**Terms of reference for policy-supporting research**

**Using the Sustainable Development Goals as a compass**

1. **Context**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have changed the framework in which development cooperation works. Development cooperation is now part and parcel of a broader ‘2030 Agenda’ that integrates the economic, social and environmental dimensions and addresses the drivers of poverty and vulnerability by ensuring that no one is left behind.. The SDGs are ambitious, universal, integrated and indivisible. They bring new thinking on the entire development cooperation architecture, including the UN development system. Belgium, as a donor of development cooperation, committed to contributing to realizing those ambitious goals. The Belgian Development Cooperation therefore has decided to use the SDGs as building blocks, making the SDGs our compass that provides the overall orientation of our efforts towards a comprehensive Belgian development effort.

The SDGs are now in the third year of implementation. The Belgian development cooperation is still adapting to the new setting, and now wants to internalize and mainstream the SDGs. Changing the way from retrofitting the SDGs to the Belgian development cooperation, towards the use of the SDGs as the basis for our policies is the main challenge this research project needs to address.

1. **Defining the problem and identifying the fields of activity**
   1. Moving from silos towards an integrated approach with the SDGs as a compass.

The 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs are integrated and indivisible. It is therefore crucial that the Belgian strategies are internally coherent. Some of the Belgian priorities, such as inclusive economic growth, environmental sustainability, climate change, gender equality, etc are closely linked, but not always operationalised as such. Agenda 2030 offers the opportunity to make sure the Belgian strategies fully contribute to achieving the SDGs, while respecting the interlinkages that exist everywhere.

The SDGs commit everyone to leave no one behind. The Belgian Development Cooperation uses a rights-based approach, which is geared towards that commitment. This approach, however, is very complex and different in every country and sector where the Belgian Development Cooperation intervenes. While the principle as such is globally endorsed and receives much support, it is challenging to integrate it in some priority sectors or themes of the Belgian Development Cooperation. Is it possible to engage in private sector development while focusing on those who are left furthest behind, for instance? And if yes, how can this be done, in general but also in view of our focus on least developed countries and countries in situations of fragility? Streamlining “Leaving no one behind” through the Belgian policies and providing operational guidance for this purpose is necessary.

The research project will identify policy solutions that can leverage change across a number of different goals – in line with the priorities of the Belgian Development Cooperation.

* 1. No One Size fits all: Ensuring complementarity between the Belgian structures and instruments of development cooperation

The Belgian Development Cooperation finances different types of development actors, the main ones being Enabel (governmental cooperation), civil society organisations and institutional actors (non-governmental cooperation), BIO (development financing institution), and UN organisations and development banks (multilateral cooperation). It does so in variable time horizons : short term humanitarian aid, mid-term transition and longer term development cooperation. This makes for a complex structure in which every type of actor has its own specificities and is subject to different financial and administrative procedures.

For the governmental cooperation a vision of how the Belgian development cooperation wants to contribute to the SDGs is already developed to a large extent and will be rolled out in the coming months. For other channels, the partnerships are of a different nature, requiring different approaches to contribute to the SDGs and with varying levels of influence of the Belgian development cooperation on these approaches. The Belgian development cooperation wants to support a strong civil society and therefore respects their right of initiative, meaning that CSOs have the freedom to define their own priorities. While this is important as a principle, it makes it more complicated to demonstrate a contribution to the SDGs. Finding an approach that allows to show how the Belgian development cooperation contributes to the SDGs through its non-governmental partner organisations, while respecting their right of initiative is one of the questions in this research project. The same question is relevant in the context of the multilateral cooperation, since the Belgian development cooperation mostly applies core funding to its multilateral partner organisations, thus supporting the mandate and leadership of the respective organisations. How can Belgium contribute to the SDGs via its multilateral partnerships and demonstrate that?

* 1. Monitoring the Belgian contribution to the SDGs

With the use of the SDGs as a compass comes the question of how the Belgian development cooperation can monitor its contribution to the SDGs, while respecting the leadership of the partner governments in the local monitoring. The SDG results framework contains 252 indicators, some of which are not yet adequately defined. However, the OECD has demonstrated[[1]](#footnote-1) that there are indicators in the framework that can be used by donors in their development projects. These indicators are situated at output and outcome levels (rather than at impact level), are adequately defined and have available data in a majority of countries. the Belgian development cooperation has followed that approach for its governmental cooperation and is finalising a list with standard indicators to be used in its bilateral country portfolios. Not all indicators in that list come directly from the SDG results framework as it was not always possible to find a relevant indicator that could be used in a project context. Some indicators have therefore been adapted or, in certain cases, alternative indicators are taken from multilateral or normative organisations, trying to reflect as much as possible the original SDG target the Belgian development cooperation wants to contribute to. Drafting that list, however, is only the first step in operationalising this vision.

