

Independent Evaluation of Eldis Executive Summary

Purpose

1 Eldis is an internet based information service that filters, structures and presents development information via the web, email and offline products. It receives funding from DFID under MK4D, and from NORAD, SIDA, and SDC. After 10 years, the donors have requested a significant external independent evaluation of the service, the purpose of which is to serve an accountability function for the donors, to link with an MK4D review, and to assist with decision-making about further funding (donors) and operation (IDS). Both evaluations will also feed into IDS's own reflexive learning about its knowledge services.

The Eldis evaluation is guided by the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact. It builds on interviews and information collected by IDS and visits to users in Malawi, Tanzania and Bangladesh.

Main Conclusion

2 The overall conclusion for donors is that Eldis is an exceptional resource for development policymakers and practitioners, and that maintaining a public sector funded, cross-sectoral, multi-subject portal mandated to present a diversity of viewpoints that can influence policy is an important development resource.

3 There are other portal-type websites and many players exist in the commercial domain on the internet. However, each are filling different niches, using different approaches and philosophies, and offering a different user environment. It is likely that such a choice of development information suppliers rather than a single powerful player dominant on the internet will benefit the quality and range of information available.

4 Eldis represents the 'free public good' philosophy to information services delivery. There is ample precedent for governments subsidizing communication as well as platforms for the production of pluralistic informed content, (e.g. subsidize telephone connectivity for rural, poor or handicapped people as well as emergency response service and the ability to provide assistance to law enforcement authorities; the licence fee and charter for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a strong example of subsidised pluralistic content in the UK, whilst within the UN system HINARI and AGORA are subsidized information sharing efforts).

5 It is clearly emphasized in the Berlin Declaration that without strong scientific platforms built on the widest possible access to research information; progress towards the Millennium Development Goals will not be sustained. Especially that content and software tools must be openly accessible and compatible. Eldis is one tool that represents a significant response by the UK, Sweden, Norway and Switzerland to the Berlin Declaration. Indeed, as the quantity, variety and quality of content available on the Internet continues to increase, including through the evolution of Web 2.0 services, the role of aggregators and commentators becomes more important.

Response to the Main Evaluation Questions

Achievements

6 Based on evidence which includes 2,820 questionnaire responses, 19,000 sent to a friend messages, 40 in depth interviews, website and email usage statistics, and many anecdotal responses from service users, Eldis contributes to development practitioners' use and exchange of relevant, evidence-based development knowledge and documentation.

To what extent has Eldis delivered the range and quantity of products and services set out in its Logframe?

7 Eldis is continuing to build and enrich their dataset, improve the coverage of the website, and produce email outputs. These match or exceed the Eldis Logframe targets and include: 293 'Document Summaries' each month (and a searchable collection of 22,000), 4,500 'Organisation Descriptions'; 'weekly features', 'E-mail bulletins' containing summaries and other news to 37,000 unique email subscribers, 'Resource Guides' on 25 topics, 42 short, 'Key issue pages' on emerging research and policy issues, 8 searchable news-focused 'Email newsletter collections', 6 in-depth guides to development debates called 'Dossiers', as well as Blogs and Newsfeeds. The programme uploaded onto the Eldis website an average of 335 content items per month during 2006/7, sent out an average of 35 email reporters each month, produced and distributed 4,400 CDRom discs and organised Cache/CDRom agreements with 565 different organisations, with blanket permissions from 395 organisations and Creative Commons agreements from 67. The Cache now includes over 4,500 documents. Eldis has developed an Oryx content management system for improved performance and stability and developed an Eldis Community Platform to support collaborative work and self-publishing.

How effective are Eldis editorial and production systems in delivering these products and services?

8 The programme employs, on average, seven editors and a similar number of more junior Abstractors to whom much abstracting is efficiently delegated. Most Editors stay in post for several years typically, before moving on. The Eldis team are productive in creating quality content, with useful differentiation of roles being implemented, which augers well for efficiency.

9 To improve Up-time Stability and invest in the future of service delivery, the electronic platform of Eldis is being upgraded to a system referred to as Oryx. The protracted shift to a new Oryx platform for Eldis has temporarily disrupted staff output, user access and the delivery of planned content. There is still some way to go with fully launching the new system.

To what extent is Eldis achieving the targeted levels and patterns of use set out in its Logframe?

10 Eldis is hitting the targets set out in its Logframe regarding website visit rate, email subscription, sourcing of latest documents and synthesis briefings and is helping to fill an important niche in the development information market. OVIs related to increase in visits to Eldis and % of users seeking southern content are less easy to verify due to recent changes in web statistics collection, the process of shifting to an Oryx platform and difficulties in defining southern-based content. 27 % of web-users and 55% of email subscribers are southern-based. Eldis users come from NGOs, 24%; Research/teaching 22%; Individuals, 11%; International organisations 10%; Consultants, 9%; Government, 9%; Commercial business, 3%, Bilateral aid agency, 2%, and Media, 2%.

