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### **An initial reaction to the DFID Research Strategy Launched on 22 April 2008.**

For someone who works on “innovation” there are many good things in the new DFID Research strategy. Indeed far too many to list in this short reaction. But overall many of the difficult issues raised in the 2002 DFID research policy paper look as if they will be seriously addressed in the next five years. DFID commits itself to developing its own capacity to utilise the results of the research it finances; it will make effort to link to other funders including those in the UK (the research councils); it will support forward looking horizon scanning and there is even a modest research response mode to facilitate challenges to conventional wisdom.

But most remarkable of all is the commitment to put “equal effort” (repeat “equal effort”) into strengthening the capacities of the development community to *use* research-based knowledge as to the *production* of new knowledge (paragraph 3.1).

This is a major shift for DFID and would be for most aid agencies. It appears to be a strong commitment to an innovation approach to funding. in the broad sense of shifting the focus towards the utilisation of research-based knowledge to improve productivity and other aspects of production (to reduce poverty). But the carefully drafted document shows traces of the huge battles that presumably took place to achieve this shift. The many signs in the text of what might be called an ‘innovation perspective’ are contrasted by other more traditional views about the funding of “research” (though there is little clarity what this actually is) and the need to ‘communicate the results’ (in the rather passive sense of the largely defunct “linear extension” model).

This shift within DFID represents a shift of power from the “research elite” who conventionally control research funding and choose its topics and methods to other (as yet largely undefined and probably no less elite) actors including farmers groups and to “intermediaries” such as consulting and engineering organisations that are found to be so crucial in highly innovative economies (interestingly the word engineer does not appear in the strategy, nor, by the way, does the word livelihood).

In these battles between these two perspective it is as if certain sections of the long-awaited Science and Innovation Strategy (such as the four “results areas” of section three) have been grafted onto the more traditional (and conventional) elements of the research strategy, namely the six research areas. The difference in perspective can most easily demonstrated by mentally replacing the word “research” with the word “innovation” in the text. For instance, what would DFID have to do if it were committed to supporting “innovation” in sustainable agriculture rather than supporting just one part of it, namely research?

There is much it would and could do. It would certainly take a “systems perspective” in order to decide where best to allocate its funds and to integrate what it does in country (for instance in business development services and private sector financing) with the local and international knowledge economy (at the moment centrally administered programmes are often resented by country offices as they are “not consistent with Paris Declaration Commitments”). It would build capacity to demand, absorb and utilise new knowledge particularly by intermediary organisations such as consulting and engineering design organisations. It would be clearer about the role it expects British organisations to play relative to those in developing countries. But above all else it would find new ways to inject its money into the ‘bottom of the pyramid’, rather than continue pour it in at the top in the hope that it would percolate through to the grasses roots.

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