

1 The strategic role of research in poverty elimination

Susanna Moorehead, Head, ESCOR Unit

New ideas and sound evidence are essential tools in reducing world poverty. Good research, targeted at the right audience in a timely manner, underpins successful changes in approach, policies and behaviour. At a time of rapid transition, knowledge is the vital ingredient that will affect the impact of globalisation on people living in poverty.

Government funding for research is crucial. As more and more research is done in the private sector, the role of public investment in research, focused on the needs of people living in poverty, becomes increasingly important.

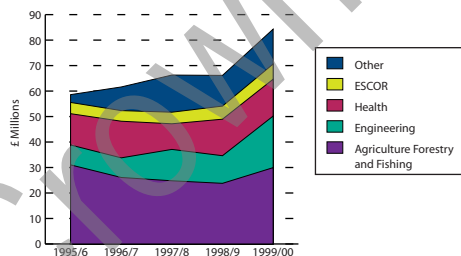
The UK makes a significant contribution to economic, social and political knowledge about poverty reduction and development. It is a world leader in the number and quality of research institutes on poverty and development.

DFID invests over £90 million a year in research. Around 12% of this is allocated to research on economic and social issues. The Economic and Social Research Unit, known as ESCOR, is responsible for man-

aging most of this investment, amounting to £9.6 million in 2001/2002.

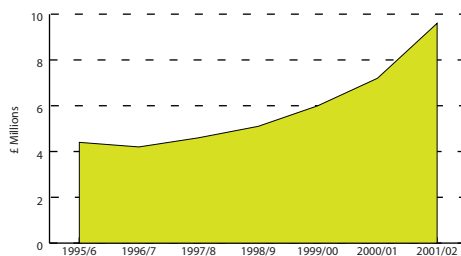
ESCOR's remit is to support high quality, reliable research designed to have a practical impact on development policies and activities. It particularly values interdisciplinary work that reflects the complexity of poverty. The knowledge generated through ESCOR is used directly in DFID's bilateral aid programme, in partnerships with governments

Figure 1: DFID Research and Knowledge Investments 1995–2000



Source: DFID Statistics on International Development, Table 12

Figure 2: The growth of ESCOR investments in social and economic research 1995–2002



Source: DFID Statistics

Creating Real Research Partnerships

Oga Steve Abah, Theatre for Development Centre, Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria

The Theatre for Development Centre (TFDC) has been working with theatre in Nigeria for the past 25 years. Their experience has convinced them that this method of research allows the expression of voices that often go unheard. They are part of the new Development Research Centre (DRC) on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability. Steve Abah comments on the characteristics of good research partnerships:

‘Two things are critical to the way that Southern research partners can work: first, how much input they have into defining and designing the project; second, how much of a real relationship can be generated between Northern and Southern partners in the group.’

In the new DRC the proposal has been a ‘conflation of ideas’ from different partners. As result, says Abah, ‘everyone sees the project as their own and the motivation to carry out the work in the field is high’.

Two planning meetings – one in the UK, one in India – were held for all the partners to design the research programme. The participatory, action-research methods used by TFDC created excitement. Researchers from other traditions were able to see the value of approaches that allow responses outside parameters set by the researcher.

‘It was clear from the workshops that most of the challenges faced by researchers cut across countries and traditions. There was a real cross fertilisation of ideas leading to the establishment of different collaborations within the research programme, which will add to the value to the findings.’

Collaboration and Partnership

The White Paper, ‘Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor’, 2000 makes a renewed commitment to focusing more of the UK and global research effort on the needs of poor people.

One way in which ESCOR is taking forward this commitment is by promoting research partnerships between Northern and Southern research institutions. All UK development studies institutions have partnerships with developing countries. The number of partnerships has expanded as research contracts have, increasingly, required institutions to work with a partner in the South. While many of these are useful and valued by those involved, others are token efforts.

The quality of the partnership between research institutions North and South is one criterion by which Development Research Centres will be judged. ESCOR expects relationships with developing country institutions to be true partnerships

Working in partnership with practitioners is now a characteristic of much economic and social research. Here in Sumatra, a research team member and park official plan together.

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that go far beyond sub-contracting or the delegation of data collection to partner institutions.

Policy Impact

All economic and social research funded by DFID has a strong policy focus, though DFID recognises that much of the impact is indirect. Even where there is a direct link, lead times can be long, chains of causality tenuous, and institutional memory is often insufficient to determine retrospectively how research outputs affected changes in policy climates and choices.

