



# Adapting for Change: Country Strategy Approach in Fragile Contexts – selected highlights of the evaluation report

## Background and rationale for the evaluation of Finnish Country Strategy approach in Fragile Contexts

Finland's development cooperation with its long-term partner countries is planned and implemented under a Country Strategy approach, that in its present form was launched in 2012. The Country Strategies encompass bilateral and earmarked multi-bilateral development assistance managed by the Regional Departments. The purpose of the approach is to bring country-level policy and programmatic engagement into a broader framework of results-based management (RBM).

While the implementation of several Country Strategies has been evaluated before, the Country Strategies for the most fragile partner countries has not been assessed as an entity until now. This time the country strategy evaluation took an approach that differs from the earlier evaluations: rather than concentrating on the results of cooperation, it was considered more useful to **assess the applicability and feasibility of the Country Strategy instrument in fragile contexts**, given their specific challenges and requirements. Findings are expected to inform the next generation of Country Strategies that are currently being finalized.

The evaluation drew evidence from the experience of Country Strategies in **four countries**, namely Afghanistan, Myanmar, occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Somalia and in **one region**, i.e. the Strategy for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian aid in response to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq was included, to draw wider findings and conclusions. The evaluation covered the period 2012 – current.

Country Strategies are prepared for long-term partners and encompass bilateral and earmarked multi-bilateral development assistance under the control of MFA's Regional Departments.

In this summary the Evaluation unit highlights interesting findings and conclusions reached by the Evaluation Team lead by Dr. Julia Betts and a team of 18 international experts.

## Finland was an early adapter of the fragility approach and has over years contributed to its international conceptual and normative development

Finland has participated in several of the key international initiatives in addressing fragility, including:

- International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (2008)
- New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States (2012)
- Stockholm Declaration (2016)

Finland's wider engagement in these normative processes was not a central focus for this evaluation but was considered relevant in terms of the backdrop for the evolution of its strategic thinking, and for its contributions to the wider international agenda on the issue.

## Many Faces of Fragility

The report acknowledges that the four countries and one region featured in this evaluation are diverse in terms of the root causes, sources and effects of their fragility. The common factor in each context is high volatility and risk propensity. Finland's co-operation in all five contexts is characterised by a channelling of bilateral resources through multilateral organisations and international development finance institutions. Also the five Country Strategies studied in the evaluation are diverse. In particular, in Afghanistan, the Country Strategy takes the form of a parliamentary-agreed White Paper, including explicit objectives for foreign and security or trade policy. For Syria/Iraq, Finland has adopted a regional strategy, which supports both Syria and the surrounding countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq).

## Varying scope and uses of Country Strategies

There were several factors that explain the variance in format, content and scope. One explanation is that Finland's Country Strategies in the five fragile contexts were designed through different processes. In Somalia and Syria/Iraq, time pressure meant rapid development. In Myanmar, the formulation of the Country Strategy was initiated simultaneously with re-prioritising Finland's long-term development cooperation countries in Asia (MFA October 2019: interview). By contrast, in occupied Palestinian territory, a lengthy design process was guided by human rights assessment and a preparatory study, which included consultations with stakeholders. In Afghanistan, the White Paper status meant that Parliamentary approval was required.

The evaluation team found out that also the use of country strategies varied from country to country. Generally, the partner organizations and partner country administrations were not familiar with or even aware of the existence of country strategies.

### Box 1 Country Strategy uses

#### Internally-facing

- As an internal strategic guide for bilateral assistance provided by Regional Departments (all five contexts)
- For internal management and accountability (Occupied Palestinian territory, Myanmar, Somalia and Syria/Iraq)

#### Externally-facing

- To confirm/legitimise financing choices made (Myanmar, Occupied Palestinian territory, Somalia)
- To articulate Finland's position/inform formal policy dialogue (Occupied Palestinian territory, Somalia, Syria/Iraq)
- (For Afghanistan specifically): To provide the Finnish Parliament with updates on Finland's support to Afghanistan

**Related recommendation: 1) Explicitly conceptualise the Country Strategy approach as a tool for adaptive management in fragile contexts, building links between humanitarian and development assistance where possible.**

## Finnish aid is relevant and well aligned with partner countries' priorities

The report concludes that while programmatic assistance was well-aligned with both national strategies and plans, and with the vast needs of direct beneficiaries and national authorities, the positive findings could not be linked to Country Strategies that provided limited guidance to programme partners on ensuring appropriate targeting.

