How DFID Learns

ICAI

Independent Commission for Aid Impact

Contents

The Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) is the independent body responsible for scrutinising UK aid. We focus on maximising the effectiveness of the UK aid budget for intended beneficiaries and on delivering value for money for UK taxpayers. We carry out independent reviews of aid programmes and of issues affecting the delivery of UK aid. We publish transparent, impartial and objective reports to provide evidence and clear recommendations to support UK Government decision-making and to strengthen the accountability of the aid programme. Our reports are written to be accessible to a general readership and we use a simple 'traffic light' system to report our judgement on each programme or topic we review.

G	**Green:** The programme performs well overall against ICAI's criteria for effectiveness and value for money. Some improvements are needed.
G A	**Green-Amber:** The programme performs relatively well overall against ICAI's criteria for effectiveness and value for money. Improvements should be made.
A R	**Amber-Red:** The programme performs relatively poorly overall against ICAI's criteria for effectiveness and value for money. Significant improvements should be made.
R	**Red:** The programme performs poorly overall against ICAI's criteria for effectiveness and value for money. Immediate and major changes need to be made.

Executive Summary

Excellent learning is essential for UK aid to achieve maximum impact and value for money. We take learning to mean the extent to which DFID uses information and experience to influence its decisions. Each ICAI review assesses how well learning takes place. Our reports to date indicate a mixed performance. This review seeks to identify the way DFID learns and what inhibits it from doing so consistently. We drew on our reviews, assessed data from DFID's own surveys and carried out interviews inside and outside the department.

Overall   *Assessment: Amber-Red*

DFID has allocated at least £1.2 billion for research, evaluation and personnel development (2011-15). It generates considerable volumes of information, much of which, such as funded research, is publicly available. DFID itself is less good at using it and building on experience so as to turn learning into action. DFID does not clearly identify how its investment in learning links to its performance and delivering better impact. DFID has the potential to be excellent at organisational learning if its best practices become common. DFID staff learn well as individuals. They are highly motivated and DFID provides opportunities and resources for them to learn. DFID is not yet, however, managing all the elements that contribute to how it learns as a single, integrated system. DFID does not review the costs, benefits and impact of learning. Insufficient priority is placed on learning during implementation. The emphasis on results can lead to a bias to the positive. Learning from both success and failure should be systematically encouraged.

Objectives   *Assessment: Green-Amber*

DFID's high-level objectives for learning are sound. It has a learning strategy that seeks to guide individual and organisational learning. DFID, however, needs to clarify further how it learns as an entire organisation. Since late 2012, learning has become more of a focus for management attention. In particular, DFID is engaging more with how to learn from failure. Leaders and managers are not, however, holding themselves and staff accountable for ensuring that learning fully informs decision-making or increases DFID's impact.

Delivery   *Assessment: Green-Amber*

DFID has invested considerable resources in strengthening evaluation and research (over £1.2 billion), although it has not identified the precise total. This investment has increased the volume and quality of the knowledge available to its staff. Staff struggle to apply it, however. DFID is making efforts to improve accessibility to knowledge but needs to make more of an effort to ensure its content is useful. There are many opportunities for staff to learn from each other but more can be done to guarantee that this takes place. Whether staff have the opportunity to learn from experience is too dependent on individual heads of office.

Impact   *Assessment: Amber-Red*

DFID does not routinely assess the impact of learning on decision-making. Improving skills, sharing knowledge and know-how within networks and direct experience on the job improve performance. There are many examples of available knowledge not being used, to the detriment of DFID's impact and value for money. DFID's teams and staff should be more consistent in their approach to learning. Staff report that they sometimes are asked to use evidence selectively in order to justify decisions.

Learning   *Assessment: Amber-Red*

DFID is not sufficiently integrating opportunities for continuous learning within day-to-day tasks. In particular, staff do not have enough time to build learning into their core tasks. DFID is not fully ensuring that the lessons from each stage of the delivery chain are captured, particularly in relation to locally employed staff, delivery agents and, most crucially, the beneficiaries. Heads of office do not consistently define a positive culture of learning.

Recommendation 1: DFID needs to focus on consistent and continuous organisational learning based on the experience of DFID, its partners and contractors and the measurement of its impact, in particular during the implementation phase of its activities.

Recommendation 2: All DFID managers should be held accountable for conducting continuous reviews from which lessons are drawn about what works and where impact is actually being achieved for intended beneficiaries.

Recommendation 3: All information commissioned and collected (such as annual reviews and evaluations) should be synthesised so that the relevant lessons are accessible and readily useable across the organisation. The focus must be on practical and easy-to-use information. Know-how should be valued as much as knowledge.

Recommendation 4: Staff need to be given more time to acquire experience in the field and share lessons about what works and does not work on the ground.

Recommendation 5: DFID needs to continue to encourage a culture of free and full communication about what does and does not work. Staff should be encouraged always to base their decisions on evidence, without any bias to the positive.

1 Introduction

Introduction

1.1 ICAI believes that DFID should excel at learning if the full impact and effectiveness of the UK's aid budget is to be achieved. When learning is poor, this can have serious effects on the value for money and impact of aid. This is why our reports always rate learning.[1]

ICAI reports indicate that DFID does not learn consistently well

1.2 The 31 ICAI reports[2] considered by the team examined 140 DFID programmes across 40 countries/territories, including visits undertaken to 24 DFID country offices. The ratings show that DFID does not learn consistently well (see Annex A1). Our 2011-12 Annual Report notes that 'with DFID's technical expertise and standing, we would expect to see better sharing and lesson learning about what is both good and poor practice'.[3]

The purpose of this review

1.3 We wish to understand what causes DFID's learning to be inconsistent. The International Development Committee (IDC) has also requested that ICAI review how DFID learns. It would like a better understanding of why there have been both good and poor examples of learning in DFID. This report seeks to do this and to make recommendations for possible improvements.

What learning is and what it requires

1.4 We define learning as the extent to which DFID gains and uses knowledge[4] to influence its policy, strategy, plans and actions. This includes knowledge from both its own work and that of others. Our report makes a distinction between the knowledge[5,6] DFID collects and how it is actively applied, which we term as 'know-how'.[7]

We focus on organisational learning

1.5 This report refers to both individual and organisational learning (see Figure 1). We primarily focus on how DFID learns as an organisation. We do this because DFID is subject to multiple factors (some of which are set out in paragraph 1.10 below) that mean without continuous learning DFID's impact and influence will be weakened.

Figure 1: Individual and organisational learning

Individual learning describes how staff members themselves gain knowledge and know-how over time.

Organisational learning describes how the organisation uses knowledge to change what it does over time. It is more than the sum of individual staff members' knowledge and know-how.

1.6 Our report looks at how DFID learns as a system. In 1990, Peter Senge[8] identified that organisational learning is 'only successful when it is based on an understanding of how the whole organisational system is connected, rather than a focus on individual parts.'[9] Figure 2 on page 3 sets out some of DFID's key functions in the cycle of devising and delivering aid programmes.

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[1] ICAI's standard assessment framework provides ratings for four overall areas: objectives, delivery, impact and learning.

[2] Of the overall 33 reports ICAI has published to date, we excluded ICAI's first report (*ICAI's Approach to Effectiveness and Value for Money*) and ICAI's 32nd report (*Rapid Review of DFID's Humanitarian Response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines*), since these did not have a particular scoring for Learning.

