



Department  
for International  
Development



Cabinet Office



# What Works Review of the Use of Evidence in the Department for International Development (DFID)

Evidence into Action and What Works Team – June 2014

# Striving to identify ‘what works’ is central to the DFID mission, and to those who we support

## The What Works Review

The What Works Review of the Use of Evidence in DFID was carried out by the What Works team in the Cabinet Office and the Evidence into Action team in DFID. There was an additional external review team member from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Approximately 30 interviews were carried out as part of the review. The review focused on the three themes of generation, transmission and adoption of evidence.

The review also considered a number of key documents, including the 2013 DFID Evidence Survey and the recent ICAI report – ‘How DFID learns’. On the basis of this evidence, the review aims to provide a viewpoint and challenge DFID to build on current practice.

## Comment from David Halpern, What Works National Adviser

We were very struck by the passion and widespread use of evidence within DFID – and by the openness of senior figures to do even better. It is a department with strong connections to academia; good quality assurance of business cases; and an open culture. There was also a sharp awareness that the levelling of the department’s budget necessitated tougher choices between areas of spend, and a determination that these judgements be rooted in robust evidence. But the strengthening of the evidence base, particularly about cost-efficacy across approaches and regions, cannot just come from external reviews. Rather it requires the building of deliberate variance into policy and practice itself. It requires DFID moving from being a lead consumer of evidence to being a lead producer too, practitioners and country offices becoming experimenters in their own right, and a determination to develop impact measures across and within very different domains of intervention.

One remark, made by a senior member of the department, particularly struck me. Asked about the future of DFID, the answer came back that it was not aid, but knowledge. The most value that DFID can add to growing nations is advice and knowledge, from ‘what works’ in the administration of government, to the management of economies, to the delivery of education or healthcare. It is a fantastic vision – one to be proud of, but still some way off for all of us.

## Foreword from Mark Lowcock, Permanent Secretary, DFID

The What Works initiative is terrific. It encourages us to focus on a challenge that is absolutely critical to effective policy making: how can we incorporate evidence into our decisions in a timely and efficient way. This challenge is particularly acute in international development, where working in fragile and complex environments makes these decisions even more difficult.

I am pleased to see the findings of the review, which show that we have much to celebrate in the way we use evidence in DFID. However, it’s also clear that there are areas where we can make real improvements.

We want to build on our strong culture of valuing evidence and embed it fully in all our work. I particularly want to see better evidence on value for money and cost effectiveness.

I look forward to discussing the findings with colleagues across Whitehall, and considering how we can all learn from good practice.





# DFID has a global reputation for generating high quality and robust evidence

## What DFID does

DFID has a budget of approximately £300 million to support the generation of high quality research. Teams in the Research and Evidence Division manage research programmes, and evaluations provide an important source of evidence to assess the impact of DFID-funded programmes. DFID is developing a new evaluation strategy, which will aim to ensure that evaluations are more closely aligned with key policy priorities and that new evaluations focus on gaps in the evidence base.

Evidence use at the country level is essential to effective policy making and delivery and so DFID has established two research hubs: the South Asia Research Hub, based in Delhi, and the East Africa Research Hub, based in Nairobi. The hubs work with country offices to understand their research priorities, commission summaries of existing research or primary research and provide technical advice, as well as building research capacity in-country.

The Professional Evidence and Applied Knowledge Services (PEAKS) is a system available to DFID staff to commission the generation or synthesis of evidence to short timeframes, where evidence isn't already available.

The Evidence into Action team oversees the generation of evidence synthesis products, supports country offices to commission research and builds the skills of DFID staff to use evidence. Brokers work with policy teams to produce papers (rigorous literature reviews) and briefs (short overviews). DFID has also pioneered the application of systematic reviews within international development. 57 DFID-funded systematic reviews have been published to date.

The Policy Research Fund is available for DFID staff to secure funding for research projects that focus on a specific policy area.

## Strengths

### **Collaborations – Research and Evidence Division and Policy teams**

Collaborations between evidence specialists (including research hubs) and policy teams were cited in the review as important systems for generation of robust and relevant evidence.