Key dialogue priorities were appropriate to context, and geared to statebuilding, though not informed by Finland's multilateral agency influencing plans. In volatile environments, Finland's programmatic assistance showed some adaptation to conditions over time. However, the Country Strategy approach can further support adaptive capacity.

Finland's strategic choices at country level have been based on three main foci: 1. Development policy priorities provide rationales for Finnish engagement in all countries; 2. National/international strategies and plans, if relevant, and 3. Finland's existing portfolio in the contexts

- In Afghanistan, for example, the White Paper's impact areas of improved justice, security, good governance and human rights, improved basic public services, and a diversified economic base are geared to the international community's goals in the country.
- In Myanmar, the Country Strategy and some choices for intervention funding informed each other through an iterative process
- In occupied Palestinian territory, impact areas of (1) Palestinian children's right to equitable and quality education and (2) Strengthened resilience in vulnerable areas were selected based on Finland's existing portfolio and the National Policy Agenda of the Palestinian Authority.
- In Somalia, where the Country Strategy experienced a rapid preparation process, the selected impact areas (statebuilding and women and girls' rights) were largely framed around existing interventions.
- In Syria/Iraq, the Strategy was developed around an existing 'legacy' portfolio of interventions, and was understood as a transitional mechanism to guide a new regional approach for Finland's engagement.

The evaluation team noted that there is a strong attention to statebuilding and peacebuilding concerns within Country Strategies. While Finland has a good reputation as a principled and neutral actor in fragile states, its conceptual approach to statebuilding and a rigorous approach to risks should be improved.

Positive results were achieved in policy dialogue and informal consultations.

## Carefully selected partners

The evaluation report states that Finland has feasible choice of working mostly through multilateral organizations and CSOs combined with clear rationales for partner selection.

Beneath the choice of modality, the selection of specific organisations for implementation, whether multilateral or CSO, had clear rationales. For the 46 projects for which data was available, 36 (79%) contained a clear rationale for partner selection.

Partner choices were determined by:

- Mandate and expertise
- Capacity/leadership in the specific area of intervention
- Presence and outreach within the context
- Ability to target a specific area or population
- Satisfaction with prior results
- Occupying a specific niche

## ...but also room for improvement in the areas of analyses

Strategic priorities for Country Strategies were aligned with – but not determined by – conflict and fragility factors. The analytical basis of Country Strategies in terms of conflict and fragility should be improved.

According to the evaluation report, the key areas to improve in Country Strategy Approach in fragile contexts include sharpening the analytical basis and making the strategies more comprehensive. More rigid analyses were called for

- Fragility
- Conflict sensitivity
- Needs (including capacity development needs of government or other stakeholders)

The report points to the diversity of needs in fragile and conflict-affected contexts – as for other humanitarian and development settings. They range from the needs of affected populations to those of civil society, government and other institutions, which may need support for capacity strengthening and institution-building. According to the report, planning and programming in fragile situations should take into consideration the “importance of a systems-building approach, focused on the adoption of medium-term partnerships to build policy and strategy frameworks, improve capacities and strengthen ownership”. As regards beneficiaries’ needs, the report notes the absence

of disaggregation of needs: “Within all five Country Strategies, the single area where disaggregation was definitively included is women and girls, cascading directly down from development policy priorities. However, the categorisation is limited to these broad-brush categories. Other categories of vulnerability – which may be strongly present in the context – are not reflected in Country Strategies.”