[3] *Annual Report to the House of Commons International Development Committee 2011-2012*, ICAI, 2012, paragraph 54, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/ICAI-Annual-Report-2011-12-FINAL.pdf.

[4] Haridimos Tsoukas and Efi Vladimirou, *What is Organisational Knowledge,* Journal of Management Studies, 2001, Vol. 28, Issue 7, pages 973-993.

[5] A good example of this is outlined by Michio Tanaka (Toyota) who said, 'The ideas behind the Toyota Production System have basically diffused and are understood by our competitors. But the know-how regarding how to implement it in specific factories and contexts has not.' See: Jeffrey H. Dyer And Kentaro Nobeoka, *Creating And Managing A High-Performance Knowledge-Sharing Network: The Toyota Case,* Strategic Management Journal, 2000, http://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/1441/147b.pdf.

[6] Steve Denning, *What is Knowledge Management?,* paper presented to the World Bank Management Board, 1998, cited in Sarah Matthews and Nigel Thornton, *Doing the Knowledge: How DFID Compares with Best Practice in Knowledge Management,* DFID, 2000.

[7] See, for instance, ICAI report on *DFID's work through UNICEF*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/ICAI-report-DFIDs-work-with-UNICEF.pdf.

[8] Peter Senge is a leading writer and teacher on organisational learning. He is on the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

[9] Quoted by Ingie Holvand in *Knowledge Management and Organisational Learning: An International Development Perspective,* Overseas Development Institute, 2003, http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/170.pdf.

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Figure 2: Key activities required to deliver UK aid
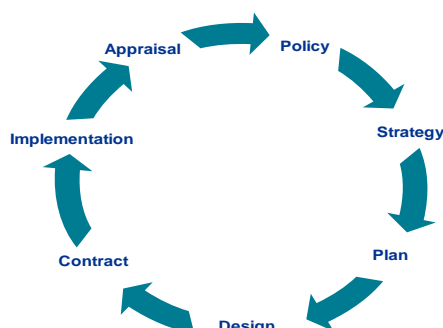
Source: ICAI.

1.9 We believe that DFID needs to learn within and between each of these activities. Knowledge needs to flow around DFID as a whole as well as within its different functions. Our findings and scoring reflect the priority we have placed on DFID learning as a system.

Why learning is a priority

1.10 Our reports recognise that DFID faces complex challenges, all of which combine to make learning a priority. We consider some of the key factors to be:

- that DFID is increasingly working in unstable parts of the world;
- the need for greater efficiency and effectiveness;
- the need to demonstrate clear results and achievement of targets;
- DFID's geographic spread across the world;
- the need to integrate policy, planning and delivery;
- the need to leverage local knowledge;
- that DFID is one of many organisations seeking to achieve similar objectives;
- the use of other partners to deliver aid;
- that staff regularly rotate between posts;
- the effect of staff joining and leaving the department;
- the way in which knowledge and know-how are held within particular groups;
- the pressure of increased scrutiny and the need to demonstrate results;

- the rapid pace of change in aid delivery approaches; and
- changes to available technology.

Key issues that make learning a priority

1.11 Many of DFID's staff are located in countries that experience conflict or political and/or social instability (see Annex A2). DFID now prioritises its bilateral aid towards these countries. Circumstances in these contexts change rapidly and DFID needs to be able to respond to such changes and adapt accordingly.

1.12 The budget DFID manages is increasing. The solid line in Figure 3 shows that DFID's expenditure between financial years 2006-07 and 2012-13 increased by 41.3% (£2.2 billion) to £7.7 billion. Over the same period, DFID's overall staff complement rose by 8.7%, by 222 full time equivalents (FTE) to 2,767 FTE, represented by the dashed line.[10,11]

Figure 3: DFID's budget and staffing (actual)
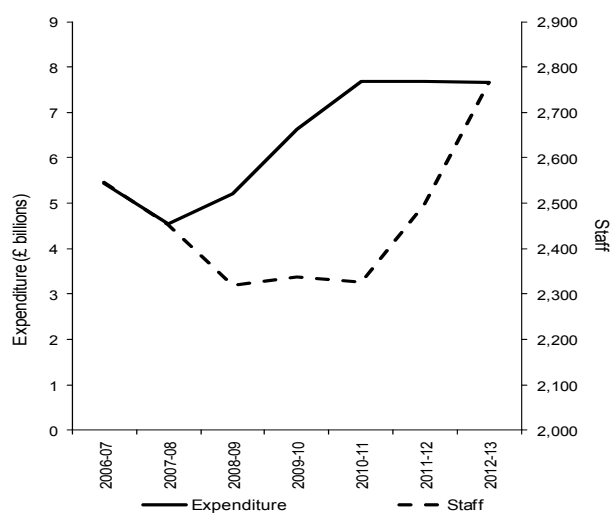
Source: National Audit Office (NAO) briefings to the IDC and DFID Annual Reports.[12]

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[10] If 2008-09 is considered a baseline, expenditure rose by 43% (£1.9 billion) by 2012-13. Staffing increased by 20% (447) over the same period.
[11] *Performance of the Department for International Development 2008-09, Briefings for the House of Commons International Development Committee,* National Audit Office, *November 2009,* http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/DFID-Performance_briefing.pdf and *Annual Report and Accounts 2012-13,* DFID, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/208445/annual-report-accounts2013-13.pdf.
[12] *DFID Annual Report and Resource Accounts 2010-11 and Business Plan 2011-15,* IDC, 2012,

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1.13 DFID plans to increase expenditure by 15.6% from 2012-13 to £8.9 billion for the year 2013-14.[13] As at September 2013, DFID's total staffing was 3,041 FTE (an increase of 9.9% in one year). As a result, each DFID staff member will need to improve efficiency and effectiveness so that the increased expenditure can be managed to the best effect. Newly joining staff will need to effectively collaborate with those previously in post.

1.14 DFID needs to share its knowledge amongst the many places where it delivers aid. A total of 1,543 FTE of DFID staff are based in 53 countries outside of the UK (see Annex A2).

1.15 DFID needs to share knowledge between its central functions and its overseas staff. Most DFID policy and planning staff are based in the UK (897 FTE in London and 600 FTE in East Kilbride). Central functions need to learn from the practical experience from where aid is delivered. The opposite is also true; knowledge collated by DFID in the UK (for instance, in central policy teams) needs to influence what and how aid is delivered.

1.16 What works in one location may not work in another. DFID and other agencies regularly note the need to tailor approaches to context.[14] Local knowledge needs to be maintained and updated over time, becoming know-how.

1.17 DFID is a funder of aid. It commissions, contracts and partners with others that deliver aid on the UK Government's behalf. DFID needs to learn from each part of its delivery chain. Regular feedback is

required from staff and partners in order to enable this to take place.

DFID is always losing and gaining knowledge

1.18 Staff are continuously leaving and joining DFID (sometimes referred to as 'churn'). Fragile states are particularly vulnerable to high staff turnover by UK-based staff. For instance, in Afghanistan, DFID informed us that staff turnover is at a rate of 50% per year. We are aware of one project in the Democratic Republic of Congo having had five managers in five years. DFID inform us that a staff appointment typically lasts slightly under three years. Figure 4 shows the rate of churn since 2010-11.

