

Evaluation Digest: Evaluation of FCDO's Support to CoST, the Infrastructure Transparency Initiative

The Evaluation of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) support to the CoST Infrastructure Transparency Initiative, funded under the FCDO Green Cities and Infrastructure and Energy Programme (GCIEP), assesses programme performance during 2021–2025, examines the longer-term impact of the CoST approach since 2015, considers elements of value for money, and provides forward-looking recommendations.

Summary of Findings

Relevance

CoST's aims are universally relevant to its stakeholders, and its four-pillar model is relevant, to an extent, to achieving these aims, given learning over the past two decades on transparency, accountability and participation in improving public outcomes. CoST's global/local operating model is seen as relevant to its expertise and influence, and stakeholder needs. The CoST model has been implemented flexibly to adapt to country contexts, including over time, but some perceive CoST as not fully applicable in all contexts and not sufficiently flexible to respond fast to significant, rapid shifts in context. The array of CoST members shows its willingness to work in different contexts, including where good governance and anti-corruption work is most needed. While the CoST International Secretariat (IS) has promoted

gender, equality, disability and social inclusion, CoST's autonomous members integrate these concerns variably in their CoST programmes.

CoST as a global standard-setter

CoST plays a role beyond its member countries as a recognised global centre of knowledge on infrastructure governance. Its tools and standards, including the Infrastructure Data Standard (IDS), Open Contracting for Infrastructure Data Standard (OC4IDS), and Infrastructure Transparency Index (ITI), are widely regarded as robust and adaptable frameworks for improving transparency in infrastructure investment. These have informed the work of international initiatives and standard-setting bodies, including the OECD and the Blue Dot Network. Through this, CoST contributes to shaping global norms and practice on infrastructure, extending its influence beyond its direct footprint.

Background

CoST is a United Kingdom registered charity that promotes transparency, accountability and improved governance in public infrastructure via its members worldwide. Operating through country and sub-national members anchored in government institutions, it works with governments, industry and civil society to strengthen the disclosure and use of infrastructure data. By supporting greater transparency and public scrutiny, CoST aims to empower citizens and stakeholders to hold decision-makers to account, contributing to reforms that reduce mismanagement, inefficiency and corruption, and improve the quality and effectiveness of infrastructure investments. To improve infrastructure governance, CoST members implement the CoST four-pillar approach, comprising disclosure of infrastructure data, independent assurance of that data, multi-stakeholder working, and social accountability. The CoST International Secretariat (IS) supports implementation by developing tools, standards and guidance, and by facilitating stakeholder engagement, capacity building, and knowledge sharing.

Coherence

Overall, the evidence suggests that **CoST primarily complements rather than competes with other transparency and governance initiatives**. Its focus on infrastructure procurement and capital investment transparency occupies a distinctive niche that aligns with broader efforts to improve governance, public financial management and anti-corruption. However, global and member-level coordination with other initiatives is often informal and varies by context. While relationships are generally positive, limited institutional coordination means that potential synergies are not always fully realised and some overlap occurs at member level.

Effectiveness

At the **intermediate outcome level**, CoST has enabled local partners to establish member programmes. It has contributed significantly to accurate data and improved evidence in infrastructure management at member level, but significant gaps remain in the completeness of the data. CoST multi-stakeholder groups (MSGs) have carried out structured monitoring and scrutiny, but this has been more limited than in the previous reporting period due to funding constraints. Only a handful of independent reviews were done, but uptake of CoST's new Infrastructure Transparency Index (ITI) assessments meant that nine out of CoST's 19 active members had undertaken some sort of CoST structured scrutiny process 2021-2025. In some contexts CoST has trained journalists and communities to monitor infrastructure investments. CoST has built trust between stakeholders, and this has led to better collaboration between actors. More difficult to achieve was other country actors using infrastructure data and mobilising to advocate for reform, even if achieved by some members.

At the **outcome level**, CoST has contributed to an improved business environment for infrastructure to a limited extent. In addition to

more infrastructure data in the public domain, in some contexts, actions by CoST members supported by CoST have contributed to the key systemic changes needed. There is also some, but not wide-spread, evidence of improvement in specific infrastructure projects with implicit savings.

