DEEN
DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS EXPERTS NETWORK

Listening to the Experts

Findings from the inaugural Development Effectiveness Expert Survey (DEES) 2026

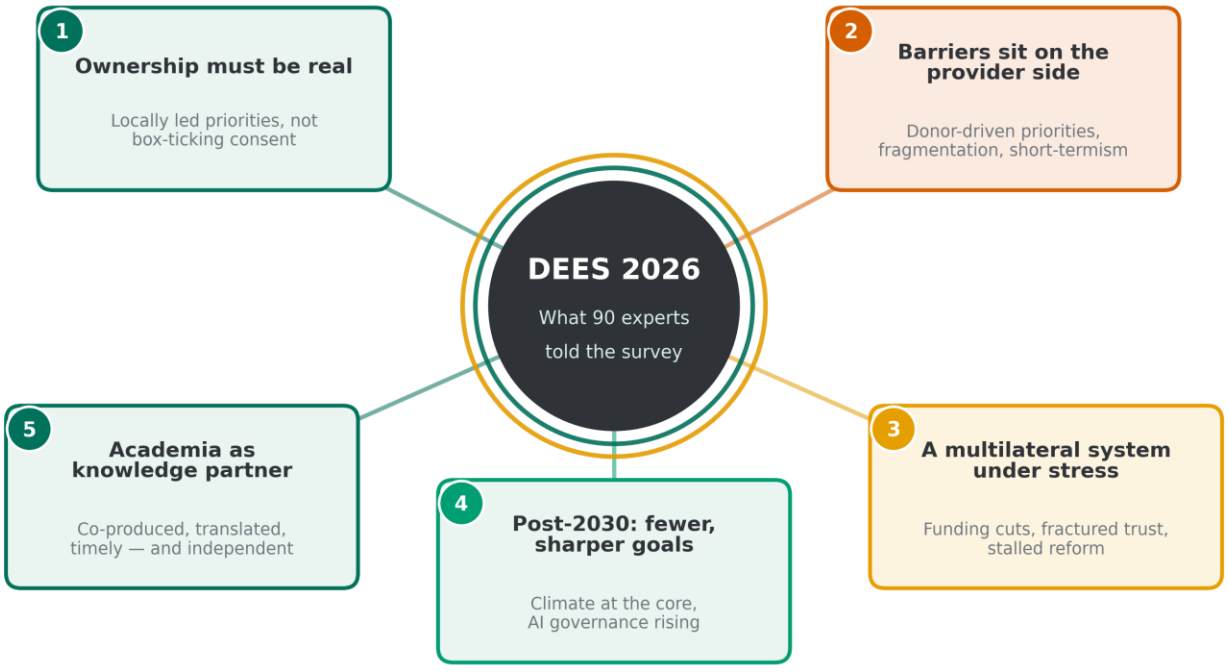
POLICY BRIEF 1 · NOVEMBER 2026



Rice terraces, Bali, Indonesia. Photo: CEphoto, Uwe Aranas / CC BY-SA 3.0

University College Dublin · Queen's University Belfast · University of Glasgow · Wageningen University & Research

1,699	90	27	5.3%	290+
experts invited	respondents	countries	response rate	open-text answers



About DEEN and this survey

The Development Effectiveness Experts Network (DEEN) is a collaboration between University College Dublin, Queen's University Belfast, the University of Glasgow and Wageningen University & Research. It exists to connect academic evidence and experts with the governance and policy processes shaping development effectiveness — the 2030 Pact Dialogues, the

OECD/UNDP-supported High-Level Dialogue on Advancing Effective Development Co-operation, and the wider post-2030 agenda now taking shape.

DEEN's first product, the Development Effectiveness Expert Survey (DEES), ran its inaugural 2026 round among experts identified through a systematic screen of the development effectiveness literature. Ninety responded, from 27 countries across six continents. This brief reports what they told us: what effectiveness means, what blocks it, whether the multilateral system can deliver, and where the post-2030 agenda should focus.

What 'effectiveness' means

Experts put results first and ownership a clear second: 'achieving results and lasting impact' (39 of 90), 'country ownership and leadership' (25) and 'locally led development' (23) lead the field. Donor-centred framings rank last — only 9 associate effectiveness with the donor's own national goals. The expert community still reads effectiveness through the Paris/Busan lens of ownership and results, not newer mutual-benefit framings.