Figure 4: Rates of overall staff turnover (in %)

Year	Home Civil Service (HCS)[15]	Staff Appointed In Country (SAIC)[16]
2010-11	10.2	14.8
2011-12	10.3	10.7
2012-13	8.0	9.5

Source: DFID.

1.19 This process represents both a constant gain and loss of knowledge to DFID. When staff depart DFID, their knowledge should be retained in the organisation. Similarly, when staff join DFID, their prior knowledge should be made available to others.

Knowledge and know-how are held by particular groups

1.20 DFID uses a system of 13 expert cadres plus one it terms 'generalist' to manage its expert professionals.[17] Annex A3 shows the numbers of full-time equivalent posts for each of these cadres at September 2013.[18] Between January 2012 and September 2013, the number of such posts increased by 14%, from 703 to 800 (comprising 26% of all staff). A total of 450

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http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmintdev/1569/156902.htm; *House of Commons, International Development Committee – Department For International Development's Annual Report and Accounts 2011-12,* IDC,2013, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmintdev/751/751.pdf; and *Department for International Development Annual Report and Accounts 2012–13*, DFID, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/208445/annual-report-accounts2013-13.pdf.

[13] ICAI is planning to undertake a review of DFID's approach to the scaling up of its aid programme in 2014.

[14] The first recommendation of an evaluation recently undertaken for DFID and other donors notes: 'Political economy analysis should be undertaken for any Public Sector Governance Reform programme (PSGR). Its purpose should be to contextualise the proposed PSGR, identify the risks and assess the chances of success. *Summary Report of the Public Sector Governance Reform Evaluation,* SIDA, Irish Aid and DFID, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/199777/Public-sector-gov-reform-eval-summary.pdf.

[15] 'Home Civil Service' (HCS) includes staff employed from the UK, who are based both in the UK and abroad.

[16] 'Staff Appointed In Country' (SAIC) are contracted directly in the countries where DFID works. Their terms and conditions differ from those of HCS.

[17] DFID employs individuals with specific technical expertise, organising them into cadres. These experts act as professional advisers, designing and overseeing (from a technical point of view) the implementation of policy and projects. They have traditionally been separate from project managers.

[18] DFID is in the process of putting into place a cadre for its programme management staff in addition to the groups included in Annex A3.

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(56%) of these specialist posts are in offices overseas (see Annex A3).

1.21 A total of 971 of DFID's 3,041 FTE personnel are Staff Appointed In Country (SAIC). These staff have particular local knowledge and know-how that UK staff, who are posted overseas, are unlikely to have.

Increased scrutiny means effective learning is even more important

1.22 There is an increasing level of scrutiny of the UK aid programme (not least from ICAI). DFID has committed to the principles of the Aid Transparency Initiative.[19,20] DFID recognises that it has to demonstrate value for money and the impact of UK aid. To do this, DFID needs to demonstrate clear impact, not least through case studies that illustrate the value it delivers.

Wider reforms across the UK Civil Service are changing DFID's approach to learning

1.23 DFID is required to contribute to the delivery of the 2012 Civil Service Reform Plan.[21] The department has set out how it will do this in its June 2013 'DFID Improvement Plan' (summarised in Figure 5).[22]

Figure 5: DFID Improvement Plan priorities

- deliver results through sustained leadership and improved programme management;

- understand and adapt to the future development environment;

- build a sustainable staffing model that can flex and adapt to the changing development environment;

- lead management of change by understanding what we have learnt and building on what we have achieved; and

- drive continuous cost reduction by leading year-on-year efficiencies.

Source: DFID Improvement Plan, June 2013.

1.24 DFID is one of five government departments piloting such a plan.[23] Each plan aims to build staff and organisational capabilities. DFID is putting in place new competency frameworks for staff as a result of the wider Civil Service reform process.[24]

How DFID learns is subject to a live internal debate

1.25 In the period since we chose to undertake this review of learning, discussion on the topic has increased within DFID.[25] In February 2013, an internal blog by the Director General for Country Programmes asked staff how they shared knowledge. She wished (among other things) to identify what the incentives were for staff to learn from success and failure. The resulting online discussion was frank and wide-ranging. It resulted in further broad discussions on the topic.

1.26 DFID recognises that it needs to improve how it learns. DFID's Executive Management Committee was presented with a paper drafted by two DFID staff in February 2013, entitled 'Lessons, Learning, Trial and Error'.[26] This identified areas where the authors perceived DFID to be on the right trajectory for learning (for example, its work on evaluation discussed in paragraphs 2.30-2.37) and where it had more to do (for example learning from failure, discussed in paragraphs 2.15-2.17). DFID has also sought to identify how well it uses evidence for decision-making (the 2013 DFID Evidence Survey described in Annex A4). A 2013 review of DFID's project management states that DFID needs to prioritise learning and adaption during project implementation.[27]

Our methodology

1.27 This is a thematic review. The findings set out in this report result from collating evidence from a range of sources and identifying emerging

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[19] The 2013 Aid Transparency Index ranks DFID 3rd out of 67 major donors, worldwide. See http://www.publishwhatyoufund.org/index/.
[20] See DFID's Development Tracker, http://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk.
[21] *The Civil Service Reform Plan*, 2012, HM Government, http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Civil-Service-Reform-Plan-acc-final.pdf.
[22] *DFID Improvement Plan*, DFID, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249733/DFID-improvement-plan-3.pdf.

[23] The others published to date are for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Department for Communities and Local Government and HM Revenue and Customs, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/departmental-improvement-plans.
[24] DFID defines its Core Competency Framework as 'an outline which is consistent across the organisation and helps identify the types of behaviour the organisation wishes to promote, develop and is keen to engender'. *DFID Core Competency Framework*, DFID, 2010, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfid-core-competency-framework.
[25] We announced the intention to undertake this study in our Year 3 work plan, published in January 2013.
[26] The Executive Management Committee comprises DFID's Permanent Secretary, the Directors General and the Non-Executive Directors.
[27] The 'End-to-End Review' of the Programme Management Cycle.

1 Introduction

patterns. We used a mix of methods, structuring our enquiry into a modified version of ICAI's standard assessment framework.

1.28 We reviewed the general literature on learning, including literature describing best practice. We also reviewed documentation and guidance from DFID and the UK Civil Service, as well as from third-party assessments of DFID's performance. We reviewed all ICAI reports to date and discussed the issues with all but two of the team leaders who had led our reviews.[28] We then chose 12 previous ICAI reviews as case studies (see Annex A1). We also spoke to six UK non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

1.29 We analysed data from seven internal DFID staff surveys undertaken between 2010 and 2013 (see Annex A4). Had this material been insufficient to answer our questions, we would have undertaken our own survey. Data from these surveys proved appropriate; our questions were sufficiently congruent with those from the surveys.[29]

1.30 This material proved very rich. It provided statistically significant information for particular groups across DFID. The most recent survey, which examined how DFID used evidence and how DFID learns, was particularly informative, including 1,702 individual comments.[30] DFID has also undertaken its own analysis of this data which has been presented to staff and senior management and published externally.

1.31 We also used semi-structured interviews with both individuals and in focus group discussions to drill down into particular themes and issues. We sought views from a cross-section of staff across all parts of the organisation. We spoke to 92 individuals, of whom 87 were DFID staff from:

- 11 DFID fragile state country offices;

- 5 non-fragile small country offices;

- 16 HQ departments; and

- 13 advisory cadres.

