to build buy-in for development efforts.⁸³ Relatedly, some cautioned that effectively communicating impact requires a coherent understanding of organizational objectives, supported by evaluation and learning systems that aggregate results credibly for domestic audiences.⁸⁴ Implicit in many of these perspectives was a tension between attribution (demonstrating direct, agency-specific results) and contribution (acknowledging an agency's role in broader, longer-term change) – a distinction that, as discussed below, has significant implications for how agencies design their measurement and communication strategies.

78 AFD 8, 10; Norad 5, 12; NZ MFAT 11.

79 AFD 9; KOICA 3; Norad 8; NZ MFAT 9.

80 AFD 6.

81 AFD 7, 8.

82 AFD 3, 4, 5, 6; KOICA 4; Norad 3, 7; NZ MFAT 1, 5, 7, 10.

83 AFD 5.

84 AFD 3, 5, 6; KOICA 4; Norad 3, 7; NZ MFAT 1, 5, 7, 10.

Main findings and discussion of interview results

Taken together, our conversations revealed that in the current climate of uncertainty, the challenges, responses, and characteristics associated with the future of effective action center around four key questions, each of which responds directly to a unique source of pressure in the broader operational environment. For development agencies, the answer to these questions will likely drive reforms in the years ahead, particularly on *how* and *on what* agencies work, and provide a critical starting place for conceptualizing the practices that underpin the future of effective agency action.

Question 1: What is the role and purpose of development agencies?

Many of the effectiveness challenges raised by interviewees trace back to unresolved questions about the role and purpose of development agencies, and the narratives shaping development co-operation today and in the years ahead. Interviewees consistently emphasized that a lack of clarity around mandates and objectives makes it more difficult to deliver effective programming, while also exacerbating internal challenges such as skills mismatches, uncertainty about appropriate delivery instruments, and weak coordination across the broader national development ecosystem.⁸⁵ In this sense, clarity of purpose is not merely strategic but operational: clear mandates help answer the question of being “effective at what,” providing direction on thematic and geographic priorities as well as guidance on the capacities, processes, and organizational structures required to deliver results. Put differently, clarity on role and purpose provides the starting point for an agency’s theory of change and underpins alignment between objectives, tools, and delivery models.

In the current landscape, the role and purpose of development agencies are under increasing pressure, from both domestic and international sources. Domestically, the erosion of public (and political) confidence in the value of development has amplified “mutual interest” narratives,⁸⁶ including a shift towards more explicitly transactional views of development as a tool for strengthening foreign or commercial interests.⁸⁷ These sit in tension with traditional narratives that view development as a moral imperative, where “solidarity” acts as the driver and motivation of engagement.⁸⁸ Internationally, pressures to use development resources to respond to immediate crises and to tackle global challenges in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) sit alongside country-focused engagement aimed at supporting economic transformation.⁸⁹

85 AFD 8; KOICA 4, 11; Norad 10; NZ MFAT 4, 6.

86 Tobias Heidland, Moritz Schularick, and Rainer Thiele, “Mutual Interest Development Cooperation: Aligning Incentives in a Fragmenting World,” Kiel Report No. 5 (Kiel: Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2026), https://www.kielinstitut.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/fis-import/f2f2aacd-478f-4751-9930-41d97af6c4ca-Kiel_Report_5_MIDC_EN.pdf

87 Nilima Gulrajani et al., “Crafting a New Rationale for Northern Donorship.”

88 Ibid; Nilima Gulrajani, Rachael Calleja, “The Principled Aid Index: Understanding Donor Motivations” (London: ODI, 2019), <https://odi.org/en/publications/the-principled-aid-index-understanding-donor-motivations/>

89 Masood Ahmed, Rachael Calleja, and Pierre Jacquet, eds., *The Future of Official Development Assistance: Incremental Improvements or Radical Reform?* (London: Center for Global Development, 2025), <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/future-official-development-assistance-incremental-improvements-or-radical-reform.pdf>

These pressures not only expand the number and range of priorities for agencies (i.e., what agencies aim to achieve) but place pressure on limited development budgets when these initiatives are all funded by the same pool of public resources.⁹⁰

