
Chapter 8 Conclusions

8.1.1 Based on the analysis and evaluation reported in preceding chapters, the evaluation team has arrived at a number of overall conclusions and has drawn up the recommendations presented in the following chapter.

The Strategy as a Whole

8.1.2 The RNRRS has been an improvement on previous research management arrangements, ensuring relevant prioritised research; and achieving value for money by contracting out programme management and introducing competitive research funding. Although the framework conferred increased coherence by comparison with the previous approach, in combination with the competitive process, the model tends to encourage fragmentation, which has neither facilitated the sustainability of research efforts, nor the sustained long-term links between researchers or research institutions. However, since 1997 there has been a recognition to increase sustainability through closer ties with southern institutions, the strategy has evolved in some ways which partially addressed this. (6.1 and 6.4)

Science Quality

8.1.3 Taken as a whole the quality of science in RNRRS has been high. With very few exceptions, the research outputs have been published in appropriate peer reviewed journals. Most programmes have substantial numbers of projects that successfully use existing scientific knowledge in creative ways, with a few projects having made significant contributions to new scientific knowledge. DFID should be proud of the overall scientific quality of RNRRS research. (4.9)

8.1.4 The overall management of programmes has been good, although there has only been limited inter-programme cooperation. Significant differences in programme management styles do not seem to have impacted negatively on the research quality. Short-term duration of projects and the absence of monitoring and evaluation procedures have not created optimal conditions for research into long-term challenges of the natural environment. (6.3)

8.1.5 The quality of the science or research leaders is high. This has been a critical aspect of the strategy and the reputation and recognition of DFID as a global influence and leader within the realms of renewable natural resources research.

Achievement of Programme Outputs

8.1.6 Programmes report high levels of achievement against output and the great majority of projects funded by the RNRRS achieved the outputs they intended. (3.2)

Appropriateness of Projects to Programme Purpose

8.1.7 This has been more varied, according to the PMs' own assessments. In some cases, projects may have been marked lower on contribution to purpose because of the gap between the upstream nature of the project, and the very poverty focussed purpose statement. Individual PM interpretation may also be a factor. It is possible that, as beneficiaries, and target institutions have become more involved at project design stage, projects will have greater potential to contribute to programme purpose.(3.2)

The use of logframes

8.1.8 All aspects of the Logframe, purposes, outputs, activities and assumptions, need to be monitored to determine impact from projects and programmes. The Logframe should be able to frame impact assessment for programmes that, in turn, could be utilised as a management tool for strategic management of the research, its outputs and its uptake and impact on the poor.

8.1.9 DFID should be required to report more regularly and effectively on the impact of its research programmes. The evaluation team endorses this finding from the Surr report (2002), and feels that for future research programmes, DFID should develop an impact assessment strategy, and an appropriately timed programme of impact assessments, commissioned centrally. This should be linked to the logframes and it's OVIs and to management of the programmes through their logframes.

Evidence on demand driven research

8.1.10 As the RNRRS has evolved, there has been more emphasis on consultation with potential end-users in stakeholder workshops, at early stages of project design and implementation. This has led to more appropriate project design, though there is little formal evidence to support this. Care has to be taken that the emphasis on end-user involvement still leaves space for the development of global public goods research products. (5.6)

Involvement of target organisations

8.1.11 In recent years there has been more involvement of target organisations at earlier stages of project design and implementation. It is anticipated that this will close the gap between research outputs and uptake, though it is too early to assess this effectively. (5.6)

Programme approach to dissemination and uptake

8.1.12 Programmes have focussed on the dissemination of research outputs as the RNRRS has drawn to its conclusion. A number of different approaches have been taken to dissemination. (5.6)

Evidence of adoption and impact

8.1.13 A number of impact studies are currently being undertaken, but there is no systematic way of assessing impact or indeed the number of adopters of a research output. Other studies of the returns to research, and of research impact, give some indications that the returns to the RNRRS are likely to be high. Country observations by the evaluation team provided clear indications that virtually all projects have had short term positive impact on the incomes of the poor at the community/local levels among the limited number of participants in project activities.(5.5)

8.1.14 Furthermore, there is some evidence of spread to neighbouring communities in the majority of the projects. However, there is virtually no evidence of economic impact at regional or national levels, although there are prospects of such impacts in the future. A majority of the projects have already had impact on the scientific community, in terms of adoption of methodologies pioneered by the projects, and there are indications of limited impact at the policy level. It is clear to the evaluation team that the average project size of £100,000 to £200,000 and average duration of 2 to 3 years needs to be increased. (5.5)

8.1.15 Over the next year or two there will be more evidence on not just the economic returns of RNRRS research but on the impact it has had on poor people's livelihoods. However, this hard evidence has not yet been gathered in a sufficiently systematic fashion to allow any overall assessment to be made.

