Evaluation Brief: DFID Online Research Portals and Repositories

Introduction

As part of its commitment to ensuring that its policies and programmes are based on evidence, DFID supports high quality research into strategic development issues. To support the communication of this research it also funds a number of intermediary organisations, including online research portals and repositories. This evaluation focused on three of them: Eldis, R4D and SciDev.Net.

The Portals

The three portals all have the same broad purpose of disseminating good quality research to a global audience, with the primary target being users in the South. However each portal represents a very different model to achieve this, with equally different costs.

Eldis: Disseminates research products from multiple sources. Targeted at development practitioners, decision makers and researchers, it helps users to find and assess the research by authoring supporting pieces (e.g. policy briefs, topic guides) and curating links to other research and sites. Cost: £400,000 p.a., 75% funded by DFID.

R4D: A repository of DFID-funded research and project reports from the 1990s to the present day. Funded solely by DFID; a new R4D service was launched on gov.uk in summer 2016. Focuses primarily on making content available, with additional functions to make it more accessible. Cost: £300,000 p.a. at the time of evaluation, sole-funded by DFID.

SciDev.Net: Reports science-based research news for global development. Content is largely original news articles authored for region-specific editions. Content includes multimedia, data visualisation, 'speed reads' and editorials. Intended for development professionals, policymakers, researchers, journalists and 'the informed public'. Cost: £2.2 million p.a. Funding from DFID and multiple other sources.

Evaluation objectives

1. Assess the portals' quality and accessibility
2. Describe intended user populations and their online information behaviour
3. Draw out and illustrate plausible pathways between portal use and uptake of evidence in policy and practice
4. Assess whether the portals represent Value For Money

Findings

- The evaluation concluded that policy actors of all kinds, in both the North and the South, want to use research evidence in their work a**nd are increasingly able to use the internet to find it**.
- **There is little discernible difference between policy actors in the North and the South** in the way they use the internet to find research evidence: generally, searching online for research tends to be frequent, rapid and 'impatient'.
- **Starting a search for research evidence with Google is pretty much universal** and generally considered to be highly effective: further 'chaining' to other sites or materials often does not go beyond the first page of Google. Use of the DFID-funded portals' own internal search function is very low.
- Online interactions are characterised by a **perceived lack of time to search extensively or to appraise deeply**, in the first instance, the quality of what is found**.
- For 'time-poor' policy actors **trusted sources (host website, author, affiliation) are paramount** in indicating the likely credibility of the research found online.
- **DFID is a trusted source** among the participants.
- **Users of all kinds want access to *data*, independently of research articles**: governments' own websites are frequently used to find national and sub-national data, while the World Bank and UN sites (WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNAIDS) are the 'go-to' for international data.

World Bank & UN are the 'go-to' sites for international data & aid policy guides

- **A wide range of different media, formats and products – videos, PowerPoints, content summaries and guides – is frequently used** to orient online searchers when looking for research evidence.
- **Mobile devices are increasingly popular** for searching for research evidence, with dramatic recent rises in visitors to the DFID portals using mobiles and tablets.
- **Both Eldis and SciDev.Net are providing VFM.** There is good evidence that they are continuously trying to improve the services they offer both to users and producers of information.
- There is **evidence that availability of research online is increasing its uptake and application in the policy making process** – while this is strongest at the level of the individual, there are also signs of it happening across organisations.
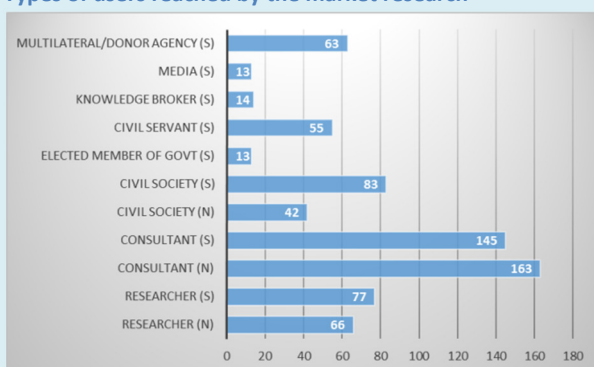
Evaluation methodology

The evaluation used three primary data collection methods:

1. **Market research** – A global online questionnaire mailed out to 10,000 policy actors and practitioners[1].
2. **Country case studies** – 44 policy actors and practitioners in Ghana, Tanzania and Nigeria participated in:
   - A two-part face-to-face '**contextual inquiry'**, in which participants were observed conducting real online search tasks: firstly, repeating one of their own recent research activities and, secondly, 'consumer testing' the DFID portals.
   - Keeping a **research diary** recording daily online research activity over a 10-day period.