1.32 To compensate for a slight bias in the survey material to senior and specialist staff, we ensured that our focus groups included a significant number of administrative and locally employed staff in DFID.

The structure of this report

1.33 This thematic report follows ICAI's standard approach, structuring our findings under the headings of objectives, delivery, impact and learning. We rate each according to ICAI's scoring system (see contents page). The objectives section considers whether DFID has clear objectives for what and how it learns. Under delivery, we have chosen to discuss where DFID has invested in knowledge generation, the ways in which staff prefer to learn and the role of formal training. In the impact section, we examine the overall impact that learning has on DFID's decision-making. We use the learning section to discuss how DFID integrates learning into the lifecycle of projects and programmes.

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[28] These persons were unable to be contacted having moved on to other jobs.
[29] We wished to use evidence from currently available data in order to reduce the burden on DFID and other respondents.
[30] There were 272 separate comments relating to the Learning and Development Survey.

2 Findings

Objectives   *Assessment: Green-Amber* 🟢🟠

2.1 This section considers whether DFID has clear objectives for what and how it learns. We review the department's strategy and go on to examine incentives for learning and the role of line managers.

Strategic approach

DFID's learning strategy sets the right direction

2.2 DFID produced a corporate learning strategy in 2011. This sought to prioritise learning within DFID and, as Figure 6 shows, it was sponsored by the Permanent Secretary.

Figure 6: Senior management's commitment

'We have committed ourselves to developing a culture of innovation and continuous improvement, being more open and honest about our successes and failures and learning from the successes and failures of others. As a learning organisation, we aim to encourage constructive challenge to our established practices.'

Mark Lowcock, CB, Permanent Secretary and Neil Robertson, Head of Human Resources Department.

Source: DFID Learning Strategy 2011-15, 2011.

2.3 The strategy has several elements, including:

- building capabilities in operations, professions, leadership, overseas postings and learning;

- improving staff opportunities for learning (for instance, by providing distance learning);

- improving the linkages between DFID's research, evaluation and operational functions;

- providing more online knowledge;

- ensuring all staff are valued (promoting diversity and equality); and

- clarifying roles and expectations for learning.

2.4 We believe that these high-level objectives are sound. Our view is, however, that while aims for individual learning set out in the strategy are clear, those for organisational learning are not sufficiently defined. Similarly, the link between DFID's learning and the impact and effectiveness of UK aid is not sufficiently set out. We believe that the purpose of DFID's learning should clearly be to improve the impact and value for money of UK aid.

The organisational learning strategy is not yet fully clear

2.5 DFID's strategy states, in several places, that it wishes to address how the department learns as a system. The strategy also refers to an overall architecture for learning. It does not, however, set out how DFID's parts should work together to enable it to be a learning organisation. There is a lack of clarity about how DFID's research, evaluation and operational departments individually and collectively contribute to DFID's learning.

2.6 The Human Resources Department was responsible for drafting DFID's learning strategy. We note that many staff we interviewed had not read or were not aware of the strategy prior to our review. Our respondents often equated learning with personal development, whereas – as our definition states – learning is both a personal and an organisational process. We would expect the relationship between personal and organisational learning to be more clearly set out and to be both fully integrated and appreciated by staff.

The strategy should be driven at a more senior level

2.7 We would also expect senior management to drive DFID's strategic approach to learning. Oversight currently lies with a 'Learning Council'.[31] This meets once a quarter and is co-ordinated by the Human Resources Department. Minutes and responses in interviews show that the Learning Council has focussed on individual learning and development. They also indicate a lack of clarity about how this Learning Council fits into DFID's decision-making structure.[32] It is notable that the Executive Management Committee (comprising DFID's Permanent Secretary, Directors General and the Non-Executive Directors) considered how DFID learns in February 2013 (see paragraph 1.26). Senior managers are, therefore, taking an interest in DFID's strategic approach to learning.

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[31] The Learning Council is chaired by the Director, Human Resources. Its members include two directors of regional divisions, the Director, Policy Division and Chief Scientific Officer, the head of Learning and Development and others responsible for IT.

[32] 'Members then looked at the unique contribution the Learning Council could make. It is difficult to see where the Council fits in DFID's governance structure at present.' Minutes of the Learning Council, 29 November 2013.

2 Findings

We would expect that, if the aims of the learning strategy are to be fully achieved, DFID's top managers should directly make sure it is implemented. They have the responsibility to ensure that all DFID's parts operate as a single learning system.

Learning and Individual Performance Management

DFID actively seeks to improve individual performance

2.8 DFID has put sufficient objectives in place to support the personal learning and development of its staff. There is also a commitment to ensuring that each country office and department has learning and development plans. Individual performance frameworks and actions, such as a 'talent management' initiative, seek to improve how individuals learn.[33] DFID has also introduced new common Civil Service training courses as part of the wider reform programme.[34]

2.9 The Cabinet Office undertakes an annual 'People Survey' of civil servants.[35] In the 2013 survey, 88% of DFID staff agreed with the statement that 'learning and development activities I have completed in the past 12 months have helped to improve my performance'. DFID is the highest performing civil service main department for 'learning and development'.[36]

How organisational learning is linked to performance is not made explicit or assessed

2.10 We found only one example within DFID, in its Civil Society Department, of it making an effort to set out the relationship between learning and DFID's results and performance. We are concerned that this linkage is not articulated more explicitly throughout the organisation. We heard from our respondents that organisational learning is not always seen as a priority objective in departments, given the pressure to deliver results and spend the aid budget. We believe learning should have the clear purpose of enabling the aid budget to have the highest impact and value for money for the most people.

Incentives

DFID has strengthened incentives for individual learning

2.11 The DFID improvement plan (see paragraph 1.23) sets the objective of strengthening learning and development for staff. It states that staff should have at least five days of learning and development each year and that all staff should have access to Civil Service Learning, with improved access to learning and development opportunities for staff overseas, working with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Civil Service.[37]

DFID staff are highly committed to their work

2.12 The commitment that DFID staff show to the department's objectives provides a key incentive for staff to learn. The annual Civil Service People Survey indicates that DFID staff are among the most committed of all civil servants to their department and its objectives. In the 2013 Civil Service People Survey, 84% of DFID staff agreed with the statement that 'when I talk about my organisation, I say 'we' rather than 'they''. This was the highest score of any main UK Government department.

Lack of time is reportedly a key constraint

2.13 In practice, staff report that workload pressures stop them from making time to learn. Staff find it hard to prioritise time to identify, share and use lessons.[38] This is a common theme of all the staff surveys and of our interviews. It is notable that DFID has, for some time, recognised the need to create time for knowledge exchange among its specialist cadre staff. Since 2011, members of the specialist cadres provide 10% of their time to supporting sections of DFID other than their own. This is termed 'cadre time' and was (according to

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[33] 'The Department has also introduced talent management to the A1 grade (Grade 6, the highest grade below the senior civil service) in 2012-13 and will now work on extending this to other grades in 2013-14. Talent management includes regular line management and reported discussions, use of the talent matrix and developing robust performance improvement plans.' *DFID Departmental Improvement Plan*, DFID, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfid-departmental-improvement-plan--2.

[34] These common courses are collected into a package of 'Civil Service Learning'.

[35] A total of 448,835 civil servants were surveyed, of whom 270,793 responded.

[36] Question B23, DFID People Survey, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/civil-service-people-surveys.