Relevance

To what extent is Eldis filling a gap in terms of information needs of target users?

11 Evidence from the country studies and a counterfactual survey highlight how Eldis is fulfilling user needs: The country studies reveal that target users need information for: research, training, postgraduate studies, preparing lectures and assisting students/supervision, consultancies, project proposals, field work, PRA, livelihoods analysis, accessing grey literature, fund raising, advocacy, strategy development and policy making. Information is sought to substantiate reports and provide regional perspectives on issues such as health and education, to enhance cross-sectoral understanding of issues and to help in clarifying concepts, developing indicators and setting standards.

12 Journalists, scientists and individual users report keeping updated on the latest findings and debates for their area of expertise. People in more operational roles based in developing countries report adapting examples of best practice or further developing these. Others source information for evaluating their own field-based projects or for background information for funding proposals. Some users even glean examples of formats for reporting back to donors where funding had been secured. Users in strategic positions reported feeding the information into broader policy processes at organisational or governmental levels. Several user in the counter-factual survey specified job searching.

To what extent is the mix of services provided by Eldis an effective response to the varying needs and preferences of different target users?

13 Eldis specialises in cross-sectoral coverage and multiple-delivery formats and represents a mixture of updating services and synthesis/educational services. Feedback from interviews and surveys suggests Eldis is a popular source of development knowledge complementing other information sources with narrower specialist coverage. The Eldis focus on research, policy and strategic information is well suited for a target audience comprising policy formers, strategists, international organisations and academics. It is one of the longest established web-based development information brands and has a large user base for web and email services.

14 Eldis users interviewed in the ITAD evaluation country studies and many of the Eldis 'Bios' reported valuing: the free, open-access site, not needing to register, access to full text journals, well packaged CDs, consistency of topics, which they can follow-up over time, broad-ranging, not sector/institution-specific information and the provision of links to related sites.

15 The service is constantly evolving around changes in information sharing and associated agendas of people, donors, the Institute of Development Studies, markets and publishing patterns. The evidence suggests that users find the service useful for their needs and that Eldis is reaching a wide range of audiences. In country studies, the Eldis services were considered credible and reliable and Eldis content ranks highly in Google searches using key development search terms.

16 The service is well used in the north and the south, with around one third of web users and 55% of email subscribers from 'the south'. Demand for southern produced content is increasing and the % of southern records produced by the Eldis team has increased. However, the overall % of southern content has decreased due to an interruption in content

sharing between GDN and Eldis since early 2006 when GDN was transferred to Cairo and the content moved to a locally-hosted 'interim platform'.

17 Awareness of the service and perceptions about its utility amongst policy makers and shapers, those involved in management of development, related education and research, and NGOs i.e. those who represent the Eldis client group but who are not necessarily users (the counterfactual survey) appears less pronounced and may imply a need for further researching and marketing outside of the current user group.

Impact and sustainability

What does the evidence suggest about how Eldis contributes to the ability of development actors to access, exchange and use evidence-based development information?

18 Evidence from Eldis surveys and interviews from different categories of target users highlight a range of impacts: Policy makers and policy influencers – especially report impacts on government departments and multinational organisations processes, the negotiation processes of civil society organisations, including improving their understanding of the intellectual and strategic interests of those they are trying to influence. Other policy actors were less specific, but identified recurrent value in focused on impacts on particular processes. Researchers – highlight access to new materials, specific documents and the value of additional viewpoints. Through Eldis, NGO staff report more simple access to materials for personal and organisational learning, often fulfilling a need to become familiar with areas of work for which they have had little formal training, with high levels of re-use among this audience. (Specific examples are provided in the report).

19 Sustainability of Eldis requires the capacity to keep pace with changing demands and technology and to ensure sustainable funding. Sustainable development and the fulfilment of the MDGs in this context requires equality of access to scientific progress, support for the formation of a knowledge based culture of inquiry and policy justification, support to changes in the communication and publication practices of poorly-resourced groups to improve their impact, and the promotion of a strong scientific platform built on the widest possible access to research information to sustain support and progress.

Recommendations

20 Numbered recommendations contained within this report are juxtapose with the text to which they relate and are numbered in the order in which they appear. The final section of the report separates these out into recommendations 'for donors' and 'for Eldis' the latter are further divided into those for the near term and those which could be considered more strategic and might be taken on board by the knowledge services.