



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC

Evaluation 2014/3

Evaluation of SDC's Thematic Networks



Evaluation of

SDC's Thematic Networks

Commissioned by the Evaluation and Corporate Controlling Division
of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Contents:

- I Evaluation Abstract**
- II Senior Management Response**
- III Evaluators' Final Report**

Annexes and Case Studies (CD)

Bern, December 2014

Evaluation Process

Evaluations commissioned by SDC Senior Management were introduced in SDC in 2002 with the aim of providing a more critical and independent assessment of SDC activities. These Evaluations are conducted according to the OECD DAC Evaluation Standards and are part of SDC's concept for implementing Article 170 of the Swiss Constitution which requires Swiss Federal Offices to analyse the effectiveness of their activities. SDC's **Senior Management** (consisting of the Director General and the heads of SDC's departments) approves the Evaluation Program. The **Evaluation and Corporate Controlling Division**, which is outside of line management and reports directly to the Director General, commissions the evaluation, taking care to recruit evaluators with a critical distance from SDC.

The Evaluation and Corporate Controlling Division identifies the primary intended users of the evaluation and invites them to participate in a **Core Learning Partnership (CLP)**. The CLP actively accompanies the evaluation process. It comments on the evaluation design (Approach Paper). It provides feedback to the evaluation team on their preliminary findings and on the draft report. During a Synthesis Workshop, the CLP validated the evaluation findings and conclusions and, with the facilitation of the SDC Evaluation Officer and the Evaluation Team, elaborated recommendations and lessons learned for SDC. These are noted in the **Agreement at Completion Point (ACP)**.

Based on the **Final Evaluator's Report** and the ACP, members of the middle management of SDC drafted the **Senior Management Response (SMR)**. The SMR was subsequently approved by SDC's Senior Management.

The ACP and the SMR are published together with the Final Evaluators' Report. For further details regarding the evaluation process see the Approach Paper in the annex and on the CD attached.

Timetable

Step	When
Approach Paper finalized	December 2013
Implementation of the evaluation	March 2014
Agreement at Completion Point	June 2014
Senior Management Response in SDC	September 2014

I Long Evaluation Abstract

Donor	SDC – Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
Report title	External Evaluation: Thematic Networks in the SDC
Geographic area	Global
Sector	Multisector Other: Thematic networks
Language	English
Date	October 2014
Authors	Breard & Associates: Patrick Breard, Lene Poulsen, Judith Kallick Russell

Subject Description

This report is an independent evaluation of the functioning and results of the Thematic Networks in the SDC. The evaluation considers in particular the contribution of the networks to SDC's operational and policy work, to the quality of its strategies and policies, and to SDC's thematic competence and knowledge management. It covers the period 2009-2013. The Evaluation does not compare the networks but focuses on the network structure as such.

Evaluation Methodology

The Evaluation applied mixed methods and analysis tools. Data collection included review of existing documentation and the collection of new data through face-to-face and telephone interviews with network stakeholders at headquarters and in Swiss County Offices (SCOs), a general online survey of the 12 existing Thematic Networks and a user survey among network members. The data collection also included case studies in three SCOs (Benin, Kyrgyzstan, and Nicaragua) and benchmarking studies of thematic networks in other donor agencies (particularly Sida and DFID). The analysis tools consisted of stakeholder analysis, network analysis, and an assumption and contribution analysis.

Major Findings and Conclusions

The thematic network structure was a critical tool for SDC's 2008 reorganization and mandate to promote learning, share knowledge, provide theme-related operational advice, capitalize on experiences, and formulate good practices to ultimately improve operations in the field. The network structure is particularly important in a decentralized organization, where multidirectional vertical and horizontal communications is important to increase regional and local ownership. Overall, the established network structure has proven able to respond to the functions defined in the mandate of the thematic networks in terms of promoting learning and passing on professional and methodological knowledge; providing theme-related operational advice to the organizational units within the network; and capitalizing on experience and identifying good practices. The efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of the thematic networks vary and are continuously developing and adapting, as they should be, particularly for a relatively new organizational structure where the official reorganization phase only finished in 2012.

While the overall structure seems to have arrived at a relatively stable state in terms of network functioning with effective use of general networking tools such as face-to-face meetings, there is now a need to further develop a systematic, results-based mechanism that will facilitate more focused, impactful results and a use of the networks as organizational tools rather than objectives per se. While the general concept of the thematic network structure as the modus operandi for SDC's thematic focus has been internalized throughout the organization, there are still uncertainties about how best to use the networks including roles and responsibilities and network members are generally not claiming full ownership and engagement. This is reflected for instance, in the tendency for limited pro-activeness of the members in the daily functioning of the networks such as D-groups and e-discussions where a dynamic dialogue rarely develops and most communication is vertical with very limited horizontal communication.

Some of the challenges to the daily functioning are related to practical issues such as language barriers. However, there are also challenges with regard to the perceived relevance of some of the network functions, such as technical advice and sharing of good practices where the SCO demand is often specific and requires adapted solutions rather than global advice.

The challenge for SDC to focus thematically, which has often been highlighted for instance in OECD DAC peer reviews, seems to be reinforced through the current network structure with the thematic networks distributed throughout the organizational units, drawing attention in 12 directions. Thus far, there are only limited structures put in place to ensure an integrated approach of the thematic networks. As a result, the general perception of SDC as a strong thematic organization has decreased in spite of the fact that staff directly involved in technical activities has increased through the network structure.

Priorities for Change

The priority areas for change include Role and responsibility of the thematic networks in SDC's structure; Functioning and effectiveness (use of different instruments); Outcomes (thematic advice, knowledge management for improved thematic quality, policy); Design and anchorage (focus areas, local-regional-global); and Membership profiles.

Summary Recommendations

- SDC should continue with thematic networks to strengthen thematic quality of its operations and policy.
- Each thematic network should apply result-based management to clearly define their contributions to SDC operations.
- Thematic networks should strengthen their efficiency with special focus on responding to SCO needs.
- The thematic networks should strengthen the integrated thematic approach.
- SDC should foster a learning culture.
- SDC should ensure that the network architecture is optimal.

II Senior Management Response

Evaluation of SDC's Thematic Networks

Recommendations (Evaluation Team - ET)	Proposed concrete measures (Core learning partnership - CLP)	Management Response (Steering Committee)
<p><u>Recommendation 1:</u></p> <p>SDC should continue with thematic networks to strengthen thematic quality of its operations and policy.</p> <p>Senior management should establish an overall steering group for the thematic network structure with participation of representatives from senior management, SCOs, management of thematic networks, quality assurance section, and K&LP to coordinate and monitor the thematic network structure and ensure that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The thematic focus and activities of the thematic networks are explicitly integrated in key operational processes, including the full Project Cycle Management and human resource management, The thematic focus of the networks is aligned with the thematic priorities presented in the Bills to the Parliament and priority domains of Country Strategies, Procedures are established to ensure that thematic networks for areas that are no more in demand by SDC's operations will be reorganized either through integration of the themes into other thematic networks or by ceasing the focus to the area, Each network has a well-functioning network management, including focal points, network facilitators, theme managers, and a core / steering group with participation of SDC network members from headquarters and SCOs, Each thematic network develops structure, functions, 	<p>CLP <u>partly agrees</u> with Evaluation Team</p> <p>The CLP agrees with the recommendation in the sense that TNW should be stronger positioned and better used through greater recognition of their values. However, the CLP believes that the creation of an additional body (network stakeholder group) is not the key to achieve that. Instead, the CLP believes that the senior Management should develop a better ownership on this topic and that the representation of the TNW in senior management bodies, in BoD discussions and further forums (retreat, Politik-Fragen, etc) should be more prominent.</p> <p>The CLP agrees with the ET that internal human resource investment is an issue (however, that does not account for financial resources which it considers mostly adequate). In line with that, SDC should develop a medium term thematic profile.</p> <p><u>Proposed concrete measures</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Include K&LP as permanent representation of focal points in the relevant platforms of the senior management</i> 	<p>Management <u>partly agrees</u> with ET</p> <p>The BoD agrees that it will involve itself more in issues of thematic networks and learning, notably during its retreats</p> <p>However, it does neither agree with nominating one of its members as "champion" for general networks issues nor with including K&LP as permanent representation of focal points in senior management meetings.</p> <p>But instead, in view of further improving TNW management, TNW issues will be addressed in the Status report and taken up by Team managers at least once a year at Senior management level in relevant platforms such as retreats of SDC Directorate.</p> <p>BoD agrees with CLP to elaborate a medium to long-term thematic profile for SDC in light of forthcoming thematic priorities on the next Bill to Parliament 2017-2020.</p>

Recommendations (Evaluation Team - ET)	Proposed concrete measures (Core learning partnership - CLP)	Management Response (Steering Committee)
<p>and priorities according to specific needs and opportunities for that network,</p> <p>f. Ensure that technology is in place and is being used for full integration of National Program Officers in network planning and other network management activities such as participation in core/steering groups,</p> <p>g. Thematic networks are innovative, proactive, and support the organization's changing needs in a complex environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Appoint a member of the directorate as champion for TNW and the implementation of the recommendations of this evaluation (e.g. WPI)</i> • <i>Elaborate a medium to long-term thematic profile for SDC</i> 	
<p><u>Recommendation 2:</u></p> <p>Each thematic network should apply result-based management to clearly define their contributions to SDC operations.</p> <p>The network management in consultation with the whole network should apply rolling multi-year planning and result-based management with special focus on SCO needs and SCO knowledge resources that should/could be mobilized through the network. The result-based management work plans should include indicators and targets for network activities at output and outcomes levels. Moreover, the multi-year plans should clearly identify:</p> <p>a. Contributions to the full Project Cycle Management with identification of roles and responsibilities of Network Members and the bureaucratic processes for mobilizing Network Members, including role of Focal Points, Theme Managers, and Core Members, for different forms of technical support through different network tools such as peer support, field visits, and virtual support, and according to specific criteria,</p> <p>b. The role of Focal Points to decide when to respond directly to a request for technical advice, when to involve National Program Officers, or when to involve the entire network,</p>	<p>CLP <u>agrees</u> with Evaluation Team</p> <p>The CLP recognizes the importance of multi-year planning. In fact, most of the FP and TNWs are already using key instruments of results-based management for their respective mandates.</p> <p>Nevertheless the CLP also stresses the importance of the characteristics of the TNWs in terms of flexibility, innovativeness, and responsiveness. Therefore the implementation of RBM should not lead to a bureaucratization of TNW and it should specifically focus on contribution logic to outputs and outcomes on policy, normative and operational level.</p> <p>The CLP recognizes the definition of theories of change for the FP and TNWs as key instruments to achieve an adequate RBM.</p> <p><u>Proposed concrete measures</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Plan activities based on theories of</i> 	<p>Management <u>partly agrees</u> with ET</p> <p>BoD agrees with the CLP that rigid medium term planning is not appropriate to make networks' contributions to SDC's operations and policies more visible and accountable.</p> <p>TNW do already apply annual planning and thus contribute to RBM of the institution as a whole. Nonetheless, TNW contributions to SDC operations ought to be "client oriented" and respond to the needs of the institution as a whole, including SCO.</p> <p>In this regard, each TNW should be managed on the basis of a medium term strategy paper (Leitdokument B), with outcomes and indicators relevant to SDC's operational and policy needs and priorities.</p>

Recommendations (Evaluation Team - ET)	Proposed concrete measures (Core learning partnership - CLP)	Management Response (Steering Committee)
<p>c. Regular monitoring of thematic quality at all phases of the Project Cycle Management, for instance through systematic participation of Focal Points and /or Network Members,</p> <p>d. Systematic mainstreaming of the thematic networks in Project Documents,</p> <p>e. Priority needs of SCOs in a demand driven manner based on systematic monitoring of SCO knowledge needs with identification of most appropriate means of knowledge sharing and thematic advice according to the specific SCO,</p> <p>f. Role of regional and thematic sub-groups in the delivery of thematic network outcomes, specifying the role of Regional Advisors as link between regional and global knowledge and know-how including capacities to link the regional and global levels.</p>	<p><i>change.</i></p>	
<p>Recommendation 3:</p> <p>Thematic networks should strengthen their efficiency with special focus on responding to SCO needs</p> <p>The network management should review and continuously develop network processes to promote efficiency, including:</p> <p>a. Development of a multi-directional communication strategy to promote horizontal communication, including spontaneous knowledge sharing,</p> <p>b. Development and coordination of regional and thematic sub-groups according to needs expressed by Network Members and SDC Senior Management, and define the roles, responsibilities, and structures of regional and thematic sub-groups in the overall network structure,</p> <p>c. Strengthening network animation through training and special recruitment with focus on promoting network initiatives by regular members, foster network</p>	<p>CLP disagrees with Evaluation Team</p> <p>The CLP finds that FP and TNWs should be responsive to SDC in general, while policy demands of the head quarter addressed to FPs should not jeopardize operational needs of SCOs. Strengthening the functioning of TNW to this effect is not a matter of efficiency but a matter of relevance.</p> <p>In order to strengthen relevance and functioning, the CLP initiates a new effort to clarify the specific mandate of each TNW in a bottom up process. The core mandates of the TNWs should be defined taking into account the differences between the 12 networks. This should include reinforcement as well as revising of responsibilities of the network</p>	<p>Management partly agrees with ET</p> <p>The BoD agrees that TNWs should strengthen their effectiveness/ efficiency but also their relevance in responding to the SCOs' needs. However, part of their tasks is also to support other units of SDC including HOs and representation offices with multilateral organisations.</p> <p>Furthermore, as SCOs are integral parts of TNW, the later have also a particular responsibility to train local staff, empower them in assuming their responsibilities, and in general strengthening a learning culture.</p> <p>Moreover, BoD expects the head of divisions responsible for thematic areas to be active in validating and disseminating</p>