**Related recommendation: 2) Enhance the technical rigour of Country Strategies in fragile situations, geared to specific peacebuilding and statebuilding aims in the context and with strong attention to risk.**

## MFA’s Human Rights Based Approach

One of the recommendations made by the Evaluation team is that in order to better “walk the talk” in human rights based approach the assessment of progress against human rights realisation through financed programming should be included in Mid Term Reviews of each Country Strategy.

CSO-financed initiatives should clearly demonstrate the use of human rights-based approaches, including clear rationales for targeting specific rights. For multilateral initiatives, where relevant, the use of safeguarding mechanisms should be clearly verified.

“MFA may consider integrating a robust human rights context analysis into the strengthened political economy analyses (PEA), and requiring all revised Country Strategies to include a clear statement, based on analysis, of which specific rights are being targeted in the context; why Finland is well positioned to address them; and how (alone/in partnership; through funded initiatives or policy dialogue; etc.). Additionally, MFA should require all Country Strategy revisions in fragile environments to review the relevant human rights body/architecture in the context and present a feasibility assessment for support.”

Assessment of progress against human rights realisation through financed programming should be included in Mid Term Reviews of the Country Strategies.

**Related recommendation: 6) Ensure more rigorous treatment of the Human Rights-Based Approach in fragile contexts.**

## Some recommendations already responded to

During late 2018 and early 2019, MFA worked to develop the concept for a more comprehensive approach to country strategies. The report notes that while not specific to fragile contexts, the revised instructions for the preparation of the Country Strategy and Country Programme for Development Cooperation, issued in January 2020, respond to the more comprehensive approach, for example by requiring consultations with the different Departments/Units when mapping out the prioritized means of implementation for the strategic goals of the Country Strategies. Linked to an intensified focus on the 'triple nexus' of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding action, the focus has been on adapting existing processes and systems.

Under the new Country Strategy guidance also the risk systems are more developed. For instance, there is a requirement to identify the causes and potential consequences of the risk, as well intended risk treatment. The new guidance also identifies three main categories of risk (strategic, operative and financial), but does not yet specify political or conflict/fragility-related risks.

**Related recommendation: 5) Refresh or revise the key policy frameworks for working in fragile contexts and 4) Enhance RBM systems allied to the Country Strategy to maximise their value with a specific emphasis on risk in fragile context.**

## Evaluation Criteria, Methodology and Limitations

**The evaluation applied four main evaluation criteria** to guide the overall enquiry; Relevance, Effectiveness, Coherence and Connectedness. Evaluation questions were aligned to these criteria.

**Evaluation design adopted a highly systematic approach** drawing evidence from across the corporate systems of MFA, as well as the experience of Country Strategies in Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Somalia and Syria/Iraq. Six 'evidence streams' shown in the graph below were applied through a sequential approach, building the evidence base through progressively deeper analysis as the evaluation proceeded. These comprised: (1). Institutional systems analysis (2). 387 stakeholders interviewed (3). Quantitative analysis of Finnish assistance to the five relevant contexts for the period 2012–2018 (4). Desk analysis of 64 projects in the five contexts (5) Field missions to the five contexts in September and October 2019 and (6) Learning from other organisations. Findings were validated with MFA in workshops held in February 2020.

**Main limitations to the evaluation:** Results data for the study was limited, being based on a combination of project reviews/evaluations and Country Strategy results reporting, triangulated by interview and other

qualitative data. Results presented by the evaluation are therefore caveated accordingly.

- The evaluation includes findings up to December 2019, the point at which data gathering closed. Concurrently, MFA was moving ahead with re-designing its Country Strategy approach. Efforts were made to ensure coherence between the two processes, in order that both were mutually constructive/reinforcing. However, revised Country Strategy guidance issued in January 2020 as this evaluation report was being drafted. While the revised guidance has been incorporated into the evaluation where feasible, the evaluation's design and data gathering applied the former guidance, dated 2016.
- Finally, the component case studies presented in Volume 2 of the evaluation report do not comprise full evaluations of Finnish assistance in a given context. Accordingly, they do not claim to provide a definitive performance assessment of all Finnish assistance provided during the period 2012–current. Rather, they offer limited insights to the context, generated through a systematic approach, to inform the wider evaluative process.



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