### **Case Study: Working with Evidence Brokers**

An example of DFID's collaborative approach is the recent evidence paper 'Learning Achievement: Engaging with Evidence'. Working with the support of an evidence broker, education advisers quality assessed and synthesised evidence relating to three themes: teaching practice; school environment; and accountability. Critically appraising bodies of evidence has allowed advisers to engage with research and informed their thinking about programme design and spending.

### **Cross departmental generation of evidence**

There were cases where DFID was working effectively with other departments to generate new evidence in innovative ways. Those interviewed were positive about this approach and saw evidence generation as part of the process of designing interventions.

### **Case Study: International Climate Fund (ICF)**

The UK's ICF is a £3.87 billion fund jointly managed by DFID, DECC, Defra, HM Treasury and FCO. It provides an example of a policy area in DFID with a strong emphasis on learning through trial and innovation. The ICF has a focus on piloting and demonstrating the potential for climate-resilient low carbon growth, to help build the global knowledge about what works, where and how. This will give us a much better understanding of how countries can most effectively grow and develop in a sustainable way, and how best to allocate the world's growing flows of climate finance (expected to reach \$100 billion a year by 2020).

# It's time to generate evidence that allows difficult, timely judgements to be made

## Challenges and opportunities

### Trialling and innovation

Whilst multi-arm trials are conducted in DFID, the review didn't uncover a culture of designing programmes that deliver outcomes, but also allow DFID to extract insights. Interventions should be seen as an opportunity to generate new evidence. Encouraging more people to test the efficacy of interventions would strengthen DFID's ability to use robust options appraisal when making decisions, which will ultimately lead to better outcomes for beneficiaries. Getting people involved in running trials will help build staff confidence and capacity in evidence use more generally.

*"We need to get better at answering how we do things (as well as what) ."*

### Gaps in the Evidence Base

There is an abundance of high quality evidence in some areas (e.g. health and agriculture), but large evidence gaps in other areas. DFID has improved the targeting of research funding to priority policy areas, but there are still significant gaps in the evidence base. In some policy areas there is a real shortage of good quality suppliers. DFID needs to play a role in addressing evidence gaps and thinking more systematically about generation across portfolios. Interviewees noted that evidence synthesis products are particularly helpful in encouraging policy makers to gain a balanced overview of the evidence base and gaps in this area are particularly detrimental to decision making.

### Evidence generation at country level

The review indicated that there is a tension at country office level between a focus on evidence generation and the immediate pressures of delivery. Country offices felt that evidence generated in the centre is interesting, but not always relevant and they aren't always informed of DFID funded research being carried out in-country. Several interviewees noted that the Head of Country Office was particularly crucial in setting the tone and encouraging input into central generation, but priorities of heads of offices vary depending on who is in post.

*"DFID needs a clearer and more joined-up approach to the use of evidence at country level."*

### Links between DFID and academics

Although DFID has strong links with academia, the review highlighted some ongoing challenges. DFID hasn't always been able to convince academics of the value of tailoring the research to ensure that it is focused on the areas that are most relevant to policy makers and those delivering programmes on the ground. DFID could be more pro-active in de-commissioning research that does not have a clear policy remit.

## We challenge DFID to...

- Develop a trials function, that can provide advice to frontline and central staff. Put trialling and innovation at the centre of programme design and take full advantage of opportunities to test what works and act on it. Consider how DFID can play an active part in a cross Whitehall trials function.
- Build capacity among all staff to develop and run their own trials. Build confidence in using evidence, and ensure there are visible evidence and evaluation experts throughout the organisation to provide advice and support. Provide impetus behind the move to up-skill all civil servants in these areas.
- Focus on mapping the evidence base in priority policy areas. New research and evaluation commissioned should address gaps.
- Nominate a DG-level champion to share DFID's approach to working with academia across Whitehall. Accelerate discussions about bridging the gap between academia and government within the policy profession.
- Consider creating a cross national crowd funding function, that allows departments and external organisations, that are interested in international development issues, to identify gaps in the evidence base and enables funders across countries to pool resources to fill these gaps.

