

Solid Progress, Delicate Questions

My initial reaction to the research strategy is that senior management at DFID have opted for a position that shouts: steady as it goes. Given the largely positive course already charted and the anticipated acceleration in funding, that is a defensible response, albeit a low-risk one. My one real worry with the strategy is that there may not be enough space within it for taking risks.

Let me start by acknowledging where there has been sensible and solid progress in the thinking that informs the strategy.

There are strong bookends: 'Growth' and 'Future Challenges and Opportunities'. I'm pleased with the new priority given to growth with the caveat that it cannot be the exclusive domain of economists—growth is about the interactions of history, geography, politics, and social exclusion with economics. Ideas elsewhere in the document about the importance of the interactions of power, politics and poverty need to be part of the growth discussion too.

The 'Future Challenges and Opportunities' work will provide DFID with a capacity to peer into the future. And it needs it—unlike this strategy, the previous one was very silent on the emerging economies of China and India and what this meant for development. However the horizon scanning facility needs to be funded properly—it only attracts £1 million per year now and is slated for an increase, not a “significant increase”. I am also concerned that the programme is already over-determined and will preclude space for the observation of the unexpected “black swans”.

Plans for building on past strengths such as health and governance and for developing emerging strengths such as climate change are sound. In terms of my own thematic areas of specialisation, the increased commitment to agriculture is welcome—particularly if ways can be found to link up with the research being done by a wide variety of actors in this area. Another of my own particular interests - infant nutrition- is mentioned in a few places, with due acknowledgement of its cross-cutting nature. But all cross-cutting issues that are not climate change are vulnerable to neglect and I hope DFID can resist the temptation to cut this particular one which is so vital to the MDGs in which progress is slowest.

In terms of the research process, we at IDS are very pleased to see a greater commitment to knowledge that is co-constructed across domains--global and local, North and South, user and producer--together with some details on how that might be achieved. This is very much in line with our 360 degree perspective on knowledge generation.

But will the strategy be bold enough to follow the logic of its own rhetoric? For instance the strong distinction made between the “what” and the “how” of research is worrying. Changes in the way that research is governed will likely generate very different research agendas. Similarly one does not get a strong

sense that the consultation process that informed the strategy drew from outside the usual suspects.

Likewise the focus on learning about and from the impact of research is a good thing if: (a) the effort is real and transparent and allows for the range of impacts--positive, neutral and negative—to emerge, and (b) impact is not defined exclusively in a target-driven, policy change way. Impact, or perhaps more appropriately, influence, is unpredictable terms of what it looks like and in the confluence of events (research being just one of many) that leads to it. I hope DFID will support more work on how change happens and the roles of knowledge, research and information within change processes.

Finally, there is accountability. If DFID follows through on its commitment to closely monitor its strategy it will satisfy one set of stakeholders—the UK public. But its ultimate stakeholders are surely the poorest citizens in the poorest countries. I urge DFID to find ways to invite those citizens to closely monitor both DFID-funded research and related DFID actions. This will revolutionise accountability pathways and enhance the sustainable impact of DFID and its partners where it matters most—on the ground.

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