International Labour Organization | Evaluation Office

▶ Synthesis reviews & meta-studies (2026)

***i*-eval Insights from evidence, No.5**

Examining resource efficiency and its impact in advancing decent work

Insights from a synthesis and quantitative analysis of 265 ILO development cooperation evaluation reports (2020–25)

October 2026



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This i-eval Insight paper has not been professionally edited, but it has undergone quality control by the ILO Evaluation Office.



Key highlights

Evidence from 265 independent evaluations of ILO development cooperation projects in the period 2020 – 25 evidenced that **resource efficiency is not determined by a single factor, but by how resources are planned, accessed, managed and combined throughout the project cycle.**

The analysis identifies a set of interconnected conditions, synthesized below into six key insights:

- **Insight 1.** Strong design sets the foundation for efficiency and results
- **Insight 2.** Efficient access to and deployment of resources helps translate capacities into substantive results
- **Insight 3.** Active management and timely decision-making turn resources into efficient delivery
- **Insight 4.** Strategic partnerships with clear roles and responsibilities and co-financing strengthen capacities to deliver and sustain results
- **Insight 5.** Resource efficiency depends not simply on having fewer staff, but on having the right capacity in the right place
- **Insight 6.** The main challenge is connecting resources to results

The insights presented in this paper provide practical evidence for decision-making across the project cycle, helping project teams and managers identify where adjustments to design, resourcing, implementation arrangements, partnerships and staffing can improve the use of available resources and strengthen the conditions for results.

Introduction



The *i*-eval Insight series transforms evidence from final independent evaluations of development cooperation projects into concise, targeted knowledge products. By synthesizing evaluation findvings, the series highlights key messages for different audiences and makes evaluation evidence more accessible and relevant to their information needs.

This fifth edition draws on 265 independent evaluations conducted between 2020-25. It examines **how the ILO uses and manages resources across its development cooperation portfolio and identifies the factors associated with efficient delivery and stronger Decent Work results.**

The key insights are based on evaluated development cooperation interventions and selected performance indicators related to efficiency. The analysis examines relationships across performance dimensions to identify patterns that may help explain differences in results across the portfolio. It uses evaluation ratings recorded on a four-point scale, from Unsuccessful (1) to Highly successful (4), and considers whether stronger performance in one dimension is systematically associated with stronger performance in another. Descriptive analysis is complemented by statistical tests to assess the direction and strength of these relationships. The findings indicate associations, not causal relationships. They show where performance dimensions tend to move together but do not establish that stronger performance in one dimension causes improvements in another.

Further information on the analytical approach, treatment of the rating scale and statistical tests is provided in the Methodology Annex.

Key trends at glance, 2020–25

Overall performance (2020–2025)

Approximately 80% of ILO projects were assessed as making efficient use of available funds, achieving results at a reasonable cost.

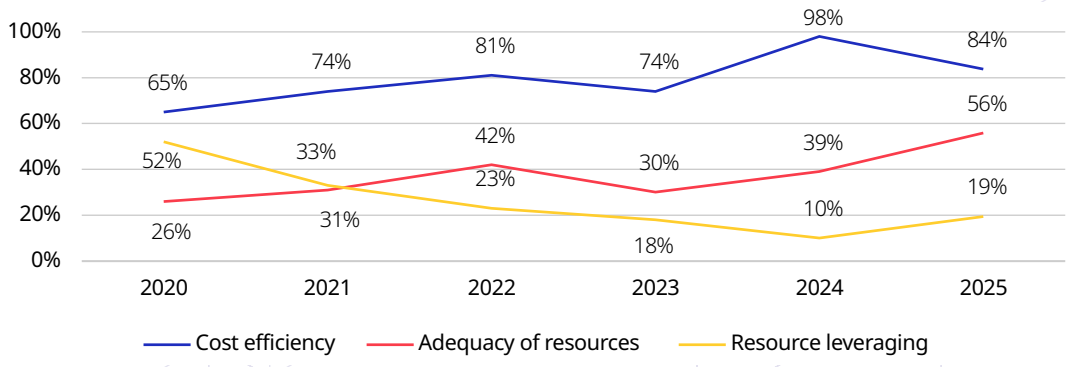
Nearly 40% of ILO projects were assessed as having sufficient financial, human and other resources to carry out their activities effectively.