Building trust through multi-stakeholder working

A consistent finding across the evaluation is CoST's contribution to building trust and collaboration between government, civil society and the private sector. Its multi-stakeholder group (MSG) model provides a structured space for dialogue in contexts where such engagement is often limited. This has enabled improved communication, shared understanding of infrastructure challenges, and more constructive engagement between actors. While this does not always translate directly into measurable outcomes, it represents an important enabling condition for reform and more accountable infrastructure governance.

Efficiency

Funding has been a significant constraint for CoST during the evaluation period. While the initiative has diversified its funding sources to some extent, it remains heavily dependent on funding from FCDO. The latter has provided crucial support to CoST, but delays and changes in FCDO decisions have reduced efficiency and affected implementation. Available resources have generally been allocated strategically across members and activities, and systems are in place to support responsible financial management. The IS monitors key cost drivers and has taken steps to manage and reduce expenditure where possible. However, funding constraints have limited the financial support that can be transferred to members. CoST members provide significant in-kind contributions, including staff time and other resources, although these contributions are not systematically captured. Despite this support, several core activities remain dependent on funding from the IS.

Overall, **CoST demonstrates good value for money, reflecting a high degree of economy and indications of cost-effectiveness.** Nevertheless, value for money has been affected to some extent by inefficiencies linked to funding constraints, limited leverage among funders and partners, and the variability between members in whether and how well they adopt gender equality, disability and social inclusion approaches.

Delivering value for money as a small programme

CoST operates with very limited financial resources. Over 2021-2025, its average annual funding was below £1.2 million. Despite this, it has acted as a global centre of expertise on infrastructure transparency, influencing the actions of global actors through its standards. It has supported 19 members in 16 countries, contributing to tangible infrastructure transparency gains, system improvements and exponential savings in specific projects, relative to its budget. This reflects high economy and indications of cost-effectiveness. While its higher-level outcomes and impact are not yet widespread, the scale of influence relative to resources suggests that CoST offers good value for money, particularly in laying the groundwork for longer-term infrastructure governance

Impact

CoST has **contributed to important institutional changes, particularly cultural shifts toward greater data transparency, accountability, and trust.** It has also influenced policy, regulatory and systems reforms. Case studies suggest these shifts, alongside political and contextual factors, are laying foundations for longer-term improvements in governance and integrity. In some contexts such as Thailand and Uganda there is evidence of more embedded change where political conditions were supportive. However, evidence of system-wide improvements in infrastructure quality and efficiency remains limited, even in contexts where CoST has been active for longer, particularly where entrenched political economy constraints persist.

Sustainability

CoST's shaping of global good practice on infrastructure management and member-level effects on government legal frameworks and systems, is likely to endure. Yet, these results, as well as improvements in data publication, will remain vulnerable to political and institutional change at member level, and resistance to more openness. However, CoST's impacts on the demand for transparency and accountability would help bolster these gains.

The CoST funding model has faced challenges, and **efforts to secure additional resources have produced limited results to date.** Grants remain, and are likely to continue to remain, the primary source of income for CoST. Compared with similar organisations, CoST has not been able to attract funding from foundations or the private sector. It has also generated some but limited commercial income, linked to individual pillars of the CoST model. Addressing this may require strengthening the programme's business case and generating additional evidence of results. There may also be scope to explore alternative funding sources, including commercial funding, although this could involve trade-offs with aspects of the CoST model, as not all elements of its work are equally suited to market-based funding. Diversifying funding sources will require careful planning and sustained effort and may be difficult to achieve without stable and predictable core funding.

Laying foundations for long-term change

The evaluation finds that CoST has contributed to important shifts in attitudes and practices related to transparency and accountability in infrastructure. These include increased awareness of the importance of data disclosure, greater openness among some government institutions, and stronger engagement by civil society. While these changes do not always result in immediate improvements in infrastructure outcomes, they represent foundational steps toward more transparent and accountable systems.

Other contributing factors

The evaluation tested four factors on how well they explain CoST's results, in response to the terms of reference.