# DFID systems provide access to a range of resources, and staff rely on professional networks

## What DFID does

DFID has two formal, online databases for the transmission of evidence. Networks within and beyond the department support more ad-hoc transmission of evidence and knowledge.

The Evidence and Programme Exchange (EPE) is an internal DFID portal for accessing evidence, organised by policy area. DFID also has subscription to approximately 7000 academic journals, which are accessible through the e-library function on the DFID intranet.

Research 4 Development (R4D) is an external website to ensure that DFID research is contributing to the global evidence base. It holds all DFID-funded research on an open access basis. DFID also funds Eldis, an external site which increases the availability of development research. It provides free access to relevant global research on international development issues organised by key development themes.

Organic systems of transmission are evident within the department. Professional cadres and Senior Research Fellows aid the transmission of the latest findings.

## Spotlight: Professional cadres

The cadres are a system for identifying the technical specialism of staff. Advisers have gained professional expertise through advanced academic study or extensive in-country experience, and there is a formal process for gaining accreditation. Roughly 800 out of 3,000 staff in DFID belong to a cadre. Advisers are expected to keep up to date with recent developments in the academic literature and technical competencies reflect these expectations. Cadres hold annual conferences where knowledge is exchanged across teams and countries and networks are built. Advisers spend 10% of their time working outside of their normal day job, contributing to their professional network.

## Spotlight: Senior Research Fellows

DFID is bridging links between government and academia – Six Senior Research Fellows (SRFs) are seconded part time from academic institutions.

Their role is to:

- Provide expert technical guidance and support to DFID research and policy teams.
- Provide links to the global knowledge community and work to enhance the quality of research commissioned by DFID.
- Strengthen the capacity of DFID's global and country staff to use the latest evidence in policy and programmes.

## Strengths

The review uncovered the value of professional cadres and SRFs as mechanisms for informal evidence transmission. Advisers frequently cited networks as their primary and trusted approach to finding out what works, over and above the more formal transmission mechanisms. As they are embedded within the department's policy and research teams, SRFs provide DFID staff with easily accessible expert academic perspectives.

*“Cadres are absolutely key in sharing knowledge about what works – they allow opportunities for meeting, exchanging, peer-reviewing and developing professional pride.”*

# Investing in evidence is not enough: failsafe transmission mechanisms are crucial to translate evidence into decisions

## Challenges and opportunities

### Awareness of DFID evidence

DFID has invested a significant amount in access to evidence, but the review indicated that resources are underused. The Quality Assurance Unit (QAU)'s Annual Review from 2013-14 showed that only 17 business cases (out of 46 assessed) referenced synthesised evidence products and 14 cited DFID-funded evaluations. This finding was supported by the review, with several interviewees acknowledging the difficulties of keeping up to date with the various DFID evidence products available. Interviewees were often unaware of where to go to find previous evaluations of relevant interventions and tended to focus on global research rather than programme evaluations.

### Effectiveness of Systems

Interviewees drew attention to the difficulty of navigating several different systems and the challenges associated with poor search functions. These findings are supported by the 2013 DFID evidence survey, which found that only 28% of staff agree that systems are 'good' for accessing research and evidence. The review also found a lack of incentives to use systems such as EPE. There was a view that systems needed to go beyond regurgitating knowledge and offer a degree of interpretation to support the translation of evidence into reasoned and balanced judgements.

*"It's a challenge to encourage staff not to just rely on their networks for evidence. A system like EPE will only work if everyone uses it and buys into it."*

### Delivery specific knowledge and country offices

The review highlighted the downsides of over-reliance on adviser networks as a vehicle for sharing evidence. These include the potential to encourage silo working and exclude those who don't have adviser accreditation from the transmission of information about what works. In some cases the objectivity of the evidence that is shared was seen to be compromised by the specific views of advisers. There was a lack of transmission of delivery specific knowledge and an uncertainty around how those not in the professional cadres understand 'what works'. There aren't clear mechanisms for the transmission of evidence from country offices up to central DFID. Whilst the professional cadres and research hubs play an important role in transmission of evidence to and from country offices, many interviewees stressed the importance of the Head of Office as a blocker or enabler. The feedback loops and evidence broker relationships between the centre and country offices must be strengthened and the importance of in-country knowledge and delivery know-how should not be forgotten by the centre.