Recommendations (Evaluation Team - ET)	Proposed concrete measures (Core learning partnership - CLP)	Management Response (Steering Committee)
<p>ownership, and increase network facilitation to trigger queries from field staffs on D-groups,</p> <p>d. Development and sharing of know-how and not just thematic knowledge,</p> <p>e. Development of good practices, lessons learned, and thematic reports based on SCO needs and input,</p> <p>f. Improvement of existing networks tools, particularly trainings, technical workshops, development of technical and position papers,</p> <p>g. Introduction of new members to networks with one-on-one consultations – written or verbal –between representatives from network management and new members to improve their understanding of their roles and responsibilities and the opportunities the network offers,</p> <p>h. Continuous thematic training for network members according to needs and opportunities,</p> <p>i. Update the yellow book for easier reference for users of network services and develop overview of technical capacities available among the members of the network with identification of their geographic location,</p> <p>j. Explanation of role of SDC Communication Officers at headquarters and in the field within the communication about network roles and activities.</p>	<p>management (line managers, theme managers, focal points, and thematic program officers).</p> <p>Specific activities regarding the functioning of TNW can be defined only based on an updated core mandate and taking into account all NW audience.</p> <p><u>Proposed concrete measures</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce and revise the mandate and responsibilities of the network management. 	<p>innovative approaches and methodologies, and sharing good practices and lessons learned across SDC and its partners in a systematic way, with the support of K&LP.</p>
<p><u>Recommendation 4:</u></p> <p>The thematic networks should strengthen the integrated thematic approach</p> <p>Focal Points of all thematic networks should ensure joint planning to maximize their complementarity in support to SCO priority domains with special focus on:</p> <p>a. Defining complementarity for joint support to the Project Cycle Management,</p>	<p><u>CLP partly agrees with Evaluation Team</u></p> <p>The CLP agrees that harmonization and coordination of TNW activities are crucial; however joint planning should not be a purpose in itself. Rather, synergies among different TNWs should be exploited when relevant and based on needs which result from operational activities touching upon</p>	<p><u>Management partly agrees with ET</u></p> <p>Unlike the recommendation of the Evaluation Team, BoD agrees with the CLP and hence does not see the need for TNW to go for joint planning. However, TNW should be encouraged to further strengthen internetwork collaboration and develop complementarities according to operational</p>

Recommendations (Evaluation Team - ET)	Proposed concrete measures (Core learning partnership - CLP)	Management Response (Steering Committee)
<p>b. Defining cross-cutting network activities, including Face-to-Face, training, and peer support,</p> <p>c. Establishing a website for joint planning and coordinated activities for easy reference.</p>	<p>different, ev. cross-cutting, thematic domains.</p> <p>Moreover it is not only the FP's task to initiate integrated approaches but the initiative should also be expressed by NW members, in particular field staff, program officers and the line management.</p> <p>Also, the CLP considers that the suggestion for thematic career clusters, such as a green cluster would strengthen TNW harmonization and the model of thematic careers as such.</p> <p>It should also be recognized that most of the TNWs have constructive collaboration with external networks and international centers of thematic excellence.</p> <p><u>Proposed concrete measures</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • propose clusters for the thematic career • Encourage the network members, in particular field staff, program officers and the line management to initiate integrated approaches 	<p>needs and opportunities.</p> <p>As suggested by the CLP, thematic staff profiles should be clustered according to thematic priorities of the next Bill to Parliament 2017-20.</p> <p>Ideally, thematic staff profiles and related careers should be organized around clustered (interlinked) thematic issues such as green or social sector.</p>
<p><u>Recommendation 5:</u></p> <p>SDC should foster a learning culture.</p> <p>Senior Management should strengthen a learning culture that will embrace successes, failures, and risk taking. To achieve this, Senior Management should develop:</p> <p>a. A strategy for the role of risk taking in thematic networks and processes for systematically learning from success and failures and scale up innovations,</p>	<p>CLP agrees with Evaluation Team</p> <p>The CLP notes the Evaluation's findings about the importance of explicit senior management leadership in promoting a learning culture based on opportunities and risk-taking has been highlighted in recent evaluations of DFID, including their systematic use of instruments such as</p>	<p>Management agrees with ET</p> <p>A good learning culture is of particular importance for SDC. Learning from successes but also from failures strengthens its credibility and hence should be promoted by SDC management. In this regard, BoD expects TNW to be more active in reflecting and reporting on</p>

Recommendations (Evaluation Team - ET)	Proposed concrete measures (Core learning partnership - CLP)	Management Response (Steering Committee)
<p>b. Guidelines for partnerships for knowledge and know-how development and sharing with special attention to the role of knowledge and know-how partnerships in the thematic networks,</p> <p>c. Implement existing or develop new processes to encourage institutional knowledge and expertise and not just individual learning,</p> <p>d. A strategy for learning from others including the role of external partners in the networks and the use of differentiation between outcome-oriented network memberships with well-defined roles and responsibilities for all members and D-groups where more passive membership is an option,</p> <p>e. Strengthen the role of thematic learning in SDC's organizational training concepts,</p> <p>f. Guidelines for Line Managers to incentivize and reward knowledge sharing.</p>	<p>'failure-fairs'.</p> <p>Moreover, the CLP also recognizes the importance of appropriate reward schemes for a learning culture based on successes and failures as recommended by the Knowledge Management Evaluation (2009).</p> <p><u>Proposed concrete measures</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Foster and support innovation with appropriate reward schemes for a learning culture.</i> 	<p>operational and policy successes as well as failures and challenges.</p> <p>BoD believes however that setting standards should not be overemphasized to the detriment of learning. Thus BoD is of the opinion that additional guidelines and strategies are not required.</p>
<p><u>Recommendation 6:</u></p> <p>SDC should ensure that the network structure is optimal.</p> <p><u>In future adaptations of SDC's organizational structure, Senior Management should consider the optimal network architecture, including organizational anchorage, the role and responsibilities of Theme Managers and Focal Points, and the number of thematic networks, with special attention to:</u></p> <p>a. The different roles and needs for Theme Managers in the different domains,</p> <p>b. Authority of Focal Points to negotiate directly with the Line Managers outside their own line the use of network members time for network activities, for instance for providing horizontal cooperation,</p> <p>c. Ensuring that an integrated thematic approach will be favored.</p>	<p>CLP agrees with Evaluation Team</p> <p>The CLP agrees with the finding in the Evaluation that the TNWs have been able to adapt to an organizational set-up that is not always optimal. The situation of networks with the backing of a global program is different from the situation of networks without such a strong thematic anchorage and authority (e.g. regarding human resources and network management).</p> <p>The anchorage of TNWs in geographic units of focal points may be counterproductive to the effectiveness of the TNWs, since the insufficient institutional authority of FP on thematic standards does not sufficiently</p>	<p>The recommendation is not applicable at this moment as it is meant for possible future adaptations of SDC's organisational structure.</p> <p>Nonetheless BoD is aware that there is room for improvement with regard to TNW architecture as well as roles and responsibilities within the TNW. Adjustments will be done in view of the thematic orientations of the next Bill to Parliament.</p>

Recommendations (Evaluation Team - ET)	Proposed concrete measures (Core learning partnership - CLP)	Management Response (Steering Committee)
	<p>support the application of best operational practices (thematic quality standards) in other organizational units. Therefore, it should be further detailed what an optimal architecture (not structure) should look like, taking into account the differences between TNWs.</p> <p>Also the repartition of responsibilities between FP, theme managers, core group members and line managers should be clarified.</p> <p><u>Proposed concrete measures</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rethink and define optimal network architectures for different types of networks. In particular the anchorage of TNW in organizational units. • Define repartition of responsibilities between FP, theme managers, core group members and line managers 	
	<p><u>Further recommendations by the CLP</u></p> <p>The CLP recommends that the K&LP will lead a (participatory) mapping exercise identifying the different mandates and responsibilities of the FP and the diversity of the focus and structure of TNW, for instance different focal point set-ups, different roles of core groups and different levels of participation of boundary partners.</p> <p>The mapping exercise should result in a proposal on structuring/setting up of the</p>	<p>BoD does not see the need to go for a complete mapping of the TNW.</p> <p>BoD is however in favor of conducting a light mapping of the financial and human resources of the focal points, which should ultimately be a basis to optimize the TNW management.</p> <p>The light mapping will be carried out by K&LP, who will report to BoD within 6</p>

Recommendations (Evaluation Team - ET)	Proposed concrete measures (Core learning partnership - CLP)	Management Response (Steering Committee)
	<p>different TNWs and clarified responsibilities of actors in line with recommendation 6.</p> <p>Based on the findings on the relationship with boundary partners (including i.e. NGOs, multilateral Organizations, other federal offices and centers of expertise) a policy for partnership and membership should be suggested by the FPs.</p>	<p>months.</p>

III Evaluators' Final Report

Evaluation of SDC's Thematic Networks

Commissioned by the Evaluation and Corporate Controlling Division
of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Breard & Associates SARL, St. Alban - France

Patrick Breard patrick@breard.com

Lene Poulsen lene.poulsen@gmail.com

Judith Kallick Russell jkallickrussell@yahoo.com

October 2014

Acknowledgements

The Evaluation team would like to thank all those who have supported and informed this study. Without their rich and frank input the Evaluation would not have been so precisely substantiated. We are particularly grateful to the members of the Core Learning Partnership who have provided insightful perspectives and shared advice throughout this process. We are also thankful to Gita Swamy-Meier Ewert for her critical review and support throughout the design and report writing phases.

We would like to thank the cooperation offices in Benin, Kyrgyzstan, and Nicaragua. They have supported us with their time and attention and have shared experiences and expectations that have directly contributed to substantiate this study. We are also grateful to Sida and DFID staff for allowing us to learn from their experience.

Finally the Evaluation team would like to thank Herbert Schmid and his colleagues in the Evaluation and Controlling Division for providing careful, day-to-day guidance throughout the assignment.

Table of Contents

- Executive Summary.....1**
- 1. Introduction.....4**
 - 1.1 Evaluation Methodology6
 - 1.2 Context.....8
- 2. Findings.....9**
 - 2.1 Relevance9
 - 2.1.1 Twelve Thematic Networks 10
 - 2.1.2 Coherence between the Thematic Networks and SDC Mandate 11
 - 2.2 Efficiency / Effectiveness 13
 - 2.2.1 Organizational Framework 14
 - 2.2.2 Activities and Contributions 19
 - 2.2.3 Thematic Networks in Other Organizations 23
 - 2.3 Impact..... 25
 - 2.3.1 Theory of Change..... 25
 - 2.3.2 SDC Operations 26
 - 2.3.3 External Partners..... 29
 - 2.3.4 Thematic Excellence 30
 - 2.3.5 Unexpected Side Effects 30
 - 2.4 Sustainability 31
 - 2.4.1 Networks as Value Added 31
 - 2.4.2 Organizational Thematic Learning..... 32
- 3. Conclusions 32**
- 4. Lessons Learned..... 33**
- 5. Recommendations 34**
- Annexes..... 37**

Acronyms and Abbreviations

A&FS	Agriculture and Food Security Network
BOD	Board of Directors
CLP	Core Learning Partnership
CEDRIG	Climate, Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction Integration
CC&E	Climate Change and Environment Network
C&HR	Conflict and Human Rights Network
CS	Country Strategy
CSPM	Conflict Sensitive Program Management
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFID	UK Department for International Development
DLGN	Decentralization and Local Governance Network
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction (Network)
E&I	Employment and Income Network
FDFA	Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
F2F	Face to Face
FP	Focal Point
HQ	Headquarters
HRBA	Human Rights Based Approach
K&LP	Knowledge and Learning Processes Division
MeRV	Monitoring of development-relevant changes
MoB	Management by Objectives
M4P	Making Markets Work for the Poor
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPO	National Project Officer
KM	Knowledge Management
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCM	Project Cycle Management
PED	Political Economy and Development Network
RBM	Result Based Management
REO	Reorganization
SCO	Swiss Country Office
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SECO	State Secretariat for Economic Affairs
Sida	Swedish International Development Agency

Executive Summary

SDC established its thematic networks in 2008 and they have been – to varying degrees – consistent with SDC's strategic objectives by promoting learning, sharing knowledge, providing theme-related operational advice, and capitalizing on experiences. After 5 years of functioning, SDC mandated this Evaluation to analyze to what extent and in which context the introduction of networks has improved the effectiveness of SDC's operational and policy work, the quality of its strategies and policies and SDC's thematic competence and knowledge management.

The thematic networks currently address 12 different thematic focus areas in SDC and include participation of SDC staff members at headquarters and at Swiss Cooperation Offices with a related thematic responsibility. Moreover, a majority of the networks include external partners as members. As a reflection of SDC's overall thematic and geographic coverage the 12 thematic networks are anchored in different operational units at headquarters. Based on the individual development of thematic focus over the years in SDC, the networks build on different network traditions. This, combined with the current geographic and thematic focus, means that the 12 thematic networks are at different levels of maturity and differ in terms of focus given to different functions and outputs such as knowledge sharing, technical advice, participation in policy development, and development of norms, guidelines and methodologies.

The 12 thematic networks are dynamic structures with a relatively high level of flexibility and interest in supporting innovative efforts, providing a strong framework for relevant and dynamic dialogue, learning and knowledge generation. However, there is no well-developed culture for risk-taking and learning from failures in SDC as is required in complex environments. Furthermore, the large number of thematic networks combined with limited attention to joint planning and monitoring among the networks is counter-productive to SCO needs for an integrated thematic approach. In addition, the network functions do not fully respond to SCO needs, particularly in terms of know-how and how to adapt good practices, as well as integrated thematic approaches fitting the priority domains of the Country Strategies.

The thematic networks have continuously benefited from the support of SDC senior management, even if active network promotion has been limited. As 12 slightly different entities, the networks have various degrees of adoption of the initially envisioned governance structure. The thematic networks have been mainstreamed in a range of internal corporate procedures and guidelines, though there are some remaining gaps and partial implementations. Still, SDC networks make an important contribution to thematic quality assurance with the direct involvement of Theme Managers, Focal Points, Thematic Program Officers, and – to a lesser extent – the broader network community. Thematic networks contribute to promoting and passing on professional and methodological knowledge without yet making the most of all available tools. Altogether, thematic networks contribute to SDC institutional learning primarily through ad hoc initiatives, rather than systematic mechanisms. External partners contribute to the quality of the networks also through ad hoc initiatives and not strategically. The thematic networks are an effective instrument to SDC's Knowledge Management and are beginning to develop ways to capitalize on experience and formulate good practices while being supported by adequate financial resources.

Collectively, the networks are already demonstrating a limited level of impact after only a short period of time. They clearly provide added-value to SDC and its partners in a more

collaborative, participatory format from the previous F-Department. Some networks have developed Theories of Change or results frameworks to guide their work, linking it to SDC strategic objectives, and monitor their outcomes, achieving more focused impact. Networks have proved to be a strong tool for identifying, developing and mainstreaming norms and policies, which ultimately improves impact in the field. Though functioning within a strong vertical, top-down context, networks offer a framework that has begun to support SDC to overcome geographic, organizational, and thematic compartmentalization.