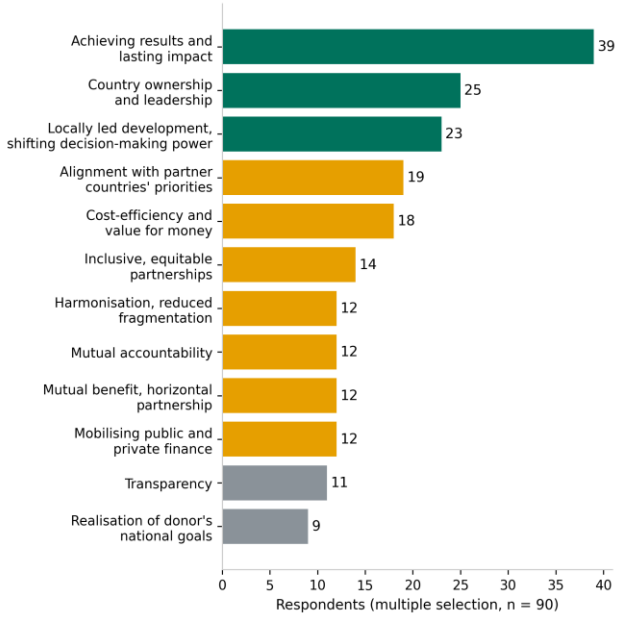


Figure 1. 'What do you most associate with effectiveness in development co-operation?' (multiple selection, n = 90).

1 · Ownership must be real, not rhetorical

The most cited enabling factor is genuine country and local ownership, aligned behind locally defined priorities. But respondents repeatedly warn against box-ticking versions — ownership conflated with central government preferences, or demonstrated by a single no-objection letter.

> *"Country ownership and leadership … raise the question of whether we are really talking about country ownership or rather government ownership. If a government is not accountable to civil society and its policies do not reflect the genuine needs of the wider population or emerge from inclusive and equitable domestic partnerships, we can hardly speak of genuine country ownership."*
>
> — survey respondent, Europe

2 · The biggest barriers sit on the provider side

Asked about barriers, experts point less at recipient capacity than at donor behaviour: donor-driven priorities, visibility-seeking, tying, fragmentation, and short funding cycles that reward disbursement over institution-building. Recipient-side governance — corruption, weak institutions, elite capture — is the clear second cluster.

> *"Projects are designed to meet funder priorities (however noble) rather than being authentically driven by local priorities … country ownership is, to a large degree, demonstrated by saying the country doesn't object. What this speaks to is a clear prioritization of funder concerns over implementing country concerns."*
>
> — survey respondent, Oceania

> *"Constituent members paranoid about domestic pushback to their financial contributions; excessive focus on simple, small, photogenic initiatives 'that work' over the complex, necessary-but-inherently-messy institutional transformations (especially public sector reform) that are the essence of the development process."*
>
> — survey respondent, N. America

3 · A multilateral system under acute stress

Experts lean pessimistic on whether the multilateral development system can currently address the most pressing global challenges: 47% disagree, against 38% who agree (n = 58; mean 3.8 on a 1–7 scale).

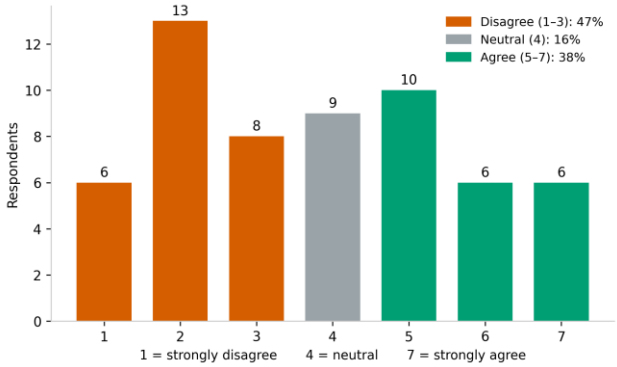


Figure 2. 'The multilateral development system currently has the capacity to address the most pressing global development challenges' (n = 58).

The open answers are blunter: the US retreat and steep funding cuts, geopolitical fragmentation, populist backlash, and institutions seen as rigid, overlapping and resistant to reform.

Several flag a legitimacy deficit — northern-centric governance and the unresolved question of China's engagement.