*"Some advisers might be basing programmes on what they think works, or what was at one time thought to work."*

## We challenge DFID to...

- Overhaul current transmission systems and develop one system that is fit for purpose. Include a database of DFID evaluations in an easy to use format. Have functions allowing advisers to upload summaries and rate pieces of evidence.
- Build channels that are accessible and used by many agencies and countries, and deliberately externally facing.
- Further progress needs to be made to ensure all staff have access to networks and there are reliable routes for the transmission of evidence across the department (Randomised coffee trials could be a low impact solution, but consider others).
- Heads of Professions to continue, and be more proactive, in encouraging advisers to work collaboratively and share knowledge across the department (not just within cadres). Continue to test and identify additional effective channels for transmission, monitoring the take up rates for different approaches and noting that these may be low tech such as departmental blogs or even hard copy.

# There is strong leadership and evidence is embedded in the culture

## What DFID does

DFID has embedded a culture of evidence use through seconding academic experts on a part-time basis. This includes the Chief Scientific Adviser, Chief Economist, Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser and Senior Research Fellows. These high profile roles offer challenge and support across the department.

Senior leaders set a clear expectation that staff should use evidence to inform policy making. This is articulated most clearly in the business case template which DFID staff use to gain approval for programme spend and explicitly states that staff must use evidence to support their case. The DFID Quality Assurance Unit peer reviews all business cases for programmes over £40m, producing a short report with an assessment of how effectively evidence has been used and suggestions for areas of improvement.

The Evidence into Action team are building the capacity of staff and beneficiaries in using evidence. In 2013 the Evidence into Action team conducted a survey looking at the use of evidence across the department. They found that evidence is valued in DFID with 63% of staff stating that they value evidence a lot. 60% of staff agreed that the use of evidence has increased in DFID over the past three years.

## Strengths

**QAU** - The Quality Assurance Unit was widely cited as a key tool in improving and incentivising the use of evidence across DFID in recent years. Staff felt the process was constructive and valued the formal mechanism for gaining objective insights from peers.

**Professional cadre expertise** - Interviews supported the view that evidence is widely considered to be important within the department. Interviewees noted that having a good knowledge and understanding of the evidence base in your policy area can be an important source of prestige, especially for advisers.

*“If advisers get personal kudos for using evidence and it becomes part of their professional integrity, this can strengthen the incentive to use evidence.”*

**Role of senior leadership** - Interviews reiterated the importance of leadership. The presence of the Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Economist on departmental committees was cited as a hard incentive to use evidence, but frequent think pieces and blog articles were also seen as important mechanisms to get staff thinking about use of evidence within DFID.

## Spotlight: Quality Assurance Unit (QAU)

**About:** The Quality Assurance Unit was set up in 2011 to bring increased rigour into spending decisions. Its mandate is to provide internal, independent quality assurance of the Business Case model adopted across DFID. 46 business cases were reviewed in 2013, with a total value of £8.8 billion.

**Process:** The QAU peer reviews all business cases for programmes over £40m, producing a short report with an assessment of how effectively evidence has been used and suggestions for areas of improvement. 6-10 reviewers from a range of professional cadres input into the ratings and recommendations. All QA reports and ratings are agreed with the Chief Economist. A review meeting is held with the Lead Reviewer and the team who submitted the business case – the minutes from this meeting must be attached to the business case when being put up to Ministers.

## QAU scores 2013

- **26%** of cases were put in the highest category (vs. 7% 2012).
- **82%** of large business cases were in the top two categories (vs. 80% 2012, 29% 2011).
- **19%** were deemed “below-the line” - requiring resubmission (similar to 2012).
- **26%** were judged to have made weak use of evidence (vs. 40% in 2012 and 59% in 2011).

