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CONSULTATIONS

Research Strategy 2008-2013: Visioning and Strategy Workshop 7 and 8 March 2007

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This paper is a summary and synthesis of the ideas discussed at DFID's research visioning and strategy workshop on 7 and 8 March. The paper is in three parts:

- i) a synthesis of key challenges and opportunities for DFID research in future (1) based on the views of **eleven research leaders** who addressed the two-day event;
- ii) a summary of **internal views** on the choices and directions for the new strategy;
- iii) a digest of the key issues in relation to the three key "how" topics considered on both days: that is, locating demand for research; building capacity in developing countries to do, access and use research better; and getting research into use.

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1. Key messages from research leaders

DFID research must help poor countries prepare for a rapidly changing world.

The world is changing rapidly and in ways that the poorest control the least. Some of what the future holds is already clear. Climate change will wreak unprecedented change in the natural environment, challenging the livelihoods and resilience of millions. An increasing carbon restrictive global market will transform trade, energy supply and transport.

We have moved from a world that was rural to one that is urban. Pressure on urban livelihoods will grow, and demands on government to provide services, shelter and employment will increase, especially jobs for growing numbers of young people.

The forces of globalisation will reinforce the power of global capital further. It is unlikely that the centres of global governance will be able keep pace. At the same time, the world has never been more globally inter-connected.

A seismic shift in geo-politics will accompany changes in the world economy. The economic growth of India and China will result in a multi-polar world order. The impact of the BRICS' economies on poorer countries needs to be assessed now, as do BRICS' own development experiences and their aid policies.

DFID must get ahead of the curve.

Good research takes time to produce and longer still to be assimilated and taken up. DFID research must help developing countries prepare for these changes and support poor people to develop coping strategies. DFID should make a standing commitment to 10 year horizon scanning with developing countries. DFID must not abandon its focus on the millennium development goals but learn to look ahead.

For sustainability, DFID must think multi-sectorally.

To respond effectively to the challenges ahead, DFID – and other development actors – need a new kind of "sustainability science". This means a multi-sectoral approach to research, which brings together natural, social, behavioural, political and economic sciences.

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DFID must help to globalise the way global knowledge is produced

DFID must help to globalise the way development research is produced and find ways to implicate and use local knowledge better. Tackling global issues in country contexts will involve building

knowledge in inclusive and plural ways from developing country bases. This will require better demand appraisal, and ways of making research processes more relevant and meaningful to end users and beneficiaries.

DFID research must remain ideologically untied

Development thinking faces the end of an ideological era. The Washington development consensus has been challenged. The experience of emerging economies such as India and China is overturning the conventional wisdom of economic modelling and employment-generating growth. Too much of our development “knowledge” is based on applying what is known in advanced market economies within developing country contexts, based on a linear policy model and “one size fits all” solution. A fundamental role of research is to challenge policy and practice and overturn dogma. There has never been a better time for research to support pragmatic, independent thinking. [DFID must decide what research questions – eg growth or governance questions - can be answered satisfactorily at country level, how endogenous knowledge can aid this process and which researchable problems will benefit from global thematic treatment.]

DFID must do more to get research into use

The development community suffers from collective amnesia. DFID must ensure that the evidence-base gets used and we don't continuously reinvent the wheel. What developing countries often need most are “mundane” solutions, getting into use what research exists. For instance, two thirds of the burden of disease in developing countries could be alleviated by implementing existing interventions or making them available more cheaper. DFID also needs a better understanding of when and how change happens and the role of research within this. Can DFID do more to build coalitions at national level to better use the knowledge base, linked into international learning networks? For UK researchers, the Research Assessment (funding) Exercise offers few incentives to put effort into helping developing countries get research into use.

DFID must modernise the way research is managed

Does DFID's role as both a supplier and demander of knowledge put research management in a delicate position? DFID needs to encourage innovation, entrepreneurship and risk taking in research management and devote more staff to the “intelligent client” function. DFID's future portfolio must make room for “blue-skies” thinking and experimental research and involve strong mechanisms for both learning from a diversity of research questions and approaches, and communicating this learning to others.

Fitting in with donor agendas can have the effect of destroying independent research capacity in developing countries. DFID must avoid perpetuating this and learn from research donors that have succeeded in supporting and strengthening southern research capacity. The Northern development research community is self-restricting. At developing countries' behest, DFID should foster research partnerships with those from a wider set of professional backgrounds (eg accountants, lawyers not just development academics)

DFID can do more to ensure that research informs its own development policies and practices, both at country level and in global policy debates.

