

Evaluation Management Response – VLIR-UOS

General

Evaluation title:	Thematic Evaluation of Departmental Projects: Creating the Conditions for Impact
Evaluation year:	2019
How was this <u>management response developed and validated</u> ?	This management response was prepared by the VLIR-UOS secretariat. A first draft was discussed by the expert group 'Uptake' which was set up as a result of this evaluation. Finally, the management response was discussed (resulting in one minor adaptation) and approved by the Bureau UOS on 18 December 2019.

Context and general appreciation

Many of VLIR-UOS supported projects create new knowledge, applications or services. Most of these projects explicitly want to have an impact beyond the own academic institution (societal, environmental, economic, etc.). In the VLIR-UOS Theory of Change, and in the strategies of most projects, there is an explicit vision (at the level of general objectives) that there will be an uptake of knowledge, applications and/or services and thus a wider use of the knowledge, applications and/or services created by the intervention. As creating new knowledge, applications and/or services does not automatically lead to uptake and use, projects are supposed to develop different strategies to **create the conditions for this uptake**.

However, little clarity currently exists about (the diversity in) the different existing approaches (how are strategies different from one another? What is the total pallet of potential approaches? Categories?). Recent evaluations, and a recent impact evaluation in particular¹, had found that the quality of these strategies is a crucial success factor in the impact of interventions outside the partner institution (next to the academic impact within the institution). VLIR-UOS started the present (learning-oriented) evaluation in order to acquire more knowledge about how interventions can effectively create the conditions for uptake on the basis of existing knowledge and on the basis of existing VLIR-UOS interventions. This focus on "creating the conditions for uptake" needs to be considered as one of the dimensions of the way VLIR-UOS tries to make its interventions more impact oriented (cf. Management for Sustainable Development Results paradigm). As such, this evaluation and the results of the evaluation, incl. the implementation of this management response, need to be considered as complementary to the VLIR-UOS M&E policy, Theory of Change guidelines, etc.

¹ This evaluation financed by the Belgian Special Evaluation Unit can be consulted here: https://diplomatie.belgium.be/nl/Beleid/Ontwikkelingssamenwerking/Onze_werkmethoden/Dienst_Bijzondere_Evaluatie/Verslagen

The results of this evaluation will allow VLIR-UOS, as a non-implementing organisation, to look at ways to improve the uptake of project results. This also implies reflecting about potential incentives for academics to invest more in “creating the conditions for uptake” and how VLIR-UOS could create the enabling environment for this. To guide this process, VLIR-UOS has set-up an academic expert group on ‘Uptake’ to help VLIR-UOS in translating the results of this evaluation in new policies, practices, systems, tools, platforms, etc while also remaining aligned to academic concerns .

Management response to recommendations of the evaluation

Recommendations for departmental projects

Although these recommendation are not oriented towards VLIR-UOS as an organisation, we will briefly respond to these recommendations (referring to our response to recommendations for VLIR-UOS when relevant).

Recommendation 1: Include an assessment of structural barriers to uptake and efficient project implementation in the context analysis. The evaluation results highlight the fact that a sound understanding of the project’s context facilitates research, and that alignment to (developmentally relevant) policy priorities in the sector or partner country create the conditions for research uptake. Therefore, it is recommended that sufficient resources be invested in establishing an elaborate understanding of the project’s context, which includes an assessment of structural barriers (e.g. dominant production regimes, imbalanced power relations, capacity constraints on the part of the relevant stakeholders or existing conflicts between important stakeholders in the sector).	
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	See recommendation 10

Recommendation 2: Identify end-users, if possible, at the proposal or early implementation stage. The evaluation demonstrated that the main uptake of knowledge, services and/or applications developed by the projects takes place with those stakeholders who are either the collaboration partners or the explicit targeted audience of the funded project. Identifying end-users early-on ensures that dissemination activities and/or products can be targeted, and collaboration partners can be selected accordingly.	
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	See recommendation 10

Recommendation 3: Consider the users’ demand for (new) knowledge, services and/or applications as well as their capacity to absorb it. The evaluation results show that needs orientation regarding both the projects’ overall design and dissemination of products and/or activities creates the	
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conditions for uptake. Continuous needs orientation, e.g. through advisory boards or baseline assessments, can ensure that research does not lose track of users' needs and that (new) knowledge, services and/or applications corresponds to users' capacities to apply and use them.

Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	The importance of a needs orientation in VLIR-UOS projects is already taken into account through the selection criteria. The importance of this aspect will be further integrated in the development of a manual and exchange formats, which will also include good practices such as advisory boards (see recommendation 14).

Recommendation 4: Ensure that research results and activities target users directly. The results of the evaluation showed that 'un-targeted' publications or communication (e.g. via radio or academic publications) is less likely to create the conditions for uptake; and that uptake of knowledge/services/application takes place with the explicit targeted audience of the funded project.

Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Partially agree
Response / Actions planned	Although VLIR-UOS agrees it is important to target users directly, it also needs to be underlined that scientific publications, and contributions to science, remain very important results in research projects. The importance of targeted publications and communications will be further integrated in the development of a manual and exchange formats, which will also include good practices (see recommendation 14).

Recommendation 5: Build on and valorise knowledge and contacts from previous projects and experiences. Evaluation results demonstrate that continuity is a success factor for research uptake. (External) relations, built up in the previous project, or which are available through the promoters, the department or the university, save significant resources from setting up relevant networks. This is particularly relevant for follow-up SI.

Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	See recommendation 9

Recommendation 6: Consider various forms of collaborating with and/or integrating end-users.

The evaluation found that participatory research and various forms of direct interaction/collaboration are conducive in creating the conditions for uptake. However, the involvement of end-users in the set-up/design phase of a project was found to be a prohibitor of successful uptake. Collaboration should therefore ideally start at the early implementation stage; modes of collaboration (participatory research, training and sensitization, advisory boards, or regular meetings in which intermediate results are discussed) should be determined based on the partners' needs and capacities. Finally, direct contact with the research team was found more effective in achieving uptake than indirect contact, e.g. via intermediaries. Direct, physical interaction should therefore, if possible, be preferred over indirect relations with end-users.

Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):

Partially agree

Response / Actions planned

VLIR-UOS can only partially agree with the formulation of this recommendation. Further enquiry of the evaluators allowed VLIR-UOS to add more nuance to this recommendation. Involving stakeholders early on, before the start of a project, is considered as conducive for research uptake. However, involving stakeholders in all step of the formulation process (incl. planning, budgeting, etc.) is not positively correlated with uptake. For VLIR-UOS, involving stakeholders in formulation stages related to context (stakeholder analysis, context analysis, etc.) is considered as an added value. Stakeholders also need to be consulted when defining the objectives of interventions. However, VLIR-UOS agrees that in the actual planning/budgeting stage, projects might also need a phase where the project team itself can make decisions based on information gathered.

The recommendation related to intermediaries can also be nuanced (also after consultation of the evaluators). The findings of the evaluation invite VLIR-UOS to reflect further on the role of intermediaries in creating uptake as it has found that intermediaries are not a recipe for success per se. The recommendation draws from a project focusing its dissemination on intermediaries, assuming the intermediaries would automatically do further dissemination. This project did not actively plan further dissemination with the intermediaries, possibly also guiding and capacitating them. This is an important finding, and VLIR-UOS will reflect further on this matter when designing a manual and exchange formats (cf. recommendation 14).

Recommendation 7: Ensure complementarity of dissemination activities and contacts. The evaluation results indicate that uptake is best achieved if collaboration/direct contact and information sharing go hand in hand. For example, trainings were found most effective when participants had an opportunity to apply the newly acquired knowledge, e.g. in participatory research. Promoters are therefore encouraged to combine several mechanisms to facilitate uptake to a comprehensive (potentially multi-actor/-level) strategy.	
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	The importance of a comprehensive (potentially multi-actor/-level) strategy will be further integrated in the development of a manual and exchange formats, which will also include good practices (see recommendation 14).

Recommendations for VLIR-UOS

Recommendation 8: Keep the emphasis on developmental relevance in the VLIR-UOS call conditions and selection criteria. The evaluation results demonstrate that relevance is conducive to creating the conditions for uptake, and second, that the developmental relevance of VLIR-UOS funded research projects is generally high. As the calls already start with highlighting the VLIR-UOS country strategy to assure 'relevance and complementarity' (referring to the needs and priorities of the partner country, in particular the national priorities in terms of poverty reduction and national policies for higher education), it is suggested that emphasis be maintained, while adding others (see below).	
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	The VLIR-UOS selection system, to be optimised in the coming months, will maintain its focus on development relevance as different evaluations show that this is an important success factor. Next to the attention to relevance in selection, VLIR-UOS will also investigate how the organisation should proceed (or not) with developing its own country strategies linked to the priorities of partner countries. The current country strategies have become outdated and VLIR-UOS needs to consider how it will move forward. The challenge lies in identifying an efficient approach to guarantee this development relevance and identify the potential niche for partnerships between local and Flemish HEIs: as a framework in calls for proposals, by including this in application forms, through an update/renewal of country strategies, or by aligning to existing frameworks (Joint Strategic framework, EU frameworks (Europeaid)), etc. In every scenario, VLIR-UOS will take into account that a certain framing of future interventions can be valuable in assuring development relevance.

