

DFID Response

Review of the DFID Systematic Review Programme

FEBRUARY 2013

DFID established a systematic review programme in 2010 with the aim of generating rigorous reviews of the bodies of evidence around key questions of interest to DFID. Between 2010 and March 2012, DFID commissioned 68 systematic reviews. Many of these relate to international disciplines that are dependent on qualitative studies and an important element of the programme has been testing application of systematic review methodology which is traditionally more focused on quantitative data.

While programme staff have sought to continually learn and make improvements, DFID commissioned an internal review of the programme to methodically capture, and gain a greater understanding of, the views and experiences of DFID staff and external stakeholders, such as review teams and methodological experts. The review was carried out by two members of staff from DFID's evaluation cadre, neither of whom was currently working in Research and Evidence Division in order to bring greater objectivity to the review. The reviewers read key documents, including programme documentation and completed systematic reviews, interviewed a cross section of stakeholder groups, sent out questionnaires to all main stakeholders not selected for interview and sent out a general invitation on the DFID intranet for anyone else who wished to provide feedback.

The key aims of the review were to assess the process of generating the reviews and the quality, access and use of the outputs. The findings of the review will aid future planning and improve current processes and practices. They will also be shared with the growing number of donors that are commissioning systematic reviews so that they can learn from DFID's experience. The review and this response will be published on DFID's R4D website.

Response to recommendations

Recommendation #1: *Clearer guidance on SRs should be given to those submitting questions and a question template should be developed.*

Agree. We have developed a template for submission of questions to ensure questions are clear, focused and give background information regarding what they are trying to establish. An early version was tested in 2012 for DFID questions tendered by 3ie, and the Systematic Review Lead worked with the staff involved to ensure a well worded question and clear rationale behind why DFID was asking the question. We have since developed the template further. Training on developing systematic review questions has been provided previously to a range of DFID staff and will be provided to interested staff before a further round of systematic reviews is commissioned. .

Recommendation #2: *A larger commitment and investment of time, notably by DFID leads, should be made in developing and modifying questions to get them right before a call for proposals is made.*

Agree. We have learnt from experience that commissioning a review question involves a commitment of time and effort and we will make that much clearer to DFID staff in future rounds. The revised question template provides a framework that will support staff to develop a good question and ensure they think through why they are asking the question. Once a question is selected for commissioning, the Systematic Review Lead and supporting group will work with the relevant staff to further hone the question. Even after this stage, the question might need to be tweaked further, following discussion with the successful bidder, and this is common practice in systematic reviewing.

In relation to commitment from the DFID lead, the template asks who the DFID leads for the review will be and guidance will clearly indicate expected commitments from the DFID leads. Where possible the DFID leads will be expected to retain ownership of the review throughout the process even if they move to another part of DFID.

Recommendation #3: *DFID should issue clearer information to the Review Teams about what tools and guidance on producing Systematic Reviews are available and how to access them.*

Recommendation #4: *The system of allocating reviews to Support Groups and paying for this should be made clearer.*

Agree. When further systematic reviews are commissioned, training on the process and roles and responsibilities will be provided to all Review Teams by DFID. We will ensure that review teams understand what support they can freely request and expect from the supporting group that has been allocated to them. We will make clearer the role of supporting groups in quality assurance, including their influence on whether work will eventually be published by DFID as a systematic review.

Recommendation #5: *Based on experience with the SRs to date, RED should provide realistic estimates to other stakeholders of the time investment required and expected duration.*

Agree. We have reassessed our original assumptions about the time involved in completing a Systematic Review and agree that 12-18 months is realistic for most reviews, though depending on the quantity and type of evidence found, reviews may be done more quickly or take longer to complete. When we call for questions within DFID, the guidance will be clear about the time requirements of DFID leads throughout the process of carrying out the review.

Recommendation #6:

Suitably qualified staff, ideally combining research and knowledge broker skills, should be posted to this function (DFID Systematic review lead) and kept in post for a whole SR cycle if possible.