It is expected that many operational challenges will come up once they need to be applied in the Belgian partner countries. Given the fact that the Belgian development cooperation focuses on the least developed countries (LDCs), most of which are also in a context of fragility, there will undoubtedly be challenges with data availability and the measurement of the indicators. The research project will investigate whether the approach that is followed should be adapted or not. Specific attention will be given to interlinkages and the identification of silos, and possibilities of linking up with local data collection. For the other channels of the Belgian development cooperation, the research project will look into the possibilities to monitor the Belgian contribution to the SDGs, using the Belgian strategies as a starting point while keeping into account the specificities of the actors as described in point 2b.

As a horizontal focus in the work on monitoring the Belgian contribution to the SDG the researchers will focus on the principle of leaving no one behind and the internal coherence of the Belgian action, also to avoid that the positive results in the framework of one SDG could have adverse effects on others.

* 1. Learning

The 2018 OECD mid-term peer review encouraged the Belgian development cooperation to invest in a process of action-based learning and capturing evidence on the real time effects of its institutional and programmatic innovations[[2]](#footnote-2). Since the use of the SDGs as a compass is a programmatic innovation, it is important to establish a process that allows the Belgian development cooperation evaluate the extent to which the intended contribution is effectively delivered, but also to draw lessons from this in order to review the policies there where necessary. Despite the fact that the SDGs focus on long-term change, these lessons need to be timely enough to capture early signals indicating that the Belgian policies need to be reviewed. What are those early signals, how should they be captured and how can they be fed back into the policy cycle in a timely fashion? The research project will develop guidance on action-based learning in the framework of the SDGs. This guidance will make sure to focus on all levels of decision making.

Another important aspect of using the SDGs as compass is ensuring that relevant people have the relevant knowledge. The DG Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD) is mainly organised per channel, posing challenges in terms of horizontal learning. Some directorates have a geographic focus, others a more sectoral/thematic focus. The research project will develop and give training that is made to measure. This requires a vision of who needs to have what kind of knowledge in the framework of the SDGs and how to assure the necessary information is shared and used in order to fully play their role. The research project will come with a proposal for this.

1. **Expected results of policy support for Belgian Development Cooperation**
   1. Mapping of current links with SDGs

As the Belgian Development Cooperation has not measured nor monitored its contribution to the SDGs so far, the research project will begin with an in depth mapping of the current (theoretical) contribution of the Belgian development cooperation to the SDGs per channel. This will require a methodological framework in order to do so. Different perspectives can be taken into account : an input perspective (ODA) and an outcome perspective (objectives). The research project will make a discussion paper with the pros and cons of both perspectives and suggestions of an approach for the Belgian development cooperation. The approach that is accepted will then be used to do the mapping. Based on the mapping of the Belgian development cooperation, the research project will scan the Belgian development policies and identify areas where the two converge and diverge. Based on this study the research project will suggest possible changes in the Belgian policies in order to make them more relevant in order to contribute to the SDGs, there where necessary. The study will also look into the current SDG-reporting against a few strategy notes, and suggest how to better methodologically The results of the study will be presented in a report together with the suggestions for change.

* 1. Identifying opportunities and policy solutions for leveraging interlinkages

The research project will identify policy solutions that can leverage change across a number of different goals – in line with the priorities of the Belgian Development Cooperation. Given the breadth and width of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, it is suggested to focus on interlinkages between priority areas related to inclusive economic growth, environmental sustainability and climate change, and a rights based approach, while also focusing on the role of multi-stakeholder partnerships in this. This will incorporate recommendations for more coherence and will focus on leaving no one behind. Intermediary reports elaborating on the aspects of interlinkages/coherence and leaving no one behind are useful for discussion and for capacity building events in DGD and with Belgian actors.

* 1. Proposals for measuring the Belgian contribution in the governmental cooperation and beyond

The research project will study the approach that will be rolled out by then in the overall SDG-monitoring and the governmental cooperation and make suggestions for improvement. Case studies will be carried out (including field missions) to identify good practices and areas for improvement. A report will be presented with the results of this study and recommendations for improvement.

The other channels will be the subject of separate papers that will identify possibilities for measuring and monitoring the Belgian contribution to the SDGs. Case studies for the non-governmental and multilateral cooperation, humanitarian aid and BIO will be carried out that will result in separate proposals for an approach.

* 1. Learning

The research project will produce an approach for action-based learning in the framework of the SDGs. The approach needs to allow the Belgian development cooperation to develop short feedback loops which allow assessments of whether the intended effects and contribution to the SDGs are taking place or whether reorientations should happen and how. The approach should be mindful of the Belgian aid architecture, with the embassies playing an important role in keeping the finger on the pulse.

Capacity strengthening will be an integral part of the research project. All the products coming out of this project will be presented at DGD and actor staff in order to build up knowledge and raise people’s awareness of the importance of the SDGs. Workshops, conferences, trainings will suggested by the research team in function of what is considered most effective for the product in question.

1. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/the-2030-agenda-and-development-co-operation-results_2f391534-en> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.oecd.org/dac/peer-reviews/Belgium-mid-term-review-2018.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)