Therefore the sustainability of the networks stems primarily from their recognized added-value. Integrated thematic and bottom-up approaches promote relevant and effective networks and support institutional thematic learning. Networks are fairly well established and poised to move to the next stage of development.

Against this backdrop, the Evaluation formulates the following recommendations:

1. SDC should continue with thematic networks to strengthen thematic quality of its operations and policy.

Senior management should establish an overall steering group for the thematic network structure with participation of representatives from senior management, SCOs, management of thematic networks, quality assurance section, and K&LP to coordinate and monitor the thematic network structure and ensure that optimization of the thematic networks.

2. Each thematic network should apply result-based management to clearly define their contributions to SDC operations.

The network management in consultation with the whole network should apply rolling multi-year planning and result-based management with special focus on SCO needs and SCO knowledge resources that should/could be mobilized through the network. The results-based management work plans should include indicators and targets for network activities at output and outcome levels.

3. Thematic networks should strengthen their efficiency with special focus on responding to SCO needs.

The network management should review and continuously develop network processes to promote efficiency.

4. The thematic networks should strengthen the integrated thematic approach.

Focal Points of all thematic networks should ensure joint planning to maximize their complementarity in support to SCO priority domains.

5. SDC should foster a learning culture.

Senior Management should strengthen a learning culture that will embrace successes, failures, and risk taking.

6. SDC should ensure that the network architecture is optimal.

In future adaptations of SDC's organizational structure, Senior Management should consider the optimal network architecture, including organizational anchorage, the roles and responsibilities of Theme Managers and Focal Points, and the number of thematic networks.

1. Introduction

In 2008, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) embarked on a major reorganization to respond to the increasing complexity of the international development cooperation agenda. Some of the major challenges identified by SDC in its former structure included too little coordination between bilateral, multilateral, and thematic activities with different departments pursuing different strategies, and too many and poorly coordinated domains. To address these challenges, thematic networks were established to “provide a framework in which knowledge is exchanged and skills are built and maintained.”¹ Network functions were defined, to:

- Promote learning and pass on professional and methodological knowledge,
- Provide theme-related operational advice to the organizational units within the network, and
- Capitalize on experience and formulate good practices.²

Since 2008, a total of 12 thematic networks have been established and located in the operational domains³ and units within SDC under the direct responsibility of the responsible for the thematic area in SDC, the theme manager. The daily management of the networks is ensured by thematic focal points supported by core groups of network members, program officers and / or external backstoppers. Moreover, the networks benefit from administrative support. Network members are SDC staff located at headquarters and in the Swiss Cooperation Offices (SCOs) who will typically be “thematic program officers”. Moreover, some of the thematic networks include external partners among their members. Overall, it is estimated that more than 1,300 staff from SDC and its partner organizations participate in one or several thematic networks. In addition, the division of Knowledge and Learning Processes (K&LP) provides support for knowledge management and networking.

¹ Network Mandates, 2008. Original text: “In den Netzwerken wird Wissen ausgetauscht, Kompetenzen aufgebaut und erhalten. Sie ermöglichen den Linienvorgesetzten wie auch den Focal Points, ihre Kernaufgaben wahrnehmen zu können.” Translation provided in various notes from the K&LP department, including “SDC Networks – Overview for Networks Members” Fact Sheet, 9.1.2013.

² Network Mandates, 2008. Original text: “1/Lernen fördern und Fach- und Methodenwissen vermitteln operationelle, 2/thematische Beratung in den Organisationseinheiten, 3/im Netz Erfahrungen kapitalisieren und gute Praktiken formulieren”. Translation provided in various notes from the K&LP department, including “SDC Networks – Overview for Networks Members” Fact Sheet, 9.1.2013.

³ SDC is organized in four operational domains: Global Cooperation, Regional Cooperation, East Cooperation, and Humanitarian Aid.

Table 1: Organizational anchorage of thematic networks in SDC

DOMAIN	DIVISION	THEMATIC NETWORK LEADERSHIP ⁴
Global Cooperation	Analysis and Policy	
	Global Institutions	
	Global Program ⁵ Climate Change	Climate Change & Environment (CC&E)
	Global Program Food Security	Agriculture and Food Security (A&FS)
	Global Program Migration & Development	Migration & Development (Migration)
	Global Program Water Initiatives	Water
	Knowledge and Learning Processes	
Regional Cooperation ⁶	Staff Unit, Regional Cooperation	Gender
	West Africa	Education
	Eastern and Southern Africa	Health
	East Asia	Political Economy and Development (PED) - no longer active
	South Asia	Conflicts and Human Rights (C&HR)
	Latin America and the Caribbean	Employment & Income (E&I)
	Quality Assurance and Aid Effectiveness	
East Cooperation ⁷	Western Balkans	Decentralization and Local Governance (DLGN)
	New EU member Countries	
	Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	
Humanitarian Aid and SHA	Staff Unit, Humanitarian Aid & SHA	
	Multilateral Humanitarian Aid	Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)
	Asia and America	
	Africa	
	Europe & Mediterranean Basin	
	Field Resources	
	Equipment and logistics	

⁴ Theme Managers and Focal point(s)

⁵ The Global Programs Climate Change, Food Security, Water, and Migration and Development concentrate on multilateral policy dialogue, the formulation of innovative solutions, and the sharing of knowledge.

⁶ Regional cooperation domain focuses on bilateral cooperation with SDC priority countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

⁷ East Cooperation domain focuses on bilateral cooperation with Eastern and Central European countries as well as Central Asia.

While the 12 thematic networks share a number of common features they are also characterized by different modes of operation, membership, and geographic coverage as a reflection of SDC's overall thematic and geographic coverage. Likewise, the 12 networks differ in terms of focus given to different functions and outputs such as knowledge sharing, technical advice, participation in policy development, and development of norms, guidelines and methodologies.

To assess the performance of the thematic networks as an organizational strategy and structure vis-à-vis the overall goals and priorities of SDC, an external evaluation has been commissioned by SDC. The mandate defines the focus of the evaluation in terms of:

- Functions and contributions of the networks,
- Role, costs and benefits,
- Benchmarking with other network-based organizations, and
- Learning and transfer of knowledge.

1.1 Evaluation Methodology

The overall goal and objectives of the Evaluation as defined by SDC⁸ is to analyze to what extent and in which context the introduction of networks has improved the effectiveness of SDC's operational and policy work, the quality of its strategies and policies, and the thematic competence and knowledge management.

The methodology for the evaluation was further defined during the inception phase in collaboration with the Independent Evaluation Team, the Evaluation and Controlling Division, and the Core Learning Partnership (CLP)⁹ established for the Evaluation. The final methodology is described in the Inception Report¹⁰ approved by SDC and follows a conventional evaluation using mixed methods and analysis tools for assessing the thematic networks with regard to relevance, effectiveness and efficiency, impact, and sustainability and present conclusions, lessons-learned, priorities for change, and recommendations. The Evaluation has benefitted from a continuous and critical dialogue throughout the exercise with a broad range of network stakeholders, including during a final participatory workshop with the CLP for review and further development of preliminary findings, conclusions, and priorities for change.

The Evaluation was launched in January 2014. It is informed by various means and sources including review of background documentation, interviews with network stakeholders¹¹, a background survey on the networks' structures and activities, and an online survey¹² of network members on their perceptions of the networks' roles and impacts. Three Swiss Cooperation Offices (SCOs) were also visited to provide a deeper and more concrete understanding of network impacts in the field: Benin, Kyrgyzstan, and Nicaragua. Aides-memoires on the findings from the SCO visits are included in the annexes to the report.¹³ Finally, the Evaluation conducted an assessment of thematic networks in other development

⁸ See Approach Paper/03.12.2013 presented in Annex 8.1.

⁹ The Core Learning Partnership established to accompany the Evaluation consists of representatives of the 12 thematic networks.

¹⁰ See Annex 12.

¹¹ See Annex 1.

¹² See Annex 8.

¹³ See Annexes 3, 4, 5

cooperation organizations to provide context and inspiration¹⁴, with particular focus on the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The annexes to the report include detailed analyses carried out for the Evaluation, including stakeholder analysis, assumption-cum-contribution analysis, and network analysis.¹⁵

A number of evaluability challenges were identified by the Evaluation team and validated by the CLP during the inception phase and workshop. Some of the expected challenges have been confirmed during the Evaluation, while others have been mitigated by the Evaluation methodology.

Table 2: Evaluability challenges of the Evaluation

KEY EVALUABILITY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED DURING INCEPTION PHASE	EVALUABILITY CHALLENGES OBSERVED DURING THE EVALUATION AND CHALLENGES THAT HAVE BEEN MITIGATED
Impact measurement	Considering the relatively short time period that the thematic networks have been established, concrete impacts are difficult to identify.
Lack of baselines	Mitigated: The F-Department – the technical department prior to establishing networks – carried out annual user surveys, the F-Barometer, on the services provided by the F-Department. Moreover, SDC has a remarkably good documentation.
Lack of counterfactuals	The nature of the Evaluation does not allow the establishment of a counterfactual, particularly considering the dynamic structure of SDC post-reorganization.
Dynamic nature of the networks	The Evaluation has confirmed that the networks are still maturing and evolving. In addition, they have developed into 12 different structures in response to network needs, though complicating an overall assessment.
Time boundaries	Mitigated: The Evaluation focuses on the period 2008-13. Overall, time boundaries have not been a challenge for the evaluation. However, the Evaluation will invariably focus on the current status and less on the process that has taken place over the last 5 years.
Institutional memory	Mitigated: Limited institutional memory has affected the Evaluation's data collection, with some apparent contradictions in statements from different sources. Substantial review of background documents and use of triangulation has helped to address the issue.
Cost benefit analysis	The scope of the Evaluation does not allow for a proper cost-benefit analysis as suggested in the Approach paper. This was confirmed by the CLP during the Inception workshop and it was agreed that the Evaluation would not assign economic values to perceived benefits and costs.
Benchmarking	Mitigated: SDC is unique in its replacement of a single technical unit with thematic networks and global programs for priority areas for SDC's influence of the global agenda. While other bilateral donor organizations have invested substantially in thematic staff networks over the last years, their structures and contexts are different from those of SDC. Still, the Evaluation has identified good practices and lessons-learned from Sida, DFID, UNDP and others.

¹⁴ See Annex 6.

¹⁵ See Annexes 9, 10, 11.

KEY EVALUABILITY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED DURING INCEPTION PHASE	EVALUABILITY CHALLENGES OBSERVED DURING THE EVALUATION AND CHALLENGES THAT HAVE BEEN MITIGATED
Differentiation between networks and focal points	The thematic networks are often difficult to distinguish from the functions of the Focal Points. This is in line with the original mandate ¹⁶ that the networks will allow the Line Managers and Focal Points to perform their core tasks. The Evaluation did not find clear distinction between when Focal Points performed their tasks as technical advisors or in the name of the networks.

The evaluation report is presented as a succinct document based on SDC's requirement. For further details, the reader is invited to explore the annexes.

1.2 Context

With the focus on results-based development policies over the last decade, SDC has given increased focus to the technical quality of the final results and the need for establishing effective mechanisms within the organization to ensure technical excellence. In this context, the organization initiated discussions about knowledge networks in the beginning of the 2000s. Some of the initial efforts culminated in 2004 with the organization of the 'Dare to Share Fair' at SDC Headquarters. One of the key ideas promoted at the Fair was that the challenge for a development organization such as SDC is not so much knowledge management but rather supporting social learning as a means for knowledge generation and sharing through both virtual and face-to-face networking. In addition, the knowledge network discussion was based on SDC's long tradition for supporting thematic networks, including staff networks on thematic areas developed over the years in support of SDC's programs.

Based on SDC's experience, knowledge networks were identified as effective vehicles to replace the former thematic and technical department (F-Department) as part of the 2008 reorganization. The F-Department was established in 2001 and organized around the following thematic priority areas: Natural Resources and Environment, Social Development, Governance, Employment and Income, Conflict prevention and management, and Knowledge. The F-Department was designed to provide technical services to the operational divisions through policy and concept development, identification of good practices, technical advice, networking and promote access to networks, education and training, and information and documentation. The staff was predominantly technical advisors and many were recruited to cover both F-Department functions and functions in geographic lines. While it was intended to increase the integration of technical services into operations, it also led to some perceived inefficiency related to the complex lines of authority and reporting.

The F-Department gained feedback on their efforts through the F-Barometer, which was an annual user survey among SCOs and operational units at headquarters. Overall, the surveys showed appreciation of the services provided but also concerns about their relevance for field operations, including the number of guidelines, practices, and policies that were not directly adaptable to different contexts. Moreover, there were differences between SCOs and headquarter units regarding expectations about the services. In 2005, the F-Barometer showed that operational departments and SCOs saw a potential in increased networking of local expertise, particularly through regional networks. However, several respondents also pointed to the additional workload of networking. Therefore, it was determined that new networking activities should be targeted, selective, and limited in scope. Moreover, to strengthen networking of local expertise, the F-Department should play a more active role in

¹⁶ Defined by a decision of the Board of Directors in 2008.

developing network capacity. It was found that the lead for networking should remain within the operational units, although there was no agreement about who should support the networking tool.

Many of the concerns expressed in the annual F-Barometer were later reflected in the reorganized SDC with the leadership¹⁷ of 12 thematic networks with links to SDC's specific domains: Global, Regional, East Cooperation, and Humanitarian Aid, and with a mandate to be responsive to operational / field-based needs. The networks are therefore located across the organization with members based in different geographic and thematic units at headquarters and the field.¹⁸ To ensure full integration of the thematic areas into the operational activities, a general principle of the reorganization was that there would be no independent policy formulation or program budgets for thematic networks.

The following section on Findings focuses on relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability and will discuss key functioning of the 12 thematic networks and their roles in contributing to the thematic quality of SDC's operations, policies and vision as defined in SDC's objectives. SDC's overall strategy is outlined in the Bills to the Parliament for the Framework Credits for 2009-2012 and 2013-2016, also referred to as the Dispatches^{19, 20}. Within an overall objective of supporting the efforts of poorer countries to overcome humanitarian crises and deal with problems of poverty and development, SDC's five strategic objectives are defined in terms of:

- Preventing and managing crises, conflicts, and catastrophes,
- Provide equal access to resources and services,
- Promote sustainable economic growth,
- Support transition to democratic, market economies, and
- Promote a globalization that further socially responsible and environmentally friendly development.

2. Findings

2.1 Relevance

Box 1 presents an overview of the key findings with regard to relevance that is the extent to which the 12 thematic networks are consistent with SDC's mandate, operations, and policies, including thematic priorities.

