

EVALUATION OF DFID'S RENEWABLE NATURAL RESOURCES RESEARCH STRATEGY (RNRRS) 1995-2005

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with ten subject matter specialists

The evaluation found that the quality of science in the RNRRS has been high, with some positive impacts on livelihoods. It is recommended that DFID continue to support natural resources research. Further thought should be given to DFID's niche within the international structures supporting research, and to linkages between the research programme and other DFID development interventions. This includes the approach to basic and adaptive research, dissemination and capacity building.

Agriculture and natural resources (NR) play an essential role in poverty reduction. Improving technology in agriculture/NR is essential for food security, for enabling developing countries to meet the quality standards of world markets, and for ecosystem management. The Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy (RNRRS) has run from 1995 to 2005. Its aim is to "remove researchable constraints to the sustainable development and/or management of natural resources". The research effort was managed through ten research programmes (RPs) comprising over 1600 research projects. RNRRS funding totalled £190 million over the period 1995 to 2004. Most funding went to Africa (56%) followed by Asia (32%) and Latin America (12%).

The aims of this independent evaluation were (a) to assess how effectively the RNRRS RPs delivered agreed outputs (b) to identify components of the programmes with a strong poverty impact and/or

significant policy influence (c) to learn lessons for the new DFID Sustainable Agriculture research strategy.

The evaluation found that the quality of science in the RNRRS has been high, with significant contributions made to scientific knowledge. There is also some evidence of positive impact on livelihoods. The evaluation made nine main recommendations.



FINDINGS and RECOMMENDATIONS

1 – DFID should exploit its comparative advantage in NR research for development.

The RNRRS has been a globally recognised and influential programme. DFID's comparative advantage has been in promoting a livelihoods and poverty focus for technology generation, and understanding the research-development continuum. DFID needs to ensure that it builds on the foundations developed over the last ten years.

2 - DFID should continue to fund NR management research, with improved efficiency and effectiveness.

RPs have largely been successful in meeting their target outputs. One successful model has been a cluster of related research projects addressing key research gaps and priority problems of the poor, linking basic research, local adaptation and international dissemination. The RNRRS has also created a substantial multi-disciplinary network of researchers, and supported many southern research institutions.

Over the ten years, the RNRRS has generally shifted away from upstream, basic research towards more adaptive research and dissemination, and from a purely technical focus towards increased social science input. This is likely to have improved its immediate poverty impact. However, adaptive research projects can quickly 'empty the cupboard' of appropriate technologies. Finding the right balance between basic and adaptive research will be a challenge for the new programme.

3 – DFID should transparently set priorities for RNRRS in the mix of international and national public goods to deliver.

The RNRRS has delivered a mixture of international and national public goods in a complex and changing policy

environment. For any new research programme, DFID must decide on where to place itself in the international context and select the best model for delivery of the key objectives it wishes to address, for example: (a) to deliver new knowledge (b) to link stakeholders to existing knowledge (c) to demonstrate benefits in order to influence national processes and systems (d) to build sustainable links between research institutions (e) to build capacity in southern research institutions, or (f) a combination of the above. Some specific research themes with potential poverty impact are proposed for consideration by the new programme.

4 – DFID RNR research funding should be flexible

The role of DFID's Central Research Department in managing change and allowing flexibility has been crucial in helping the RNRRS adapt quickly and effectively to major changes in UK aid policy. Funding options should be flexible, allowing a range of approaches, from short commissioned studies/ issues papers to long projects. The ability of RP Managers to respond quickly to policy and information gaps through small studies has undoubtedly helped the programmes to influence policy and build partners' skills.

5 – Overall RNRRS management needs to be strengthened.

The ten RPs have performed well using a variety of management models and systems. Overall RNRRS management could have been stronger e.g. in cross-RP synthesis, exploiting synergies, and in linkages to the rest of the development agenda. Specific recommendations are made on governance structures, quality assurance and M&E systems, and project cycle management.

6 – Uptake systems need to be identified and supported at policy level

With changes in aid policy, progressively greater reliance has been placed on other

agencies, mainly national government systems, to secure dissemination and uptake of research outputs. The RNRRS has therefore given increasing support to strengthening the enabling environment for dissemination. There is scope for DFID to further this process through policy dialogue.

7 – Capacity building of researchers and policy-makers, and institutional strengthening, needs to be built into future work

Building capacity in southern research institutions is vital to sustain demand-led adaptive research efforts, and RPs have carried out an innovative range of capacity building activities. Whether strengthening capacity is the responsibility of a centrally-funded research programme is arguable; however, other mechanisms for this do not always exist and there can be an unfilled capacity gap. Any new programme will need to address this issue and ensure strategic linkages with other capacity-building initiatives.

8 – External evaluation processes are needed to complement M&E systems

M&E systems have not been developed in a coherent manner, although individual RPs have undertaken significant M&E. This has made it difficult to assess the wider poverty impact of RNRRS and its relative costs and benefits. Regular independent M&E is recommended to support strategy-wide management.

9 – Transitional arrangements should be made to ensure that the benefits of existing and ongoing work are not lost

Transition funding is recommended, with some resources earmarked for capturing the experience of individual RPs, to support the change process.

DFID Response (by Central Research Department)

This evaluation was commissioned jointly by Central Research and Evaluation Departments. The nature of the RNRRS – its size, long life and extensive use of sub-contracting – make it a complex subject for evaluation. We commend the evaluation team for producing a good quality and comprehensive report. We welcome many of the team's findings, in particular the high quality of the science, contributions to new knowledge and evidence of beneficial impacts on the lives of poor people. We note the conclusion that the ten programmes in the RNRRS have been largely successful in meeting their target outputs.

The findings and recommendations of the evaluation are timely as DFID prepares for a new Strategy for Research on Sustainable Agriculture (SRSA). A document on the SRSA draws on the lessons learned from the evaluation and is the current (June/July 2005) subject of widespread consultations. These lessons, in particular the need for stronger management in some areas, coherent monitoring and evaluation systems and a smooth transition from the RNRRS to the SRSA will be built into the design of new programmes which DFID expects to commission later in 2005/06.

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DEPARTMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Department for International Development (DFID) is the UK government department responsible for promoting development and the reduction of poverty. The government first elected in 1997 has increased its commitment to development by strengthening the department and increasing its budget.

The central focus of the government's policy, set out in the 1997 White Paper on International Development, is a commitment to the internationally agreed target to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015, together with the associated targets including basic health care provision and universal access to primary education by the same date. The second White Paper on International Development, published in December 2000, reaffirmed this commitment, while focusing specifically on how to manage the process of globalisation to benefit poor people.

DFID seeks to work in partnership with governments which are committed to the international targets, and seeks to work with business, civil society and the research community to this end. We also work with multilateral institutions including the World Bank, United Nations agencies and the European Community.

The bulk of our assistance is concentrated on the poorest countries in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. We are also contributing to poverty elimination and sustainable development in middle income countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and elsewhere. DFID is also helping the transition countries in central and eastern Europe to try to ensure that the process of change brings benefits to all people and particularly to the poorest.

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