An **expert review ('heuristic evaluation')** of the 3 DFID portals was also conducted to test objectively-defined web interface characteristics such as user control, error prevention and recovery, consistency, 'real world feel'.
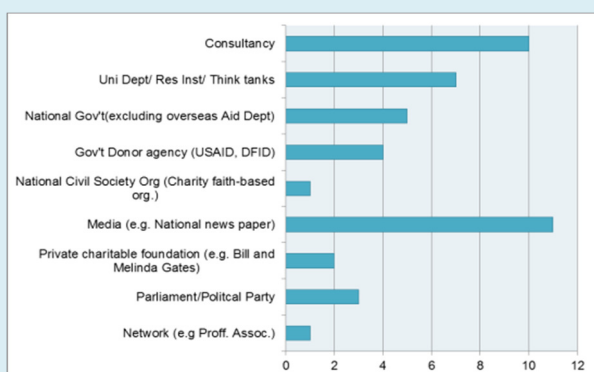
3. **Value for Money (VFM) assessment** – A VFM review was conducted for two of the websites, Eldis and SciDev.Net, consisting of interviews, financial analysis and webmetrics analysis.

Types of users reached by the market research

User type	Value
MULTILATERAL/DONOR AGENCY (S)	63
MEDIA (S)	13
KNOWLEDGE BROKER (S)	14
CIVIL SERVANT (S)	55
ELECTED MEMBER OF GOVT (S)	13
CIVIL SOCIETY (S)	83
CIVIL SOCIETY (N)	42
CONSULTANT (S)	145
CONSULTANT (N)	163
RESEARCHER (S)	77
RESEARCHER (N)	66

(S) South, (N) North

Case study participants

- Consultancy
- Uni Dept/ Res Inst/ Think tanks
- National Gov't(excluding overseas Aid Dept)
- Gov't Donor agency (USAID, DFID)
- National Civil Society Org (Charity faith-based org.)
- Media (e.g. National news paper)
- Private charitable foundation (e.g. Bill and Melinda Gates)
- Parliament/Politcal Party
- Network (e.g Proff. Assoc.)

Recommendations

Although the DFID-funded portals' content is valued and perceived to be of high quality there is potential to increase the awareness and use of them. Some recommendations are:

- Make the **DFID** association (rather than 'UK Aid') more apparent on DFID-funded sites.

- **Handheld devices, especially mobiles,** should be taken seriously as ways of reaching intended users with research evidence.

- Make the overall design more **user-centred** including re-structuring menus & sub-categories to make navigation easier.
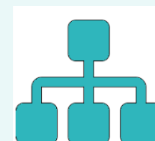
- **DFID should consider supporting partner Governments' own websites** to improve their accessibility to policy actors seeking reliable national and local statistics. There is a high level of awareness and expectation of Government websites as sources of information amongst policy actors of all types (and all sectors).

- Invest in **search engine optimisation**.

- Use more filters based on **country or on region:** country-specific profiles are an important aspect for users searching for context-specific research evidence.

- Invest in making available **locally relevant content** e.g. in local languages and region/country specific research.

DFID could help inform the local debates that represent public opinion and therefore better inform national public policy by **supporting NGOs to disseminate online topical research**.

DFID should consider including in the training/induction package of all new contracted, in-country DFID programme leaders, a module on **internet skills and online research resources**.

The evaluation produced a number of recommendations specific to each of the portals.

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[1] The response rate to the email invitation issued by the survey team was 9.2% on average (excluding unknown response rate for open links)

Phillipson, R., Brown, C., Sharp, H., Botchie, D., Bromley, J.M., Weigh, N. (2016) *Evaluation of DFID Online Research Portals and Repositories. Volume I: Final Evaluation Report.* London: Mott MacDonald