Recommendation #7:

The relative roles of SR lead and support groups should be more clearly explained to Review Teams; in particular, Research Teams' expectations of direct support by the DFID SR lead need to be managed.

Agree. The SR lead role has been filled by fast streamers over the three years of the programme. These have had a research or research methodology background. Since the end of 2012 more resources have been put onto the programme including staff who will not move on an annual basis. We now have on the team an A2 giving strategic direction, a fast streamer and management and administrative support. The systematic review team reports to the Deputy Director of Research and Evidence Division (and has done since the start) and has a close link to the Director.

The role of the SR lead will be explained to review teams at the start of a contract, alongside an explanation of the role of the supporting groups and DFID leads. Any technical requests received by the SR lead will be passed on to the relevant supporting group.

Recommendation #8:

DFID leads need to commit more time to SRs if their question is selected and retain continuity of staff if possible

Recommendation #9

Some unforeseen delays should be allowed for in critical paths.

Agree. When we call for questions within DFID, the guidance will be clear about the time requirements of DFID leads throughout the process of carrying out the review. The SR lead will give as much notice as possible of when drafts will be available for review by DFID leads.

Recommendation #10: *DFID should review external work on methodology, commissioning additional work if necessary, and prepare further guidance, which should particularly be directed at the stage of question selection.*

Agree. We will continue to keep abreast of the growing literature about systematic reviewing and keep in close touch with supporting groups about developments. We will consider how we might engage supporting groups at selection stage, to help assess whether a question might be answerable.

Recommendation #11: *SR work should be included in the 10% cadre time or generalists' objectives and reflected in PMFs.*

Agree. This is already included in the 10% cadre time of the evaluation cadre. We have asked the other Heads of Profession to support this suggestion.

Recommendation #12: *Lack of capacity could be ameliorated by staggering the SR contracting and not running such large calls.*

Agree. The first rounds resulted in large numbers of systematic reviews being commissioned. One reason for this was to get the programme started and quickly build up a critical mass of systematic reviews in international development. We are now confident that systematic reviews are an accepted part of the evidence base and are recognised as a valid and useful methodology in international development. Therefore we plan to call for fewer systematic reviews in each round in the future. We are also exploring the possibility of commissioning Systematic Reviews on a more ad-hoc basis as suitable questions are identified. This will help to smooth the demand for Systematic Reviews and reduce capacity strain.

Recommendation #13: *A two stage process should be considered along the lines:*

- 1 Scoping the availability of relevant literature and*
- 2 Detailed analysis and synthesis.*

There should be a break point in the contract after Phase 1.

Agree. This will improve value for money. When new SRs are commissioned, we will introduce a two-stage process that will be reflected in the contract terms of reference. This will allow for the literature to be scoped in the first stage so that the time and cost required to carry out a full systematic review can be more accurately estimated and contracted. It also provides an opportunity to refine the question depending on what literature is available.

Recommendation #14: *Tighter filters should be applied to question selection and to assessing the capacity and capability of review teams.*

Agree. See responses to recommendations #1 and #2. We will ensure that support is provided to DFID staff developing questions, and will work closely

with staff whose questions are selected to ensure the question and rationale are clearly articulated for bidders.

The capacity and capability of review teams is key to the success of the programme and will be reviewed when assessing bids. Following experience from the first round of systematic reviews we have ensured that every review team has methodological support available to them throughout the review process. In particular, DFID will ensure adequate support is available to Southern institutions and support regional capacity building efforts where appropriate.

Recommendation #15: Communication and dissemination should be more strongly built into the Review Team contracts. Senior DFID staff should be deployed in the promotion of the SRs.

Agree. We will strengthen the review teams' role in uptake of their SR through the contract terms of reference and liaison with the team around the time the SR is published.

