

Management Response & Recommendations Action Plan

Evaluation Report Title: Evaluation of DFID funded online portals and repositories

Response to Evaluation Report (overarching narrative)

This response relates to an evaluation commissioned by DFID and undertaken by Mott MacDonald and the Open University on three research portals and repositories funded by DFID: Eldis, SciDev.Net and Research 4 Development¹. To date, none of these portals had been subject to external, independent evaluation organised by DFID.

The evaluation produced a range of findings and recommendations, which are listed in the table below. Findings cover user populations and online information behaviour, the quality, accessibility and value for money of the portals under investigation and pathways to impact. Many of the findings confirmed some of the thinking by staff managing these programmes, with the evaluation being a useful tool to validate these assumptions. The evaluation also made some useful recommendations for the portals, many of which are already being implemented. Most of the recommendations to DFID have been accepted or partly accepted.

From the outset, we viewed this evaluation as challenging due to the large, diverse and unidentified global user populations of these services. The evaluation team were professional and responsive, and engaged well with both DFID and programme staff. Their efforts to adhere to tight timescales, and to produce additional work (e.g. 2 page summary), were appreciated. However, some evaluation questions about portal value and impact remain unanswered.

The evaluation findings have been shared at a presentation to DFID staff, including the Knowledge Management Head of Profession and evaluation advisors. Outside DFID it was shared at the Research Communication Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Group, and it will be published on Development Tracker and R4D.

¹ GDNet had been included in the original terms of reference but the programme ceased before the evaluation was commissioned.

Recommendation	Accept or Reject	If “Accepted”, Action plan for Implementation or if “Rejected”, Reason for Rejection
To DFID and other funders of online research portals and repositories:		
Invest in search engine optimisation. It’s the most popular way to start a search for research evidence.	Accepted	Any future DFID funding to research portals or repositories should ensure that search engine optimisation (SEO) is incorporated. For example, this could include staff time to review digital content and technical tools available to enhance SEO. This finding has informed the development of the new Research 4 Development site.
Publicise links to related websites more clearly. We found both our market research respondents and case study participants were initially unaware of, but interested in following up on, the sites we named to them.	Accepted	This is a helpful and practical recommendation, which can be implemented where there are clear links between programmes and repositories/portals. For DFID staff, links to portals are included in guidance on the internal Evidence and Policy Exchange (EPE), and included in induction training for new Advisers. For external audiences, the links may be less explicit, but this is something we can continue to encourage, with the proviso that any work to promote the repositories/portals needs to be outcome driven and represent good value for money.
Make internal site searching easier. An effective, transparent, site search engine is part of its usability. The curator role of a research portal will not be maximised	Accepted	The finding on limited use of internal site search engines is interesting. This is a practical recommendation, which has been shared with the programmes under investigation, and is of particular relevance to design of new sites. However, as internet search engines are the most

without an effective way of investigating the site.		popular way to start a search, the recommendation on search engine optimisation would be a priority.
Make the overall design more user-centred. Menus and sub-categories should be revisited; websites should be built for high and low bandwidth.	Accepted	<p>This is an important recommendation of the evaluation, in particular the need to be conscious of developing digital products based on evidence and on user needs.</p> <p>Some of the programmes under investigation are already implementing the second part of this recommendation. For example, bandwidth optimisation has been a key area of SciDev.Net's recent work. They conducted a site evaluation that identified and fixed three principal areas contributing to page weights — human, design and technology factors. They also completed user testing in the regions to assess how the website performs on slower bandwidths and will continue to monitor this.</p>
Make the sites mobile friendly.	Accepted	This recommendation will be easier to incorporate into future programme contracts as the need to remain up to speed with technological developments will require investment. The new Research 4 Development has been optimised for use on mobile devices.
Portals should consider whether and how they want to attract new users: whether they want to increase user numbers or focus on existing users; and whether they want to	Rejected	This recommendation is confusing, as it appears to offer two mutually exclusive approaches. In reality it is likely that DFID funded portals will want to spread effort across attracting new users <u>and</u> maintaining and nurturing their existing user base.

focus on expanding their user base by attracting new users to return to the site, and hence turn them into regular users, or to expand the number of users who reach the portal content via Google, social media or newsletters, or whether they want to nurture existing users.		
Utilise social media as a tool to attract users to portal content.	Accepted	This recommendation is sensible and is already recommended in our research uptake guidance . The guidance encourages programmes to make use of existing social media platforms and communities rather than create bespoke groups, which require facilitation and management, as well as regular engaging content.
(Continue to) package/repurpose research evidence into digestible products that can be quickly scanned by users.	Accepted	This will be considered as part of the design for any new funding for knowledge portals.
(Continue to) invest in making available locally relevant content e.g. in local languages.	Accepted	This will be considered as part of the design of any new funding for knowledge portals.
Make the DFID association more apparent—amongst the development policy community we reviewed, DFID is regarded as a trusted	Rejected	This finding has been shared with colleagues in DFID's Communications Division. The public branding for DFID funded research is UKaid to ensure we maintain a coherent external brand.

source and therefore a prompt to follow the material found with a DFID link.		
For DFID's online research dissemination strategy more generally:		
Consider supporting partner Government websites to improve their accessibility to policy actors seeking reliable national and local statistics.	Accepted	<p>DFID is committed to open data. The potential of private data to address development challenges can only be unlocked when the data can be made available to others.</p> <p>DFID's Data for Development (D4D) team has a recently-approved programme with the UN Statistics Division to support 20 countries, the majority of which will be DFID priority countries. The programme will be part of the UK's response to the calls for a Data Revolution for sustainable development. The aim is to make Sustainable Development Goal data open and available to the widest possible audience. The funding will go towards building capacity of countries in dissemination of data; modernising National Statistical Systems with up-to-date technology and skills; engaging with key users of data; and creating an on-line, international data and visualisation platform for Sustainable Development Goal indicators.</p>
Utilise the 'democratic pathway' from online use to research uptake by supporting Southern NGOs to disseminate online small pieces of locally relevant research to feed into local political debates.	Partly accepted	<p>Provided the research was rigorous this is a helpful recommendation. Good stakeholder mapping for research uptake should identify this as a potential option, though it may not be relevant in all contexts and for all research themes. Evidence into Action team will address this recommendation in the next revision of the Research Uptake Guidance for DFID-funded research programmes.</p>

<p>Train all new in-country DFID programme managers in internet searching and the range of DFID-supported research websites. Programme leaders have both privileged access to senior policy makers and a remit to promote change, most effectively done by showing them 'what works'; they are busy people who need rapid access to lessons and 'how to guides'. They can also act as promoters of DFID supported websites.</p>	<p>Accepted</p>	<p>Advisor induction includes modules on finding and using evidence. Research websites, including DFID-funded online portals and DFID-funded research programme websites have been and will continue to be signposted to country offices.</p>
<p>Future surveys should be conducted across DFID funded portals periodically and at the same time. Surveys should ask a set of standard questions as well as optional extras tailored to the learning needs of the particular services. A comparative analysis could then be done on the results and learning shared across portal management teams.</p>	<p>Partly accepted</p>	<p>The evaluation team struggled to identify a good set of comparator online portals for the DFID-funded portals under investigation. A comprehensive set of standard questions therefore may be difficult to identify. This is because portals have different aims, audiences, formats and types of content. The challenges remain high regarding getting good response rates to online or email surveys.</p>