[37] *DFID Departmental Improvement Plan*, DFID, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249733/DFID-improvement-plan-3.pdf.

[38] For instance, 75 of 134 comments in DFID's Learning and Development Survey, 2013, say that workload/lack of time are the main obstacles to undertaking more effective learning.

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several of our sources) introduced against opposition from some line managers. The practice is now widespread and accepted and appears to be effective in supporting the flow of knowledge around DFID. Our view is that making this time mandatory was a good decision which could be extended to other staff and increased.

A positive bias and fear of failure are a disincentive to learn

2.14 A commonly reported disincentive towards learning is that DFID staff often feel under pressure to be positive. This applies to assessing both current and future project performance. DFID needs to learn from success.[39] Biasing reporting, analyses and lesson-learning towards success is, however, counterproductive. We noted this incentive at work in our reviews of DFID's approach to Budget Support[40] and TradeMark Southern Africa.[41] Achievements were misrepresented as a result. DFID's commitment to demonstrate constantly improving results is sometimes cited in our evidence as driving this behaviour.[42]

2.15 This positive bias links to a culture where staff have often felt afraid to discuss failure. One head of department told us that 'DFID does not fail'. The Evidence Survey, internal staff discussions and evidence from the internal 2013 Review of DFID's Programme Cycle (referred to as the 'End-to-End Review') all indicate that a fear of identifying and discussing failure has been a disincentive to effective learning. For DFID to improve performance, staff need to discuss fully what, why and how failure takes place. We note that in all ICAI's reports we identify areas for improvement;

nothing DFID does will ever be perfect. Continuous learning will always be required.

2.16 We understand that DFID will fail from time to time. Many of DFID's activities are inherently risky. Innovation inevitably will lead to some failures as well as to successes. We think that DFID should be both taking risks and innovating. We, therefore, expect DFID to experience occasional failures. We believe that learning from failure is as valuable as learning from success. Staff report that a factor that has made fear of failure greater has been increased public scrutiny (not least from the IDC and ICAI). As a public department that plans to spend over £8 billion in 2013-14, DFID has to be accountable for its impact, activities and value for money. This provides an incentive to address failure quickly, honestly and effectively.

2.17 During 2013, DFID began to discuss failure in a more open and constructive way than it had previously done. This began substantially with the February blog of the Director General for Country Programmes (see paragraph 1.25). Following this, a short video was produced by DFID staff in the Democratic Republic of Congo that discussed failures in a water supply improvement project. This internal video has been catalytic in stimulating discussion about how DFID should be more honest about failure. It has resulted in the introduction of ideas, such as the need to fail fast.[43] During 2013, DFID's Research and Evidence Division has piloted approaches to discussing failure in 'fail faires', where staff come together to identify what can be improved.[44,45] It is too early to say whether these will support a change of culture in DFID in its attitude to learning from failure, albeit they appear to be a positive innovation.

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[39] We have seen evidence where DFID also does not recognise the success it is having, for instance, in its work with police in Nepal: *DFID's Peace and Security Programme in Nepal*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/ICAI-report-DFIDs-Peace-and-Security-programme-in-Nepal2.pdf.

[40] Specifically, a decision to continue to provide budget support to Tanzania in the face of justified concerns. *The Management of UK Budget Support Operations*, ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ICAI-Budget-Support-Final-Report-32.pdf.

[41] *DFID's Trade Development Work in Southern Africa,* ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/reports/dfids-trade-development-work-southern-africa/.

[42] *DFID Departmental Improvement Plan*, DFID, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249733/DFID-improvement-plan-3.pdf.

[43] The term originates in the computer industry. Fail-fast systems are designed to stop normal operation rather than attempt to continue a flawed process.

[44] DFID has borrowed the approach from the World Bank which notes: 'Only if we understand what DOESN'T WORK in this field and stop pushing our failures under the rug, can we collectively learn and get better, more effective and have greater impact as we go forward.' A part of the approach is to use humour to overcome the fear of discussing failure. See http://failfairedc.com/about/.

[45] We note that, in evidence to the IDC on TradeMark Southern Africa, the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary made clear statements admitting failure and have sought to learn from the identified concerns.

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Line management

Line managers are key to creating the incentives for learning

2.18 DFID's objectives are only made real when line managers apply them. DFID comprises 20 divisions made up of 90 individual departments. The head of each department sets the example and the expectations of learning for their teams. They are able to encourage or discourage staff to be candid in learning from failure. This influence is amplified by many departments being located far away from the UK, effectively creating many unique cultures. We can find no pattern linking the size or location of a department with how it demonstrates learning. How a department learns is a result of any given particular manager's leadership and example.

2.19 Heads of office are responsible for making sure that all staff are able to contribute their knowledge. As noted in paragraph 1.21, 32% (971 FTE) of DFID staff are appointed in-country. One experienced locally employed senior programme manager told us of her experience of four heads of office. She noted that the ability of local staff to share their knowledge depended on the culture set by the then head of office. We have seen examples of local staff, with considerable insight and skill, not able to contribute sufficiently to their office's knowledge and decision-making. We have also seen examples of good practice.[46]

2.20 Line managers need to be better held to account for ensuring that learning takes place. It is they who will ensure that DFID implements the right objectives and creates the right incentives to ensure that it learns effectively. Most line managers are not sufficiently held to account for demonstrating how their departments learn or that all staff are able to contribute their knowledge. The findings of a recent report by the National Audit Office (NAO), relating to the entire Civil Service, apply to DFID. It said that, with regard to learning, 'success requires a cultural shift, where line managers are skilled in staff development, where feedback and self-reflection is the norm and where flexibility exists to shape jobs for learning.'[47] DFID has not yet fully undergone such a cultural shift, although key elements of it are being put in place.

Delivery   *Assessment: Green-Amber* 🟢🟡

2.21 In this section, we examine the mechanisms by which DFID learns as an organisation. We review where it has invested in knowledge generation, the ways in which staff prefer to learn and the role of formal training.

Investments in the production of knowledge

DFID creates sufficient knowledge for learning

2.22 DFID has created a set of mechanisms to enable it to capture organisational knowledge. Taken together, these should provide sufficient material to enable effective learning. Some of the mechanisms that DFID uses to capture knowledge are:

- research;
- evaluations of projects and programmes; and
- the work of specialist resource centres.[48]

2.23 These mechanisms have not traditionally been integrated into the implementation of projects. We examine the mechanisms DFID has used to learn while implementing projects in paragraphs 2.83 to 2.88.

Research & synthesis

DFID funds a wealth of research

2.24 DFID's 2008-2013 Research Strategy committed the department to spending up to £1 billion in this area over five years.[49] As well as being available publicly as a part of DFID's contribution to global development, this research is intended to inform decisions on policy and practice, in order to achieve poverty reduction. Figure 7 on page 11

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[46] See, for instance, our *Evaluation of DFID's Support for Health and Education in India*, ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-Evaluation-of-DFIDs-Support-for-Health-and-Education-in-India-Final-Report.pdf.