In the years ahead, clarity about the purpose and role of development agencies will be a critical input for effectiveness in both the immediate and longer term. In the short term, clearly articulating the purposes agencies serve – including the domestic benefit providers seek through co-operation – could give a clearer logic for immediate decision making, including in relation to budget cuts or identifying new investment opportunities. Greater clarity may also support more credible and durable relationships with partner countries, particularly if transparency on provider motivations strengthens trust⁹¹ and enables longer-term planning around shared objectives.⁹² At the same time, agencies and their political principals face an inherent balancing act: while strategic clarity is essential for effective delivery, overly rigid strategic guidelines risk constraining flexibility and provoking political resistance as priorities evolve.⁹³ Over the longer term, however, clarity of purpose serves as a reference point for adapting organizational tools, skills, and systems to deliver on agreed objectives – effectively defining the endpoint of an agency’s theory of change and enabling more strategic workforce and organizational planning. In this context, some interviewees highlighted the importance of investing in foresight and scenario-based planning to ensure that strategic choices account not only for current demands but also for the capabilities and instruments that will be required under plausible future pathways.⁹⁴ Such activities may become more important as uncertainty about the future of development as a distinctive function of government – vis-à-vis other internationally focused policy areas – is called into question.

Question 2: How can agencies improve impact under constrained budgets?

In the current context, development agencies are facing pressures to demonstrate impact towards a growing number of priorities, often with declining public budgets. For interviewees, pressure to “do more with less” has highlighted many of the organizational inefficiencies that traditionally inhibited strategic, coherent, and scalable action and results. For instance, beyond the direct challenges associated with budget volatility – such as the difficulty sustaining multiyear commitments and protecting delivery quality and oversight⁹⁵ – interviewees noted that project fragmentation undermined effectiveness by stretching staff capacities, while poor coordination contributed to duplication and missed opportunities to extract value through intraorganizational

90 Ibid.

91 Nilima Gulrajani et al., “Crafting a New Rationale for Northern Donorship.”

92 Samantha Custer, Ana Horigoshi, Bentja Boer and Kelsey Marshall. *Listening to Leaders 2025: Development cooperation over a decade of disruption*. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary, 2025. <https://docs.aiddata.org/reports/ltl-2025/full-report.min.html>

93 Nilima Gulrajani et al., “Crafting a New Rationale for Northern Donorship.”

94 AFD 8.

95 AFD 6; KOICA 1, 2; Norad 4, 9; NZ MFAT 5.

synergies and alignment.⁹⁶ In this context, some interviewees noted that their agencies have already been implementing reforms aimed at improving efficiency, such as building more “programmatic” approaches to reduce project fragmentation.

Approaches for improving the efficiency – as well as the effectiveness – of development resources can take many forms. For some, having fewer resources has highlighted the need to focus budgets more strategically, including through leveraging comparative advantages to specialize in key regions or sectors or by utilizing operational strengths.⁹⁷ For instance, NZ MFAT has made a strategic choice to focus on the Pacific, where its long-standing relationships and regional proximity provide a comparative advantage in the region.⁹⁸ Calls to “radically simplify” development spending follow a similar logic, – where limited resources can be more impactful if targeted to fewer, larger, more cost-effective interventions in a smaller array of countries, as opposed to the fragmentation that defines the status quo.⁹⁹ In this approach, evidence of “what works” is used to inform the choice of intervention, combining cost-effective programming with simplified allocation, reduced operational costs (with less spent on consultants and, presumably, fewer parallel processes for staff to manage), and economies of scale.¹⁰⁰ Others highlight the importance of agency processes as drivers of efficiency, cautioning against an over-reliance on interventions with the cleanest experimental evidence, particularly when asked to deliver on transformational changes that are harder to measure, slower to materialize, and deeply context specific.¹⁰¹ Instead, they note that agency practices inform impact, as clear processes to support co-designing projects with local actors, iterative learning by doing, and participatory monitoring help strengthen outcomes by protecting space for locally grounded experimentation and adaptation. For others still, tightening budgets means that achieving impact will require more concerted efforts to combine the resources available – through pooling, co-financing, or strategic partnerships – to deliver impact at a scale not possible when working alone. Indeed, development agencies are exploring new types of partnerships – including with the private sector, philanthropies, or multilaterals – as well as ways to reduce the transaction costs of partnering with others, such as through developing standard project designs and coordinating results measurement.¹⁰² However, doing so is not without risks; some interviewees noted that willingness to engage via multilaterals, for instance, can be difficult due to low effectiveness of key institutions.¹⁰³

96 AFD 5; Norad 1; NZ MFAT 5, 12.

97 Rachael Calleja, Beata Cichocka, and Sara Casadevall Bellés, “How Can Development Agencies Leverage Their Comparative Advantage?” *CGD Blog*, September 9, 2025, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/how-can-development-agencies-leverage-their-comparative-advantage>