RNRRS Level Governance and Management

8.1.16 Although extremely hands-on during strategy development and in the early years, latterly DFID's management of the RNRRS has been characterised by a 'light touch', which has nevertheless been responsive and supportive. Despite limited resources, DFID's Central Research Department RNRRS Core Team has been able, with input from some key lead advisers, to provide strategic guidance as the policy context has changed, to monitor contractual performance, provide knowledge management, and offer strategic guidance and positive and flexible operational support to PMs. Despite this, important management constraints have resulted in a lack of synergy and coordination across the strategy as a whole. The argument that, since PMs are contracted individually, there is no need for an overarching governance structure, or for overly-onerous monitoring, does not outweigh the requirement for oversight and synthesis to facilitate accountability and transparency, and the need to promote synergy and coherence through cross-programme mechanisms.(6.2)

Individual Programmes

8.1.17 Individual programmes' strategies and structures exhibit considerable diversity. Nevertheless, trends can be detected in the evolution of all the programmes' strategies which suggest that research managers have already begun to incorporate some of the characteristics of the consortium model which is proposed in the Research Funding Framework 2005 - 2007. There is no strong correlation between programme management processes and programme performance, either in terms of science quality or potential poverty impact. Although good practice lessons are noted, a range of management approaches appear equally effective. (6.3)

Project Cycle Management

8.1.18 The degree of competition for the award of projects is variable, but it is not possible to say whether the different practices have actually resulted in a less competitive environment for some research areas. Contract and financial administration mechanisms operate smoothly, and project leaders comply with these and with technical reporting requirements without difficulty. However, not all programmes carry out formal evaluations, either internal or independent, and the lack of a standardised project monitoring and evaluation procedure means that independent oversight of project and programme performance has not been possible. (6.4)

Capacity Building

8.1.19 There has been a clear shift of research project management responsibilities to developing country science and/or development groups during latter years and strong working relationships established between individuals has been an important informal mechanism for strengthening researchers' capacity. However, there is no compelling evidence that the contract research model is particularly suitable for making a sustainable impact on the capacity of southern research institutions, or building deep institutional competence. Although a new emphasis on capacity building has been apparent throughout the last few years of the RNRRS, no specific capacity building policies or strategies have been devised. (6.5)

Balance between scientific knowledge generation and impact on livelihoods

8.1.20 Although RNRRS has achieved some notable successes, the current model, with a mix of activities that attempt to balance the production of IPGs and NPGs has not yet achieved a demonstrated impact on large numbers of poor people in the developing countries. There are also legitimate concerns about its ability to respond to new research challenges that require fundamental research. DFID runs the risk of not achieving its long term objectives with the current model, unless resources are significantly increased to allow longer term basic/fundamental natural resources development research either within or outside the RNRRS framework, as well as longer term country based applied research and dissemination activities. Alternatively, other research funding and management models could be adopted. (7.5)

DFID's comparative advantage

8.1.21 The RNRRS has generated globally recognised and influential programmes covering the key facets of natural resources research and the use of research in the fight against poverty. The strategy has generated the flexibility required to evolve over the 10 year period and to emerge as a world leader in balancing aspects of basic, applied and adaptive research supplying outputs to impact on poverty. DFID need to be able to ensure that it builds on and strengthens the foundations developed over the last 10 years.

8.1.22 Over the 10 year period the RNRRS has generated enormous stakeholder networks. These cut across international, regional and national development issues including academic, public, private and the NGO sectors. All these networks are influential, but their synergy needs to be strategically addressed if they are to reach their full potential for supporting policy and practice changes and enhance the practicalities of poverty reduction.

Options for the future

8.1.23 DFID must determine its priorities for the new research funding framework. The most appropriate option or options for management of a future RNRRS programme must be selected in the light of these priorities. It is not possible to systematically determine which research themes should be continued or terminated pending the clarification of these priorities and the determination of the most appropriate option for future research management. Furthermore it would be risky and undermine the investment made through RNRRS to end the existing research programmes as currently planned. It therefore, appears that a further period of transition funding may be necessary to allow time for the determination of priorities for the new framework, selection of the most appropriate management options and for identification of thematic research areas (7.6).