[47] *Identifying and meeting central government's skills requirements*, Comptroller and Auditor General, NAO, 2011, http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/10121276.pdf.
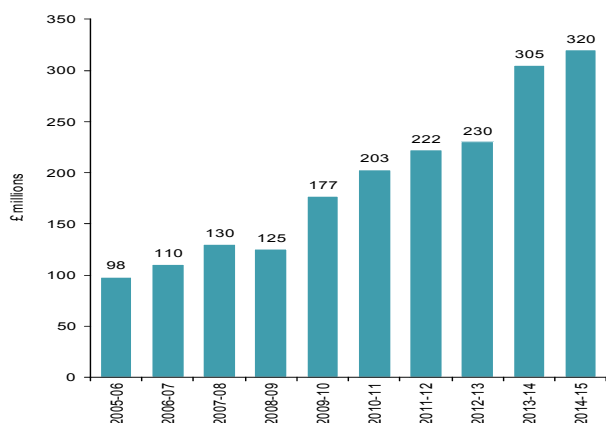[48] See also paragraphs 2.89 to 2.92 for a discussion of DFID's monitoring mechanisms and the relationship to evaluation.
[49] *Research Strategy 2008-2013*, 2008, DFID, http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/PDF/Outputs/consultation/DFID_ResearchStrategy2008LOWRES.pdf.

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sets out DFID's actual and planned spending on research.

Figure 7: DFID's spending on research[50]

Source: IDC.[51]

2.25 Research is provided by third-party organisations in the UK and worldwide. It is right that the products of such research are made available to all as a global public good, as they are through the Research for Development (R4D) website.[52] This site links to DFID's current and past research, held in over 40,000 records and is freely accessible online. DFID uses systematic reviews to synthesise evidence on particular topics.[53] We are concerned, however, that DFID may not be targeting its research efforts sufficiently on its key priorities. As a result, valuable research may be lost among the volume produced and thus have insufficient influence.

DFID has sought to improve the quality of its research but it is not put to sufficiently good use

2.26 We note that in recent years DFID has sought to improve the quality of the research it funds,

clarifying guidance and quality control. In 2011, the UK Government Office for Science noted a 'recent and marked…shift with DFID towards better integration of high quality scientific evidence into decision-making, policy and strategy'.[54]

2.27 We note, however, that in 2013 the NAO and IDC criticised DFID for 'not yet making good use of the research it commissions'. The IDC recommended in 2013 that DFID needed to improve its staff training and put increased resources into its Research and Evidence Division.[55]

Synthesis, dissemination and interpretation remain a challenge

2.28 DFID has recently invested specific resources to improve the synthesis and dissemination of its research (partly in response to IDC recommendations). Since 2012, it has put in place a 22-person 'Evidence into Action' team, based in the UK, with responsibility for making such knowledge more accessible to users. Their work is only just beginning, with most activities having only begun in the last quarter of 2013. As such, it is too early to assess impact.[56] We note, however, that they have a catalytic role in some areas, for instance, in helping staff address failure by organising the 'fail faires' (see paragraph 2.17). DFID has also emphasised developing skills in interpreting evidence and research, particularly among its specialist cadres.[57]

DFID is seeking to close the distance between research and implementation

2.29 DFID is moving to integrate its research more closely with implementation. Regional research hubs with dedicated staff seek to bring implementation and research closer. DFID sees this as making research more relevant to the

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[50] Spending has increased from £98 million per annum in 2005-06 to a planned £230 million in 2012-13. Figures for 1998-2012 are actual; those for 2013-15 are budgeted.

[51] *Department for International Development Annual Report and Accounts*, 2011-12, IDC, House of Commons, 2012, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/673 53/Annual-report-accounts-2011-12.pdf.

[52] See http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk. R4D is not to be confused with the Results for Development, which is an independent body based in Washington, D.C., http://r4d.org.

[53] See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/systematic-reviews-in-international-development. DFID reviewed the use of these reviews in 2013 in Phil Rose and Mike Battcock's *Review of the DFID Systematic Review Programme,* 2012, http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/systematicreviews/Review_of_Systematic_Revie ws_October_2012_FINAL.pdf.

[54] *Science & Engineering Assurance Review of the Department for International Development*, Government Office for Science, 2011, http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/goscience/docs/science-review-dfid/11-1260-science-engineering-assurance-review-department-for-international-development.

[55] *Department for International Development's Annual Report and Accounts 2011-12*, IDC, House of Commons, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/673 53/Annual-report-accounts-2011-12.pdf.

[56] For a summary of current work undertaken by this group, see https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/263 661/EiA-prog-doc-Nov2013a.pdf.

[57] *Research Strategy 2008-13*, DFID, 2008, http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/PDF/Outputs/consultation/DFID_ResearchStrategy2008LOW RES.pdf.

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needs of programming. There are two such hubs, DFID Delhi and DFID Nairobi (the latter currently being established). DFID has told us that others may be put in place in the future.

Evaluation

DFID funds much evaluation work

2.30 DFID does not maintain a total record of the amount spent on evaluation. We understand from the new head of evaluation that an exercise is underway to obtain a more accurate assessment. We have identified that DFID has committed (from central budgets alone) over £200 million to fund evaluations (see Figure 8). DFID also funds evaluations through external organisations (see paragraph 2.31 below). In addition, individual programmes and projects often (but not always) contain budgets for evaluations (this is not captured centrally).[58] In addition to DFID's 54.7 specialist evaluation posts,[59] DFID also contracts in dedicated expert advice.

2.31 Figure 8 sets out how DFID now funds most of its evaluations. DFID is currently unable to set out all its expenditure on evaluations, although it intends to report on this during 2014. We have attempted to identify key elements of spending on evaluation in this report.

2.32 DFID also finances external evaluation through organisations, such as 3iE and the World Bank. 3iE is a not-for-profit organisation that itself funds evaluations of aid impact.[60] DFID has committed £25.5 million of core funding to 3iE (2009-15), plus a further £4.1 million for specific evaluation of innovations in agriculture (2013-15). In addition, DFID provides £11.4 million to the World Bank for a Strategic Impact Evaluation Fund (2013-15). DFID's five-year, £6.6 million support for impact evaluations in human development by the World Bank ended in 2013. DFID is also providing £10.9

million for a Humanitarian Innovation and Evidence programme (2012-18).

Figure 8: The Global Evaluation Framework Agreement (GEFA)

DFID evaluations are mainly delivered by third-party contractors. DFID staff use GEFA to contract for evaluations (although this is not mandatory). When launched in 2012, GEFA had a total indicative allocation of £150 million for its expected duration, currently until 2016.[61] Consultancy firms and other institutions underwent a competition to participate. Those qualified competed to deliver individual evaluations. A total of 11 evaluations were contracted under GEFA in 2012-13 at a total value of £8.2 million. By July 2013, a further 16 were in the process of being contracted at a total cost of £15.9 million.

Source: ICAI and a DFID submission to the IDC.[62]

2.33 In December 2012, DFID also agreed to a three-year contract (with a likely one-year extension) worth £832,000 for the provision of expert advice on evaluation planning and design. This Specialist Evaluation and Quality Assurance Service acts as a resource to support DFID staff. It seeks to provide quality assurance of evaluation products; evaluation and monitoring planning and selection of approaches; and design advice.[63]

Evaluations are increasing

2.34 Evaluations are a key source of knowledge for DFID.[64] DFID's 2013 annual evaluation report states that 26 evaluations were completed in 2012-13, with a further 60 expected to be completed in 2013-14. DFID informs us that, as of February 2014, this estimate has reduced to 40 evaluations completed in 2013-14.[65] A total of 425 evaluations

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[58] For instance, within DFID's funding of civil society organisations (CSOs) through Programme Partnership Arrangements, see *Support for Civil Society Organisations through Programme Partnership Arrangements*, 2013, ICAI, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-REPORT-DFIDs-Support-for-CSOs-through-PPAs.pdf.

