Issues in research dissemination

F. Odhiambo, WEDC

THE UNITED KINGDOM Department for International Development (DFID), runs a Knowledge and Research (KaR) programme in which it is recognised that knowledge generation and dissemination are key to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals; a principle which is stated in several DFID documents including Target Strategy Papers (DFID, 2000). The DFID KaR programme is based in London and commissions research into development problems which cut across geographical boundaries. The DFID KaR is divided into four programmes: research into rural livelihoods; health and population; social development; and infrastructure and urban development. Each programme commissions its research separately through a number of ways including annual calls for proposals and some individually commissioned researches. Two of these programmes, Health and Population and Rural Livelihoods sub-contract their research management to various organisations. As a result, they both have a number of small sectoral research programmes.

DFID commissioned the Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) of Loughborough University, and Information Training and Development (ITAD) in September 2001, to carry out an evaluation of the dissemination of outputs of its KaR programme. The aim of this paper is to highlight the main issues that arose out of this evaluation and discuss how these impact on research dissemination.

Evaluation methodology

Our brief was to carry out an evaluation of DFID's research dissemination activities across its four research programmes. Throughout the evaluation, we employed an interactive approach in which we kept DFID informed of progress and held meetings to agree the methodology. We also received ongoing comment and feedback from DFID on the research methodology. Part of this constituted guidance on whom to interview.

Data collection methods

We used four data collection methods, namely, literature reviews, content analysis, semi-structured interviews and case studies which were chosen for highlighting cross-cutting themes relevant to research dissemination.

As part of the data collection and consultation process, we held a participatory review workshop at DFID headquarters at 1 Palace Street. Participants included representatives from the advisory staff and the newly appointed Communications and Information Management Resource Centre (CIMRC). The aim of the workshop was to present to interested DFID staff, an overview of the findings and provisional recommendations arising from the evaluation, as well as providing a forum in which possible questions and issues arising from our recommendations could be discussed. Feedback from the workshop was a valuable means of shaping the final recommendations offered to DFID.

Limitations of the evaluation methodology

The main limitation that we found was in assessing the cost-effectiveness of DFID's dissemination. There was little data that could be readily abstracted and applied to our analysis. Most respondents interviewed did not have a separate budget-line for dissemination and consequently, could not give us the type of information we required in order to assess cost-effectiveness.

Emerging Issues – Research Programmes

Responsibility for dissemination

Probably the most important step in ensuring that results of a research programme are disseminated is to agree whose responsibility it is to do the dissemination of the research. Is it the responsibility of the research contractor, the funding body or both? It seems that there is a case to be made for both parties to be involved in the dissemination of research findings. The research contractor is probably better placed to disseminate findings to stakeholders and the beneficiary community. Similarly, programme managers have a role to play in using the findings of research to inform policy and to influence governments at both national and international levels. A significant and interesting observation of our study was that in general, research programmes with a written dissemination strategy [that is, clearly defined responsibility], demonstrated better practice than those without. This is not really surprising as a written strategy helps to provide focus and direction as well as legitimising dissemination as an important research activity.

Incentives for dissemination

Following from the above, it is clear that if responsibility for dissemination is not demanded of researcher contractors, many will view it as an add-on that is done only if there is time and funds at the end of a project. Without an incentive structure therefore, very little proactive dissemination is performed in the majority of cases. What are the incentives for research dissemination? Incentives cannot be

easily defined but they are usually determined by the context within which they are to operate. As such, incentives for dissemination might include feedback on production of research outputs, a separate budget-line for dissemination, a central support desk for dissemination, distinct monitoring and evaluation of dissemination and so on. Anything which operates to legitimise and ease the performance of dissemination may be regarded as an incentive.

We found in DFID that there were examples of good practice where strong incentive structures were in place and contributed to excellent work on dissemination happening. For example, extra funding could be bid for at the end of a project to fund dissemination. Some of these incentive structures will be described later. The challenge for any research programme is to establish these structures where appropriate to ensure that best practice is routinised across the research programme. In this way, research contractors will be encouraged to work against barriers to dissemination which in the absence of any incentives, prevent them from taking dissemination seriously.