Only 26% of ILO projects were assessed as successful in mobilizing additional resources, such as funding, partnerships or other contributions, to support their work.

Regional breakdown of performance

- **Africa:** Cost efficiency strengthened markedly, reaching consistently high levels from 2022 onwards, while resource adequacy improved more recently and resource leveraging remained comparatively weak.
- **Asia and the Pacific:** Performance was volatile, with cost efficiency recovering strongly in 2024–25, resource adequacy generally outperforming resource leveraging, which declined in recent years.
- **Arab States:** Performance fluctuated considerably, although 2025 shows broader improvement across all three dimensions, particularly resource adequacy and leveraging.
- **Europe and Central Asia:** Cost efficiency was generally strong but variable, while resource adequacy was comparatively high and resource leveraging remained consistently limited..
- **Latin America and the Caribbean:** Cost efficiency improved substantially and reached 100% in 2025, accompanied by improving resource adequacy but persistently low resource leveraging.

Figure 1: Resource efficiency in ILO development cooperation projects: Performance trends, 2020–2025



Examining resource efficiency and its impact in advancing decent work: insights from a synthesis and quantitative analysis of ILO development cooperation (2020–25)[1]

Insight 1. Strong design sets the foundation for efficiency and results

Resource efficiency starts with realistic design, proportionate scope and use of existing systems, which in turn pave the way for stronger performance in normative work and standards promotion.

Projects were generally more resource-efficient when objectives, delivery models and geographic scope matched available means from the outset. This, in turn, paved the way for stronger performance in normative work and international labour standards (ILS) promotion.

The qualitative evidence drawn from ILO final independent evaluations since 2020 points to a **common set of design features** underpinning both cost efficiency and normative performance. Projects performed better when their scope and objectives were realistic relative to available resources, their intervention logic was coherent, and their design built on existing systems, tools and previous investments. These features helped limit duplication and unnecessary costs.

Strategic alignment with existing national, regional or global priorities also supported more efficient implementation in some cases. For instance, evalutive evidence in 2025 highlighted that in Viet Nam, alignment with partner needs and the DWCP framework helped mobilize human resources from constituents and partner institutions. In Lebanon, complementary donor-funded interventions were aligned around immediate assistance and longer-term reform, reducing duplication and enabling a coherent division of labour between ILO and UNICEF. In Paraguay, alignment with the Global Accelerator and broader strategic processes helped position the project for additional financing and sustained engagement.

Box 1. Key design features

- Achievable objectives
- Coherent intervention logic
- Realistic timeframes and resource assumptions
- Stakeholder validation
- Built on previous interventions

1 This analysis draws on 265 final independent evaluation reports of ILO Development Cooperation-funded initiatives from 2020–2025 that were rated either "successful" (score of 3) or "highly successful" (score of 4) for the specific key performance indicators (KPI) on cost-efficiency, adequacy of resources and resource leveraging. These were associated statistically and qualitatively with KPIs related to effectiveness in achieving results and likelihood of impact.

Conversely, weaker-performing cases often reflected a mismatch between ambitions, scope and resource-efficiency. Broad thematic and geographic coverage tend to reduce the focus of interventions, spreading resources across multiple countries and outcome areas. These concerns are a consistent pattern in the reviewed period, where objectives, geographic coverage or planned activities exceeded available resources and implementation timeframes, contributing to delays, reduced coverage or the scaling back of planned interventions.

The efficient use of existing systems provides a bridge to normative results. Both the quantitative and qualitative analysis of evidence repeatedly shows higher cost efficiency associated with stronger performance in normative work and ILS promotion. In this regard, stronger normative performance is associated with designs that embedded ILS and normative objectives from the outset, providing a clearer pathway for available resources to translate into policy, institutional and workplace-level results.

Overall, the share of interventions rated successful or highly successful in achieving results at normative level rises steadily with cost efficiency—from 22 per cent among interventions with unsuccessful cost efficiency to 78 per cent among those rated highly successful. Statistical analysis suggests that stronger cost efficiency tends to go hand in hand with better performance in normative work and ILS promotion, without implying that one necessarily causes the other.