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2. Internal strategic advice

On prioritisation

- Avoid proliferation in the choice of research themes. Current themes are MDG focused. The 2006 White Paper commits us to develop them alongside further, alongside other priorities (eg governance and climate change).
- Distinguish between short and longer term research questions and impacts (ie introduce a work-stream of anticipatory research)
- There is huge mileage in doing the “how” questions better. Big generic issues – such as how policy makers learn from each other – are still poorly understood.
- We also need a more incentive-savvy and entrepreneurial approach to research funding and more imaginative and better managed risk-taking.
- The global public goods terminology is not easily understood and therefore not a helpful way to prioritise. However the concepts of global accessibility of research outputs and the equity of costs and benefits distribution are useful.
- Continue to include expert opinion as a method of prioritisation (eg through research scoping exercises). DFID economists can help with making value for money judgements across research themes.
- Climate change is likely to be the biggest future shock that developing countries will face.
- Consider how the new portfolio can be more than the sum of its parts. What features are needed for a coherent investment

On harmonisation

- Avoid interpreting harmonisation as standardisation; so the emphasis should be on complementarity and partnership over harmonisation of research communication by donors/research funders.
- Consider where DFID wants to “lead, follow or get-out of the way” for each of our research areas and themes within each.

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3. Topic analysis and key considerations

Key issues for locating demand for research

- Demand is neither necessary nor sufficient for good research. Fundamental research (eg the discovery of the atom) may have no user-orientation. Research can be fundamental and user-orientated but still owe little to popular demand (eg the invention of the smallpox vaccine).
- Locating demand for development research is difficult. DFID's different research stakeholder groups differ in their ability to articulate demand, and research capacity and demand capability are closely linked. DFID's centralised structure for managing research means that it often relies on Northern research partners' interpretations of Southern demand.
- Research relationships take time to foster, reveal and consolidate demand for more research. Demand appraisal is a sophisticated process, for which DFID's current tools are weak.
- Availability of donor funding can skew demand - the MSc research topics of students at African universities would provide a good idea of “authentic” research demand in the academic sector.
- It is easier to identify demand for national research “goods” than those relating to globally relevant themes. This makes it all the more important to construct global research questions in pluralistic ways that respond to local concerns and involve country researchers and local knowledge.
- Beware of unreliable demand! Donors need to know that governments may be suspect “demandeurs” of good governance research.
- Research that emanates from authentic demand and is not donor-driven is inherently more usable and stable than that which is not.

Implications and essential considerations for the new strategy

- DFID should institutionalise processes for supporting “blue skies” research. DFID needs to cater for both Edison and Pasteur-type research.
- DFID should globalise the production of research outputs and outcomes. To do this, research on global themes needs to be constructed from local concerns and conducted in pluralistic ways that make best of use local knowledge and research capacity.
- DFID could use the stable triangle of its offices, and ministries and research institutes in partner countries to locate demand (and encourage uptake). Better still, DFID needs to establish long-term specialist “listening posts” for gauging research demand. Where should these be?
- DFID must find ways of building accountability into its engagement with stakeholders about demand.
- DFID needs better methods for demand appraisal.
- The new strategy must tap into the latent learning about demand within the 90 N/ S research institutes that make up DFID's 24 research programme consortia.
- Should DFID do more to find out about demand from less powerful and visible groups – ranging from the grass roots, to the military, religious leaders and the private sector?

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Key issues for building capacity to do, access and use research

- Home-grown capacity drives demand for research in country and improves the chances of uptake and use. Capacity building must target not just individuals and

institutions but also intermediary organisations, such as the knowledge brokers and information intermediaries.

- Capacity building can take place in many ways, not all of which DFID is well placed or has a track record in supporting. Fundamental capacity components that do need to be addressed are: strengthening capabilities of researchers and their institutions to conduct and communicate research; of intermediaries to report, engage with and broker research knowledge; of policymakers to seek out and use research evidence; of stakeholders to articulate demands for research.
- While capacity is needed on many levels, there are dangers of uncoupling research from capacity building: they are natural and necessary partners.
- The concentration of donor support on primary education in the last few decades has been inimical to the research environment and research capacity building in general.
- While there are good (and overworked) individuals in Africa the general level of organisational capacity is poor. The situation in Asia is more complex: organisations range from world-class to weak.
- Forms of research capacity building that have been shown to work include:
 - Identifying what works for recipients (frequently the organisational development and research management support)
 - The attachments and secondments of the 60s and 70s; and exposing southern researchers to global research opportunities
 - Building on institutions, mechanisms and processes that are already in place (eg regional centres of excellence)
 - Supporting information intermediaries, knowledge brokers, and others who play a role in the take-up, repurposing and re-packaging of research knowledge
 - Where institutional support is concerned, responsibility, resources and need to be co-located.
- An important objective of capacity building should be to free up those who are excellent at research to do research.
- Building research partnerships across continents needs to be based on trust and mutual accountability. This takes time to develop and is a precondition of good capacity building.
- In general, the results of capacity building require more time and money than donors expect. Donors also need to recognise the incentives to retain and utilise local staff researchers in local research institutions, and play to these.
- [Could research collaborations be allowed to charge large overheads for southern members/organisations in a network/consortium, and use those overheads in to build institutional capacity (e.g. infrastructure, recruitment of research managers, fundraisers etc.)?]
- Why has CRD monitored capacity building in research programme consortia as an activity rather than an output? Can we find a better term for capacity building, which some partners find pejorative.
- Capacity building is a researchable question in its own right. (2)

