

DFID's Research Strategy 2008-2013
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There is much to commend in DFID's new Research Strategy for the next 5 years. I was pleased to see an analysis of where research fits into a broader set of processes involving politics, interests and power. Change rarely happens in a rational, linear fashion, based on well-grounded research. Rather, it is the gradual build up over time of evidence, ideas and constituencies which helps shift policy and practice.

The six principal fields of research – growth, sustainable agriculture, climate change, health, governance, and future challenges – span an enormous range of issues with their own interconnections. So it is good to see DFID recognise the need to link up, for example, sustainable agriculture and health. These interlinkages need to be truly systematic, given the nature of the challenges faced, which do not fit in neat boxes, and the fact that some of the most innovative and interesting ideas are sparked off at the interface between different subject areas and disciplines. More cross-links should be promoted – and indeed are critical, catalytic research areas in their own right. For example, research on economic growth must take ecological limits into account, especially climate change. Health issues are closely linked to maintenance of biodiversity and ecosystem services, such as water. Good governance and environmental sustainability tend to go hand-in-hand.

On climate change, we are already seeing both direct and indirect impacts from climate change. The first include the effects on people and plants of changes in temperature, rainfall, drought and disease. The second include the many unintended consequences of climate mitigation policy, such as the boom in biofuel production, consumer campaigns to cut carbon footprints by refusing to buy air-freighted produce from Africa, and growth in carbon offsetting schemes which threaten local land rights and livelihoods. It is good that DFID plans to support analysis of climate change impacts in countries worst affected. Given the uncertainty as to how climate change will play out at local and regional levels, support for mapping and monitoring changes over time would be most valuable. I was pleased to see set up an International Climate Change Network which can act as an global learning platform, to strengthen in-country expertise and connect it to a range of resource centres South and North. This could promote shared learning on community based adaptation and ways to maximise co-benefits between adaptation, mitigation and access to clean energy.

I am also glad to see a significant increase in spending on research communication. DFID should be congratulated on its continued commitment to improve the impact of the research it funds, and is a valuable example to other donors.

I have a few queries and points of concern.

First, the document makes frequent reference to the terms “partner” and “partnership”, without clearly spelling out the rights, responsibilities and expectations associated with

different kinds of “partnership”. Given the size of DFID’s budget, in many cases the “partnership” is more likely a patron-client relationship, and should be recognised as such.

Second, DFID does need to find ways of making better use of its own research, and build evidence and findings into new ways of working. DFID senior management would do well to emphasize the value placed on becoming a learning organisation, able to question its own assumptions.

Third, there is slightly schizophrenia about the role DFID seeks to play, in relation to other actors. See for example, para 3.12 “The challenge now is to take what we have learned and to apply it to issues that matter locally in developing countries.” The document should define more clearly how DFID works with others to achieve these ends rather than being directly engaged.

Fourth, the rapid restructuring of markets and supply chains poses great threats to market access especially for the poorly organised smallholder sector. While some of this may be due to what the document describes as the “demand for greater efficiency”, in many cases it is a result of market concentration and the power which goes with this, which allows buyers to shift costs and risks onto suppliers. New research partnerships are needed with the retail sector to assess how to counter such biases.

Inevitably, a document of this nature operates at high levels of generalisation – there is frequent reference to Africa, as though it were one single country, instead of being hugely diverse. Equally, the “private sector” spans an enormous range of organisations in terms of scale, and business model.

I was glad to see flagged up the need to explore future challenges and opportunities, including the Rumsfeldian unknown unknowns. It is vital to situate the future architecture of aid, investment and multilateralism within a rapidly shifting global geo-politics. The focus on aid presented here needs to be complemented by the large and growing flows of private capital in many forms, which dwarf aid flows in many countries. How can DFID work with other parts of HMG, such as the Foreign Office, to track and respond to the broader security agenda?