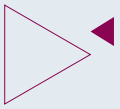
Box 2. Efficiency and normative results: evaluative evidence from 2020 – 25

As highlighted in ILO Evaluation Office ex-post meta-analysis on ILO's Decent Work results and effectiveness since 2020, stronger normative results were associated with projects that connected them to institutional capacity, policy and legal reform, and implementation mechanisms. In practice, when projects work through national institutions and established mechanisms—such as labour or other sectoral ministries, inspectorates, social protection institutions and tripartite structures—these systems provide channels for translating international labour standards into policy and practice.

The pattern therefore suggests that building on existing systems is not only an efficiency measure: it can help direct resources towards institutional pathways through which normative results can take root and be sustained.

Insight 2. Efficient access to and deployment of resources helps translate capacities into substantive results

Timely access and effective deployment are critical to translating available resources into stronger Decent Work results.



Resource adequacy is more than having sufficient funding; it requires **having the right financial, human and technical resources available when they are needed**. Across evaluations, the evidence suggests that adequate and timely resources provide the capacity and continuity needed to translate normative objectives into institutional and policy results.

A consistent pattern is that resources can be nominally available but still be inadequate in practice if they are not accessible or deployable when needed. Across the portfolio, evaluations identify delayed disbursements, recruitment bottlenecks, procurement and contracting procedures, approval processes and administrative requirements as constraints that slowed implementation. Conversely, predictable funding flows and timely deployment of staff and inputs supported continuity and timely delivery.

A second pattern is that human-resource adequacy is as important as financial adequacy. Adequate staffing means having the right technical and coordination capacity, in the right place and at the right time. The evidence associates experienced coordinators, technical specialists and field-level presence with stronger implementation, stakeholder engagement and capacity to adapt. Conversely, overstretched teams, delayed recruitment and limited administrative support reduced follow-up capacity and placed pressure on implementation. This means a project can be adequately funded but still face a resource constraint if it lacks the staff or expertise needed to turn funding into delivery.

More adequate resources are associated with stronger normative performance. The evaluations show that successful normative work is resource-intensive in specific ways: it involves technical expertise, sustained policy engagement, capacity-building of ministries and social partners, legal and policy analysis, support to labour inspectorates, tripartite dialogue, and follow-up on ratification and implementation.

The share of interventions achieving successful or highly successful results in normative work and ILS promotion increases from 42 per cent where resource adequacy was rated unsuccessful to 73 per cent where it was rated successful. Statistical analysis confirms a positive relationship, although its strength is modest. This suggests that having adequate human and financial resources can provide an important enabling condition for normative work, while other factors also play a substantial role.

Insight 3. Active management and timely decision-making turn resources into efficient delivery

Adaptive resource management and flexible delivery models sustain efficiency in complex contexts. Stronger performance is associated with adaptive management, timely decision-making, strategic budget reallocation, flexible delivery arrangements and effective coordination.

Implementation management appears to be an important link between available resources and cost-efficient delivery. The quantitative analysis shows a moderate positive association between implementation management and cost efficiency, with successful or highly successful cost-efficiency ratings increasing from 42 per cent among interventions with unsuccessful implementation management to 87 per cent among those with successful management.

While good management does not cause cost efficiency automatically, the qualitative evidence identifies **four management practices that help projects use available resources more productively**:

- **Adaptive budget and activity management:** cost-efficient implementation was associated with managers actively adjusting the use of resources as needs and operating conditions changed. This included reprioritizing activities and shifting resources across activities or countries. Importantly, adjustments were made while protecting core results.
- **Flexible and cost-conscious delivery choices:** Efficient projects adapted how activities were delivered to obtain results at lower cost or maintain delivery under constraints. Practices included, among others, using virtual or remote delivery, local rather than international expertise, in-house technical capacity and use of existing partnerships.
- **Proportionate staffing and coordination arrangements:** Cost efficiency was supported by management structures that matched implementation needs without creating unnecessary overhead. Positive practices included shared personnel and management functions across projects, and access to country-office, regional and headquarters expertise when specialized support was needed. The evidence also shows the limits of "lean" management: understaffing, excessive workloads, limited training on procedures, staff turnover and unclear reporting lines reduced implementation capacity. Equally, decentralization was efficient when responsibilities, authority and administrative support were clear.
- **Timely and streamlined operational processes.** Efficient implementation relied on managers being able to access funds, recruit staff, procure inputs and obtain decisions or approvals when quickly and when required.