Box 1: Key Findings

- The mandate of the 12 thematic networks in terms of knowledge development and sharing, operational advice, and good practices is consistent with SDC's mandate and strategies;
- The 12 thematic networks are dynamic structures with a relatively high level of flexibility for the individual network to develop according to the specific thematic context. While the networks in principle support innovation, there is no well-developed culture for risk-taking and learning from failures as required in complex environments according to the

¹⁷ Theme manager and Focal Point (s). It is important to understand that it is only the leadership that is located in the different domain units.

¹⁸ Moreover, some thematic networks spread outside SDC with members located in other organizations.

¹⁹ (Botschaft/Message).

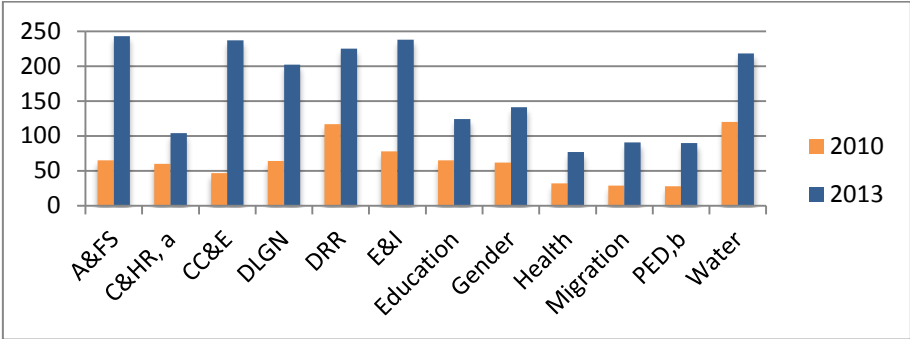
²⁰ Bills to the Parliament for the Framework Credits for 2009-2012 and 2013-2016.

- Bill to Parliament for Framework Credits;
- The significant number of thematic networks combined with limited attention to joint planning and monitoring among the networks is counter-productive to SCO needs for a thematic integrated approach;
 - The network functions do not fully respond to SCO needs, particularly in terms of knowhow and how to adapt good practices and in terms of integrated thematic approaches fitting the priority domains of the Country Strategies.

2.1.1 Twelve Thematic Networks

The 12 thematic networks were formally established between 2008 and 2010. Some of the networks were built on SDC networks that existed before the reorganization. For instance, the Gender contact persons in SDC already had a staff Gender network and the Water program has a long tradition for networks with SDC staff and external partners. The different traditions for networking and different years of establishment have an impact on the maturity of the networks. In addition, the networks are to a large degree defined by the Focal Points. Time periods with low capacity for network facility for instance linked to staff rotation have had obvious impacts on otherwise ‘mature’ networks (See 2.2.1.5 for more information). As can be seen in the following figure, all 12 networks have had an important increase in number of members. However, the numbers cover both active and more passive members. Several networks such as CC&E, A&FS, and DRR have, therefore, also launched activities to eliminate passive members who no longer show interest in network participation, which will likely decrease the recorded number of network members.

Figure 1: Number of members and membership development of the thematic networks 2010-2013



Notes: a: C&HR network membership numbers from 2011 & 2013, b: PED network membership numbers from 2010 & 2012

The thematic networks do not have technical competence criteria for membership. Overall, it is expected that members are primarily SDC staff working on the specific thematic issue. SDC members will often have limited to no formalized training in the specific thematic areas, although many have thematic experience. In addition, seven of the networks include staff from partner organizations among their members who generally bring thematic experience. As one of the original purposes of the thematic networks was defined in terms of learning from others, the importance of including external members in the networks was highlighted in a decision by the Board of Directors (BoD) on 28.11.2011 encouraging all networks to consider how best to include external partners in their activities.

The overall mandate of the thematic networks was defined in SDC Management Decision of 26.09.2008 in terms of the key functions of the networks: institutional learning, provision of thematic advice to the operational units, and good practices. The networks will support the Line Managers and Focal Points in carrying out their key functions. The 12 networks adhere to the overall decision both in definition and application. In addition, some networks highlight other key functions as part of their mandate:

- a. Raising thematic profile and thematic mainstreaming (particularly C&HR, DRR, PED, Migration),
- b. Quality assurance (particularly C&HR, Gender, Health),
- c. Policy development / influencing (particularly C&HR, DLGN, Gender, Health, Migration),
- d. Organizational coherence on thematic issues (particularly Water),
- e. Rapid problem solving through peer exchange (particularly Water),
- f. Link with other thematic networks (particularly A&FS and DRR).

These special key functions respond well to SDC's mandate and show the importance of flexibility in the design of the thematic networks:²¹

- a. PED and Migration are new thematic issues for SDC, and DRR and C&HR are defined in the strategy as a global issue with the network leadership anchored in the Humanitarian Aid domain and Regional Cooperation; all requiring special attention to mainstreaming;
- b. C&HR and Gender have normative mandates (implementation of the Conflict Sensitive Program Management (CSPM) and Gender sensitive approaches);
- c. Networks whose leadership is anchored outside the Global domain are not linked to special global programs with policy mandates. Networks on issues defined by SDC's Strategy as global themes (health) or crosscutting areas (gender, governance) therefore have an important policy input function.

Moreover, the Evaluation finds that point d, e, and f are highly relevant for all thematic networks:

- d. Organizational coherence on thematic is important for a corporate identify;
- e. Peer exchange is a validated good practice for thematic support provided good management of the available human resources in the networks and full authority to do so;
- f. To ensure effectiveness of the overall thematic network structure with 12 different thematic areas special attention is required to ensure an integrated thematic approach.

2.1.2 Coherence between the Thematic Networks and SDC Mandate

In principle the 12 thematic networks are consistent with SDC's mandate and overall strategy as defined in the Bills to the Parliament for the Framework Credits for 2009-2012 and 2013-2016. The Bills, though, put little emphasis on the specific functions of the networks as they were defined originally in 2008, including knowledge management, advice within the organization, and capitalizing on experiences. Still, the 2013-16 Bill provides more explicit attention to thematic issues than its predecessor, including strengthened capacity to deal with

²¹ A Stakeholder Analysis in Annex 11 provides further details about the characteristics of the 12 thematic networks.

global challenges²² in priority countries and regions, and support to initiatives on innovations, policies, and standards to strengthen developing countries' capacities to manage global challenges. As such, the thematic focus that the networks strive to achieve and the geographic focus of several of the networks, matches the objectives of SDC's Strategy. However, the 2013-16 Bill also highlights the dynamic and complex conditions in SDC partner countries, which call for risk taking, acceptance of failures, flexibility, and adaptation. The Evaluation finds that some of the thematic networks promote flexibility and some innovativeness, for instance through learning projects. However, a culture of risk-taking and acceptance of failures still has to be developed.

Whereas the overall structure of the 12 thematic networks is consistent with SDC's strategies, the Bills to the Parliament also highlight the need for SDC to focus geographically and thematically. The Evaluation concurs with the conclusion of other institutional evaluations of SDC, including the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Peer Reviews that consistently call for greater thematic focus in Swiss Development Cooperation. The high number of thematic focus areas and corresponding high number of thematic networks seem counterproductive to an integrated thematic approach to the complex development and emergent challenges as called for, for instance, in the post-2015 agenda. The Evaluation appreciates the increasing use of initiatives to coordinate network activities, such as joint planning for some of the networks and joint activities. However, there is still no overall structure to guarantee an integrated thematic approach of the networks. As a result, the networks tend to be 12 individual networks operating side by side with challenges of overlaps, competition and grey thematic areas that are not fully covered. During the Evaluation, participants pointed out that the F-Department's five thematic focus areas were more consistent with the needs at SCO level, where the thematic areas cut across the priority domains of the Country Strategies. Most projects and programs therefore require attention from several networks. For instance, some of the health projects in Kyrgyzstan also included components of civil society, social development or local governance. But there are limited procedures offered by the thematic network structure for an integrated approach of several networks in support of the priority domains in the Country Strategies.

Each network emphasizes to various degrees the three key network functions defined originally during the 2008 reorganization. Generally, the theme related operational advice is seen as less relevant for many SCOs. This corresponds, to the concerns already expressed by SCOs in the F-Barometer form 2003-2007 to questions about the relevance of technical advice from headquarters or other SCOs. These surveys also showed that generally there is limited demand for such services. Furthermore, the complexity in partner countries leads to a need for adaptation of good practices rather than direct sharing of good practices and general technical advice. However, the Evaluation saw limited attention to development of procedures to best adapt good practices to local contexts and the networks generally focus on knowledge rather than knowhow. Still, SCOs generally appreciate the existence of the thematic networks and the social networking and greater sense of corporate belonging they offer, which further harmonization of SDC's image throughout the world. It should also be noted that SDC's key principle of gender equality at all levels of SDC's operations has been furthered by the efforts of the thematic network on gender.

The two Bills to Parliament relevant for this Evaluation (2009-2012 and 2013-2016) refer to the role of networks to support SDC as a learning organization where the most important resource is its staff. According to the 2009-2013 Dispatch, networks integrate staff at SDC

²² Climate change, water scarcity, food insecurity, pandemics, and irregular migration.

headquarters, SCOs, and partner organizations. The BoD has on several occasions highlighted the importance of the integration of external partners to strengthen learning from others as an integral part of the network mandate. A BoD decision of 28.11.2011, for instance, requires for the 2012 planning Focal Points to include considerations on how best to include external partners. However, most of the networks still limit membership to SDC staff. Networks that integrate partner organizations not only come closer to the objective outlined in 2009-2012 Bill (particularly Water, A&FS, CC&E, DLGN, DRR, E&I, and Education), but also report positive impact in terms of knowledge development, capitalizing on experience, and learning. Some challenges were reported during the Evaluation regarding incentives for partners to participate to ensure that network participation would not give any advantage for mandates or SDC contracts. It should also be noted that networks with membership limited to SDC staff have taken special measures to include partner organizations constructively in the network functioning, for instance by inviting them for special e-discussions, Face to Face events (F2F), and special events (e.g., Health and Gender).

Finally, it should be noted that the Bills to Parliament stress the importance of poverty eradication as the overall objective of all SDC activities, including the thematic networks. With SDC's current organizational structure, the daily oversight of the poverty mandate is under the responsibility of the Quality Assurance and Aid Effectiveness Section, who is also responsible for the process / methodological quality assurance of the networks and thereby overseeing the role of the networks in contributing to poverty reduction. The Evaluation finds that by harmonizing network activities in an integrated thematic approach, the networks would have greater possibilities to address poverty eradication in a coherent and integrated manner with greater impact.

2.2 Efficiency / Effectiveness

Box 2 presents an overview of the key findings with regard to efficiency and effectiveness, that is the performance of the network operations and functioning as an organizational tool for knowledge sharing, thematic advice, and capitalizing on experience.

Box 2: Key Findings

- SDC management supports the thematic networks, which are mainstreamed in a range of procedures and guidelines, however with moderate contribution to awareness raising;
- Thematic networks are an effective instrument to SDC's Knowledge Management and are beginning to develop ways to capitalize on experience and formulate good practices;
- Thematic networks make an important contribution to SDC thematic quality assurance mostly with the direct involvement of Theme Managers, Focal Points, and Thematic Program Officers, less so with the broader network community;
- Thematic networks contribute to SDC institutional learning but systematization remains in progress;
- Thematic networks build bridges across the organization, though with limited coordination to maximize thematic and regional synergies;
- External partners make a valuable contribution to the quality of thematic networks;
- Thematic networks have sufficient financial resources to deliver valuable support to SDC and its partners.

2.2.1 Organizational Framework

2.2.1.1 Management

Since the launch of the thematic networks, the **BoD** has provided them with the necessary space and resources to grow. Annual Status Reports are submitted to the BoD that has taken decisions with regard to SDC's network landscape and functioning. The thematic networks are represented in the BoD through the heads of Domains. Upon proposition of the Theme Managers, the BoD, at times, requests and instructs Focal Points and the networks to elaborate policies or strategies related to their theme²³. Although K&LP benefits from the attention of SDC senior management, OECD DAC's peer review (2014) points out that "SDC's knowledge management system has strengths and weaknesses and would benefit from having a champion in senior management"²⁴. Furthermore, the thematic networks are not systematically and regularly referred to by the BoD as management tools that must be tightly embedded in the functioning and results of the entire organization. In addition, according to the online survey conducted by the Evaluation, only 37% of SDC headquarters (HQ) staffs agree that SDC's management promotes sufficiently strengthening of thematic knowledge.

Line Managers are the Heads of the organizational units and Country Directors. Their mandated tasks in thematic quality assurance²⁵ ²⁶ cover recruitment of thematic staff, thematic training and networking, application of "Good Technical Practice", steering operations in line with technical standards, and minimizing the loss of expertise and fostering technical careers. They negotiate with the Focal Points how (much) their Thematic Program Officers will participate in network activities. In practice, Country Directors especially have played a seminal role in the early years of the networks by encouraging their staff to join and participate in network activities, including by mainstreaming network participation in the objectives of the staff. The online survey carried out for this Evaluation indicates that networks are part of the job description of 83% of SDC HQ respondents and 66% of field participants. Furthermore, 74% of survey participants from SDC HQ and 63% from the SCOs indicated that participation in the networks is referred to in their annual objectives / annual performance reviews. However, only 36% of SDC HQ survey respondents and 49% from SCOs agree to the suggestion that staff's active participation in thematic networks is **acknowledged and rewarded**. Line Managers are certainly impactful network supporters but not yet proactive, systematic, or **visible** enough in their **support**. Line Managers remain unclear regarding involvement of the Focal Points and/or the broader networks for thematic quality assurance and the criteria upon which this task is delegated or transferred across the organization.

2.2.1.2 Networks' Governance

Theme Managers are the heads of the divisions where the thematic networks are anchored and to whom overall SDC responsibility for a theme has been entrusted. By mandate Theme Managers²⁷ have to^{28,29} set thematic priorities, manage and report on their theme, recruit and

²³ SDC, "Tasks, Competencies and Responsibilities in Thematic Quality Assurance", SDC Knowledge and Learning Processes Division, Bern, 2010.

²⁴ OECD, "Review of the Development Co-Operation Policies and Programs of Switzerland, DAC Peer Review", OECD, Paris, 2013, p.58.

²⁵ SDC, "Tasks, Competencies and Responsibilities in Thematic Quality Assurance", op.cit.