Many senior DFID staff are already supportive of, and involved in promoting, the SRs. The programme reports directly to the Deputy Director of Research and is a major personal delivery objective of the Director of RED. The Director General of Policy and Global Programmes and the Director of Policy Division are closely linked into the commissioning process and request regular updates about the programme. Outputs are discussed at the Permanent Secretary's Monday Morning Meetings and are made available to all DFID Directors. This senior support for the programme is not so keenly reflected in middle management although the culture of understanding and using systematic reviews in DFID is starting to gain momentum.

We have developed a Systematic Review communication strategy which considers incentives, activities and support for senior DFID staff to ensure that SRs are used within DFID and promoted beyond DFID. For example, we are considering whether all future SRs should have an identified senior sponsor, such as a Head of Profession or Department, at the question development stage.

Recommendation #16: DFID should promote development of the 3ie database and better co-ordination with other portals.

Recommendation #17: Measures to increase mutual access by international partners to SR findings should be considered building on the 3ie database.

Agree. Posting the SRs online in a variety of places is an important aspect of making them available and accessible. A key objective of the Systematic Review programme is to ensure that they are used by DFID staff and partners. However, we recognise that as other agencies start to commission SRs on international development issues, there will be a greater need to ensure that they are all available in one place. To this end, we will continue to encourage initiatives such as the 3ie database of international development

systematic reviews. We regularly meet with other Systematic Review donors and keep them informed of our work in this area. We are working with the evaluation group of the OECD DAC to establish how we can coordinate the content, quality and dissemination of systematic reviews.

Recommendation #18: Use of SRs should be monitored in a structured way, notably their use in Business Cases and policy submissions

Agree. We are assessing how SRs are being used within business cases worth over £40m in DFID to establish a baseline. We will monitor use against this baseline in the future.

Recommendation #19: For each SR, the SR Lead and the DFID lead should reach an explicit agreement about the policy lead's involvement. To the extent possible, the same individual should be involved throughout.

Agree. The call for questions within DFID will clearly outline the expected involvement of the DFID leads in the guidance. We will establish an explicit agreement on the level of the DFID lead's involvement and will ensure, where possible, that they retain ownership of the SR if they move to a different team within DFID.

Recommendation #20: No general system of risk management is recommended; handling strategies [for sensitive reviews] should be decided case by case.

Agree. We welcome the universal viewpoint that SR findings should be independent of DFID policy and like other research the outputs of this programme are to inform and challenge DFID thinking. The independence of the RED Director (who is also the Chief Scientific Adviser) and of the Chief Economist is a key part in ensuring that evidence from research, evaluation and statistics is openly accessible, and used to inform DFID policy. We will continue to keep abreast of emerging findings from systematic reviews and develop handling strategies for those that challenge DFID policy on a case-by-case basis. In due course we will develop case studies of impact where new evidence has informed and changed DFID policy.

Recommendation #21: If policy briefs are required, DFID policy teams should normally prepare them. Review Teams should always produce Executive Summaries.

Agree. We have already stopped review teams from preparing policy briefs based on the systematic review evidence as policy implications should be analysed by policy-makers, not researchers. We agree that clear and concise executive summaries of the research process and findings are an important contributor to uptake of SR findings and will scrutinise these closely to ensure review teams produce them to a high standard. We will provide detailed guidance on the expected structure of SRs when commissioning new reviews.

Recommendation #22: *Value for money will be improved by using SRs only for suitable questions and by doing fewer of them and investing more per review.*

Agree. We have covered improving question setting and having smaller calls for systematic reviews in responses above. We will involve DFID's Evidence Brokers in selection of questions to ensure that they would not be answered more effectively using a different evidence product.

We recognise that bids are likely to be of higher value in the future as we and researchers have a better idea of how involved the SR process is, although this will be controlled through the two stage process outlined in response to recommendation #12.

We will ensure that an appropriate management and support budget for the SR programme is maintained. We will determine the number of SR questions commissioned based on identified business need.

Recommendation #23: *This is mainly beyond the scope of this review but the Research and Policy Directors may wish to reflect further.*

Agree and already in hand. The Directors of RED and Policy and the Director General of Policy and Global Programmes are all closely linked to the systematic review programme and will direct the next steps of the programme in early 2013.