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 commited 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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report

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Supporting Agriculture
An Evaluation of DFID's Support for Sustainable Agriculture since the early 1990s

A review of ODA's[1] commitment to support sustainable agriculture concludes that projects have been largely successful, but the sustainable agriculture strategy itself had little influence on sectoral investments or cross-sectoral working.

MAIN FINDINGS

- DFID's sustainable agriculture projects have delivered outputs efficiently and have been responsive to national contexts. The projects were seen as relevant by partners, were strong technically, were effectively implemented, and in some settings were influential on donors and partner government policies.
- DFID's sectoral investments were not driven by the sustainable agriculture strategy, partly because it was broad in scope and in effect endorsed much of the effort that was already taking place.
- the lack of an action plan, monitoring system or, initially, dissemination material, prevented the strategy from achieving broader impact.
- the strategy contributed towards a drift in focus on impact, in part owing to insufficient attention being paid to issues such as the role and effectiveness of government service providers and links with national policies.

1 The Department for International Development (DFID) was called Overseas Development Administration (ODA) prior to 1997. However, this document refers to DFID throughout.

Background

This study examined the support given by DFID to promoting sustainable agriculture over the period 1994 to 2001. The Sustainable Agriculture Strategy (SAS) was approved in 1994 following a specific UK commitment at the Rio conference in 1992.

The SAS amounted to a broad affirmation of existing approaches towards rural development within DFID. The strategy advocated few revisions to established practice and consolidated the focus on environmental sustainability, albeit within a narrow biophysical definition. Its poverty focus was narrow, with the poor defined as rural producers, rather than as landless labour and urban migrants.

The enhanced focus on poverty established by the incoming government in 1997 led the Natural Resources Department (NRD) to review the relevance of the SAS. What was needed was an approach with a more explicit focus on poverty elimination and the livelihoods of the poor. In this way, the SAS was absorbed into the Sustainable Livelihood (SL) approach from 1997.

The evaluation was undertaken in three stages. Stage 1 examined the SAS itself, its conceptual and developmental contexts, and its general influence on DFID programmes and partners. Stage 2 involved evaluation visits to four countries - Bangladesh, Kenya, Namibia and Botswana - selected as being representative of the range of contexts and sub-sectors (agriculture, livestock and fisheries) within which DFID has implemented SA activities. Within these countries, the experience and performance of 16 projects were reviewed.

The SAS is best understood as a response to UNCED and a step towards the broader analytical foundation on which the sustainable livelihoods approach is based. The lessons that emerge from this study are relevant not so much to good practice in project design, but to issues concerning the role of strategy within DFID and the need for broad ownership of strategy.

Findings

Expenditure on bilateral sustainable agriculture projects, as measured by PIMS, increased over the decade, as advocated in the SAS. Total DFID expenditure in the renewable natural resources sectors, however, did not increase.

Despite its professed intentions, the SAS had little influence on either DFID-funded NR research or NGO activities funded under the Joint Funding Scheme. Systematic promotion of the SAS beyond DFID was minimal. With the exception of success in influencing the CGIAR centres, its effect has been slight.

The sustainable agriculture programmes were quite different in each of the four countries, but shared a common feature in that they were internally diverse and not developed or managed as a coherent whole. Most pursued a mix of approaches in several sub-sectors. Attempts at strategic focus and reorientation were limited and only partially successful. The Bangladesh, Kenya and Namibia programmes all experienced difficulties in obtaining adequate crosscutting advisory support.

Evidence from the four countries that the SAS had an impact on Renewable Natural Resource Country Strategy Papers (RNRCSPs), sustainable agriculture programmes, or sustainable agriculture activities is complicated. All were consistent with the SAS, but this is attributed to the breadth and comprehensiveness of the strategy rather than to any systematic dissemination of the SAS. With the partial exception of the Botswana strategy, the RNRCSPs were no more successful at influencing the programmes.

Overall, the SA projects reviewed scored highly in terms of outputs: 80 per cent of the projects have largely achieved their (revised) outputs and 63 per cent their purpose. In most cases, it is too early to judge achievement of project goals.

There are four main conclusions to draw from the evaluation. First, DFID's sectoral investments were not driven by the strategy. This was partly because it was broad and in effect endorsed much of the effort that was already taking place. Partly, too, this reflected ambiguities in the structure and implementation of the strategy. It had no action plan, monitoring system or (for the first two years) dissemination material. The consistency between programmes and the SAS had more to do with the personal advocacy of the Head of NRPAD than with the persuasiveness and coherence of the strategy.

Second, these ambiguities prevented the strategy from achieving broader impact. In particular, the strategy did not win support from advisers representing other sectors and had little impact on the research programme and the JFS. Where scope existed to forge links between sectors, the lack of cross-departmental ownership of the SAS helped to frustrate this.

Third, the strategy was not adequately focused on impact and, consequently, on reducing poverty. Insufficient attention was paid to issues such as the role and effectiveness of government service providers and links with national policies. Stronger participation on the part of cross-sectoral advisers would have picked up these weaknesses in the design phases.

Fourth, the strategy was not successful in enhancing the coherence of natural resource country programmes. This may be difficult to achieve, since projects and programmes are slower to change than policy, and since each must build on the local opportunities that are available.

Lessons

Lessons for DFID strategies

DFID invests considerable time and effort in developing strategies such as the SAS. The limited impact of the SAS on programme design and performance, and to a lesser extent overall spending, suggests that the time of country programme teams might have been better deployed.

Where strategies are deemed necessary their impact would be strengthened by securing agreement on what the strategy is for and ensuring it is concise, action-oriented, and includes clear indications of milestones and resource requirements.

Documents like the SAS that outline approaches and policies in specific sectors are unlikely, by themselves, to encourage cross-sectoral working. If learning and working between sectors is to be achieved in DFID, new incentives are required.

Lessons for rural livelihoods

An understanding of the nature and causes of poverty is necessary to plan and manage for poverty reduction goals. This implies stronger efforts to engage crosscutting advisers from economics, governance and social development departments in debates around rural poverty reduction. Projects and programmes risk being supply- rather than demand-driven if there is no genuine cross-sectoral approach within geographical departments.

Office-wide endorsement from senior management throughout DFID, and concerted promotion activities are needed if sector departments such as Rural Livelihoods are to exert a sustained influence over geographic departments to secure funding and endorsement of their approach to poverty elimination.

This has two implications:

- the approaches must be seen as relevant beyond the sectoral boundaries that are currently perceived to exist within DFID around sustainable livelihood approaches. Feedback during the evaluation suggests further efforts are needed to secure this breadth of endorsement.

- a large part of the potential usefulness of SL approaches will be based on their capacity to present a clear and coherent response to core developmental imperatives. In particular, approaches need to demonstrate capacity to internalise important macroeconomic and institutional insights.

Sustainable livelihood approaches are addressing many of the shortcomings identified by this evaluation. They include a focus on how poor people secure a living, and attempt to widen debates around natural resource management to include poverty reduction concerns.

2 UN Conference on environment and development (UNCED), held at Rio de Janiero.

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