²⁶ SDC, "SDC Networks – Overview for Network Members: Fact Sheet", SDC Knowledge and Learning Processes Division, Bern, 2013.

²⁷ In addition to their responsibilities as line managers.

guide Focal Points, issue technical advice documents, and allocate financial resources to the networks. In practice, Theme Managers have interpreted their role differently depending on the needs and context of the theme and thematic network. Overall, these functions have been more or less explicitly delegated to the Focal Points, with some higher risks of insufficient thematic guidance or networking results. When Theme Managers have strong thematic expertise, it has been mentioned that they may rather advocate the theme to senior management than network matters per se. In addition, Theme Managers are expected to take “(...) due account of the learning and knowledge needs of other organizational units and of the entire organization, particularly the demand voiced by the country programs”³⁰. While a number of instruments such as F2F meetings and e-discussions have proven effective to elicit the needs of network members, not all networks carry out periodic assessments –e.g. annual online survey to identify priority demands- of **SDC needs in thematic knowledge** at the organizational and country levels. Cross-fertilization and collaborations between thematic areas have been punctually organized, leading at times to tangible outcomes, but the extent to which Theme Managers strategize cross-thematic integrations and cross-networking knowledge development may be limited. While the financial resources allocated by the Theme Managers to the thematic networks are found to be adequate, consultations held by the Evaluation indicate that the delegation of tasks to some Focal Points do not necessarily come with the required capacity to maximize the networks –e.g. sufficient time to facilitate the network. Furthermore, SDC has started to develop regional thematic networks for which the provision of capacities – human and financial –is also limited.

Focal Points represent SDC thematically³¹ · ³² and facilitate thematic knowledge management (KM) and organizational learning in SDC. According to their mandate, they provide advice and manage the portfolio of their backstopping mandate(s) and strategic partnerships. Focal Points are expected to organize, inter alia, the work of the network, encourage horizontal exchange among the networks, maintain and develop professional and methodological skills, and organize thematic training. This requires a range of competencies that are not only thematic but also span across networking skills, capability development, knowledge and learning management. Focal Points can be supported by Thematic Program Managers or external backstoppers. In practice, Focal Points come with different strengths, sometimes demonstrating thematic expertise jointly with networking experience or, more often, just one of these capabilities. In that case, thematic expertise tends to prevail over networking skills that were indicated to the Evaluation as being quite difficult to find. On a case-by-case basis, Focal Points can take on the role of Theme Manager –e.g. when the corresponding Theme Manager has no genuine thematic expertise. This may create additional workload for the FP to the detriment of the pure **networking function**. Furthermore, Focal Points to whom thematic leadership has been delegated do not necessarily benefit from the same hierarchical recognition for external representation. In line with the normative document on network roles³³, some networks (e.g. E&I) have committed different Focal Points to cover respectively specific sub-thematic areas with effective results in terms of network vibrancy. Some global programs have recruited assistants with knowledge management background to specifically focus on network facilitation.

²⁸ SDC, “Tasks, Competencies and Responsibilities in Thematic Quality Assurance”, op. cit.

²⁹ SDC, “SDC Networks – Overview for Network Members: Fact Sheet”, op. cit.

³⁰ SDC, “Tasks, Competencies and Responsibilities in Thematic Quality Assurance”, op. cit.

³¹ Ibid.

³² SDC, “SDC Networks – Overview for Network Members: Fact Sheet”, op. cit.

³³ SDC, “Tasks, Competencies and Responsibilities in Thematic Quality Assurance”, op. cit.

Networks **Core Group** members³⁴ are primarily expected to engage in proactive participation in and contribution to network activities, and to support the Focal Points with the planning and monitoring of network activities and recruitment of new members. The current setup and leverage of Core Groups appear to be uneven between networks. A majority of networks have Core Group meetings periodically –e.g. from every other month to every 6 months. **Active Core Groups** are indicated to **make a significant difference** for animating the networks while less active ones are found to be less effective at generating participation. Still, some networks are challenged to regularly convene Core Group participants. Accountability and incentive mechanisms to acknowledge and reward network support of Core Group members have been differently taken up across the organization. Some networks (e.g. DRR, Gender, and C&HR) do not have formal Core Groups, though in some cases alternative network management structures such as steering and advisory groups have been established. One network – Water – is in the process of setting up an advisory group as a consultative body, in lieu of a Core Group that is an agenda setting body, with thematic contact points in every relevant geographic division. These contact points liaise with regional thematic contact points animating regional networks in their respective region, jointly forming a comprehensive and inclusive architecture. This appears to be an effective approach to foster cross-regional and global coordination³⁵. Core Group members are usually HQ staff. Quite rarely regional program staffs working at the SCOs are Core Group members (e.g. Education) and never National Project Offices (NPO).

2.2.1.3 Membership and Support

By mandate **Network Members** are primarily expected to contribute to the thematic quality of SDC programs by means of professional advice, and engage in proactive participation in and contribution to network activities. However besides the F2F and to the exception of a couple of networks, network participation is more reactive than proactive. While network members still find D-groups useful, few can be considered as vibrant. **Spontaneous or facilitated queries and responses do not exist in a number of the thematic networks** and D-groups are quite often vehicles to share information in one direction, from headquarters to the field. E-discussions tend to be well managed and to generate reasonable levels of participation in every network. Though to some extent, participants tend to provide cases or examples when questions are asked, and not engage in a dialogue. Facilitating online exchanges on an on-going basis is a time consuming task and capacity has not yet been sufficiently developed. A more critical issue though is that networks are not always perceived as relevant due to their focus on global matters, which for some appears quite detached from local needs. The Evaluation acknowledges that SDC management recommends that staff should not be an active and formalized member in more than two networks. This is understandable in the prevailing set up where being a network member comes with responsibilities that have not been disaggregated to differentiate membership roles in a range of levels of networks such as primary, secondary, and tertiary networks.

Backstoppers are contracted external partners (such as universities or NGOs) and frequently engaged in facilitating the e-discussions and leading knowledge-building activities,

³⁴ SDC, "SDC Networks – Overview for Network Members: Fact Sheet", op. cit.

³⁵ Another innovate approach concerns Humanitarian Aid (HA) and Swiss Humanitarian Aid Domain: Expert Group. Since the 1980s, the domain has worked with Expert Groups organized around 10 themes. The Expert Groups meet four times a year with representatives from the HA domain. In response to increased institutional focus, a Specialized Group between Environment & DRR (SG Env&DRR) was established to provide operational support, formalizing collaborations across thematic Expert Groups. The SG Env&DRR also works with other thematic areas, particularly the SDC global programs on Food Security, Climate Change, and Water.

which may include supporting most network activities and preparing a number of specific outputs such as newsletters, concept notes prior to e-discussions, F2F agenda and reports, etc. Some backstoppers indicated to the Evaluators that they would have the capacity to support even more networks' activities if it was mandated – such as webinars, online panels, activating the networks on an on-going basis – but their current backstopping contracts have **limited time allocation**. While they comply with SDC demands, only rarely do they suggest innovative activities. Their consultation in the overall work planning of the network is not systematic. The mandate of the backstoppers tends to be activity and output driven, but not necessarily outcome oriented.

By mandate the **Knowledge and Learning Processes (K&LP)** unit is a demand driven body that provides effective support to Focal Points through the monthly Focal Point Café, quarterly training seminars, and on-demand assistance. The scope of the unit is to provide support to Focal Points but not to assist regional networks. There is no network linking staff at headquarters and in the field and backstoppers engaged in facilitating networks and in related knowledge management activities. Some learning modalities such as induction training, job shadowing, and peer coaching have not been taken up by all networks to further support Focal Points. Besides accelerating on-boarding time, these modalities are often used to help newcomers to embed existing practices in their work activities and create greater consistency between different departments in the organization. In SCOs, networking and knowledge management support is made available through the guidelines and the blog produced by K&LP. SCO staff is not necessarily aware of the trainings that are provided in the field, although tailor-made knowledge management trainings are delivered by K&LP on demand. Some SCO Communications Officers do not appear to be involved in knowledge management and network activities such as contributing local news or reports to a network newsletter, or presenting the networks and how to join to new staff or partners. K&LP does not have the responsibility to **coordinate** network activities **ex-ante** –e.g. yearly– but to report ex-post through the Status Reports. While K&LP gets the attention of the SDC BoD, the organization has not put in place a Knowledge Board or a high-level governance structure during the first years of the implementation of the networks.

2.2.1.4 Operational Practice and Processes

SDC networks are referred and mainstreamed in several key phases of the SDC Project/Program Cycle Management (PCM) guidelines but not all. For instance, there are no special references to the thematic networks in the guidelines for entry proposal implementation, Project/Program implementation, and Project handover and closing. This can lead to some missed opportunities including during Project/Program **implementation**, which is a phase during which networks can be tapped to seek comparative experiences and advice. However, the Evaluation observed that in practice the networks are sometimes used during implementation. Networks also appear to be a logical channel to communicate project activities, news, and achievements. Furthermore, Project/Program implementation includes the preparation of End of Phase reports, which are not systematically shared with the entire networks and discussed. In practice, thematic networks are rarely tapped into to provide comments on any step of the PCM – even when featured in existing work processes - but individual network members such as the Focal Points are invited to attend the Operations Committees. Criteria that help to decide when consultations should be escalated up to the entire network are not available.

Additional notable normative documents include the “Tasks, Competencies and Responsibilities in Thematic Quality Assurance” mentioned earlier. A review of various terms of references for vacancies recently published by SDC indicates that networks tend to be frequently referred in the job descriptions of new staff. The “MoB Objectives 2014 for Network

members” further spells out recommendations for mainstreaming the networks into the annual objectives of all staff.

Documentation providing guidance to the development of SDC **project documents**³⁶ makes **little reference if any to the networks**, either as an instrument through which to collect and recall good practices and lessons learned from other countries during project design –e.g. foster knowledge institutionalization through systematic review of relevant End of Phase reports-, or as a vehicle to collect and share experiences during project implementation.

Work plans of networks take different forms according to the issuing network and some examples of network indicators and long term results-based planning exist (e.g. A&FS, CC&E). Most frequently though work plans tend to be activity oriented rather than **results-based**. Typically, the work plans of the networks do not include baselines, indicators, or targets at output and outcome levels. Moreover, network outcomes are not monitored systematically for all the networks in a comparable manner and there are no general tools to ensure that networks activities are relevant and efficient in general. Few networks have developed a comprehensive Theory of Change that could form the backbone of results-based work plans although several have launched plans for applying Theory of Change approaches for planning and monitoring.

2.2.1.5 Human Resources Management

As mentioned, a review of recent SDC job vacancies indicates a trend for mainstreaming the thematic networks and knowledge management in the job descriptions of various staff positions. However, the Evaluation was not able to identify guidelines presenting how to effectively review and assess the networking skills and experience of candidates

Time committed to the thematic networks by SDC staff is mandated to be up to 50% for Focal Points, 20-30% for Core Group members, and 10% for network members³⁷. SDC staff indicates in the survey carried out for the Evaluation that their job description features a level of participation below 10% for one third of Core Group members, and below 5% for 45% of SDC networks members. When asked in reality how much time they commit to the networks, 65% of Core Group members indicate less than 10% and 58% of SDC network members indicates less than 5%. On average Focal Points indicate spending more than 50% of their time with the networks. However, it should be noted that a clear distinction between activities dedicated to the networks and to the thematic areas might not be relevant inasmuch as the thematic networks were foreseen as a tool for the Theme Managers and Focal Points to accomplish their technical responsibilities³⁸.

Thematic career paths have been recently developed for Health, Water, Green track, and E&I. This allows staff dedicating more than 60% of their time to a theme to stay for up to 6 years in the thematic position. According to several staff consulted by the Evaluation, this helps to postpone the “brain drain” that job rotation inflicts to the organization. However, the attractiveness of a thematic career may be lower than the regular management track that is often considered to offer greater responsibilities and benefits in line with an international development career. The extent to which the organizational model of thematic careers has been implemented to the fullest is questionable. In any case, some thematic staff who are not

³⁶ E.g. SDC, “Checklist for Project/Programme Documentation (ProDoc)”, SDC Quality Assurance, Bern, June 2011.

³⁷ SDC, “Tasks, Competencies and Responsibilities in Thematic Quality Assurance”, SDC Knowledge and Learning Processes Division, Bern, 2010.

³⁸ Ibid.

part of the four tracks already established, indicated genuine interest for having this scheme expanded to their own theme.

2.2.1.6 Communication Strategy

K&LP and the networks have developed various communication tools, such as fact sheets, guidelines, online videos, and blogs to facilitate both internal and external network communication. All networks have simple communication strategies. There are some implicit multi-directional communication strategies in the networks – e.g., the use of F2F for strengthening horizontal communications – and there are some tools in place for multidirectional communications, vertically and horizontally, that are not yet exploited for this purpose –e.g. D-groups-

Some SDC partners based in the field have indicated that they are not aware of the networks while others are members of one but are unaware of how to join another. Some SCO staff has also expressed a lack of awareness of SDC networks -including how to join- and a lack of visible communication from management to support the networks. There is no evidence of a dedicated communication strategy that would target different segments through different information sources, messages, and channels.

2.2.2 Activities and Contributions

2.2.2.1 Providing Quality Assurance

According to 86% of the online survey respondents, the networks have improved the effectiveness and thematic quality of SDC's projects/programs. But the Evaluation also found that it is difficult to precisely assess thematic quality assurance as indicators of thematic quality in SDC programs, projects or policies have only been developed for a few thematic areas. Particularly E&I and A&FS have developed reference indicators which are adhered to in some Cooperation Strategies. Likewise, the annual performance reports on gender equality mainstreaming also offers a good tool for thematic quality assessment for the gender network. In addition, the contribution for quality assurance is written in documents but remains demand driven and not systematic. It is not clear how/when Focal Points should be involved in quality assurance in spite of the guidelines³⁹ or the processes stemming from the PCM. As discussed earlier, Focal Points are not systematically consulted in important stages of PCM (among others, entry proposals, credit proposal and End of Phase Reports). Basically the line management brings in the necessary expertise and it is often difficult to differentiate between the network as such and the Focal Point or how the Focal Points bring in relevant network expertise for quality assurance. Likewise, Focal Points and or theme managers typically participate in operation committees but the use of the expertise from the networks in general for this participation is not systematized for instance through criteria upon which network consultations are triggered for thematic quality assurance. Network tasks and quality assurance are not specified or enough for staff to understand and systematically apply.