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Implications and essential considerations for the new research strategy

- DFID should include research capacity building as an explicit, central component of its new strategy. DFID's definition of capacity building will include not only the capabilities of individuals and institutions but also the "uptake environment". DFID recognises the role of South/ South capacity building.
- DFID should work towards a vision of research institutions in the south that are self-sustaining in the longer-term; can articulate research agendas at national and global levels; can conduct world class research and engage at appropriate levels and with intermediary institutions in order to put research into use.
- DFID will require focused and well sequenced objectives for its future capacity building investments. Should supporting African research institutes' "voice" in global scientific debates come before producing world-class research?
- DFID should start by improving the capacity building it supports through existing mechanisms (mainly but not exclusively research programme consortia). How to do that should be informed by lesson learning and evaluation of existing programmes.
- Is capacity building in some sectors inherently easier or more effective than in others? If so, should this inform the nature and scale of DFID's future approach.
- "Backing winners" and existing southern centres of excellence has risks (eg fostering elitism and potentially research conservatism). However given finite

resources, the risks of spreading resources among weaker institutions are greater.

- DFID's should consider facilitating access to information at national level about research in different sectors, through different research institutions and commissioned by different donors. The MRC's mapping of the UK research community provides a model in this regard.
- DFID needs to prioritise its future approach to capacity building carefully. Possible funding criteria could be: comparative advantage (no other donor involved); track record (ie evidence of knowing how to do it well); an evidence base suggesting good likelihood of development impact; and the "quality" of demand (what kind, from whom, articulated how?)
- DFID should learn from other donor research capacity strengthening initiatives – structures, processes, outcomes (e.g. Danida, SIDA, IDRC) before embarking on any scaled up initiatives of its own
- There needs to be capacity built within DFID to review, analyse, learn from and communicate lessons about capacity strengthening strategies, results, development outcomes.

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Key issues for getting research into use

- The ultimate test of research value is if it gets used. The difference it makes and the impacts are dependent on the user and why s/he is using the research. There is evidence that involvement of the potential users of research in the research itself greatly increases likelihood of uptake. Who are the customers of DFID funded research?
- The UK research assessment exercise provides few incentives to UK institutions for putting effort into getting research used (other drivers apply, eg publication in top journals).
- There is probably enough knowledge, technology and policy advice out there. What developing countries need most are "mundane" solutions, getting into use what exists. (In health, we know empirically that applying existing interventions can save more lives than new knowledge).
- Does original research requires different skills than getting research into use? Research and extension are very different. Therefore, is it efficient to attempt to do both?
- Complex processes of change are happening all the time – what can research bring? Getting research into use is in itself a subject for research.

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Implications and essential considerations for the new strategy

RIU is crucial

- within programmes
- explicit initiatives and
- research on RIU

DFID could approach this:

- sectorally
- multi-sectorally
- globally, regionally, locally

In order to achieve greater RIU impact DFID could:

- learn from the private sector;
- learn from Innovation Systems thinking
- invest in intermediaries, knowledge brokers, think-tanks;
- invest in research on user networks and in networks
 - To bridge researchers and users
- try to change the culture of research use in country contexts
 - How to achieve this = incentives, new interventions

- information, exchange, communication
 - How can DFID utilise new information and emerging information technologies?

DFID should consider its long-term accountability in tracking and enabling RIU

DFID should consider how it works internally to ensure effective RIU (ie in CRD, Policy and Research Division, country offices)

DFID should also consider its strategic positioning internationally: what is DFID's role; where are the partnerships; does DFID have a comparative advantage?

Footnotes

1. Speakers were asked to provide a 20 vision for DFID research; however, this task proved unrealistic and most statements covered the next 10 years or so.

2. What kind of capacity building works in what situations (e.g. fragile states) and sectors (e.g. health)? Role of intermediaries and does this vary for different kind of research knowledge? Extent of and strategies to overcome lack of political will in using evidence to inform better policies that work for the poor. Returns of 'networked research' that allies north and south institutions. Returns on different kinds of research approach, e.g. the risky, the innovative, the exploratory, the kind that engages with ordinary people as researchers and innovators. What kinds of evaluation techniques can track and assess the nature and extent of capacity building?

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