98 Cichocka, Casadevall Bellés, and Calleja, “Effectiveness in Practice.”

99 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>

100 Glennerster and Haria, “Radical Simplification.”

101 AFD 2, 8; Norad 2, 6.

102 AFD 1.

103 Norad 9, 12, 13.

Underlying several of these approaches is a common logic: that efforts to improve the impact of development resources not only require operational reforms to reduce procedures and duplication but could benefit from addressing long-standing challenges related to project fragmentation and improving coordination across actors. Both aims have been pillars of the international effectiveness agenda since 2003, when the High-Level Forum held in Rome called for greater harmonization across providers to reduce the impact of proliferation on partner country capacities.¹⁰⁴ Yet tackling both fragmentation and coordination has proven difficult due to the incentives and capacities of both provider and partner countries. For providers, a competitive landscape and the reality that co-operation is often used to raise domestic profiles with partner countries limits the incentives to coordinate or partner more actively¹⁰⁵ and drives portfolio fragmentation when small bilateral co-operation relationships are seen to open doors for political dialogues.¹⁰⁶ Organizationally, diverse development management systems can make it difficult to align requirements and standards,¹⁰⁷ while staffing constraints provide an additional barrier to collaboration, especially as individual performance is often based on moving funding out the door, traditionally providing little incentive to dedicate limited time to coordination and building partnerships (though this appears to be changing under current conditions).¹⁰⁸ For partner countries, some fragmentation may be beneficial if it improves bargaining power vis-à-vis potential conditionalities,¹⁰⁹ while partner capacities can

104 OECD, *Rome Declaration on Harmonisation*, High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness I, (Rome: OECD, 2005), https://www.instituto-camoes.pt/images/cooperacao/declaracao_roma.pdf

105 Hannes Öhler, *Do Aid Donors Coordinate within Recipient Countries?* Discussion Paper no. 539 (Heidelberg: Department of Economics, University of Heidelberg, 2013), <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/127353/1/dp539.pdf>; Andreas Fuchs, Peter Nunnenkamp, and Hannes Öhler, "Why Donors of Foreign Aid Do Not Coordinate: The Role of Competition for Export Markets and Political Support," *The World Economy* 38, no. 2 (2015): 255–285, <https://doi.org/10.1111/twec.12213>; Maurizio Carbone, "Make Europe Happen on the Ground? Enabling and Constraining Factors for European Union Aid Coordination in Africa," *Development Policy Review* 35, no. 4 (2017): 531–548, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12194>

106 Peter Nunnenkamp, Hannes Öhler, and Rainer Thiele, *Donor Coordination and Specialization: Did the Paris Declaration Make a Difference?*, Kiel Working Paper no. 1748 (Kiel: Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW), 2011), <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/54940/1/680297537.pdf>

107 Iliana Olivie and Aitor Pérez, "Why Don't Donor Countries Coordinate Their Aid? A Case Study of European Donors in Morocco," *Progress in Development Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 52–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464993415608082>; Stephan Klingebiel, Mario Negre, and Pedro Morazán, "Costs, Benefits and the Political Economy of Aid Coordination: The Case of the European Union," *European Journal of Development Research* 29 (2017): 144–159, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ejdr.2015.84>

108 Klingebiel, Negre, & Morazán, "Costs, benefits and the political economy of aid coordination"; Jan Orbie, Sarah Delputte, Yentyl Williams, Lies Steurs, Joren Verschaeve, *Improving European Coordination in Fragile States*, Practitioners' Network for European Development Cooperation (Brussels: Practitioners' Network, 2017), https://www.dev-practitioners.eu/media/key_documents/FINAL_SYNTHESIS-PN_Improving_European_coordination_in_fragile_states_11.20_4LVm0OH.pdf; Rachael Calleja and Sarah Rose, "Coordinating aid in fragile states: the promise of country platforms and principles for effective aid architecture," In *Handbook of Fragile States*, edited by David Carment and Yagadeesen Samy (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800883475.00028>

109 Klingebiel, Negre, & Morazán, "Costs, benefits and the political economy of aid coordination"; François Bourguignon and Jean-Philippe Platteau, "The Hard Challenge of Aid Coordination," *World Development* 69 (2015): 86–97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.12.011>

facilitate or hinder coordination, depending on the government's ability to lead the process, including through providing strategic guidance to align provider efforts.¹¹⁰

For development agencies, these dynamics suggest that improving impact under constrained budgets will require confronting entrenched incentives and operating models. In practice, this implies a shift towards greater selectivity in terms of where or on what agencies work and how they deploy scarce staff and financial resources, as well as the need for stronger internal incentives for collaboration – within agencies, across government, and with external partners – so that coordination and partnership building are treated as core delivery functions rather than discretionary add-ons. Absent such changes, efforts to simplify portfolios, invest in evidence-based interventions, or scale through partnerships risk being undermined by the same fragmentation and competition that have historically limited effectiveness. Under tighter fiscal conditions, the opportunity cost of maintaining fragmented, politically driven portfolios becomes more visible, raising both the stakes of inaction and the value of reform.