Figure 2. Four management practices that drive efficient resource use and delivery



Source: *i*-eval Insights own elaboration

Box 3. Evidence from stronger-performing DC-funded initiatives in 2025

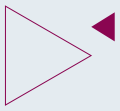
Flexible implementation arrangements helped sustain efficiency. In Lebanon, ILO and UNICEF adapted implementation arrangements to manage delays in EU funding tranches by drawing on UN resources, sharing staffing and sequencing expenditures across complementary interventions.

In Haiti, the final independent evaluation of Supporting the implementation of the National Strategy for Protection and social promotion concluded on how hybrid in-person and virtual delivery maintained stakeholder engagement in an unstable environment while limiting costs. Adaptation frequently extended to the use of local capacities and delivery systems.

The final independent evaluation of Strengthening Nexus Coherence and Responsiveness in the Palestinian Social Protection Sector evidenced how, in the OPT, the project combined ILO in-house expertise, UNICEF-certified trainers and local consultants familiar with the context, reducing costs while maintaining technical quality and relevance.

▶ Insight 4. Strategic partnerships with clear roles and responsibilities and co-financing strengthen capacities to deliver and sustain results

Resource leveraging expands what interventions can do with their core resources, giving projects access to financial, technical, human and institutional resources available through which capacity-building can be expanded and sustained.



Resource leveraging can multiply the value of core project resources. Across the evaluations, efficient interventions used strategic partnerships, cost-sharing and complementary financial, technical and in-kind contributions from other ILO projects, UN agencies, governments and other actors to pool resources, reduce duplication and pressure on project budgets, extend reach, and in some cases unlock additional or follow-on investment.

Efficiency increased when ILO projects translated technical cooperation results, partnerships and policy engagement into additional financing, in-kind support or follow-on investments. External resources often expanded project scale, reduced pressure on core budgets and improved prospects for continuity beyond the project life-cycle.

- ILO EVAL (2026), Decent work results and effectiveness of ILO operations: An ex-post meta-analysis of development cooperation evaluations, 2025

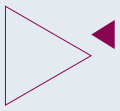
Resource leveraging is also positively associated statistically with stronger capacity-building performance. The ordinal regression analysis evidence that each one-category increase in resource-leveraging performance is associated with approximately 59% higher odds of achieving a higher capacity-building rating. Qualitative evidence helps explain this relationship, showing that **mobilizing complementary financing, expertise and institutional contributions through strategic partnerships, interventions can strengthen and extend capacity-building beyond what core project resources alone can support**. However, sustaining these gains depends on whether adequate institutional capacity, financing, and resource-mobilization arrangements remain in place beyond the intervention.

Box 4. Lessons from successful resource leveraging: Practical insights for strengthening ILO delivery and results

- **Efficiency gains are greater when managers mobilize complementary resources during implementation rather than at project closure.** Assessed evaluations evidence that projects tend to treat resource mobilization as a future sustainability issue rather than an active implementation function.
- **Look beyond additional funding.** Leverage technical expertise, staff time, facilities, equipment, networks and other in-kind contributions that can extend delivery without increasing pressure on the core budget.
- **Use partnerships strategically.** Prioritize partnerships that bring complementary resources, reduce duplication or enable activities to reach greater scale—not partnerships for their own sake.
- **Connect projects to larger financing opportunities.** Position interventions within national policy processes, UN frameworks and donor platforms that can create pathways to co-financing and follow-on investment.
- **Secure continuity before project closure.** Where results require continued financing, clarify government budget commitments, successor funding or partner contributions early enough to protect and scale the initial investment.
- **Track what is actually leveraged.** Document the source, type and value of financial and in-kind contributions so that leveraging—and its contribution to efficiency—can be demonstrated rather than assumed..