# There should be a stronger focus on achieving the best use of funds, engaging country offices and getting the incentives right

## Value for money

Whilst DFID has developed a value for money (VFM) programme and progress has been made since 2010, a number of interviewees still did not feel they had the information needed to make judgements about which programmes were more or less cost effective. They were also lacking the knowledge of what adjustments could be made to approaches to increase cost effectiveness. At a time when budgets will be levelling rather than increasing, DFID needs to put greater emphasis on aggregating VFM assessments of programmes across policy areas - increasing spend in areas where there's evidence of effectiveness or areas where we're gathering evidence on innovative interventions. The department also needs to know what isn't effective so spend can be put to better use.

*[I'd like to be able to] "tell a story about driving an extra x% of value"*

## Country offices

Messages from country offices were mixed, but there was consensus that Heads of country offices often determine the importance given to evidence, and that the pressures to use evidence centrally don't always reach country offices. Staff in country offices want to feel connected to the conversations and challenges put forward in the centre, and would benefit from a much clearer narrative around the role of evidence in their job context.

*"There is a lot of cheerleading in head office, but it has not filtered down"*

## Incentives

The review clearly showed that the insistence on use of evidence in business cases has been a significant factor in changing behaviour, but it was also clear that it can be seen as a blunt instrument for incentivising evidence use at the early stages of a programme. Interviewees were conscious of the competing incentives, given the limited time available to apply evidence in programme design and implementation. The pressure to rapidly spend money sometimes outweighed the incentives to wait for relevant evidence before making a decision. Some interviewees saw optimism bias as beneficial to getting spend approved, which can lead to the 'cherry picking' of evidence. The review identified a lack of incentives to use evidence post business case – the annual review process in its current form doesn't fulfil this role. Interviewees recognised the importance of knowing what doesn't work, but many believed there weren't the incentives to admit failure, even if it then leads to improvements being made. There was a view that if optimism bias was addressed, people could be more upfront about high levels of risk, which could make it 'easier' to fail.

*"Scaling up and delivering results is a top priority, rather than investigating what works"*

## We challenge DFID to...

- Improve the generation and use of evidence to inform difficult choices about what to fund. Actively use the levelling of the budget as an opportunity to become more ambitious in this respect.
- Build on the success of the Quality Assurance Unit, through committing to the review of annual reviews and spreading the lessons learnt across government and beyond.
- Continue to champion and celebrate the use of evidence at a senior level, with a stronger commitment to engage country offices.
- Incentivise the use of evidence throughout the lifetime of a project or programme, and trial and evaluate the effectiveness of alternative approaches to adoption itself (e.g. do staff who take part in experiments go on to become more extensive and discerning users of evidence in general?)
- Ensure use of evidence continues to be prioritised in the new business case process and that evidence is used throughout programme delivery.

## Reflections from What Works Team

DFID has made considerable advances in the generation, transmission and adoption of evidence in recent years. They remain a leader in the field across government and have been open to the challenges we've put to them.

DFID is a leading player in the generation and use of evidence cross-nationally, but even DFID is a modest player on a global stage. We feel there is a strong case for DFID to play a global leadership role in creating a stronger mechanism that aids the identification of evidence gaps and encourages pooled funding across governments and major foundations to plug those gaps. This would mean that the evidence generated is of a high standard yet accessible to experts and non-experts alike. It is an interesting question whether such evidence and funding platforms could usefully spill into the domestic agenda, and could address developed nations' needs for better evidence. While concerns around transferability remain important for policy and practice, there is much to be learnt too. For example, successful policy solutions in developing nations may sometimes give important clues for lower cost solutions in the OECD countries, not least because they may skip over legacy systems that anchor policy and practice in more established public service systems in countries like the UK.

We also came away from the review with a sense that DFID is in a strong position to show leadership in Whitehall around the better use of evidence and methods. First, its activities offer a microcosm of the issues addressed by other Whitehall Departments, including health, education and the promotion of economic growth. This also raises the interesting question of how DFID might relate to the UK's own vibrant, independent and growing What Works Centres, such as the Education Endowment Foundation, Centre for Local Economic Growth, Early Intervention Foundation, and Crime Reduction Centres – should the centres be encouraged to broaden their wings into a wider context?