According to interviews and documentation reviewed for the Evaluation, networks anchored in Global Programs seem to be less directly engaged in thematic quality assurance, while networks anchored in Regional Cooperation Divisions, the East Domain, and Humanitarian Affairs appear to be more involved. However, the online survey did not return a clear pattern on the contribution of the networks to the effectiveness and technical quality of SDC's projects/programs according to their anchor in a Global Program or a Division.

³⁹ See section 2.2.1.4 and SDC, "Tasks, Competencies and Responsibilities in Thematic Quality Assurance", op. cit.

2.2.2.2 Thematic Learning

Various training modalities have been put in place by the networks, such as learning projects (e.g. DLGN, Migration), training seminars (e.g. Water, C&HR), or certified trainings (e.g. Gender). Likewise, learning occurs also during F2F events, e-discussions, or through other external networks. Respondents to the online survey for the Evaluation⁴⁰ indicate that they have well benefited professionally -learning, networking, etc.- from recent F2F events (71%) and to a lesser extent from trainings (51%) and technical workshops (52%). But almost half of survey respondents indicate that attending training or technical workshops has not benefited them. This leads the Evaluation to question their design. More fundamentally, the extent to which learning is reactive or strategically designed is unclear. Bridges between the training concept⁴¹ adopted in 2013 and the networks are still limited for thematic knowledge. Implementation of this concept can also be an opportunity to cascade at field level the enhancement of networking skills and development of a knowledge sharing culture. It should also be noted that several of the networks have recently carried out assessments of training needs among their members (e.g. CC&E, DRR, and A&FS).

2.2.2.3 Organizational Learning

Around 82% of survey respondents agree to the proposition that the networks have improved thematic learning in their organization –e.g. SDC division, country office, State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO)⁴², partner organization etc. Yet, organizational learning does not seem to be a concept that is yet fully embedded in the thematic networks so far. Staff looks at learning aspects to be only training and individual development while limited attention is given to the benefit of the networks for organizational learning. In fact, SDC has not clearly defined what organizational learning they want to obtain from the networks and the extent to which they want the networks to codify and embed thematic knowledge in the organization. This being said, various good practices were mentioned earlier⁴³. Some tools produced by the networks were introduced in SDC's instruments –e.g. Climate, Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction Integration Guidance (CEDRIG), Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA), Conflict Sensitive Program Management (CSPM), PED's stakeholder analysis. During the Evaluation, staff has pointed to the need for systematic and leveraging key tools –e.g. End of Phase reports as background documents to inform the early stage of project design. This is also in line with recommendations from SDC's Knowledge Management evaluation⁴⁴ conducted in 2009. However it still remains unclear how thematic knowledge is embedded into the organization and who is responsible.

2.2.2.4 International Cooperation

A number of SDC thematic networks have forged partnerships with a variety of Swiss international cooperation institutions and relevant staff from many of these institutions has often become network members⁴⁵. These partners bring their expertise to the SDC thematic

⁴⁰ Cf. Annex 8.

⁴¹ SDC, "Advanced Training Concept 2013–2016", SDC, Bern, August 2013.

⁴² SECO Technical experts are based in Bern as well as decentralized in the embassies. When SDC and SECO have joint country offices staff typically work for both organizations.

⁴³ See section 2.2.1.4 on Operational Practice and Processes.

⁴⁴ Knechtli B. & al., "Evaluation of Knowledge Management and Institutional Learning in SDC", SDC & PricewaterhouseCoopers, Bern, 2009.

⁴⁵ A sample of these partnerships features:

- Water networks: AGUASAN, Swiss Water Partnership, Skat,
- Education partners: Swiss commission for UNESCO, IPE, NORAG, RECI, FSEA, ADEA, UIL, and

networks that accept external members (e.g. Water and CC&E). According to 86% of SDC staff responding to the online survey carried out for the Evaluation, external participation has a positive influence on the quality of SDC networks. Likewise, 75% of external members indicate that they have referred other actors to SDC papers, reports and experiences shared on the networks. While these results are positive, there is no evidence that every network has devised a well thought through partnership strategy. From a knowledge management standpoint, an assessment of the knowledge gaps faced by an organization is helpful to identify the need for new thematic partnerships or network members. This was further highlighted in the BOD decision on 28.11.2011 encouraging all networks to consider how best to include external partners in their activities as mentioned in the Relevance section. During the Evaluation several networks acknowledged that attracting staff from ministries and universities would be beneficial. A complementary entry is to identify outreach and policy influence objectives to inform the search for new partners. The trend to deliberately bridge policy, science and practice to increase development results is already in progress in various bilateral or multilateral organizations.

2.2.2.5 Knowledge Management

Organizations design and implement knowledge management (KM) programs to attain various strategic objectives and in response to internal and external environments. A classical KM paradigm describes two distinct directions: 1) organizations working in stable and homogeneous environments are interested in collecting and codifying knowledge so that models can be easily and cost-effectively replicated across similar conditions, and 2) organizations working in complex, highly specific or changing environments connect people so that knowledge is swiftly accessible and adapted to the local context on a need basis. Deciding to network SDC is a sound KM choice. However, the extent to which this networking and exchange of knowledge successfully occurs on a daily basis depends on each network. While some networks (e.g. DLGN, E&I) have been able to create an active community generating dynamic exchanges, most of the others tend to under-utilize the D-groups and concentrate knowledge exchanges on time-bound vehicles (F2F, e-discussions, Newsletter). If we refer to SDC's own documentation⁴⁶, the current reference to thematic networks in lieu of communities of practice is questionable. A mismatch in the terminology used by SDC can lead to unclear objectives, or lowered expectations and capacities to achieve them. When it comes to knowledge codification, which could partly palliate vibrant knowledge exchanges, it seems that networks do not generate yet the range of knowledge products expected from survey participants⁴⁷ –e.g. good practices, lessons learned, and thematic reports. The extent to which the current level of production, the topics selected, the range of stakeholders involved, and the type of product created respond to a demand originating from field survey is questionable. Considering the initial purpose of the networks that is, inter alia, to “*capitalize experiences and formulate good practice*”, the Evaluation was expecting to find series of corporately branded, practical, and didactic ‘Good Practice’ papers. Some networks have started to organize peer-to-peer missions involving network members as internal reviewers and/or advisors in lieu of external consultants. This practice has a number of benefits but does not seem to be precisely formalized or institutionally supported yet.

• E&I: Helvetas, AGRIDEA, University of Zurich, KEK CDC consultants, INBAS, PHZH.

⁴⁶ SDC, “Good Practice: Nurturing Networks”, SDC Knowledge and Learning Processes Division, Bern, 2011.

⁴⁷ Cf. Annex 8.

2.2.2.6 Joint Activities

Most thematic networks provide examples of joint activities, for instance through F2F events, e-discussions, and the development of knowledge products (e.g. A&FS and E&I, A&FS and Gender, Education & E&I, Water & Health, PED & DLGN, Migration & C&HR, etc.). Overall, collaborations between themes tend to be bilateral. A laudable exception is the CC&E network⁴⁸ but otherwise it does not seem that thematic networks are engaged in a joint planning exercise that would be part of a coordinated annual exercise for all or relevant sub-groups of the thematic networks. This appears especially missing for networks encompassing sub-themes that overlap (e.g. Education and E&I, DLGN and C&HR). But there is no overall strategic plan about how/why working together and special incentives are not necessarily in place at the individual level to foster this approach.

Regional networks tend to become part of the agenda of the global F2F (e.g. Water, Education) in order to facilitate a more comprehensive and coherent work planning. Accessibility of thematic knowledge to the local context is a critical component for the successful functioning of the networks. Across all regions, participants feel that tools and technical support from the region are more easily accepted and applied within a local context. In West Africa and Latin America, this view was even more pronounced due to language limitations and shared in interviews during the Evaluation, including during the case studies in Benin, Nicaragua, and Kyrgyzstan⁴⁹. However, it is still not all networks that have clear policies and coordination of regional networks and the mandates of the global and regional thematic networks appear sometimes to overlap. Likewise, and translation of content is not systematically addressed.

2.2.2.7 Resources Context

Assessing the costs and benefits of thematic networks in a bilateral organization is always an elusive objective. Monetizing the outcomes of the networks and the impact that exchange of knowledge, ideas, and experiences may have had on the living conditions of the beneficiaries is out of reach. The task is rendered even more complex as most of the thematic networks are not results-oriented and do not monitor their outcomes. In terms of costs, it would be a great challenge to estimate direct and indirect costs of the networks and the scope of the Evaluation does not allow for a detailed analysis and establishment of comparable budgets and much less for a proper cost analysis.⁵⁰ Networks rely on a budget to organize F2F meetings and trainings, studies, reviews and learning projects, facilitation and ShareWeb maintenance, and acquire software. However, the networks do not have budgets as such but budget lines under the thematic budgets for the Focal Points and Theme Managers. While the annual Status Reports of the K&LP division presents some overall budgets for the thematic networks, fact checking with the individual networks showed some discrepancies between their own numbers and the numbers in the budgets presented in the Status reports. This is most likely due to inclusion of different funding sources in some of the numbers and different approaches to what costs should be included as networks budgets.⁵¹

⁴⁸ The CC&E network coordinates its activities with networks & platforms that work in interconnected areas: A&FS, DRR, E&I, Poverty-Wellbeing, and Réseau. Meetings are held every two to three months to exchange information about their agendas and identify opportunities for intensified cooperation. There is a joint work plan.

⁴⁹ Kindly refer to the Aides Memoires of the three case studies presented in Annex.

⁵⁰ This was already recognized by the CLP during the Inception Workshop. Kindly refer to Annexes for the Inception Report.

⁵¹ For instance, some networks report annual budgets for F2F events of around CHF 80,000. However, these budgets do not generally cover travel costs or opportunity costs for the F2F participants and its annual allocations for often for bi-annual F2F and organization of joint F2F where each network will have a similar annual budget.

However, the budgets provided by K&LP in the Status reports can be used as a raw proxy to provide a general **context** and show that SDC does invest in their networks. For example, in 2012 the operating budget for the 12 networks was indicated at CHF 3.652 million. The overall expenditures of the organization that year were CHF 1,848.7 million. If we take the operating budget of the networks for 2012⁵² and the number of network members that year, the organization has invested an average of CHF 2,410 per network member. However, this figure is actually higher per single individual as many members are part of several networks.

2.2.3 Thematic Networks in Other Organizations

The Evaluation reviewed some relevant external organizations to benchmark SDC's networks and share experiences. The Evaluation conducted a more in-depth case study of Sida and DFID and explored other relevant organizations.

Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)⁵³

- **Context:** Sida networks were introduced as part of a major reorganization in 2009 as a mechanism for staff to share ideas, improve internal learning, and coherence. However their implementation proved to be a challenge: expectations were too high for the resources and equipment provided. In 2011 the Director General took the decision to focus the networks on knowledge management and dissemination of learning. Simultaneously, the thematic department was downsized and thematic expertise was put in the operations departments.
- **Structure:** Ten thematic networks were initially created and some of them have formed sub-networks. All Sida networks are internal, that is for Sida staff only. Their size goes from a couple of dozen members to 160. The senior policy specialists who are in charge to manage the networks devote up to 30% of their time to this activity.
- **Functioning:** The primary objectives of the networks are to build technical competences and to link staff in headquarters and embassies. Sida thematic networks do not have the mandate to develop policies and guidelines, which is done by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sida networks do not have a mandate of quality assurance or to develop knowledge products, but the management may commission such products on a case by case and consultations with network members may be organized. Networks produce newsletters, organize video meetings between headquarters and the field, organize training seminars, disseminate information resources, and organize F2F although a tight budget -EUR 18.000 to be shared by all networks for the F2F- does not provide room for frequent events. The networks do not benefit from any external backstopping.

Department for International Development, UK (DFID)⁵⁴

- **Network members:** More than one third of DFID's workforce is made up of technical advisors organized in professional cadres. Technical advisors are recruited based on professional competencies established by the cadres, that is the networks.

Likewise, some networks use backstoppers for the organization of F2F events but funded under separate backstopper budget lines and not F2F budget lines. And some other networks apply other practices. It is also noted that the many budgets seem standard for networks without specific considerations for the geographical coverage of the networks or number of participants.

⁵² Pending this budget is accurate, cf. above provisions.

⁵³ See Annex 6.

⁵⁴ See Annex 7.

- **Network structure:** There are 14 professional cadres functioning as thematic networks to strengthen thematic quality of DFID's policy and operations. The members of the professional cadres, the technical advisors, are located in geographic departments at headquarters and in the field and accountable to their line manager and their Head of Profession who are also heads of the professional cadres. The Heads of Profession are located in the Research and Evidence Division under a Chief Scientific advisor.
- **Network participation:** Members are required to provide 10% of their time for networking – 'Cadre time' – supporting DFID units other than their own. The cadre time is managed by the Heads of Profession in coordination with the line managers and the interests of the technical advisor.
- **Internal knowledge and learning:** The Evidence and Program Exchange (EPE) unit coordinates sites that identify and streamline information sources. Staff is encouraged to innovate and take risks through innovations such as 'talent management', 'need to fail fast' and 'fail fairs'.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

- **Context:** Knowledge networks were created in 1998 as a mechanism to link headquarters with country offices but become instantly used by country offices to directly support each other. The number of networks grew in the next first years to progressively cover each priority theme of the organization. There were 12 global knowledge networks 5 years after the establishment of the first one.
- **Structure:** Networks are anchored in the Bureau for Development Policy (BDP). They are thematically guided by a practice leader, operationally driven by a practice manager, and supported by a network facilitator and a research analyst. A central knowledge management unit in BDP coordinates the networks. Networks were initially internal to UNDP staff but most of them have become progressively opened to external partners. Five years after the creation of the first network, UNDP networks had between 400 to more than 1,000 members.
- **Functioning:** Networks are primarily used to enable country offices to support each other, share experiences, and develop new knowledge. Network products include newsletters, e-discussions, queries/responses, face-to-face meetings, surveys, development of knowledge products –e.g. networks consultation has become a compulsory step in the development of certain publications-, and an online portal. In the early 2010's the online networks have moved to a social networking platform to enable members to exchange in smaller cliques.

KfW Development Bank⁵⁵

- **Structure:** Knowledge management and thematic backstopping is located in the 12 thematic competence centers at KfW's headquarters, which are anchored in geographic departments. They also work closely with technical staff from GIZ (German Technical Cooperation). KfW is currently being restructured and there is some discussion about abolishing the competence centers.
- **Value-added:** From the field perspective in Kyrgyzstan, the competence centers positively support technical needs within and across geographic departments. Teams of thematic experts and program officers visit the field office frequently for technical support and backstopping of concept development and program implementation.