Question 3: How can agencies improve their development offer?

Underlying many of the effectiveness challenges raised by interviewees was a common concern that organizational inefficiencies constrain agencies' ability to deliver programming that responds to the changing needs of partner countries. These included cumbersome internal processes that slowed delivery and inhibited adaptability,¹¹¹ communication gaps between headquarters and field offices that delayed decision making and increased response times,¹¹² insufficient toolkits for meeting evolving partner needs (including as countries graduate to different income levels),¹¹³ and risk-averse organizational cultures that limit incentives or opportunities for responsive action.¹¹⁴ In each case, agency-level processes were seen to reduce the speed and ease with which staff were able to react to changing contexts, demands, or partner needs. Indeed, in a global landscape defined by frequent crises and uncertainty, interviewees were clear that the ability to adapt and respond flexibly to changing local circumstances was a critical feature of long-term effectiveness.

Building on these concerns, our prior research showed that improving the flexibility and adaptability of development agencies is critical for three main reasons.¹¹⁵ First, recent experience responding

110 Klingebiel, Negre, & Morazán, "Costs, benefits and the political economy of aid coordination"; Sarah Hearn, "Independent Review of the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States" (New York: Center on International Cooperation, New York University, 2016), https://cic.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/new_deal_engagement_exec_summ_hearn_apr14_final_en.pdf; Mark McGillivray and Safiullah Taye, "Securitization, Divergent Agendas and the Sectoral Allocation of Development Aid within Afghanistan," in *Handbook of Fragile States*, edited by David Carmant and Yiagadeesen Samy (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 316–333. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800883475.00024>

111 AFD 9, 10; Norad 6, 7, 8; NZ MFAT 5, 6, 10, 11.

112 AFD 10; KOICA 8; Norad 3, 11; NZ MFAT 4, 5, 10, 11.

113 AFD 8.

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

115 Cichocka, Casadevall Bellés, and Calleja, "Effectiveness in Practice."

to the COVID-19 pandemic had prompted strategic discussions internally about how to enhance agencies' preparedness for future shocks and their long-term resilience in increasingly complex and turbulent international environments. Second, the volatility of development budgets – both domestically and internationally – requires more flexible financial processes such as crisis modifiers, contingency clauses, or the simplification of procedures for no-cost extensions to allow projects to be adjusted in response to changing country conditions. Third, recognition that the most sustainable and effective development is locally led means that agencies must be flexible enough not only to co-design projects to advance ownership, but to respond swiftly when local realities change, including by having a range of instruments that can be used to meet evolving priorities in partner countries. In particular, the last point aligns closely with evidence from the latest “Listening to Leaders” survey, which showed that leaders from the Global South value adaptability – understood as adjusting approaches based on local expertise, modifying projects to fit local context, and aligning projects with national development strategies – as a primary attribute of provider agencies.¹¹⁶

However, increasing flexibility and adaptability will require agencies to get better at planning for uncertainty. In many cases, this will mean confronting explicit trade-offs between enabling responsive action and maintaining accountability, predictability, and learning.¹¹⁷ On one hand, processes that enable adaptability – including by facilitating field-level decision making – are clearly necessary in a rapidly shifting global context. On the other hand, if implemented without bounds or procedural constraints, adaptability runs the risk of undermining accountability to, and progress towards, strategic objectives. Indeed, practices that encourage “strategic patience” may be especially critical when interventions aim towards long-term results, while monitoring adaptation provides evidence on what works, when, and where, serving as critical inputs to organizational learning and long-term effectiveness.¹¹⁸ Similarly, adaptability may sit in tension with the pursuit of rigid “value-for-money” interventions when course corrections undermine the optimum conditions for achieving desired impact, while structural decisions relating to field presence and how or where decisions on programmatic changes are made affect the speed and ease by which adaptation can occur.¹¹⁹ Taken together, the implication for development agencies is clear: in a context of growing uncertainty and increasing demand for locally led solutions, agencies will need to reassess how institutional choices regarding delegated authority, risk management, and learning systems either enable or constrain their ability to deliver impact that responds to local needs and makes good on international commitments to deepen “localization.”

116 Custer et al., *Listening to Leaders 2025*.

117 Cichočka, Casadevall Bellés, and Calleja, “Effectiveness in Practice.”

118 Ibis.

119 Ibis.

Question 4: How can agencies better evidence and explain their impact?

