



# RIGOROUS IMPACT EVALUATION: EVIDENCE GENERATION AND TAKE-UP IN GERMAN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

*Research Report*

*Executive Summary*  
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# IMPRESSUM

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

This report presents the findings of a research project on rigorous impact evaluation (RIE) in German development cooperation (GDC), funded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, BMZ). RIEs have the potential to contribute to a more effective and efficient development cooperation by answering questions about which interventions work – and to what extent – and which do not. The research project examined the status quo of RIE, and relevant barriers and potential measures to increase both the initiation of RIEs and the take-up of (rigorous) evidence.

## Method

The study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. It drew on six different sources of data: interviews, a stocktaking survey of existing RIEs in GDC, an evidence survey among all development professionals in GDC, a review of international RIE experiences, a portfolio and document analysis, and a literature search. We triangulated our findings across the different data sources, methods and researchers within the team.

## Findings

### **Research question 1: What is the status quo of (a) the initiation of RIE and (b) the take-up of RIE evidence in GDC?**

GDC actors have implemented some RIEs and have used rigorous evidence in some cases. However, there is clear potential for more RIEs, more systematic implementation of RIEs, and a greater take-up of evidence resulting from such evaluations. There have been at least 97 RIEs in GDC since 2014. Although this is more than anticipated, the overall incidence of RIEs in the German Official Development Assistance (ODA) portfolio is low. The approach to implementing RIEs is not yet systematic. It is not embedded in an overarching learning strategy and does for instance not align with ODA flows or other possible indicators of relevance (Section 3.1). Roughly the same is true for evidence take-up. Whereas our data indicate that organisations often use evidence from their own RIEs at the project level, these RIEs do not seem to be used for strategic decision-making. This is despite GDC employees' positive view on evidence-informed decision-making. Project documents outline causal links between the intervention and its intended impacts or outcomes, yet these are rarely backed up by rigorous evidence. In addition, the global RIE evidence base is not systematically used or consulted when designing projects (Section 4.1).

### **Research question 2: What are existing barriers to (a) the initiation of RIE and (b) the take-up of RIE evidence in GDC?**

The report summarises a number of barriers hindering RIE initiation (Section 3.2) and take-up of rigorous evidence in GDC (Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2) along a theory of change (ToC). These barriers are of varied relevance in hindering RIE initiation and evidence take-up. The highly relevant barriers for initiating RIE are, amongst others, unclear benefits of RIE and uncoordinated timing between RIEs and project cycles. The highly relevant barriers for evidence take-up are, amongst others, low priority of evidence for decision-making and scarce and unsystematic dissemination of findings. Further, barriers often interact with each other.

### **Research question 3: What are potential measures for overcoming barriers for (a) the initiation of RIE and (b) the take-up of RIE evidence in GDC?**

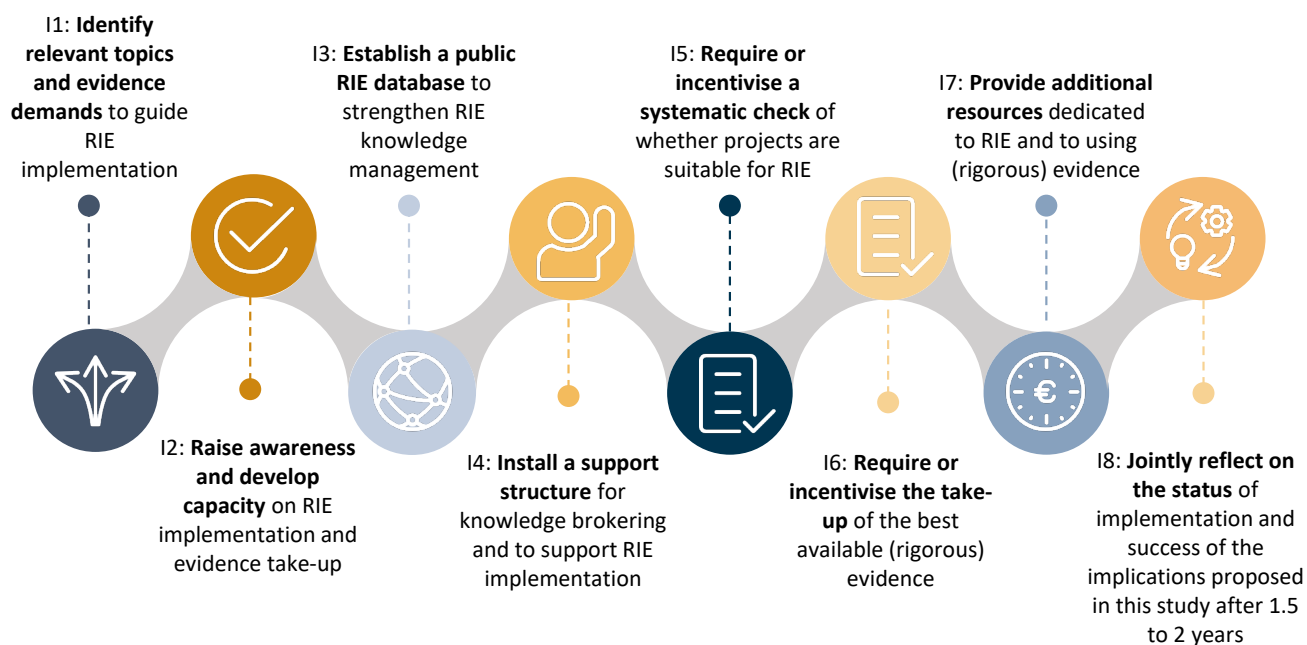
The report identifies a number of potential measures that may help to address the barriers. Some of these have already been tested in practice, either within GDC or by other development partners (Sections 3.3 and 4.3).

When **linking highly relevant barriers and potential measures**, we observe that for most of the barriers several potential measures exist (Sections 3.4 and 4.4). For instance, the low priority given to RIE evidence can be addressed not only through capacity development but through formal requirements or the definition of (more) relevant evaluation questions. Conversely, one potential measure can address a number of different barriers. Yet, we did not identify any “silver bullet” that alone will suffice in addressing all different barriers to RIE initiation or take-up, nor the most relevant barriers.

## Implications

Our analysis revealed that barriers and potential measures are interdependent and often hierarchical. Therefore, we propose an integrated systemic approach to fostering the initiation of RIE and the take-up of rigorous evidence. We have identified a set of eight **implications** (see Figure 1), illustrated below, that are intended to trigger a systemic effect.

**Figure 1** Implications



Source: own illustration

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