Insight 5. Resource efficiency depends not simply on having fewer staff, but on having the right capacity in the right place

Staffing arrangements, technical capacity and field presence need to be proportionate to the scope and complexity of the intervention.



Across the evaluations, a consistent pattern is that **resource efficiency depends on whether a project has sufficient human and technical capacity to use them effectively.** Projects with experienced coordinators, dedicated technical staff and active country-office or field-level administrative support were better able to maintain stakeholder relationships, coordinate implementation, mobilize partnerships and respond to changing circumstances. In some cases, the presence of resident experts or ILO focal points was associated with stronger implementation progress and financial execution, while dedicated coordinators and country-office support helped projects achieve results despite relatively modest budgets.

The evidence also points to the importance of having access to the right expertise when it is needed. Efficient staffing did not necessarily mean having larger project teams. Several interventions achieved strong results with lean staffing structures by drawing strategically on local expertise, country-office support, shared personnel and specialized technical expertise from across the ILO. Staff embedded in implementation contexts were better positioned to engage

stakeholders, maintain institutional relationships, identify emerging needs and adapt delivery when circumstances changed. This was particularly important in complex or multi-country settings. In-house delivery and training-of-trainers approaches also helped some projects extend their reach with limited resources.

The negative evidence reinforces this pattern. Lean staffing can become a source of inefficiency when it turns into understaffing. Overstretched teams, delayed recruitment, staff turnover and insufficient administrative support constrained implementation and follow-up and increased pressure on existing personnel. Where project scope and complexity exceeded available staffing capacity, even technically strong teams could struggle to maintain delivery, coordination and partnership development.

▶ Insight 6. The main challenge is connecting resources to results

Rigorous assessment of resource efficiency is often challenged by uneven evidence base.

Across the evaluations, a **recurring challenge is demonstrating how resources used translate into results achieved**. Assessments of resource efficiency often rely on partial evidence—such as expenditure rates, budget execution, stakeholder perceptions, implementation progress or examples of savings—rather than systematic analysis connecting costs and resource use with outputs and outcomes. As a result, high expenditure or full budget execution cannot, on their own, demonstrate that resources were used efficiently. The evidence was stronger where financial information could be considered alongside credible evidence of delivery and results.

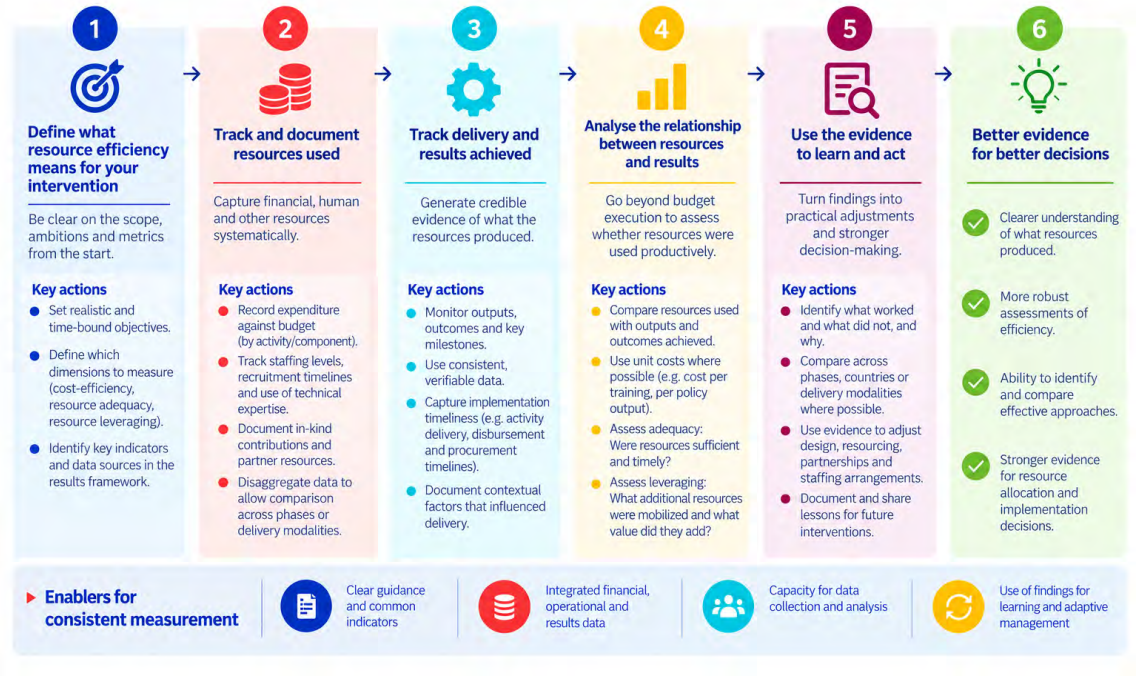
In many evaluations, judgments on cost efficiency, adequacy of resources or resource leveraging relied on partial information [...] rather than systematic analysis linking resources used to results achieved.

