



Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland

Can Values Change the World? Finland's Answer Lies in Action, According to a Recent Evaluation

Background and Rationale

The promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights has been a defining pillar of international development cooperation for decades. Globally, these principles underpin major policy frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), especially Goal 16 on peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. At the same time, international trends reveal a more challenging environment: democratic backsliding, shrinking civic space, and increasing fragility in many regions are reshaping the operating context for development actors. These shifts have heightened the importance of coordinated and principled engagement to protect inclusive governance systems and uphold fundamental rights.

Within this global setting, Finland has consistently positioned itself as a value-based actor. Since the early 2010s, its development policy has anchored democracy support in a broad framework integrating human rights, good governance, and civil society participation. These priorities are operationalised under the policy priority area of Peaceful and Democratic Societies, which encompasses strengthening institutions, enabling civic participation, and promoting inclusive governance. More recent policy developments have reaffirmed these commitments, even as competing priorities—such as economic cooperation and trade—have gained prominence.

The evaluation of Finnish support for democracy, rule of law, and human rights covering the period 2014–2024 seeks to assess how these policy commitments have translated into practice. It aims to provide evidence on implementation, results, and strategic direction, while identifying successes, challenges, and areas for improvement. Rather than focusing on individual projects, the evaluation takes a portfolio approach to understand Finland's overall contribution to the development of peaceful and democratic societies.

The findings are intended to inform both accountability and learning, contributing to more effective and sustainable future actions. In this brief, the Development Evaluation Unit of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs highlights some of the findings and conclusions reached by the Evaluation Team.

Finland's value-based identity strengthens its global influence

Finland's comparative advantage lies in its strong adherence to a value- and rule-based approach to development cooperation. The evaluation confirms that policy frameworks on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law have been clearly aligned with a broad understanding of democratic governance. This alignment has provided a solid foundation for Finland's international identity and reputation, widely recognised by partners and stakeholders.

This value-driven approach translates into authenticity in engagement. Finland is perceived not merely as a financial donor but as a principled partner committed to inclusive dialogue, accountability, and long-term transformation. Its emphasis on human rights, gender equality, and non-discrimination has enabled Finland to sustain credibility and influence beyond the scale of its financial contributions, securing a meaningful role in multilateral cooperation and policy dialogue.

Capacity building improves inclusive service delivery

A central success of Finland's support has been its contribution to improving public service delivery through capacity strengthening of duty-bearers. Across sectors such as elections, migration management, water and

sanitation, land administration, education, and health, Finnish-supported interventions have enhanced institutional capabilities and service provision.

Importantly, these improvements have increasingly embedded principles of human rights, accountability, and participation. In practical terms, this has meant more inclusive electoral processes, better access to basic services, and governance systems that are more responsive to citizens' needs. These results demonstrate how sectoral interventions can simultaneously advance development outcomes and democratic principles.

Inclusive policy frameworks strengthen legitimate and sustainable governance

Finnish support has contributed to the development and reform of normative frameworks—laws, policies, and institutional practices—across multiple contexts. These frameworks are increasingly designed through participatory processes, drawing on evidence and involving a broader range of stakeholders, including marginalised groups.

By promoting inclusive formulation of policies, Finland has supported more legitimate and sustainable governance structures. Evidence-based policy influence, supported by research and dialogue, has strengthened legal and regulatory frameworks related to human rights, participation, and access to justice. While these changes may not always result in immediate systemic transformation, they establish important precedents for longer-term reform.

Civil society partnerships amplify local ownership and participation

Support to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) has been a defining feature of Finland's approach. Long-term, value-based partnerships with both Finnish and local CSOs have helped maintain civic engagement at the centre of development policy. These partnerships have enabled outreach to marginalised populations and strengthened grassroots participation in decision-making.