Stakeholder involvement

Assigning responsibility for dissemination and providing incentive structures is only one half of the equation. The need for stakeholder ownership is equally important and is now well established in the donor community. Stakeholders are defined here to include policy makers, researchers, target institutions, beneficiary groups and partners. Stakeholder involvement must not be token but must ensure the widest possible participation of those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of the research. The essence of ownership is that recipients drive the planning, design, implementation, monitoring and the evaluation of the research process. In this way, dissemination failures stemming from the wrong choice of format, language, medium and so on can be avoided. It is crucial that research contractors bring stakeholders on board right from the project design stage.

All DFID research programmes recognise and accept that stakeholder involvement is important and there are a number of initiatives by DFID programmes in this area which represent good practice. For example, one sectoral programme involves stakeholders in the design of the project memoranda and at every stage of the research process.

Our policy is to involve stakeholders (policy makers, researchers, target institutions and beneficiary groups) in the design of project memoranda on a cost shared risk basis with the applicant research institution. Dissemination issues are now considered to be core aspects of project memoranda and these in turn have to complement the programme dissemination and promotion strategy.

Another sectoral programme insists on named collaborators in grant application forms who will be responsible for carrying out dissemination in-country. In summary, the need for stakeholder involvement is not in dispute and is established as a core principle. All research programmes

should aim to entrench this principle in practice, learning from the examples of good practice that are already in place.

Barriers to dissemination

At the sectoral programme level, there is a barrier related to skills. The management of sectoral programmes is awarded after a rigorous competitive tendering process, with the result that world-class academics and individuals are appointed. However, like contractors, sectoral programme managers do not necessarily have specialist knowledge in information and communication work. It is unarguable that such knowledge is crucial if dissemination, promotion and uptake of information generated by projects is to succeed. There is a clear need for research programmes to hire specialists in information and communication, ideally with sectoral subject knowledge. One DFID sectoral programme reiterated this and expressed the view that translating research into lay terms is a specialised task and not one that should be left to research contractors or sectoral programme management. In this regard, this sectoral programme has hired a communications expert and communications assistant to bring to the programme team the professional dissemination expertise that has been missing. This is another excellent example of good practice.

Aggregation of dissemination

Another area in which we found good practice is in the aggregation of dissemination. We found that there was some element of aggregation of dissemination in some research programmes. Aggregation is an important element of any dissemination programme because it is cost-effective and also provides a means for consolidating several research efforts. A wide range of aggregating techniques were in use including production of summaries, consolidation of findings within relevant topics and themes in a Newsletter, a website dedicated to aggregation of outputs of transport research for example and so on. There was also six project managers working on broadly similar studies who were approached by DFID to come together for purposes of dissemination. Additional financial resources beyond that approved within individual projects was provided for this purpose. This latter example was an ad hoc arrangement that served to operate as an incentive. Aggregation is an important pro-active dissemination strategy available to research programmes' management.

Programme resources to support project dissemination

We found that programme resources devoted to supporting project dissemination is varied. Examples of the resources different programmes have available include staff to co-ordinate dissemination and promotion, production of CD-ROMs of research outputs, and commissioned dissemination projects. Some of the dissemination projects are about investigating new and innovative ways to disseminate, while others are devoted to the dissemination of outputs. In

terms of resources, significant amounts are put aside for this purpose in some programmes. For example, one sectoral programme currently spends £120K annually in support of dissemination. It is not useful to be prescriptive about resources suffice to say that an appropriate amount of programme resources should be made available to support project dissemination.

Emerging issues – research contractors

Dissemination practice

All four research programmes require research contractors to describe their dissemination strategy in their grant application forms. The amount of time and effort put into the design of dissemination strategies by research contractors is variable. Some do no more than enumerate a number of pathways while others describe in detail how the strategy will be implemented and also provide justification for their choice of outputs and uptake pathway. In terms of preferred dissemination methods, the peer reviewed journal article is the most frequently used, with every project reviewed naming this as an output. This notwithstanding, there was a wide range of outputs and pathways cited reflecting perhaps, the planning and thought that went into developing appropriate dissemination strategies. It is important that research contractors should give thought to 'non-traditional' dissemination pathways so as to reach their target audiences. Perhaps the best way to do this is to start by asking 'who is this research for'? The answer to this question should provide guidance on an appropriate dissemination strategy.

Barriers to dissemination

Several barriers to dissemination can be identified. One such barrier relates to skills and training in information and communication work. There is a persuasive argument that says that whereas research contractors are specialists in their research disciplines, they cannot be expected to be, and are *not*, dissemination specialists. They should not therefore be expected to perform anything but routine dissemination. This argument is lent credence by a contractor's comment to us that she had no knowledge of how to disseminate effectively and relied upon her past experience to guide her in developing a strategy. This lack of knowledge is clearly a factor in inhibiting performance of dissemination for many research contractors.