[59] See Table A3.1 in Annex A3, DFID has recently undertaken an assessment of its embedded evaluation capacity. It now reports that it has 25 specialist evaluation posts and a further 12 posts with an evaluation component.

[60] It seeks to strengthen how evaluations are performed; see http://www.3ieimpact.org for details.

[61] GEFA was commissioned initially for two years from 28 August 2012 with the possibility of up to two one-year extensions.

[62] Written evidence submitted by Mark Lowcock, CB, Permanent Secretary, DFID to IDC, 2013, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmintdev/writev/402/icai07.htm.

[63] *Briefing to support the International Development Committee inquiry into the Department for International Development Annual Report and Accounts 2012-13*, 2013, NAO, http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Revised-brief_7-Jan-tidied.pdf.

[64] 'DFID subscribes to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee's (DAC) internationally agreed definition of evaluation as a '*systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results in relation to specified evaluation criteria'.' International Development Evaluation Policy*, DFID, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/204119/DFID-Evaluation-Policy-2013.pdf.

[65] See here for a list of current evaluations,

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were either underway or planned as at July 2013.[66] All DFID's completed evaluations are available online.[67] We are concerned that this rapid scaling up of evaluations creates considerable challenges for DFID in how it synthesises information from them.

Evaluations are of variable use

2.35 DFID needs to focus more clearly on the value of its evaluations if they are to support effectively how the organisation learns. Current practice often sees DFID using evaluations to assess theories of change.[68] DFID says its approach to evaluation has five core principles: independence, transparency, quality, utility and ethics.[69] Knowledge within many evaluations is still not fully utilised. A December 2013 review by the NAO of the use of evaluation across government highlighted the mixed use of evaluations by DFID (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: The view of the National Audit Office

'In the case of DFID, we found that references to evaluation evidence in allocating its bilateral aid expenditure were highly variable between country plans and thematic areas. Only five of 13 thematic areas of spending referred to any ex-post evaluation evidence. We found that, of 25 country-specific operational plans, 17 did not refer to any evaluation evidence. Three countries, however, had plans where over 35 per cent of spending was underpinned by ex-post evaluation evidence'.

Source: NAO.[70]

2.36 DFID staff report that the variable use of evaluations is caused by their number, their diversity and the time required to read them. This challenge will only increase along with the number of evaluations. Some evaluations do not perform the right function. We saw in Nepal how evaluation efforts had failed to assess design. This lack of credible evaluation limited DFID Nepal's ability to adapt its overall strategy, improve project design and target its interventions effectively.[71]

DFID does not track or report on the overall impact of evaluations

2.37 The challenge of synthesising, disseminating and using knowledge from an increasing number of evaluation reports is considerable. DFID reports what evaluations are undertaken and it comments on their quality. The annual evaluation report also provides some summary findings.[72] We would have expected DFID also to report the impact that evaluations have on what it does and what it achieves. Such reporting would cover actions taken in response to individual evaluations and their impact on DFID's overall value for money and effectiveness.

DFID can also learn from ICAI reports

2.38 ICAI's core role is to report on the impact and value for money achieved by UK aid. Our reports are taken into account by the IDC in its role of holding DFID to account. Our reports also act as a source of learning for the department. DFID's allocation for ICAI is £13.7 million for 2011-15 (an average of £3.4 million per year), albeit actual spending to date has been less.[73] We have produced 31 reports to date containing recommendations for DFID.[74] DFID reports on actions in response to ICAI's reports,[75] which are also summarised in ICAI's annual report.[76] Of the 121 recommendations made to DFID up to our March 2014 report on its Typhoon Haiyan response, DFID has accepted 92 and partially accepted 21.

https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluation-reports.

[66] *Annual Evaluation Report*, DFID, 2013,
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/annual-evaluation-report-july-2013.
[67] See https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluation-reports.
[68] A 'theory of change' is a logical model setting out how a planned intervention will deliver its intended impact. Evaluations usually test whether this logic has proved to be sound.
[69] *International Development Evaluation Policy*, DFID, 2013,
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/204119/DFID-Evaluation-Policy-2013.pdf.
[70] *Evaluation in government*, NAO, 2013,
http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/10331-001-Evaluation-in-government_30-12.pdf.

[71] *DFID's Peace and Security Programme in Nepal*, ICAI, 2013, from paragraph 2.87, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-report-DFIDs-Peace-and-Security-programme-in-Nepal.pdf.
[72] *Annual Evaluation Report*, DFID, 2013,
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/annual-evaluation-report-july-2013.
[72] See https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluation-reports.
[73] *Independent Commission for Aid Impact: Report to the House of Commons International Development Committee 2012-13*, ICAI, 2013,
http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/ICAI-Annual-Report-2012-13.pdf.
[74] See http://icai.independent.gov.uk/reports/.
[75] See https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/dfid-progress-updates-on-implementing-icai-recommendations.
[76] *Independent Commission for Aid Impact: Annual Report to the House of Commons International Development Committee 2012-13*, ICAI, 2013,
http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/ICAI-Annual-Report-2012-13.pdf.

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Specialist Resource Centres

DFID also funds the creation of specialist knowledge

2.39 DFID funds four external resource centres, termed Professional Evidence and Applied Knowledge Services (PEAKS). Each is linked to DFID's specialist cadres. They cover:

■ Health (including Nutrition) and Education (HEART);[77]

■ Governance, Social Development, Conflict and Humanitarian (GSDCH);[78]

■ Climate, Environment, Infrastructure and Livelihoods (CEIL); and

■ Economics and Private Sector (EPS).[79]

The PEAKS provide useful information

2.40 All the PEAKS generate, capture and present useful knowledge to DFID (for instance, as topic guides, bulletins or briefings).[80] All have websites. They allow DFID staff to request information on particular topics (through help desks) as well as to access experts who can be quickly contracted to support delivery of projects and programmes. Each is contracted through a different provider consortium. The total budget allocated for these four PEAKS is £8 million (2012-17).[81]

DFID plans to bring back some of the functions of PEAKS in-house

2.41 The 2013 annual review of the performance of PEAKS reports that 'expectations within DFID for high quality evidence based products have increased over time and since the PEAKS contracts were signed'. It also notes that DFID has an intention to reduce reliance on PEAKS, drawing instead on the 10% cadre time, albeit that 'there may be issues around business workload volumes and the need for wider experiences that may still sometimes require external support'.[82] We agree:

DFID should be seeking to increase its access to external knowledge and generate its own.

Making knowledge accessible to staff

Staff find it difficult to assimilate all the knowledge products available

2.42 DFID's internal surveys and our respondents report that staff often feel overwhelmed by the knowledge available. They find it hard to identify and prioritise what is important and what is irrelevant. We heard consistent reports from staff that they 'do not have enough time to take it all in'. DFID has various mechanisms that seek to make it easier for staff to access knowledge using its intranet. Beginning in June 2013, DFID introduced the Evidence and Programme Exchange (see Figure 10), which we previously covered in our report on DFID's Empowerment and Accountability programming.[83]

Figure 10: Evidence and Programme Exchange (EPE)

The EPE provides central points for staff to access key knowledge. There are three main ways to access it: through an evidence site, an evaluation site and dedicated cadre sites. These relate to the climate and environment, conflict, economics, education, evaluation, governance, health, humanitarian, infrastructure, livelihoods, private sector development, social development and statistics sectors. Particular staff are assigned the task of maintaining the information in the EPE sites, supported by DFID knowledge managers.