⁵⁵ See Annex 5

Medicus Mundi Switzerland

- **Structure:** Network of approximately 45 Swiss organizations and 200 individual members. Members are expected to have thematic competence and know how to use network communication tools and mechanisms, including network facilitation.
- **Improving functioning:** A general evaluation in 2013 of Medicus Mundi Switzerland recommended that the network focuses on key thematic areas and integrates knowledge sharing and advocacy, involve external stakeholders, strengthen synergies among its members, involve more field staff actively, and apply different approaches to knowledge sharing.

2.3 Impact

Box 3 provides an overview of key findings with regard to impact; that is the extent to which the thematic networks have made significant contributions to SDC's operations and policies.

Box 3: Key Findings

- Reflective of the different stages of each network, some have more developed Theories of Change or results frameworks to focus and guide their work and link it to SDC strategic objectives;
- Networks are a strong tool for identifying, developing and mainstreaming norms and policies, which ultimately will improve impact in the field;
- Though functioning within a strong vertical context, networks offer a framework that has begun to support SDC to overcome compartmentalization.

Measuring impact – long-term effects produced by network activities, whether directly or indirectly, intended or unintended – is challenging within the complex nature of international development and humanitarian cooperation. As mentioned in the methodology section⁵⁶, one key challenge in measuring the impact of the networks is the relatively short time period that SDC has developed and employed thematic networks. Other limiting factors include highly interconnected processes, various influencing stakeholders, and a lack of systematic monitoring of overall network activities within a results framework. Although impact is limited and attribution at times unclear, impact by the thematic networks on projects, programs and policies is demonstrated in some circumstances.

2.3.1 Theory of Change

While a formal Theory of Change was not formulated at the inception of the network structure in 2008, simplified outlines of the underlying Theory of Change were developed at later stages, including in preparation of this Evaluation.⁵⁷ It appears that the originally intended functions of the networks were to promote learning and share knowledge, provide theme-related operational advice, and capitalize on experience and formulate good practices.⁵⁸ Recognizing the value of network expertise, network functioning has evolved to also include network contributions to policy development. The underlying, implicit assumption for the networks is that members will gain new ideas and knowledge through their participation in the

⁵⁶ See section 1.1.

⁵⁷ Kindly refer to Approach Paper, Annex 1.

⁵⁸ Network Mandates, 2008. Original text: "In den Netzwerken wird Wissen ausgetauscht, Kompetenzen aufgebaut und erhalten. Sie ermöglichen den Linienvorgesetzten wie auch den Focal Points, ihre Kernaufgaben wahrnehmen zu können."

networks, which will then lead to improved projects, programs and policies. Moreover, the organization will strengthen its technical capacity through increased cooperation among network members. In this way, the networks are critical for allowing decentralized work while maintaining an organizational identity and connection.

Developing and employing a results-based management tool will link network activities with overall organizational goals and provide a basis for monitoring change over time. Reflecting their varied development, each network has developed different types and levels of Theory of Change or logic frameworks to guide their work. A few have more advanced representations of their vision and paths with which they plan to achieve that vision – e.g., Health, DRR, and Gender and E&I. For some of the networks anchored in global programs, there is a strategy for global programs that includes the networks, but does not articulate a separate network Theory of Change, strategy, or logic framework.

2.3.2 SDC Operations

Overall, there is initial evidence that the thematic networks have contributed to the development of policies, SDC strategies and programs, which have positively impacted the implementation of projects in partner countries. In addition, during the consultations conducted by the Evaluation resource persons referred to an improvement in the quality of the networks over the years, without referring to any baseline or indicator to corroborate this assessment. Nonetheless, the increased demand for participating in F2F, increased ease at getting contributions to e-discussions, and increased use of knowledge from NPOs may be seen as proxies.

There is a perception by staff that SDC thematic expertise has decreased with the dissolution of the F-Department and the introduction of the networks. However, during those years, F-Barometer studies were conducted as a monitoring and learning instrument and documented the relevance of the F-Department’s work in relation to daily operations – projects, programs and strategies. This provides a baseline against which we can compare the results from the online survey on the thematic networks carried out for this Evaluation. Although the scales have different ranges and cannot be directly compared, it is notable that in both 2007 and 2014 respondents were fairly satisfied with the services provided by the F-Department and the thematic networks.

Table 3: Impact of services from the F-Department on SDC operations (2007)^{59 60}

Service	No impact	Little impact	Middle impact	High impact	Average (scale 1-4) ⁶¹
Advice	3%	16%	56%	25%	3.1
Policies, concepts	7%	32%	55%	7%	2.8
Networking access	15%	26%	54%	4%	2.6
Learning	3%	18%	65%	13%	2.9

⁵⁹ Question: Over the last 12 months, what impact have the services from the F-Department had on your work?

⁶⁰ SDC, “F-Barometer 2007 – Auswertung,” Bern, 7.8.2007.

⁶¹ Scale: 1=no impact to 4=high impact.

Figure 2: Perceived influence or impact of SDC thematic networks by SDC HQ and SCO staff



The 2014 online survey⁶² also showed:

- Approximately 80% or more respondents for each network said thematic knowledge learned from the network is being applied in SDC projects and programs.
- Approximately 70% or more respondents from each network said that concretely influenced new SDC policies, position papers, and strategies.
- Across the board, a majority of respondents from each network said they benefitted from the F2F. For a few networks, as much as 80-85% said they benefitted.
- All – except one network in its early stages of development – were reported to address well what members need to know about the theme to perform their work.
- For almost all networks, more respondents felt that e-discussions rather than d-groups were beneficial.

Networks provide **technical advice** to SDC organizational units, influencing their projects, programs and operations. The advice is most effective and influential when shared directly by technical experts. For example, with the introduction of making markets work for the poor (M4P) initiative developed by the E&I as a new approach to project management, there was no internal SDC experience and staff looked to the broader network – mostly external partners with M4P expertise – for technical support. However, unlike this example, there are a number of cases where attributing this technical advice to the networks is not clear, as discussed in section 2.2.2.1.

Mainstreaming **norms and tools** developed or adopted by one network to all – such as, CEDRIG, Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA), M4P, Gender equality mainstreaming performance reports and Gender checklist – has increased thematic and technical dialogue and understanding within and across networks. F2F trainings have direct impact on project and program design and implementations, such as the case in Mongolia where, after

⁶² NB: The survey did not reach members of the Health and PED networks directly. From the Water network only 7 members got the survey directly. As many network members participate in more than one network though, indirectly several members of the Health, Water, and PED networks received the questionnaire. See Annex 8 for an analysis of the survey.

attending a F2F that included sessions on HRBA, the staff learned that their project included mining rights and HRBA helped to focus and improve their efforts. Similarly after attending a Gender F2F, the SCO in Sudan was able to identify and incorporate gender issues more systematically in their projects. The Gender checklist responds to the SDC policy of gender equity as a transversal theme requiring attention to gender issues for each project.

The formulation of **good practices** is a form of sharing generalized technical advice. As mentioned in section 2.2.2.6, good practices are being formulated on an ad hoc basis. Mandated external partners, Focal Points and thematic network members are formulating some good practices that inform on-going projects and sometimes launch new ones. For networks anchored in Global Programs, the Global Program staff generally provides the technical advice, and not the network Focal Points or members. E-discussions and D-groups share and sometimes formulate good practices, such as with WASH, the Water toolkit for HRBA. Good practices are also shared and discussed during F2F meetings, creating a space to further develop concepts and deepen understanding. There are some documents, such as the Annual Gender mainstreaming performance reports, which include sections dedicated to good practices. In some limited cases, networks capitalize on good practices identified by other organizations – UN agencies, European Commission, and the World Bank – for sharing them with SDC thematic network members. However, adapting good practices to local contexts often requires direct technical advice to support their application.

In general the networks have **influenced/informed decision-making, SDC policies and norms**. Almost every network has provided examples of relevant influence. For instance, the Water network organized an e-discussion on water and mining that has led to a policy position, operational implementation concept, and a memorandum of understanding with partners. Another example is a portfolio review conducted by two network members of the Education network, which has informed a country program. And the PED network has organized several political economy assessments that informed country strategies. Though mostly influenced by Theme Managers and Focal Points, there are some examples when issues emerging from network interests and discussions – for instance, election support, water and mining, and fragility – have influenced SDC policy and priorities.

Some Focal Points are mandated or dedicate significant efforts to **global policy work** – such as Gender, Health, and C&HR – providing policy inputs and participating in global discussions. The global programs influence policy considerably through their technical staff and do not systematically involve the networks, although there are a few instances of consultations on the D-groups and e-discussions that precede developing positions by the global programs, as was the case with CEDRIG and the Swiss position on Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO).

The networks have had some impact in geographically, organizationally, and thematically **overcoming compartmentalization** within SDC. Around 73% of respondents from the online survey indicate that they have directly contacted people known through the networks. Thematic networks continue to have a strong vertical communications flow, with some instruments and activities that are beginning to facilitate horizontal flow.

Geographically, the networks provide a framework for knowledge sharing across regions. Through the various instruments in place – F2F, newsletters, e-discussions, etc. – they create bridges not only between headquarters and the SCOs but also among the SCOs. However, SCO staff is not closely involved in the planning of network activities beyond what is discussed during the F2F meetings. For instance, in Addis Ababa, colleagues from Central America shared experiences on the concept of metal silos for grain management post-harvest in Central America through an open blog during a regional F2F meeting. However, as mentioned earlier during the Evaluation many resource persons expressed some concern in

general about the usefulness of knowledge sharing among the regions as the relevance will often be seen as questionable. There is a recent trend toward developing more regional efforts, which participants feel provides more relevant support, though they also bear the risk of creating new clusters and slowing down the exchanges organized at the international level and the overall organizational consistency that the thematic networks can strengthen. Organizationally, although there are strong vertical communications and ties, the networks strengthen linkages from the SCOs to headquarters, increasing their connection to the SDC community and their corporate identity. As one NPO stated, they would feel isolated without the network.

At the organizational level, the Core Groups in principle provide thematic linkages across divisions or throughout the organization, though in actuality this is not consistent. In addition, when a Core Group member is more senior in the line management, their impact on operations within their division is stronger. At the senior management level, Theme Managers bring network issues ad hoc to higher-level meetings, without working necessarily within an overall strategic approach.

As the networks continue to develop individually, they are also recognizing the need to collaborate to better meet the needs of the field offices. There is not yet an overall strategic approach to the interactions across thematic networks, with only ad hoc horizontal connections in headquarters and in the field. However, purposeful ad hoc collaborations are increasing and impacting the quality of operations, such as HRBA and water sanitation, Innovative rural agriculture in Latin America, and education and vocational skills development in West Africa. In addition, the large number of networks and the distribution of thematic staff throughout the organization have diluted the impact of any one network.

Many SDC thematic networks are active and influential in **policy development and global agendas**. The Health network contributed significantly to SDC's health policy and Switzerland's international health policy. An e-discussion with DRR members influenced SDC's position on the post-Hyogo position. And the development of the **Swiss post-2015 position**, being led by SDC, includes inputs from the networks through dedicated discussions in F2F meetings, e-discussions and D-groups. In addition, some network members participate in an inter-ministerial task force or provide technical support or inputs for position papers. For networks anchored in Global Programs, the networks were not directly involved in policy development and the Global Programs provided technical support.

2.3.3 External Partners

SDC thematic networks have made linkages with **external partners** to varying degrees without an overall partnership strategy (See section 2.2.2.5). For those networks with large numbers of external partners as members, backstoppers and contractors, the partners' work influences the networks and, to some extent, the networks have influenced their work. These experts often have careers in that specific topic and bring a profound understanding of the topic to the network. As active network members and leaders of network activities, external partners often significantly influence the discussions within the networks, broadening and deepening understanding for SDC staff and network members. For those networks who have purposefully not included external members – such as, Health, Gender, C&HR – they seek linkages with partners through their participation in F2F meetings, brown bag meetings, workshops, and the like. There was concern from some resource persons during the Evaluation that the same partners are continually contracted and others (even those supported by SDC in other ways) are not, limiting opportunities for diverse perspectives and inputs.

By involving partners, the networks have also influenced external partners, which lead to the networks influencing the development of **Swiss thematic knowledge**. The online survey for the Evaluation shows that 84% of external partners say their SDC network “has improved thematic learning” in their own organization. Through on-going partnerships and dialogue, some SDC thematic networks are strongly engaged in building thematic knowledge. AGUASAN – a long-standing community of practice that the SDC water network supports – is strengthening the thematic capacity of Swiss international cooperation on Water. And AGUASAN has participated in SDC water network’s F2F meetings and other activities.

2.3.4 Thematic Excellence

It remains unclear if SDC thematic networks should have the ambition to reach a level of **international excellence**, though some level of institutional expertise is necessary for optimal impact in the field. This directly relates to the need to further clarify the overarching purpose of the networks. In comparison, Sida has shifted the purpose of their networks so that they no longer have a mandate to develop or influence policies and influence international dialogue but build technical competencies and relevant international perspectives for staff.

Although the ultimate ambition is unclear, the networks are involved and recognized in the international community to varying extents. Network staff is often invited to attend conferences, meeting with other networks, and other types of activities, demonstrating recognition of thematic expertise and providing the opportunity to disseminate SDC thematic knowledge and engage in thematic dialogue. As mentioned earlier, in the online survey, 66% of respondents say they tend to refer other actors to the SDC papers, reports and experiences shared on the network. Some SDC thematic network outputs are being referred to in scientific publications, such as CEDRIG being discussed in an IADB⁶³ publication. In some areas, there are newly developing bilateral technical support and exchanges with international organizations, for example with IFAD⁶⁴, UNDP, and World Bank.

2.3.5 Unexpected Side Effects

The Evaluation has identified a few unexpected side effects from the development of the thematic networks, particularly the following:

- The mandate – according to the 2008 REO documents – is for SDC thematic networks to promote learning, to advise and to capitalize experiences. The development of 12 different thematic networks, as opposed to the 5 thematic areas in the F-Department, has diluted the perception of thematic focus throughout the organization. Still, there is an increase since the F-Department in actual numbers of current staff working directly in thematic areas.

⁶³ Inter-American Development Bank. Tetra Tech Inc., “Climate Change Data and Risk Assessment Methodologies for the Caribbean” Inter American Development Bank, Washington D.C., 2013

⁶⁴ International Fund for Agricultural Development.