Not all policy-relevant research can or should produce a handful of policy recommendations, but it should be able to influence the ways in which policy-makers and

practitioners think about and tackle development problems.

DFID is one of the most important funders of development research. It supports around 40% of development research in the UK as a whole, but the scale of DFID funding varies considerably between institutions. In some it funds as little as 3% while in others its grants support well over half of total research expenditure.

Within the DFID family, ESCOR funding is significant. For some institutions it represents over 40% of DFID expenditure and nearly a fifth of total funding. The impact of ESCOR's support for research goes beyond the projects it funds; it influences the institutions, their priorities and

Examples of the influence of UK research on policy

ODI has invested a lot of work in conditionality, debt relief and aid. Research staff addressed the fiftieth anniversary conferences of the World Bank and the IMF, and held seminars there, and in other international agencies, which contributed to a climate of opinion resulting in a reduced reliance on conditionality. Similarly, ODI consulted with UNCTAD, the Swiss and Swedish governments, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the World Bank on debt issues. These consultations assisted in the creation of the HIPC initiative.

Manchester University's long-term, collaborative research on micro-finance has been widely acknowledged to have strongly influenced models and approaches for

financial services for poor people.

Queen Elizabeth House's work on trade and investment enabled it to influence international policy, through advice to donors and contributions to international reports, but also to work with developing country governments directly. For instance, it was able to assist the government of Zambia to prepare to host meetings of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research and the Paris Club on debt reorganisation.

Work by the Centre for the Study of African Economies has affected the structure of IMF-ESAF lending programmes to poor countries. It has contributed significantly to the policy of re-focusing of ODA onto countries that demonstrate capacity to reform and has increased the support for social sectors in Ethiopian budgets.

'It is essential to have a prolonged track record working in a certain research area or a particular country, which establishes a reputation in the field. Contact with policy makers is crucial and training overseas officials provides an important means of influencing approaches at lower levels within overseas governments'.

School of Development Studies,
University of East Anglia

'Officials of international agencies and foundations credited the sector with significant influence over ideas that shape broader discussion of global development. Much of the poverty-oriented work conducted in the UK, as well as important critiques of the extensive stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s contributed to the genesis of the Human Development Report (which since 1990 has set the international agenda in defining development in terms of human capabilities). Poverty, gender, livelihoods and sustainable development – all topics of international concern – have important roots in UK research.'

Merilee Grindle and Mary Hilderbrand in
'The Development Studies Sector in the UK:
Challenges for the new Millennium'.
Report commissioned by DFID from the
Harvard Institute for
International Development.

A good understanding of the social, economic, political and physical environment is an essential pre-condition for effective policies. This student in Thailand is inputting data gathered in the field.

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ways of working. This in turn affects the influence that they have on policy makers and practitioners.

The examples of policy influence exerted by the development studies community in the UK, drawn from the Harvard Study (see Boxes on pages 7 and 8), show both specific, focused interventions and a process of engagement that affects the climate of expert opinion on broader development policy.

ESCOR is constantly seeking to improve the ways in which the research it commissions can be more useful to policy makers and practitioners in the fight against world poverty. In 2001, it commissioned a retrospective evaluation of the policy impacts of selected ESCOR outputs over the past five years to determine whether, and if so how and why, the research influenced policy.

There are at least three areas in which policy impact can be felt:

- at the general level of development debates;
- on stakeholders – including partner gov-



ernments, other donor agencies, international organisations and civil society; and

- within DFID.

The evaluation will encompass the broad range of impacts implied. This analysis will inform the development of a set of indicators that can be used to monitor the policy impact of social and economic research in future ESCOR-funded work.

Pro-active Dissemination

In the early 1990s, ESCOR increased the quantity and quality of dissemination of research findings and awarded several grants for dissemination related to individual research projects.

In the second half of the decade, a more centralised approach to communicating the results of UK-based development research was adopted. Funding was awarded to IDS and Panos for the development of a dissemination programme, ID21 (Information for Development in the 21st Century). ID21's original brief was to channel UK-funded economic and social research more effectively to a greater number of policy makers and on-the-ground development managers and to media outlets in the South. ID21 now offers a well used service providing summaries of latest research findings and links to further information and publications to which ESCOR-funded research contributed. It also produces the publication *Insights* (www.id21.org/insights.htm), which covers recent social and economic development research.