The validity of the ToC assumptions: The validity, or not, of the CoST theory of change and its assumptions help explain CoST's results. Some assumptions about how the CoST model and approach would operate were valid. Assumptions that were invalid, or held up only partially, were about funding; MSGs and their commitment; and the extent to which CoST's actions would be sufficient for committed governments to implement and enforce reforms, and actors to change their behaviours.

Partnerships with similar initiatives and the membership model: CoST is working with some of the right partners globally, but insufficiently with the funders of infrastructure. CoST members' engagement with enforcement agencies like supreme audit institutions, and private sector partnerships are also not strong. Its membership model has merit, but the way in which the model is implemented is sub-optimal.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E): CoST's monitoring and evaluation have been of limited effectiveness. Reporting quality varies, requires substantial staff time, and focuses mainly on activities and outputs rather than outcomes and impacts. There is little evidence that the M&E framework supports adaptive management or learning. It is seen primarily as a communication and donor reporting tool, not a mechanism for improvement, and does not capture contribution to impact, which limits CoST's ability to demonstrate its value-add.

Impact of crisis: Funding has been affected by global crises and shifts in priorities. At country level, crises have had a limited impact on CoST results, with other factors playing a more important role. In some cases, CoST members have been able to capitalise on crisis to advance their agenda.

Recommendations

Recommendations to CoST

Recommendation 1. Unbundle the CoST offering and position CoST as a global centre of excellence.

CoST should explore shifting to a model where it thinks of the four pillars not necessarily as an integrated package but as sets of knowledge, expertise and support CoST provides to governments, civil society, contractors and funders etc., on demand. Presenting itself as a centre of excellence on infrastructure transparency and social accountability, and a provider of standards, tools and support in these areas, would make CoST more flexible to take up opportunities of collaboration and help it fund separately for each of these branches of work, which would be far more sellable to funders than an integrated package model.

Recommendation 2. Roll out the ITI to become a credible, global index on infrastructure integrity covering 100+ countries and many cities across the globe.

CoST should raise funding specifically to work with national civil society organizations or academics beyond CoST members, to assess infrastructure transparency and systems periodically for countries/regions/cities. The

data could then be compiled into country and city indexes. Positioning the ITI as a global public good exercise might generate demand for CoST's infrastructure services.

Recommendation 3. CoST should encourage and support local partners to seek local funding and consider scaling down the number of countries it supports if additional global funding is not raised.

Member programmes need to be better funded to scale up their activities. There are two avenues to scale up funding. CoST should encourage and support local partners to seek funding to deliver member commitments. For this, it could consider matched or seed funding models to encourage members to seek other funding sources. CoST should ensure it funds members more adequately by increasing global funding raised, and/or reducing the number of members.

A model adaptable to different contexts

CoST's model combines global standards with implementation in countries, allowing work across a wide range of contexts. Case study evidence shows that members have adapted the model to some extent to fit local contexts. While some stakeholders perceive the model as rigid in practice, CoST's tools and standards are flexible and applicable across different infrastructure sectors and governance environments.

Recommendation 4. CoST should be more strategic about its partnerships.

At the global level, this would mean being more strategic about whom it partners with and with what objective in mind (future funding, increasing its visibility, furthering the ITI, etc). At country level, CoST should strengthen its model and guidance on partnership, including on which partnerships MSGs should seek. This may be with the finance ministry infrastructure management team, the SAI, parliamentary oversight committees, fellow initiatives like the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), or with other civil society organisations and industry organisations.

Recommendation 5. CoST should seek strategic partnerships with development finance institutions and rekindle its relationship with the World Bank.

CoST should raise its profile with development finance institutions, and seek stronger relationships. One opportunity may be to leverage the World Bank's ongoing decentralisation process, and seek out relevant units in the regional hubs. CoST should build on its Inter-American Development Bank relationship to develop further partnerships with regional development banks. And with the International Monetary Fund Fiscal Affairs Department, to explore links between their and CoST's tools.

Recommendation 6. CoST should orient its monitoring, evaluation and learning system to building an evidence base on systemic outcomes and impacts.