A common theme across multiple interviewees was that in the current context of domestic scepticism about the value of development as an objective of provider governments, the long-term resilience and relevance of development agencies depends on their ability to clearly communicate their impact to domestic audiences. Interviewees noted that achieving this end was currently hindered by fragmented monitoring and data systems, which curtail opportunities to learn from experience. They also emphasized that measurement was not only a technical problem but also a political one: under heightened scrutiny, measurement can tilt towards results that are easiest to count and communicate in the short term. This means that the long-term resilience of development agencies is partly contingent on their ability to articulate and evidence their wider impact over time – not simply to report short-term outputs – so that public and political scrutiny does not narrow strategic room for manoeuvre. Together, these dynamics create a two-sided bind: while weak measurement systems undermine credible communication, external pressures can also distort what gets measured, learned, and prioritized, pulling agencies towards countable performance at the expense of longer-term impact and value creation.

Part of the challenge for development agencies is that the growing number and diversity of purposes they serve raises critical questions about the type of impact they are expected to achieve. Agencies are increasingly being judged against a wider set of goals – including contributions to complex, global-level outcomes (think climate action) as well as explicit or implicit “mutual interest” aims – without a settled approach to measuring success across them, leaving a growing mismatch between results frameworks, narratives that frame the value of co-operation,¹²⁰ and the overarching impact that agencies seek to achieve. That scrutiny is not abstract: perceptions that ODA is “wasted” remain widespread in public opinion even where general support for development engagement persists,¹²¹ and the recent turbulence around USAID illustrates how quickly scepticism can harden into high-stakes restructuring. At the same time, this need for legitimacy is not only a domestic problem for providers, as partner governments also have more choice in a crowded co-operation marketplace, and their leaders increasingly prize partners that plan for long-term

120 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://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S01497189173029>

121 Joe Miller, “Majority of Americans Believe Foreign Aid ‘Wasted on Corruption’, Survey Finds,” *Financial Times*, 17 February 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/c92c76d1-02cc-45fb-99a0-9935ae04046a>; Soomin Oh, “What Is Aid For? How Public Views Are Evolving,” *SDG Communicator*, February 3, 2026, <https://sdg-communicator.org/2026/02/03/what-is-aid-for-how-public-views-are-evolving/>. Oh says, “Since 2020, support for aid has fallen in France, Germany and the UK. In Germany and France, support has plummeted dramatically from about 70% to about 50% of people saying that aid budgets should be maintained or increased. Yet support has stopped falling and appears to have stabilised at a new low: around 50% in France, Germany and the US, and around 45% in the UK. It looks like there is a core of supporters who want to maintain aid regardless of the political or economic atmosphere.” In the United States, a survey commissioned by the *Financial Times* found that nearly 60 percent of American voters believed most foreign aid is lost to corruption or excessive administrative costs (only 12 percent disagreed), illustrating how “aid is wasted” beliefs can coexist with more general pro-aid instincts.

impacts and build their institutional capacity – traits that require credible planning and evidence beyond project-by-project reporting.¹²²

For agencies, the implication is that the ability to meaningfully communicate impact requires deeper consideration of how changing objectives are shifting understandings of “impact” at the agency level, the measurement inputs needed to demonstrate impact, and the audiences that impact stories are intended to reach. The question of what counts as success when objectives multiply looms large in the current development context. If co-operation is expected to deliver SDG/global-challenge outcomes *and* provider-country benefits, agencies may need to make these goals explicit rather than letting “mutual benefit” aims sit in the background and surface only through political messaging.¹²³ Aligning such objectives and understandings of impact with organizational theories of change will require consideration of what needs to be measured to build a clear narrative of value. At the same time, agencies will need to consider who narratives of impact are for, and what evidence and framing will be most compelling to different audiences. For instance, while domestic scepticism can reward simple “wins,” partner-country leaders’ emphasis on transformational change may require portfolio-level evidence and credible explanation beyond project outputs. Put bluntly, agencies may need to decide where they will accept *less* immediacy and attribution in exchange for a more honest account of contribution over time – and then invest in the evaluation and assurance functions that make that account believable to both taxpayers and partners.

Recommendations

As agencies navigate their way through the uncertainty of the current development landscape, it’s clear that the priorities, modalities, and operations adopted in the past are not necessarily those that will be most useful in the years ahead. In the short run, the current operating environment is putting pressures on agencies to deepen efficiency and refocus limited resources to strengthen outcomes and respond to shifting partner needs. In the long run, broader questions about the value of development co-operation means that agencies face an existential threat and will need to think seriously about the objectives and impact they aspire to achieve beyond 2030, and the capacities, processes, and structures needed to deliver effectively.