> *"Imposition of development ideology on recipient countries."*
>
> — survey respondent, Sub-Saharan Africa



UN General Assembly Hall. Photo: Basil D Soufi / CC BY-SA 3.0

4 · Post-2030: fewer, sharper goals

The most frequent prescription for the post-2030 agenda is discipline: a small number of achievable, country-specific goals — 'much more like the MDGs' — rather than another broad goal architecture. Climate change, adaptation and the green transition form the dominant substantive priority, followed by poverty and inequality, jobs and human development. A notable newcomer: governance of artificial intelligence, raised unprompted by several respondents. Financing beyond aid — domestic resources, debt, private capital, 'life after aid' — rounds out the list.

> *"The post-2030 agenda should prioritise reducing poverty and inequality, creating decent and productive employment, strengthening human capital, accelerating the green and energy transition, and closing digital and infrastructure gaps … In my view, the next global agenda should be more focused on implementation, measurable outcomes, and local adaptation, so that global commitments translate into real improvements in people's welfare."*
>
> — survey respondent, SE Asia



Solar field, Senegal. Photo: Fawaz.tairou / CC BY 4.0

5 · Academia's offer: co-produced, translated, timely evidence

Three asks recur on how academia can better serve policy: co-produce research agendas with policymakers and communities from the outset; translate evidence into accessible, practice-friendly formats on policy timelines; and embed researchers in operations, task forces and advisory roles. Respondents equally insist academia keep its independence — acting as honest broker, 'holding a mirror up to donors', and elevating Global South knowledge production through equitable research partnerships.

> *"Practitioners often do not have access to journal articles, while academic books can be prohibitively expensive and too lengthy for those working under significant time constraints. Academia therefore needs to provide more practice-friendly and customised forms of knowledge … Closer partnerships between academia, aid workers and policy decision-makers are therefore needed to bridge this gap."*
>
> — survey respondent, Europe

Spotlight · Mutual benefit

With mutual benefit set to anchor the Third 2030 Pact Dialogue in December 2026, it is worth noting how the experts handle the concept. In the closed question, 'mutual benefit and horizontal partnership' sits mid-field: 12 of the 62 answering (19%) associate it with effectiveness — well behind results (63%) and ownership (40%).

In the open responses it appears in two distinct registers. One is aspirational and horizontal: 'mutual benefits, equality and mutual respect' named as the core enabling factor, 'communication and mutual understanding' as what makes co-operation work, lack of mutual respect flagged as a barrier, and academia urged to help 'identify mutual benefits'. The other is cautionary: several experts warn that the mutual-benefit turn can shade into transactionalism — the sharpest barrier-side critique being an 'over-emphasis on provider benefits', where 'significant resources do not even leave the provider country'.

> *"One of the main challenges facing multilateral development co-operation is the growing tendency towards a transactional approach to development co-operation and international relations more broadly … development co-operation is increasingly framed in terms of narrow national interests, economic returns, and geopolitical considerations rather than shared development goals and international solidarity."*
>
> — survey respondent, Europe

For the Pact Dialogues, the signal is clear: the expert community does not reject mutual benefit, but it will scrutinise whether the framing is genuinely horizontal — mutual respect, shared goals — or cover for provider self-interest.

Who the experts are — and how they responded

Invitations went to 1,699 experts identified from the development effectiveness literature; 868 opened the invitation, 157 clicked through, and 90 responded (53 complete, 37 partial), a 5.3% overall response rate — 10.4% of those who opened. Respondents are based in 27 countries. The base skews towards economics (40 of 90), development studies (29) and political science/IR (25); development co-operation and foreign aid (40), the political economy of development (35) and development effectiveness/GPEDC principles (28) lead the areas of expertise. Southern-based participation is real but thinner — broadening it is an explicit priority for round two in 2028. Results should be read as a structured expert consultation, not a representative poll.