- ILO EVAL (2026), Decent work results and effectiveness of ILO operations: An ex-post meta-analysis of development cooperation evaluations, 2025

Measurement challenges extend across the different dimensions of resource efficiency. Cost-efficiency is difficult to compare where evaluations lack unit costs, detailed cost breakdowns or information on alternative delivery options. Resource adequacy is often described through staffing shortages, delayed recruitment or funding bottlenecks, but without consistent measures of workload, vacancy duration, procurement timelines or the operational effects of delays. Resource leveraging is particularly unevenly documented: while some evaluations quantify additional financing or in-kind contributions, others identify partnerships or prospective funding without establishing the actual value of resources mobilized.

The central challenge is therefore not simply collecting more financial data, but **bringing financial, operational and results information together**. More consistent measurement would require tracking expenditure against outputs and outcomes, the timeliness and utilization of human and financial resources, relevant unit costs, and the scale and value of leveraged resources. This would provide a stronger basis for assessing not only whether resources were spent, but whether they were used productively to achieve results.

Figure 3. Measuring resource efficiency: a practical tool for practitioners



Source: *i*-eval Insights own elaboration

Closing reflections

Resource efficiency is less about doing more with less than about **making deliberate choices that enable available resources to produce stronger and more sustainable results**.

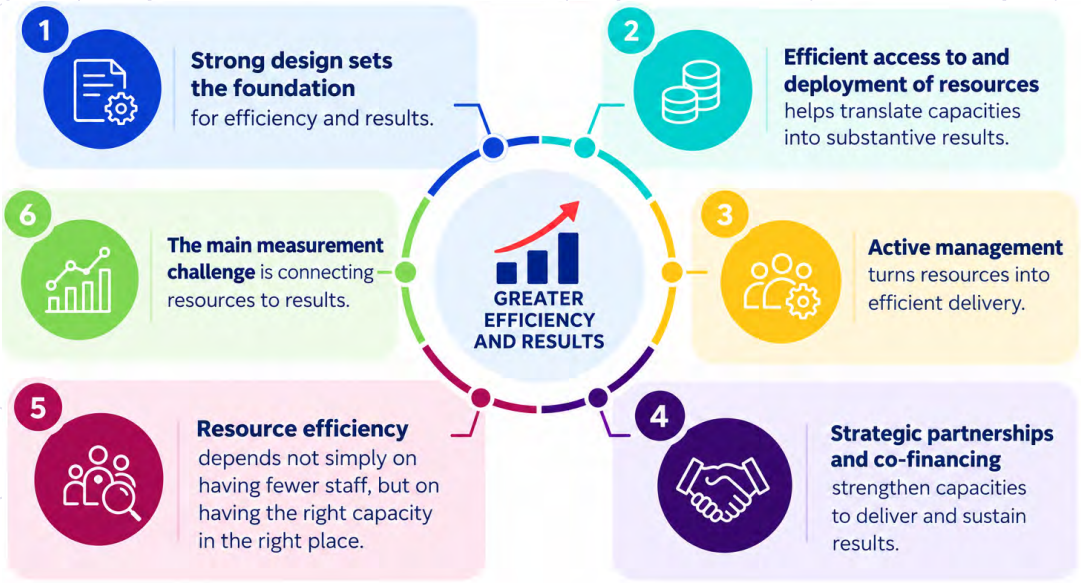
The six insights presented in this paper highlight a **practical shift** in how resource efficiency is approached across development cooperation. Three practical priorities for future development cooperation are presented: **plan resources realistically, manage them adaptively and measure them against results**.