Second, DFID could play a cornerstone role in creating a Trial Advisory Function across Whitehall, providing policymakers across government (and possibly beyond) with access to expert support on how to test variations and find out what works, potentially collaborating with academic and research council partners.

Third, DFID could provide major impetus behind moves to up-skill civil servants in the generation and use of evidence, analysis of big data, better commissioning and policy design.

Individual departments and organisations are doing exciting things in this space, but we would challenge them to come together to maximise the impact they have.

## Towards an evidence culture in DFID, Reflections from Stefan Dercon, Chief Economist

How can we do better as an organisation? No-one will argue that using evidence is ever bad. Surely we are never setting out to do what doesn't work. But that does not necessarily make it easy to build an organisation that uses evidence well and that learns from success and failure. So how do we develop an organisational culture that builds knowledge about what works and ensures that everybody acts on it?

A first reflex tends to be set up rules. Rules tend to work remarkably well, not least in the Civil Service. But there are plenty of rules in our work environment, and which rules ought to get most attention is liable to interpretation and even fads, so enforcement systems tend to be important to ensure we comply beyond box ticking. There is a place for rules that encourage us to use evidence better. But in the end, rules and enforcement systems are costly, and without a deep commitment of all involved we won't achieve the intended outcome. Here we can think of the success of the QAU - I think this is something that works. Why is the more interesting question. The fact that there is a set of rules that ensures advice is sought on the value for money proposition of a business case, the report goes to Ministers at the time of approval and that there is a definite sense of ministerial interest, clearly helps. Teams have incentives to comply with the rules and ensure that evidence is used well.

But is this enough for a genuine evidence culture? Of course not. For one thing, the QAU only focuses on the ex-ante design phase, and often, very little specific evidence is available to be certain about our judgements. Once we start implementing programmes, much more can be learnt. Setting up programmes so that we can genuinely learn 'what works' during implementation is critical. We should embed much more experimentation into our implementation, in the form of structured trials to learn how to implement and achieve better outcomes. We should ensure we don't just collect 'results' for accountability and communication purposes, but get the data that helps us to learn during implementation and adapt our programmes. We need rigour in bringing this learning together across DFID, so that it gives a fair assessment of 'what works' but also 'what doesn't work'. Sanitised versions of results and our effectiveness will not work.

We couldn't regulate for this, nor would setting up formal structures be enough. And this is where culture comes in. The organisational culture refers to our shared values, norms, expectations and behaviours – the things we think and do in an organisation, which may be based on rules but which we have sufficiently internalised to find it a normal part of our way of working. A strong evidence and learning culture needs individuals to believe it's normal to use all the evidence available and try to draw lessons from their experience. It also involves staff looking for ways to share what they know with others, but also a way to systematically learn 'what works' in their space of action. Any organisational culture will also have internalised boundaries – for example the shared sense of how much space there is to debate and be critical, before it becomes inappropriate. A strong evidence culture would involve a sense that clear evidence on 'what works' and 'what doesn't work' can always be brought to the fore. In this way, the QAU relies a lot on 'culture' as well – the commitment of peer reviewers from across the organisation to give their honest opinion of the proposed course of action. The QAU 'works' as it offers an independent space to critically assess proposed programmes from the point of view of VFM trying to be proportional with a clear sense of the objectives and public commitments of DFID.

An effective evidence culture in DFID would involve developing credible mechanisms for applauding appropriate behaviour. This would mean staff not only using evidence to start new projects, but also to critically monitor their progress and to stop things that don't work. Acknowledging when things aren't working and using this information to feed into future projects is effective behaviour which should be rewarded. Learning about 'what works' – with space for systematic experimentation – will need to be created and rewarded. Leadership will need to play a central role in communicating a culture of evidence and actions on 'what works'. However, simply saying that evidence is important is absolutely not enough. This message will only have credibility if it is reflected in the behaviour of leaders throughout the organisation. To develop a stronger culture, we need role models – 'act as I do' is much more effective than 'act as I say'. Seeing senior leaders experimenting with 'what works', communicating what they have learnt and admitting to failures would be very powerful.