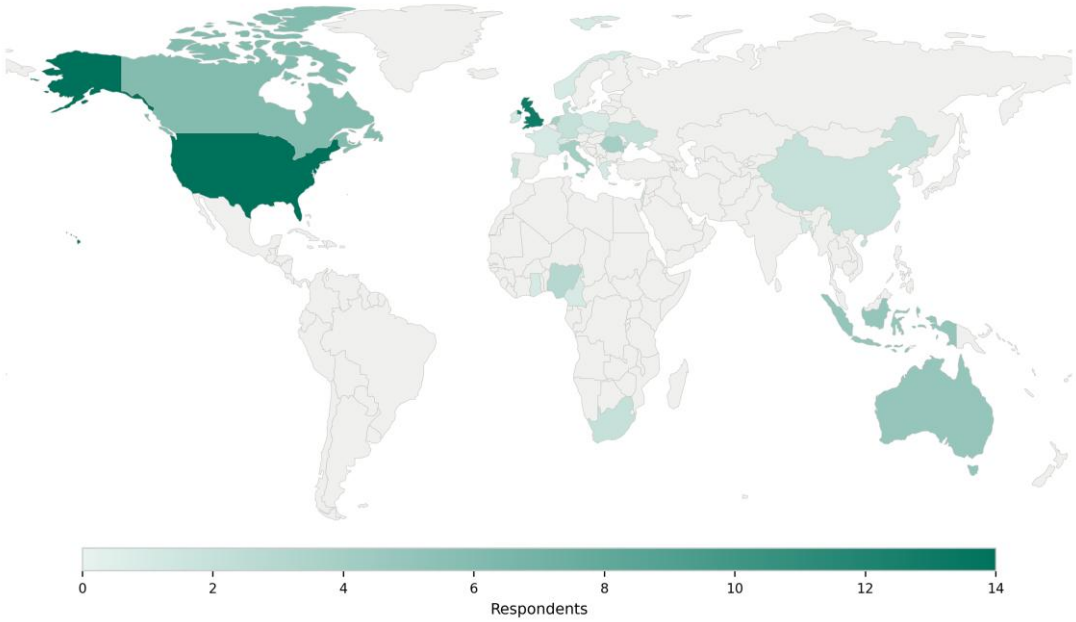


Figure 3. Global distribution of respondents

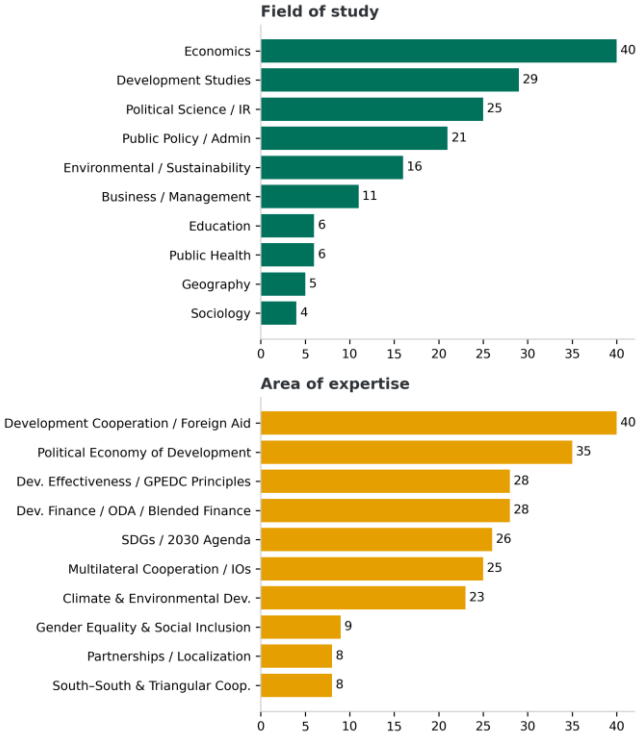


Figure 4. Respondent profile: field of study and area of expertise

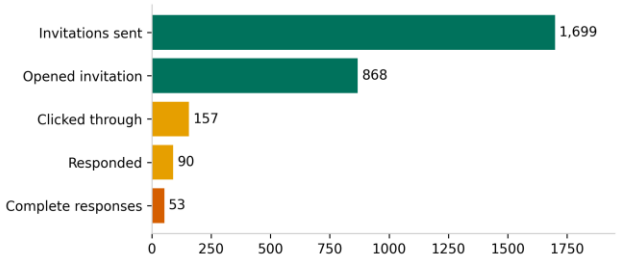


Figure 5. Survey outreach and response.

The survey ran on SurveyMonkey from late September 2026. Open-ended questions (56–60 answers each) were analysed thematically; closed questions are reported as counts.