The diversity across development agencies – in terms of their size, approaches, priorities – makes it difficult to specify explicit principles of agency best practice for the years ahead. This means that the best advice for “what development agencies should do tomorrow” to address the institutional challenges that undermine effective practice will differ based on the unique challenges and constraints that agencies face. Feasibility is also a key consideration, as development agencies are bound by broader political contexts and regulatory environments, the interplay of which requires

¹²² Custer et al., *Listening to Leaders 2025*.

¹²³ See also: Heidland, Schularick, and Thiele, *Mutual Interest Development Cooperation*.

balancing the risks and costs of change with the potential for more streamlined processes and structures. While change will be necessary for agencies to remain effective and relevant in an evolving landscape, the direction, depth, and type of changes implemented should be mediated by the organizational realities that inform each agency's role and functioning.

The remainder of this section outlines key recommendations, drawing from the findings and discussion presented above. In particular, we build from the common questions that agencies are grappling with as a basis for thinking about opportunities to support better decision making and planning for the future.

Determining the future role and purpose of development agencies

- **Embed foresight in strategic decision making to guide future choices:** Development agencies should invest in use-informed foresight that is embedded in strategic decision making, with clear entry points into priority setting and resource allocation. As agencies reassess their role, purpose, and objectives in an increasingly contested and uncertain development landscape, foresight can help test institutional assumptions across a range of plausible future scenarios. To deliver strategic value, foresight activities should be designed with a clear purpose and decision pathways, including identifying who is responsible for acting on findings. This approach both strengthens the case for sustained investment in foresight capabilities and increases the likelihood that insights will translate into concrete strategic choices rather than remaining analytical outputs.¹²⁴
- **Be explicit about what your agency is trying to achieve – and design structures to deliver it:** Development agencies should clearly articulate and operationalize their theory of change, using it as a practical tool to align objectives, resources, and organizational systems. In a context of shifting mandates, expanding expectations, and constrained budgets, the absence of a clear theory of change leaves agencies vulnerable to mission creep, skills mismatches, and fragmented delivery. A credible theory of change makes explicit not only the goals agencies are pursuing but how specific inputs, instruments, and capabilities are expected to translate into outcomes and impact. Used properly, it provides a reference point for strategic workforce planning, choice of delivery modalities, and decisions about where to invest – or disinvest – organizational effort.

Maximizing impact under budget constraints

- **Simplify processes to reduce transaction costs and burdens on staff time:** Under tighter budgets and growing complexity, impact suffers when internal processes are heavy, duplicative, and not fit for purpose. Agencies could strengthen their effectiveness

¹²⁴ For more on use-informed foresight in international development policy, see: Fraser Reilly-King, Colleen Duggan, and Alex Wilner, "Foresight and Futures Thinking for International Development Co-operation: Promises and Pitfalls," *Development Policy Review* 42, suppl. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12790>

by streamlining internal systems to clarify responsibilities, reduce approval layers, standardize reporting, and apply lighter-touch requirements for repeat modalities or trusted partners while preserving targeted assurance where risks are highest. Digital and AI tools can support this agenda, but simplification is an operating-model choice, which necessitates identifying which controls are essential, which are legacy, and which ex ante procedures can be replaced. The test of success should be whether reforms measurably reduce cycle times and staff burden, freeing capacity for deepening partner engagement and locally led learning over administration.

- **Focus where your agency adds distinctive value and stop spreading resources too thin:** Under fiscal constraint, development agencies should explicitly identify and prioritize areas of comparative advantage and use this focus to guide decisions on where, how, and on what to spend scarce resources.¹²⁵ While specialization entails political and operational trade-offs,¹²⁶ it provides a practical basis for reducing portfolio fragmentation and coordinating roles among providers operating in the same contexts.
- **Treat partnership and coordination as core delivery functions, not discretionary add-ons:** To achieve impact at scale under constrained budgets, development agencies should invest in purposeful partnerships and actively reduce the transaction costs of coordination. While partnering is neither cost- nor risk-free, selective collaboration – anchored in shared objectives and complementary strengths – can unlock results that no agency can achieve alone.¹²⁷ As a result, agencies should focus their partnership efforts where scale or specialization genuinely matter, while simultaneously lowering barriers to collaboration by developing shared reporting frameworks, due diligence standards, and results metrics with frequent partners. Crucially, internal incentives and performance systems must recognize coordination and partnership building as core delivery work rather than discretionary activities undertaken only when time allows.