A second barrier research contractors face is a lack of skills in Information Technology. Most research contractors do not have knowledge of the principles of good website design or of the 'time intensive' nature of website maintenance. An example of a good incentive put in place by some DIFD resarch programmes is in facilitating a web presence for their research contractors through ID21. This is a particularly welcome incentive because it is questionable to what extent individual projects should be involved in producing project websites at all, especially as there is a real danger of these sites having no impact beyond contributing to 'website fatigue'.

A third barrier research contractors face is time. Many spend far more time on dissemination than that budgeted for in grant application forms. In the words of one research contractor, their perception is that time spent on dissemination is provided 'free'. Amongst academic research contractors, pressures of the UK Research Assessment Exercise have meant that they are increasingly less inclined to spend time on activities (dissemination included), that are not recognised by the university reward system. An incentive structure therefore as alluded to earlier would appear to be a good means to provide impetus for dissemination.

Financial Resources

In theory, when bidding for research funding, research contractors are supposed to bid for whatever amount they feel is required to adequately perform and disseminate the proposed research. However, we found that this is rarely the case in practice. We received strong anecdotal evidence that suggested that research contractors are guided in their bidding, by perceptions formed of hearsay and experience, which suggest DFID will not fund project applications beyond a certain ceiling. So for example, one contractor in the health sectoral programme named £300,000 over three years as the ceiling in the health programmes. Thus, dissemination is only budgeted for if it can be accommodated within the notional ceiling after project costs are taken into account. This perception is misplaced as proposals are judged on their merits and not according to how much they cost.

Further, we were presented with more anecdotal evidence in which the perception is that DFID is averse to budget lines for 'air fares'. The suggested rule of thumb is to keep international travel to a minimum even if it means that target audience feedback, dissemination, promotion, uptake and implementation are compromised. The above notwithstanding, one sectoral programme (Systems programme) expects 10% of the project budget to be spent on dissemination, promotion and uptake. Another sectoral programme expects research contractors to specify dissemination activities at or before inception and to include a specific budget for this purpose. The programme encourages additional dissemination and promotional activities for which additional funds are available. One to two per cent of the programme's annual budget is normally used for this. Latterly, projects have been encouraged to propose "follow on" projects or to bid for "promotional" projects of up to £25,000 per annum expected to be led by overseas partners. These projects are expected to be designed to adapt, transfer, apply and scale out technologies developed with support from the programme.

The lesson to be learned from the foregoing is that perception = reality. Once a perception is formed, it often guides behaviour regardless of evidence on the ground unless this is made explicit. It is clear that DFID does not

allocate resource on anything but the merits of the proposed research. However, unless the criteria for judging proposals is explained, proposers will continue to be guided by their perceptions be they valid or misplaced.

Monitoring and evaluation

The above are some of the main issues that arose in the evaluation and that are relevant to research contractors as well as research programmes.

The were however some conceptual and practical difficulties which we encountered round monitoring and evaluation. Dissemination though not particularly easy to monitor, can be achieved with some degree of success by using a range of methods. The easiest perhaps and most obvious is the use of Annual Reports. Where authors are de-briefed, reports can act as a useful monitoring tool. It may not be practical however to de-brief the authors of each report in a large research programme. Advisory committees can similarly be used to good for monitoring on a more on-going basis. The danger here is that attendance at committee meetings can become a 'full-time job'. The need for monitoring needs to be balanced therefore with pressures of time.

Meanwhile, evaluation of dissemination presents a practical as well as conceptual problem. Evaluation of dissemination is difficult to undertake and often impractical. It is impractical because to successfully evaluate a dissemination programme requires the use of survey methodologies which are expensive and time consuming. Further, evaluation in terms of impact is particularly difficult because it is almost impossible to eliminate the effects of 'noise'. That is , how can you reliably judge or conclude that the effectiveness of the dissemination method rather than the appeal of the message has been the cause of changes in behaviour? There is thus a difficulty in inferring direct causal relationships between outputs and impact.

In concluding, the evaluation pointed to a wealth of good practice and raised a number of generic issues which both research managers and research contractors face thereby offering an opportunity for lesson learning through an examination of DFID's experience of research dissemination.

References

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FRANK ODHIAMBO, WEDC.