The evaluation highlights that carefully selected partnerships have allowed Finland to maintain influence even in environments dominated by larger donors. Through these relationships, Finland has supported advocacy,

community development, and the protection of rights, often achieving meaningful local-level change. The emphasis on partnership rather than transactional funding has contributed to trust, ownership, and sustainability.

Rights-based approaches drive transformative change

The Human-Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) is deeply embedded in Finland's programming. Rights-holder-focused analysis and programming ensure that interventions prioritise the needs and interests of vulnerable groups, including women, persons with disabilities, and marginalised communities.

This approach has produced transformative effects at the local level. Changes in perceptions, attitudes, and social practices—particularly regarding gender equality and inclusion—have been observed across multiple contexts. Although such transformations are often incremental and context-dependent, they represent significant progress towards more equitable and inclusive societies.

Integrated programming reinforces synergies

The evaluation finds strong synergies between different components of the policy priority area of Peaceful and Democratic Societies, particularly between civil society participation and institutional strengthening. Interventions that combine these elements tend to achieve more sustainable and impactful results.

By integrating democratic governance principles into sectoral programmes, Finland has leveraged cross-sector synergies. For example, interventions in water management or education have simultaneously strengthened participation, accountability, and inclusion. This integrated approach reflects a holistic understanding of development, where technical outcomes and governance improvements reinforce each other.

Localised approaches advance participation and empowerment

Finland's strong emphasis on bottom-up programming and localisation has facilitated meaningful participation of communities in development processes. Many interventions support community-based governance

mechanisms, enabling citizens to directly influence decision-making and service delivery.

These approaches have enhanced local ownership and accountability, ensuring that interventions reflect context-specific needs. They also strengthen the capacity of communities to claim their rights and engage with public institutions, contributing to more responsive and participatory governance systems.

Impact is limited due to resource constraints and systemic gaps

Despite notable achievements, the evaluation identifies several challenges that constrain overall effectiveness. A key limitation is the lack of a tailored and functional results monitoring system for policy priority area of Peaceful and Democratic Societies. Existing frameworks rely heavily on quantitative indicators, which are not well suited to capturing the complex, long-term, and process-oriented nature of democratic change.

Additionally, evidence of contribution to national-level systemic reforms remains limited. While many interventions achieve strong local results, translating these into broader institutional transformation has proven more difficult. This reflects both contextual constraints and limitations in programme design and coordination.

Resource constraints further exacerbate these challenges. Funding cuts, staff reductions, and high turnover have weakened institutional capacity and reduced thematic expertise within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA). These factors pose strategic risks for sustaining Finland's leadership in democracy support and maintaining long-term partnerships.

Finally, risk management and learning processes have not been sufficiently systematic. Lessons from successful interventions are not always shared across programmes, and external political and institutional risks are not consistently integrated into planning and implementation.

Methodology

The evaluation applied a participatory, utilisation-focused, and theory-based approach. It was structured around a reconstructed Theory of Change for the policy priority area of Peaceful and Democratic Societies framework, using contribution analysis to assess how Finnish interventions contributed to observed outcomes.

Data collection combined multiple sources, including document review, quantitative portfolio analysis, and qualitative methods. The evaluation analysed a portfolio of 534 interventions, with a focused subset of 394 projects related to good governance and civil society. From this, a sample of 30 interventions was selected for in-depth analysis, complemented by a country case study in Nepal covering 12 projects.

A total of 123 Key Informant Interviews were conducted across global, regional, and country levels. These included stakeholders from the MFA, partner governments, civil society, international organisations, and other development actors. Qualitative data were systematically coded and analysed to identify patterns, success factors, and challenges.

The methodology also incorporated a human rights-based lens, ensuring that issues of participation, inclusion, and accountability were examined throughout the evaluation.

Acknowledged limitations

- Limited fieldwork in only one country reduces generalisability
- Variability in documentation quality across projects and years
- Gaps in monitoring data and project evaluation reports
- Staff turnover affecting institutional memory
- Inability to apply quantitative comparative analysis due to data constraints



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