Recommendation 9: Keep an emphasis on complementarity to other VLIR-UOS interventions.

Through the evaluation, complementarity with other VLIR-UOS interventions (referred to as ‘portfolio approach’), in particular extensions of previous VLIR-UOS interventions, was identified as a success factor for uptake. As the calls already emphasise complementarity to other VLIR-UOS interventions, it is recommended that this emphasis be kept. Therefore, it should be highlighted that follow-up projects should be purposefully designed with a deliberate ‘uptake-orientation,’ i.e. targeted towards translating previous findings into practice (e.g. by providing education/training) or piloting a solution to an identified problem.

Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	VLIR-UOS will maintain the possibility of follow-up projects, though a balance needs to be sought between follow-up projects and giving sufficient opportunities to entirely new partnerships. Still, this recommendation is an opportunity to better identify expectations towards follow-up projects. VLIR-UOS will highlight, in its future call documents, that follow-up projects need to be designed with a deliberate ‘uptake-orientation’, more than is the case for new projects. If relevant, application formats (and/or selection criteria/ descriptors) can be adapted accordingly. However, consistent with the evaluation, all projects need to be able to plan for a clear uptake strategy but these projects could in certain cases move a step further towards research valorisation and technology transfer towards civil society and private/public sector. Furthermore, VLIR-UOS in its role as platform will further reflect on how it can create further synergy between VLIR-UOS projects (and the interventions of other actors) and can strengthen its role as platform with the aim of contributing to uptake.

Recommendation 10: Define the assessment of structural barriers as a component of context analyses. Evaluation results highlight that a good understanding of the context in which a project operates, as well as of relevant stakeholders and potential users of knowledge/services/applications, positively contributes to uptake. In line with the evaluation results, a context analysis should thereby identify barriers, constraints and options and respond accordingly, and also identify opportunities where an intervention is most feasible and likely to promote innovation. This can be a first step to ensure uptake. Furthermore, it is recommended that the project is developed jointly with the Southern partner institution(s) and that it builds on preceding cooperation/projects and takes into account lessons learnt and established collaborations to attain good understanding of context and stakeholders.

Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Partially agree
Response / Actions planned	VLIR-UOS already foresees ample attention to contextual and stakeholder analysis in project applications (both academic and developmental). VLIR-UOS will provide more clear expectations towards these context analyses and integrate the assessment of structural barriers for uptake (and the identification of (end-)users), guaranteeing a better link with the stakeholder analysis (and the identification of users) and the intervention strategy (in which proposals

	<p>can formulate strategies to deal with these barriers. In a system of competitive selection, there inherently exists a disincentive to identify too many risks, including barriers to uptake. As a result, VLIR-UOS will need to provide the right guidelines in order to motivate promoters to ask the right questions and come up with a realistic analysis of risks during project formulation so that their proposal becomes stronger by showing the right balance between the envisioning of a response to global and local challenges and the identification of project hindering risks).</p> <p>VLIR-UOS projects are already jointly developed by partners from the global South and their Flemish counterparts. Follow-up projects are already explicitly requested to reflect on lessons learned from the past/ongoing project. Still, it is recognised that the expectations towards the quality of context and stakeholder analyses could be set higher for follow-up projects compared to entirely new partnerships. A challenge however is that follow-up projects are identified when the ongoing project is still in execution and therefore not all results are often not yet reported when submitting a new proposal. As mentioned earlier, while follow-up projects may be more impactful in general, VLIR-UOS still needs to continue investing in new partnerships (incl. new academics from Flanders and/or partner countries) in order to ensure an influx of a next generation of project promoters and in order to plant the seeds for future impactful partnerships.</p>
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Recommendation 11: Place more emphasis on the question of how projects aim to foster an uptake of research results throughout the process. The evaluation indicates that a general strategy regarding the creation of conditions for research uptake has not yet been pursued in VLIR-UOS departmental projects. Moreover, document analysis also showed that call documents provide few guidelines for the implementation and/or end of the project. A clear focus is put on the selection process, which concerns, in particular, mechanisms related to creating the conditions for uptake that are not attached to a project's set-up phase but only arise at the dissemination stage. It is thus recommended that more emphasis should be placed on the question of how projects aim to foster an uptake of research results throughout the process. Applicants could e.g. be encouraged to elaborate on their strategy to achieve uptake.

Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	VLIR-UOS organised this evaluation as the organisation was aware of the fact that too little clarity on the notion of uptake was being provided in call documents (and in application forms). VLIR-UOS will, together with the expert group Uptake, consider how to best integrate this in the formulation of projects, and will make the necessary changes (in formats and guidelines) accordingly. VLIR-UOS will also invest in the development of tools, the communication of good practices, etc. (cf. recommendation 14).

Recommendation 12: Use call documents to clearly define uptake. All in all, the evaluation found that project team members are not only not aware of uptake (being part of the research process), but also lack a clear understanding of the concept. It is thus necessary to provide applicants and promoters with guidance on what is understood by uptake. Call documents can provide such clarification by clearly defining uptake and can sensitize applicants to the fact that this is understood as an integral part of the research process.

Management Re- sponse (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	As mentioned earlier, VLIR-UOS organised this evaluation in order to arrive at a more clear and shared understanding of uptake. The lessons from this evaluation, and the conceptual framework developed, will allow VLIR-UOS to present a clear picture of what uptake is, what VLIR-UOS expects, and how projects can deal with this uptake challenge. This will include an integration of a clear definition of uptake in call documents. VLIR-UOS will also invest in the development of tools, the communication of good practices, etc. (cf. recommendation 14).

Recommendation 13: Approach Southern and in particular Northern promoters more strategically in order to raise awareness that creating the conditions for uptake shall be part of the research process. The evaluation results highlight that Northern promoters view their role mainly as academic sparring partners whereas Southern promoters see one of their main roles as promoting the uptake of research in their particular country. However, they do not receive the necessary support through the project due to the above described Northern promoters' perspective on this subject. Consequently, VLIR-UOS can further support research uptake by approaching Southern and in particular Northern promoters more strategically in order to raise awareness that creating the conditions for uptake shall be part of the research process. In particular, with regards to the current 'division of labour,' increased awareness among Northern promoters is expected to lead to a more joint effort, a more coherent approach and increased understanding between the two parties with regards to disseminating activities and products.

Management Re- sponse (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	This recommendation calls for a comprehensive approach. Next to clarifying the expectation about uptake in call documents, and inviting applicants to make explicit their uptake strategy, VLIR-UOS will also support and motivate promoters through other mechanisms. VLIR-UOS will introduce the necessary support mechanisms (cf. recommendation 14), will assure different levels of expectation towards projects (new project – follow-up projects) will be taken into account by selection commissions, and will regularly communicate about good practices and lessons learned. Finally, VLIR-UOS will clarify the roles of promoters, and will identify specific and joint responsibilities (such as the achievement of objectives) in the implementation of interventions, (with specific attention going to 'uptake').

Recommendation 14: Create exchange formats on successful uptake and a manual providing hands-on advice. The evaluation found that training on research communication, including practical advice, and sensitization for uptake lead to very deliberate strategies and ultimately, the successful creation of conditions for uptake. It is therefore recommended that a platform for exchange be created to help identify and share good practice examples of successful uptake. In addition, learning among project team members and the deployment of more deliberate approaches towards creating the conditions for uptake could be facilitated through a manual, which summarizes the findings of this thematic evaluation and provides hands-on advice with regards to strategies and approaches that can be integrated into the projects' design and implementation.

Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
Response / Actions planned	On the basis of this evaluation, VLIR-UOS will develop a short manual/toolbox for future interventions together with the newly established academic expert group on uptake. This manual/toolbox will need to be succinct, user-friendly and aligned to the needs of academics). Furthermore, VLIR-UOS will investigate other potential exchange formats (e.g. online toolbox, training programme, mentorship-system, e-learning module, communication of good/bad practices, platforms, etc.) as experience shows that a manual/toolbox has limited success when not supported by other measures. User friendliness and match with the needs of academics will be the leading principle in all developments.