Improving the development offer for partner countries

- **Pair adaptive practice with learning systems to turn flexibility into results:** Development agencies should embed adaptive practice within structured learning systems. Flexibility and responsiveness are critical in a turbulent global environment, but adaptation without bounds risks undermining strategic objectives and long-term impacts. As a result, adaptive practice must be accompanied by learning systems designed to ensure that adaptations are monitored and that existing knowledge is used to inform decision making in response to changing conditions. At a minimum, this requires that staff have access to – and know how to find – knowledge and lessons to inform practice. This creates a feedback loop in which

125 Calleja, Cichocka, and Casadevall Bellés, “How Can Development Agencies Leverage Their Comparative Advantage?”

126 Ibid.

127 Rachael Calleja, Sara Casadevall Bellés, and Beata Cichocka, “Exploring Barriers and Opportunities for Deepening Cooperation across DAC and Non-DAC Providers,” CGD Policy Paper 321 (London: Center for Global Development, January 2024).

responsive actions strengthen impact, rather than introducing risk or drift, and position the agency to act decisively in dynamic, locally led contexts.

- **Align decision rights, tools, and capacities with mandate and context to act decisively:** Development agencies must match their decision authority, financial tools, and operational capacity to the realities of the contexts in which they serve. Adaptive programming fails if staff lack the mandate, resources, or coordination mechanisms to act where it matters most. Agencies should critically assess whether their structures – at headquarters or in countries – enable rapid, informed, and accountable decisions. Misaligned authority or underpowered toolkits slow responses, undermine local relevance, and reduce overall impact. Getting the alignment right is not optional; it is the foundation of a development offer that can deliver results in a turbulent world.

Evidencing and communicating organizational value

- **Build measurement systems that capture both immediate results and long-term impact:** Agencies must go beyond counting outputs to show contribution to long-term outcomes. Fragmented or narrowly focused measurement risks shrinking strategic space, rewarding what is easy to report, and undermining credibility with both domestic audiences and partner countries. Agencies should maintain a small set of public-facing indicators for transparency, while complementing these with richer learning-oriented evidence streams – including qualitative insights, partner feedback, and ex post assessments of sustainability and transformational impact. This dual approach ensures accountability today while demonstrating the enduring value of development over time.
- **Communicate development's value to build lasting political and public consensus:** To sustain legitimacy, strategic latitude, and support for development co-operation in changing political environments, agencies must shift from reactive reporting to proactive value building. This means not explaining what was done, but crafting and championing credible narratives about why development matters, tailored to different segments of the domestic audience and political elites.¹²⁸ A new consensus on development requires both mobilizing public support and rallying political and policy leaders around development ambition so that agencies are authorized to act boldly rather than having to perpetually defend their relevance.¹²⁹ By building these narratives, agencies can help reverse fragmented public debates, deepen political support, and create authorizing environments that enable greater ambition and sustained impact, rather than limited, output-focused messaging.

128 OECD Development Communication Network (DevCom), *Communicating on Development Co-operation: Survey of DAC Members and Partners* (Paris: OECD Publications, 2025), <https://sdg-communicator.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Presentation-on-DevCom-Survey-2025-2.pdf>

129 Development Intelligence Lab, "Build a new consensus on development", <https://www.devintelligencelab.com/pitch/pitch-03-01-consensus>

Conclusion

Development agencies are operating in an era in which the “ODA system” is being asked to do more things, for more audiences, under greater contestation. ODA is being pulled in multiple directions – towards poverty reduction, global and regional public goods, crisis response, and geopolitically freighted objectives – altering agencies’ portfolios and intensifying scrutiny of what development co-operation is for, what success looks like, and whether public resources devoted to ODA can be defended politically over time. Broader debates about the future of development co-operation – and the model of engagement needed and desired in the years ahead – are raising fundamental questions about the role that agencies will play in tomorrow’s development system and how they will need to adjust to remain relevant. Taken together, these changes indicate that the current moment is an important one for agencies, as ongoing negotiations about the future model of development will inform not only the types of actions or practices needed to be effective in the years ahead, but how agencies will need to adapt institutionally to best deliver on new priorities and demands.

This paper is the final instalment in our three-part series on development agency effectiveness. Our first paper traced how changes in the development landscape are reshaping what agencies are expected to do, and therefore what and how “effective” action is expected to be delivered. The second paper showed that many agency officials increasingly interpret effectiveness less from the perspective of formal international principles and more through practical questions of adaptability, allocation choices, and organizational coherence. In this third and final paper, we shift the unit of analysis from principles and programming to the organizational conditions that make effective action feasible. Put simply, we ask not only *what agencies do to be effective* but, more importantly, *what agencies are able to do* – given internal constraints and the political economy of mandates, measurement, and legitimacy – to bridge the gap between global principles of effective co-operation and the organizational capabilities required to implement them under fiscal constraint and systemic flux. What emerges across the series is a picture of agencies navigating profound uncertainty about their purpose, legitimacy, and operating models, yet showing remarkable resilience and creativity in adapting to new realities. The question is no longer whether development agencies need to change, but whether they can change quickly and fundamentally enough to remain relevant in a post-ODA world.

