

It's hard to imagine how hard it must have been to write this strategy. Vested interests lining up in serried ranks outside the door. Political priorities evolving with a new administration. The real world changing in ways which expose the poverty of much current orthodoxy. And underlying the entire discussion, long-term scepticism in some parts of DFID about the real value of research: research, as they often say, as the opposite of action. Under the circumstances, it is an achievement to have produced a strategy at all, let alone one that is clear and coherent.

Will the vested interests be satisfied? Probably. The best organised lobbies are health and agriculture, and both are well represented and promised increased funding. In 2007/8, they received over 70% of the total funding of £128m. The economists and other social scientists have not done badly, with the new emphasis on growth, and important commitments elsewhere to work on social exclusion and inequality, as well as to expand work on institutions, state effectiveness and politics. Are there any losers, I wonder? Or did a significant increase in funding make it possible to satisfy everyone? It would be interesting to hear from demographers, urban planners, and international relations specialists, among others.

Institutionally, the references to partnership will please the other donors, the Foundations, the private sector, and the international institutions like the CGIAR. Developing country research managers will also be pleased by the emphasis on institution-building. The big losers, it seems to me, are UK institutions. We seem to have lost, again, the campaign to persuade DFID to recognise its responsibilities to the research infrastructure of UK plc, a global and national public good. I say this ruefully, as one who runs a part of that infrastructure, and all of whose collaborators and competitors in Europe are core-funded.

Have the priorities of the new administration been adequately reflected. Well, Gordon Brown has launched a Call to Action on the MDGs, and they are well represented. He has also talked a lot about the importance of reforming the international system, most recently in his high-profile speech in Boston. Douglas Alexander has underlined the importance of the MDGs, of course, and has given DFID four main priorities, viz growth, fragile states, climate change and reform of the international system. I would say that the first three are well covered, but that the priority GB and DA have both given to the international system is rather poorly reflected, apart from a short reference to aid. Not much on the UN or the EU, for example.

Have changes in the real world been adequately reflected, both those we are struggling with in 2008, and those yet to come. Will there be research on the credit crunch and the food price crisis, on the geopolitics of energy, on the changing nature of globalisation, on rapid urbanisation, and on the technological revolutions which will fundamentally alter the life expectancy, life styles and employment patterns of the next generation? Up to a point, I guess, in the programmes on growth and new technologies. There are some interesting challenges tucked away in the detail, like a programme to work on high-value crops grown by smallholders on the outskirts of town. Why not, I

wonder, the poverty impact of high value crops grown by large farms away from town?

As to links back into practice, this is a dominant theme, with the strategy committing 30% of the budget by 2010 into making research 'available, accessible and useable'. Golly. I'm all in favour of an innovations systems approach and of research into use – I spent some years, after all, as a farming systems researcher, and now run a think-tank whose principal mandate is bridging research and policy. But £60m a year? Let's be clear that this money, and any additional money spent on capacity development, is not 'research' as commonly understood. I wonder how many days of actual research time are actually funded now, and how many will be covered in 2010? It would be a pity if the research budget were asked to pick up expenditures which rightly belong elsewhere, for example in country programme expenditures or in policy programmes.

Finally, implementation will test the entrepreneurial skills of DFID staff, and probably of researchers too. Competitive tendering looks likely to be the dominant methodology. The key 'modality' looks like being the Research Programme Consortium, an arrangement which I would like to see independently evaluated, with particular attention to transactions costs, economies of scale, and conditions for research quality. Practically speaking, there will be 24 separate programme areas to manage within the 6 main priority themes, plus a very small amount of money for responsive research. I hope that there will be enough flexibility in the system, and sufficient flexibility in DFID, to identify and nurture promising research, in the way that Foundations and bodies like IDRC commonly do. It's really a pity that the battle to set up a separate DFID Research Foundation was lost.

This was an exercise worth doing, and the highly consultative process was exemplary. It is kind – and brave – of DFID to have asked for comments after publication. Let's hope implementation is carried out with similar courage and similar success.

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