2.4 Sustainability

Box 4 provides an overview of key findings with regard to sustainability; that is, the extent to which the thematic networks and their interventions are likely to last.

Box 4: Key Findings

- Sustainability is grounded in the recognized added-value of networks, which will motivate participation and engage management support;
- Integrated thematic and bottom-up approaches promote relevant and effective networks;
- Institutional learning is critical to sustaining a level of expertise that will deepen and solidify SDC's thematic and operational capacities;
- Networks are fairly well established, poised, and with sufficient technical, financial, and organizational resources to move to the next stage of network development.

Sustainability, the extent to which SDC thematic networks and their interventions will last, requires years of functioning to accurately measure. However, there are some specific examples that point to potential sustainability of the SDC networks and their activities in the future.

The networks as instruments are fairly well established in SDC learning and knowledge sharing. Each network is at a different stage of development and purposes, as determined by their membership and leadership. Two major upcoming factors will affect the overall functioning of the organization and therefore the context within which the networks function: 1) the upcoming change in Director-General and 2) the integration process with FDFA. Looking forward, the thematic networks are poised to strategically integrate their work and evolve with changing contexts, needs and SDC priorities.

2.4.1 Networks as Value Added

The sustainability of the networks relies most significantly on their recognition as providing expertise and the necessary services and knowledge that respond to SCO needs. With this clear **value-added**, the networks' use as management and operational tools would increase.

An **integrated thematic approach** will provide strong support to field offices with multi-thematic programs that address the complex needs of each country context. As the networks become more established, they are seeking ways to collaborate that will better support country office needs. At headquarters, they are participating in F2F meetings of other related networks and developing integrated guidelines (such as CEDRIG). At the field level, projects that include more than one thematic network share information and there are a few examples of knowledge sharing across networks with all office staff.

One of the key assumptions by stakeholders is that the networks will be more relevant, effective, efficient and results-oriented with a **bottom-up approach**. It is also assumed that this approach will instill a mutual influence whereby increased network member ownership will further motivate their participation and vice versa, while capitalizing on inputs from the field. Some examples are member participation in F2F design, joint network planning during F2F, and exploration of topics that emerged from member comments and interests.⁶⁵

In addition, although rotation of Swiss staff is viewed incongruously – opportunity for network growth or hindrance for network continuity – **NPOs and external partners are constant**

⁶⁵ See Annex 9 for further details.

members who provide strong grounding for the network. In particular, the active involvement of NPOs and field-based partners strengthens the bottom-up approach.

2.4.2 Organizational Thematic Learning

The creation of the networks introduced a paradigm shift within SDC. Whereas experts provided services to the organization within the F-Department, knowledge is now learned and shared more directly across the organization among knowledge users. **Organizational thematic knowledge** – rather than individual – is critical to sustaining a level of organizational expertise that will deepen and solidify SDC's thematic and operational capacities. As an example, a learning project led by an external partner and expert in the field with the participation of various interested network members, discussed at the F2F and culminating in a report and short lessons learned will deepen SDC institutional knowledge on a particular topic through a process that builds SDC capacity. Section 2.2.2.3 shows that organizational learning is limited, while this section points to areas where it is beginning to take hold as the networks continue to develop and evolve.

Solidifying organizational learning also requires **policies and processes** to support documentation, knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer. K&LP developed well-designed documents to support the Focal Points in their facilitation of the networks, though more is needed. The Focal Point Cafés are a strong process that provides a unique and valued opportunity to share knowledge and build capacity in network facilitation. The Field Handbook, end of phase reports and end of post reports capture the accomplishments and intended plans for a project or position, though they are not consistently applied and do not include specific reference to responsibilities within networks.

The SDC structure allows for the continuation of **theme-related technical advice to support operations**. The Focal Points, external partners and network members combined have an extensive pool of expertise. This expertise is not yet utilized to its fullest through more dynamic e-discussions, increased numbers of peer reviews and enhanced regional technical support.

3. Conclusions

The thematic network structure is critical for SDC's 2008 reorganization and mandate to promote learning, share knowledge, provide theme-related operational advice, capitalize on experiences, and formulate good practices to ultimately improve SDC operations in the field. The structure is particularly important in a decentralized organization, where multidirectional vertical and horizontal communications is important to ensure organizational identity while increasing regional and local ownership. Overall, the established network structure has proven able to respond to the functions defined in the mandate of the thematic networks, particularly in terms of promoting learning and passing on professional and methodological knowledge; providing theme-related operational advice to the organizational units within the network; and capitalizing on experience and identifying good practices. The 12 thematic networks have developed with different approaches to the various network functions and modus operandi reflecting the flexibility and adaptability of the network structure. As a result, the efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of the thematic networks vary and is continuously developing and adapting as could be expected of a relatively new organizational structure where the official reorganization phase only finished in 2012.

While the overall structure seems to have arrived at a relatively stable state in terms of network functioning with effective use of tools such as face-to-face meetings, there is now a need for more emphasis on developing systematic, results-based mechanisms that will

facilitate more focused and impactful results, including well-developed Theories of Change or results framework for each network or 'family' of networks. Likewise, with the maturing of the networks there should be more focus on using the networks as organizational tools rather than objectives per se. While the general concept of the thematic network structure as the modus operandi for SDC's thematic focus has been internalized throughout the organization, there are still uncertainties about how best to use the networks including roles and responsibilities and members are generally not claiming full ownership. This is reflected for instance, in the tendency for limited pro-activeness of members in the daily functioning of the networks such as D-groups and e-discussions where a dynamic dialogue rarely develops and most communication is vertical with very limited horizontal communication.

Some of the challenges to the daily functioning of the networks are related to practical issues such as language barriers. However, there are also challenges with regard to the perceived relevance of some of the network functions, such as technical advice and sharing good practices where the SCO demand is often specific and requires adapted solutions rather than global advice. What SCOs are more often requesting is support in adapting good practices and technical advice from other contexts to their own specific context.

The challenge for SDC to focus thematically, which has often been highlighted for instance in OECD DAC peer reviews, seems to be reinforced through the current network structure with the thematic networks distributed throughout the organizational units, drawing attention in 12 directions. So far, there are only limited structures put in place to ensure an integrated approach of the thematic networks and most of the networks tend to work independently from each other although recently there have been some initiatives to strengthen cooperation in small families of thematically related networks. Likewise, the effective thematic focus that is found at SCOs with overall thematic areas that cut across the 12 thematic networks greatly limits program officers' capacity to effectively participate in all relevant networks. As a result, the general perception of SDC as a strong thematic organization has decreased in spite of the fact that staff directly involved in technical reflections has increased through the network structure.

4. Lessons Learned

The following key lessons learned are based on the specific findings of the Evaluation:

1. Global networks offer good potential for strengthening corporate identity. However, to be effective and relevant the global networks need to be complemented by strong regional structures.
2. For thematic networks to be productive beyond simple knowledge sharing there is a need for developing communities of trust at manageable sizes.
3. The relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and impact of thematic networks depend to a large degree on the capacity of the network facilitators to animate thematic discussions and promote multidirectional horizontal communication. This capacity is both a personal capacity but also a professional skill. Ideal network facilitation will therefore be a tandem with a thematic expert and a network facilitator with strong networking skills.

5. Recommendations

Priorities for change for structure and functioning of SDC's thematic networks were collectively identified with the CLP during the final validation workshop. The priority areas for change include Role and responsibility of the thematic networks in SDC's structure (value added at all levels of SDC operations, demand driven, innovations); Functioning and effectiveness (use of different instruments); Outcomes (thematic advice, knowledge management for improved thematic quality, policy); Design and anchorage (focus areas, local-regional-global, head quarter/SCO and organizational anchorage); and Membership profiles (SDC staff's thematic qualifications, competence level, role of external members).

Based on the findings, conclusions, and priorities for change presented in this report the Evaluation recommends that:

Recommendation 1: SDC should continue with thematic networks to strengthen thematic quality of its operations and policy.

Senior management should establish an overall steering group for the thematic network structure with participation of representatives from senior management, SCOs, management of thematic networks, quality assurance section, and K&LP to coordinate and monitor the thematic network structure and ensure that:

- g. The thematic focus and activities of the thematic networks are explicitly integrated in key operational processes, including the full Project Cycle Management and human resource management,
- h. The thematic focus of the networks is aligned with the thematic priorities presented in the Bills to the Parliament and priority domains of Country Strategies,
- i. Procedures are established to ensure that thematic networks for areas that are no more in demand by SDC's operations will be reorganized either through integration of the themes into other thematic networks or by ceasing the focus to the area,
- j. Each network has a well-functioning network management, including focal points, network facilitators, theme managers, and a core / steering group with participation of SDC network members from headquarters and SCOs,
- k. Each thematic network develops structure, functions, and priorities according to specific needs and opportunities for that network,
- l. Technology is in place and is being used for full integration of National Program Officers in network planning and other network management activities such as participation in core/steering groups,
- m. Thematic networks are innovative, proactive, and support the organization's changing needs in a complex environment.

Recommendation 2: Each thematic network should apply result-based management to clearly define their contributions to SDC operations.

The network management in consultation with the whole network should apply rolling multi-year planning and result-based management with special focus on SCO needs and SCO knowledge resources that should/could be mobilized through the network. The result-based management work plans should include indicators and targets for network activities at output and outcomes levels. Moreover, the multi-year plans should clearly identify:

- a. Contributions to the full Project Cycle Management with identification of roles and responsibilities of Network Members and the bureaucratic processes for mobilizing

- Network Members, including role of Focal Points, Theme Managers, and Core Members, for different forms of technical support through different network tools such as peer support, field visits, and virtual support, and according to specific criteria,
- b. The role of Focal Points to decide when to respond directly to a request for technical advice, when to involve National Program Officers, or when to involve the entire network,
 - c. Regular monitoring of thematic quality at all phases of the Project Cycle Management, for instance through systematic participation of Focal Points and /or Network Members,
 - d. Systematic mainstreaming of the thematic networks in Project Documents,
 - e. Priority needs of SCOs in a demand driven manner based on systematic monitoring of SCO knowledge needs with identification of most appropriate means of knowledge sharing and thematic advice according to the specific SCO,
 - f. Role of regional and thematic sub-groups in the delivery of thematic network outcomes, specifying the role of Regional Advisors as link between regional and global knowledge and know-how including capacities to link the regional and global levels.

Recommendation 3: Thematic networks should strengthen their efficiency with special focus on responding to SCO needs.

The network management should review and continuously develop network processes to promote efficiency, including:

- a. Development of a multi-directional communication strategy to promote horizontal communication, including spontaneous knowledge sharing,
- b. Development and coordination of regional and thematic sub-groups according to needs expressed by Network Members and SDC Senior Management, and define the roles, responsibilities, and structures of regional and thematic sub-groups in the overall network structure,
- c. Strengthening network animation through training and special recruitment with focus on promoting network initiatives by regular members, foster network ownership, and increase network facilitation to trigger queries from field staffs on D-groups,
- d. Development and sharing of know-how and not just thematic knowledge,
- e. Development of good practices, lessons learned, and thematic reports based on SCO needs and input,
- f. Improvement of existing networks tools, particularly trainings, technical workshops, development of technical and position papers,
- g. Introduction of new members to networks with one-on-one consultations – written or verbal –between representatives from network management and new members to improve their understanding of their roles and responsibilities and the opportunities the network offers,
- h. Continuous thematic training for network members according to needs and opportunities,

- i. Update the yellow book for easier reference for users of network services and develop overview of technical capacities available among the members of the network with identification of their geographic location,
- j. Explanation of role of SDC Communication Officers at headquarters and in the field within the communication about network roles and activities.

Recommendation 4: The thematic networks should strengthen the integrated thematic approach.

Focal Points of all thematic networks should ensure joint planning to maximize their complementarity in support to SCO priority domains with special focus on:

- a. Defining complementarity for joint support to the Project Cycle Management,
- b. Defining cross-cutting network activities, including Face-to-Face, training, and peer support,
- c. Establishing a website for joint planning and coordinated activities for easy reference.

Recommendation 5: SDC should foster a learning culture.

Senior Management should strengthen a learning culture that will embrace successes, failures, and risk taking. To achieve this, Senior Management should develop:

- a. A strategy for the role of risk taking in thematic networks and processes for systematically learning from success and failures and scale up innovations,
- b. Guidelines for partnerships for knowledge and know-how development and sharing with special attention to the role of knowledge and know-how partnerships in the thematic networks,
- c. New processes or implement existing ones to encourage institutional knowledge and expertise and not just individual learning,
- d. A strategy for learning from others including the role of external partners in the networks and the use of differentiation between outcome-oriented network memberships with well-defined roles and responsibilities for all members and D-groups where more passive membership is an option,
- e. A stronger role for thematic learning in SDC's organizational training concepts,
- f. Guidelines for Line Managers to incentivize and reward knowledge sharing.

Recommendation 6: SDC should ensure that the network structure is optimal.

In future adaptations of SDC's organizational structure, Senior Management should consider the optimal network architecture, including organizational anchorage, the role and responsibilities of Theme Managers and Focal Points, and the number of thematic networks, with special attention to:

- a. The different roles and needs for Theme Managers in the different domains,
- b. Authority of Focal Points to negotiate directly with the Line Managers outside their own line the use of network members time for network activities, for instance for providing horizontal cooperation,
- c. Ensuring that an integrated thematic approach will be favored.

Annexes

Annex 1: List of Persons Consulted

Annex 2: List of Key Documents Reviewed

Annex 3: Nicaragua Country Case Study

Annex 4: Benin Country Case Study

Annex 5: Kyrgyzstan Country Case Study

Annex 6: Sida Case Study

Annex 7: DFID Case Study

Annex 8: Online Survey

Annex 9: Networks Analysis

Annex 10: Stakeholders Analysis

Annex 11: Assumption & Contribution Analysis

Annex 12: Inception Report

Annex 13: Evaluation Matrix

Annex 14: Approach Paper

Imprint

Publisher:
Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC
3003 Bern
www.sdc.admin.ch

Picture:
<http://pixabay.com/de/spinnennetz-netz-internet-mensch-69908/>

Orders:
E-mail: deza@eda.admin.ch

Specialist contact:
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC
Evaluation and Corporate Controlling Division
Freiburgstrasse 130, 3003 Bern
sektion.evaluation-controlling@eda.admin.ch

This publication can be downloaded from the website
https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/resultate_und_wirkung/evaluationen.html

Bern, December 2014