CoST should build credible generation of evidence on the effectiveness and impact of its approach, into its monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning system for its next strategic period. This would mean clarity on what data would indicate progress at various level of its results chain, including at higher outcome and impact levels. This should balance collecting better evidence on how CoST and its member programmes achieve results, with

collecting evidence of impact. Evidence generated by CoST should be integrated into its business cases and other communication materials. The evidence building should also consider how its interventions affect different groups of society differently.

Recommendation 7. CoST should seek to increase its visibility. This would be through partnerships, but also by strengthening its communication practices.

CoST should strengthen communication of its work and demonstration of its expertise in good infrastructure governance in global landscapes, especially with potential funders. Unbundling the CoST offer (Recommendation 1) and more solid evidence on results (Recommendation 6) would help CoST to communicate in a more targeted and convincing way.

Recommendations to the FCDO

Recommendation 8. The FCDO should continue to invest in CoST, at least for a transition period, with an emphasis on collecting evidence on its model, while ensuring the funding is predictable.

The FCDO should continue to fund CoST and ensure sufficient support to adequate evidence collection. CoST would require stable funding of its core staff and services, while potentially transitioning to a different way of working, improving its evidence base, and seeking new funding. The FCDO should consider providing a predictable funding horizon over the next three years, to give CoST the space in which to transition and step up its communication and fund-raising efforts. The FCDO should also consider, with CoST IS, how its reporting and evaluation requirements affects or supports CoST's learning efforts.

Recommendation 9. The FCDO should consider convening a CoST funding meeting.

The FCDO, as part of high-level support for CoST, should consider convening a meeting of good public governance and infrastructure public and private donors, to stimulate interest in funding

CoST over the medium to long term. At the meeting CoST could showcase its results, emphasising its experience in collaborative, multi-stakeholder governance and expertise on infrastructure transparency and governance, as well as the value for money it offers (leveraging system changes with small resource flows).

Recommendation 10. The FCDO should seek to create synergies between the core investments it makes in CoST, and its country programmes.

CoST programmes require greater visibility and stronger partnerships at the member level to secure local funding and expand their impact.

UK Embassies and High Commissions can support CoST in achieving this. The FCDO should link its investments in CoST with its country-level programmes. Senior Responsible Owners of FCDO programmes backing CoST should collaborate with CoST IS to inform relevant UK Embassies and High Commissions about CoST and ensure that Ambassadors/High Commissioners and key staff are introduced to CoST MSG chairpersons and secretariats. Ongoing follow-up may be needed to ensure all parties stay informed about new synergy opportunities between CoST initiatives and FCDO programmes.

Overview of evaluation methodology and limitations

This evaluation combines learning and accountability objectives. It assesses CoST's progress towards its intended outcomes and impacts, and its contribution to GCIEP objectives. It also seeks to generate learning to inform CoST future strategy and broader transparency and anti-corruption efforts. The evaluation assesses programme performance during the 2021–2025 funding period, examines the longer-term impact of CoST since 2015, considers elements of value for money, and provides forward-looking recommendations.

The evaluation applied six criteria: relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. These criteria guided the assessment of CoST's performance and informed the evaluation questions. The scope covered the global work of the CoST IS and its support to member initiatives. Member-level analysis focused on countries in Asia and Africa, FCDO priority regions, while global analysis examined partnerships, governance arrangements and the broader enabling environment.

The evaluation assessed CoST's performance against its Theory of Change through the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, combining evidence from document review, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, two electronic surveys and five member case studies: Indonesia (West Lombok and Nusa Tenggara Barat), Nigeria (Kaduna), Malawi and Uganda. It also analysed programme documentation and monitoring data, and external datasets, and reviewed transparency and accountability literature.

The evaluation faced several limitations. The small number of member case studies, and their concentration in Africa and South-East Asia, limited the ability to generalise findings across all CoST members. Survey response rates were lower than targeted, reducing confidence in the representativeness of survey results. In addition, establishing CoST's contribution to observed outcomes was challenging given the influence of other actors and contextual factors. The evaluation addressed these limitations through triangulation across multiple evidence sources, careful assessment of evidence strength and transparent reporting of uncertainties in the findings.

For more information

This research was carried out by Mokoro Limited on behalf of GCIEP.

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This evaluation digest is a summary of findings and recommendations from the complete evaluation report which is available on GOV.UK.