Our analysis suggests that, in the current operating environment, long-standing internal constraints are limiting agency efficiency and effectiveness. Interviewees pointed to several internal realities that constrain effective action on a daily basis: overstretched staffing and skills mismatches, weak internal communication and siloed ways of working, burdensome processes and slow decision making, and results systems that are not consistently able to aggregate learning or credibly demonstrate value beyond project-level reporting. In practice, these types of organizational frictions not only reduce efficiency but also narrow the space for learning, partnership building, and adaptation – precisely the activities that become most important under volatility and uncertainty. At the same time, interviewees were clear that effectiveness challenges cannot be understood as

technical or managerial problems alone. Unclear priorities and mandates – linked to wider shifts in the purposes of development co-operation – were repeatedly described as a binding constraint on performance, amplifying organizational bottlenecks and weakening incentives to invest in effectiveness when political attention is elsewhere. In this sense, effectiveness has become inseparable from legitimacy: agencies that cannot translate contested mandates into coherent operational choices – and cannot credibly evidence and communicate value – are more exposed to rapid retrenchment.

Looking forward, our evidence suggests that future effectiveness will hinge on a set of capabilities that sit alongside (and enable) the Paris/Busan principles. If ownership, results, partnerships, and transparency remain the normative destination, then agencies' internal capabilities are the means of getting there. Interviewees converged on four necessary traits. First, clarity of mandate and role is necessary to prioritize, align systems, and make trade-offs explicit. Second, being equipped for partnership, with incentives and operating models that reduce the transaction costs of coordination and make pooling feasible. Third, flexibility and adaptability, supported by decision-making structures that allow timely course correction as contexts shift. Fourth, the ability to evidence and communicate value, underpinned by results and learning systems that are capable of making credible claims beyond project-level reporting. Together, these traits reflect a wider shift in how effectiveness is being conceived, from improving delivery within relatively stable parameters to strengthening agencies' capacity to reconfigure and learn under uncertainty.

This perspective also has implications for how the OECD-DAC and the broader community discuss reform. As development co-operation expands to address global challenges and public goods, questions of measurement, eligibility, and comparability become more salient – precisely because they shape public narratives about “what ODA is doing.” The OECD has highlighted the need to modernize business models and financial management practices and to rebalance partnerships in ways that reflect new realities.¹³⁰ Our findings suggest an additional complement, as effectiveness debates risk remaining abstract unless they are paired with an account of organizational implementation: the incentives, staffing models, processes, and learning systems that convert goals into action. Put differently, the next phase of “effectiveness” may depend less on restating (or defining) international effectiveness principles or gathering political momentum for current standards – which will be difficult to do, given today's realities – and more on whether individual agencies can build the operational coherence and adaptive capacity required to live those principles in a more complex and contested landscape.

130 Sara Casadevall Bellés and Rachael Calleja, “The Evolution of the ODA Accounting Rules,” CGD Note 376 (London: Center for Global Development, 2024), <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/evolution-oda-accounting-rules.pdf>; OECD, “Modernising Official Development Assistance (ODA).” *ODA Standards*, accessed February 5, 2026, <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/oda-standards/modernising-official-development-assistance-oda.html>; Development Initiatives, *ODA Modernisation: Background Paper* (September 2017), https://devinit.github.io/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Background-paper_ODA-modernisation.pdf

Taken together, the series suggests that agencies' futures will turn on how they answer four strategic questions: what is our role and purpose; how do we improve impact under tighter budgets; how do we remain responsive and relevant to partner needs as contexts shift; and how do we evidence and communicate value to sustain legitimacy? Addressing these questions will require more than renewed principles or new narratives. It will require investments in the organisational fundamentals that translate priorities into action: people with the right skills, systems that enable collaboration and learning, processes that balance accountability with speed and adaptation, and incentives that reward coordination and long-term value creation. In this sense, strengthening effectiveness in the years ahead is inseparable from strengthening the organisational and procedural conditions that make effective practice feasible. The specific answers will necessarily vary by agency context. But the willingness to ask these questions – and to undertake the organizational reforms they imply – will increasingly separate agencies that can adapt and remain credible from those that struggle to sustain coherence, legitimacy, and, ultimately, relevance in the years ahead.

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