In practice, this calls for greater attention to timing, flexibility and implementation capacity. Project teams need timely access to financial and human resources, sufficient flexibility to redirect them when priorities or operating conditions change, and staffing arrangements that provide the right technical and field-level capacity for the task. Where core resources are constrained, partnerships, co-financing, shared expertise and existing institutional systems should be used strategically to extend capacity and reach—not simply as additional sources of funding.

Resource efficiency should be actively managed throughout the project cycle, rather than assessed primarily at the end of an intervention. This means making resource considerations part of design and implementation decisions, regularly testing whether ambitions remain aligned with available means, and adjusting resources and delivery arrangements as circumstances evolve.

Resource decisions should also be increasingly informed by evidence on what resources are producing. Projects should strengthen the connection between financial, operational and results information so that managers can identify where resources are generating value, where bottlenecks are affecting delivery, and where adjustments are required. This includes better tracking of staffing and resource deployment, unit costs where feasible, and the financial and in-kind resources mobilized through partnerships.

Figure 4: Key insights on what drives resource efficiency and stronger results



Methodology annex

For over a decade, the Evaluation Office of the ILO (EVAL) has systematically conducted annual assessments of decent work results and effectiveness of ILO operations. The performance of ILO development cooperation is assessed through ex-post performance ratings based on completed final independent evaluation reports. More concretely, effectiveness is measured by analyzing the evidence contained in independent evaluations of projects, which serve as proxies for gauging the ILO's performance and extracting lessons learned and good practices. This is done using 29 pre-defined performance criteria, grouped into four broad categories: relevance and coherence; effectiveness, sustainability and impact; and efficiency. Based on the available evaluative evidence from the evaluation reports, each of the 29 performance criteria is rated on a scale of 1 (Unsuccessful) to 4 (Highly successful).

This insights paper employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to generate comprehensive findings. Evidence from all ILO independent final evaluation reports completed from 2020 to 2025 were synthesized, totaling data from 265 ILO final independent evaluations of DC-funded projects, which measured against 29 KPI consistently resulted in a data set of 7,685 values.

Key insights regarding ILO's resource efficiency and its impact in advancing Decent Work were identified based on analysis of interventions with strongest performance across the three key performance criteria (considered outcomes or dependent variables) of cost-efficiency, adequacy of resources and resource leveraging, and five additional key performance criteria identified as independent variables from an analysis of successful and highly successful projects (normative work, social dialogue and tripartism, capacity building, implementation management and validity of design/approaches). Strongest performance was defined as interventions with at least one rating of "4" for one criterion, and "3" or "4" in the other criteria. In some cases, the analysis also made reference to successful projects with ratings of "3" across the three "dependent variables".

All findings presented in this paper are backed by evidence and analysis. From a quantitative standpoint, given the ordinal nature of the rating scale, the analysis primarily used non-parametric and ordinal statistical methods. Descriptive cross-tabulations were used to examine patterns in the distribution of ratings, while Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to assess the strength and direction of associations between performance dimensions. Where appropriate, ordinal logistic regression was used as a complementary method to assess whether higher ratings on one dimension were associated with a greater likelihood of higher ratings on another.

Observations without a valid rating on the defined performance scale were excluded from the relevant analysis. Statistical significance was assessed at the 5 per cent level ($p < 0.05$), with effect sizes, confidence intervals and descriptive patterns considered alongside statistical significance when interpreting results.

The analyses are intended to identify patterns and statistical associations within the available data. The results should therefore be interpreted as evidence of relationships between performance dimensions rather than as evidence of causal effects.

Qualitative data was used to provide narratives to support and explain the quantitative findings, and to deepen the thematic synthesis of trends, lessons learned and good practices from the meta-analysis.