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PROJECT COMPLETION REPORT SYNTHESIS 1998

An analysis of nearly 500 Project Completion Reports suggests that the progressive refinements to DFID's project management procedures over a number of years may cumulatively have had a beneficial effect.

Background

This study summarises the main trends in the performance of DFID's projects over time through an examination of data provided in Project Completion Reports (PCRs). It is the fifth such review of PCRs, which are designed to assess how well a project was carried out and how far the stated project objectives are likely to be achieved.

PCRs are required for country projects with expenditure over £500,000, and cover some 90% of geographical bilateral expenditure by value. They are usually completed by the relevant DFID Geographical Department or Overseas Office.

PCRs are now analysed on the basis of the year in which a project was approved rather

than, as previously, the year in which the PCR was prepared. This provides a more logical basis for gauging how far changes in DFID's procedures may have influenced project management and overall success.

The analysis was based on a population of 492 PCRs accounting for some £1.44 billion of expenditure. The projects covered were approved between 1979 and 1997, and the analysis divided the PCRs into those approved in three broad periods: 1979-88, 1989-1992 and 1993-1997. Judgements of success are made on the basis of a five-point rating scale: *highly successful, successful, partially successful, largely unsuccessful and wholly unsuccessful*. A positive result is assumed if either of the top two ratings is assigned.

Key Results

- While the average size of projects has fallen over time, there is very little difference in overall performance between large and small projects. This includes projects below the £0.5 million PCR threshold, where completion of a form is discretionary.
- The **standard of project management** has improved in terms of keeping project duration and expenditure within 10% of that planned. Over-runs are in steady decline. Since 1988 projects in which expenditure was held within the 10% limits performed better than those in which underspends or overspends occurred.

- Delivery of **project inputs** by both donor and overseas partner performance has improved. Over 80% of the most recent group of PCRs recorded a positive result for DFID inputs, and over 50% for overseas partner inputs. The improvement in performance by overseas partners is the more pronounced, albeit from a lower base.
- Achievement of project objectives is sensitive to **compliance with conditions** by overseas partners. Of those projects approved since 1992 in which the overall judgement on compliance with conditionality was positive, 80% largely or wholly achieved their purpose. Where the judgement was negative, only just over 50% achieved a positive rating.
- The standard of **output delivery** has remained stable over time (about 80% positive).
- **Project purpose** was judged likely to be achieved in almost three-quarters of projects approved in the 1990s. Programme Aid generally performed better than projects, with 85% of interventions positive in the 1993-97 group. African projects exhibited the most pronounced improvement, Asian projects improving more modestly. Recent data for the Americas and Caribbean indicate a decline, but this was from a remarkably high base and the result for the 1993-97 group remains well above the overall average for the period.

- Projects in which DFID's overseas partners delivered their agreed inputs on time were more than half again as likely to be successful as those in which they did not.
- With the exception of the Americas and Caribbean, such estimates as have been made of likely achievement of the wider **project goal** show a steady improvement. Overall, the proportion receiving positive ratings is now nearly two-thirds.
- Ratings for **sustainability** are optional, and in many cases none was given. But where positive ratings for purpose and goal were given, 85% of cases were judged also to be sustainable.

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Conclusion

Project Completion Reports (PCRs) do not provide a comprehensive picture of changes in project performance over time, and any analysis must be interpreted with caution. But the analysis does suggest that there has been a steady overall improvement, albeit with some variation, particularly by region. It is difficult to attribute this improvement to any one influence, especially when the external environment can be so variable. But the evidence does suggest that the progressive refinements made by DFID over the years to project management procedures may cumulatively have had a beneficial effect.

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For further information see "Project Completion Report Synthesis 1998" (Evaluation Report EV619), obtainable from Evaluation Department, Department for International Development, 94 Victoria Street, London SW1E 5JL, telephone 0171-917-0243. This report will also be accessible via the Internet in due course.

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

The policy of the government was set out in the White Paper on International Development, published in November 1997. The central focus of the policy 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.

DFID seeks to work in partnership with governments which are committed to the international targets, and also seeks to work with business, civil society and the research community to encourage progress which will help reduce poverty. We also work with multilateral institutions including the World Bank, UN agencies and the European Commission. The bulk

of our assistance is concentrated on the poorest countries in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The goal of all DFID's work is the elimination of poverty.

As well as its headquarters in London and East Kilbride, DFID has offices in New Delhi, Bangkok, Nairobi, Harare, Pretoria, Dhaka, Suva and Bridgetown. In other parts of the world, DFID works through staff based in British embassies and high commissions.

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