Usage data from June-October 2013 indicate that the unique visitors using the cadre sites per month ranged from 17 (infrastructure) to 88 (economics).[84] For both the evidence and evaluation sites, the sections on guidance proved to be the most popular, while online discussions proved to be the least popular.

2.43 While it is too early to assess the impact of the EPE on improving learning, these numbers look very low (there are 145.5 economics adviser posts). Staff report, however, that it is a positive innovation supportive of their work. In addition to the EPE, DFID's intranet has a number of

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[77] See http://www.heart-resources.org.
[78] See http://www.gsdrc.org.
[79] See https://partnerplatform.org/eps-peaks.
[80] For example, see the topic guide on Agriculture and Growth, http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/EoD/EoD_TG01_Mar2012_Agriculture_and_Growth.pdf.
[81] See DFID's Development Tracker, dfid.gov.uk/projects/GB-1-203193/.
[82] *Annual Review of Responding to DFID's Knowledge Needs: Professional Evidence and Applied Knowledge Service*, 2013, Annex A, DFID, http://iati.dfid.gov.uk/iati_documents/4135021.docx.

[83] *DFID's Empowerment and Accountability Programming in Ghana and Malawi*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/reports/dfids-empowerment-accountability-programming-ghana-malawi/.
[84] DFID has informed us that there was an issue with the system used to record usage statistics from 23 July to 3 September (which is 6 out of 20 weeks).

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'themesites' which address issues, such as violence against women and the use of cash transfers. There is a degree of overlap of these with EPE, to which they link.[85] Staff can also create sites for teams working on specific tasks or issues.

2.44 It is notable, however, that DFID staff report that they are not immediately drawn to its own systems. The internal document management system, QUEST, remains difficult to use. Its search facility is poor and documentation appearing in searches does not always directly answer the issue at hand. Two attempts to improve this have not sufficiently improved the experience of users.[86] Staff surveys indicate that when DFID personnel go online to access information, the first tool they use is Google. Our own respondents confirm this.

2.45 DFID has also invested in online collaborative and social media resources, such as Yammer, Huddle and Collaborate, to enable greater joint working among staff. These have not been in place sufficiently long for us to assess their effectiveness. While these can be useful, we believe that such mechanisms should support but not replace collaboration through face-to-face networking.

Staff learn best from experience and from each other

2.46 Sharing knowledge and know-how between individuals and groups is key to DFID learning effectively. Figure 11 shows that DFID staff prefer to use their colleagues as the first point of call for the knowledge they need to do their jobs. They also prefer to exchange what they know through dialogue.

Networks are important enablers of learning

2.47 Most DFID staff are formally linked to others who have a similar role in the organisation. The 800 FTE staff in the cadres are the clearest example

(see Annex A3). Each cadre is managed as a network, animated by a head of profession who has an explicit role to link people. Most cadres appear to work well as networks of peers. Cadre conferences, where groups of staff with similar interests meet and exchange experience and knowledge, are particularly valued for professional development. Other formalised networks include members of the Senior Civil Service, heads of country offices in particular regions and heads of divisions and departments.

Figure 11: Where staff go first to access knowledge (in %)

First Point of Call	To Find Answers Quickly	For Practical Lessons on What Works
DFID colleagues	63	57
People outside DFID	21	9
Internet	7	11
DFID Resource	6	10

Source: DFID, 2010 online survey, Strengthening Learning from Research and Evaluation.

2.48 There are also informal networks, based around shared experience, interests or friendships or more organised topics. These networks are a key part of how DFID staff and the organisation learn. They provide conduits for knowledge to flow through the organisation. Figure 12 illustrates how one informal network functions: The Urban Virtual Network.

Figure 12: The Urban Virtual Network

One of our focus groups was with members of the Urban Virtual Network, which has approximately 60 staff, crossing office, cadre and grade. We found it impressive. The group emerged because there was no institutional home for the topic in DFID at the time of its inception. Staff from a variety of backgrounds realised the topic was one that needed to be discussed. Members report that the network provides a 'safe place' where individuals are committed and trusted. They are currently developing an online themesite to disseminate learning resources. There is, however, some concern that DFID is relying on their 'volunteered' time too much. The group expressed a need for more senior management support.

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[85] The full list of themesites at October 2013 was: assets direct to women and girls, anti-corruption, cash transfers, conflict and fragility, education, empowerment and accountability, health, infrastructure for growth, innovation and technology, investment, climate, public financial management, public sector governance, violence against women, security and justice, water and sanitation. Non-Policy Division themesites relate to beneficiary feedback, humanitarian and the private sector.
[86] QUEST was put into place in 2005. 1) An attempt to integrate with Google was made, which did not improve the search capability. 2) A major upgrade to QUEST in 2010-11 made some improvements. DFID informs us that it now has a project underway to replace QUEST.

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The role of formal training

The Civil Service's understanding of formal learning is changing

2.49 Civil Service Learning plays a significant role in the learning of DFID staff.[87] Initiatives, such as the five-day per year Learning and Development entitlement, can be helpful (see paragraph 2.11) in ensuring that learning is a priority.[88] DFID also provides courses and resources, such as core competency frameworks, for developing skills common to all UK civil servants.

2.50 Since 2011, the UK Civil Service has adopted a new model for improving the capability of individual staff, '70:20:10'. It identifies that

- 70% of a person's learning takes place through experience;
- 20% through others (e.g. mentors or peers); and
- 10% from formal learning.[89]

2.51 This model seeks to describe how people learn in practice. It also acts as a guide for where DFID should place its efforts in supporting learning. DFID is now benchmarking itself against this model. In the 2012 Learning and Development Survey (see Annex A4) staff identified that, in practice, they thought they learnt as follows:

- 26% from experience;
- 29% from others; and
- 45% from formal learning.[90]

2.52 This indicates that DFID staff do not consciously and sufficiently use the experience of their work for learning. It also indicates, within DFID, an over-identification of learning with formal training.

Know-how needs more emphasis

2.53 We recommend that learning and courses should focus on developing know-how, not just knowledge.[91] Staff say they value practical learning, such as on-the-job training and the use of concrete, interactive examples.[92] Some of our respondents indicated that DFID could do more scenario and role-play-based training. We agree that this is an under-used approach in DFID. Where it is used, it can have real effect. For instance, DFID's humanitarian team was part of a five-day, multi-agency exercise ('Triplex') that, in turn, led DFID's response to Typhoon Haiyan to be more effective. We also believe that accreditation should emphasise that staff demonstrate behaviour, skills and experience; not only participate in training. We believe that know-how should be emphasised so that technical and managerial staff are more able to draw on personal experience of implementation.

Mentoring needs to be more systematic

2.54 DFID does not ensure that all staff have access to mentors. There is no requirement for staff to participate in mentoring and the practice, while common, is not ubiquitous. Mentoring provides an effective way of transferring knowledge and know-how. For those staff in professional cadres, Technical Quality Assurers (TQAs) seek to ensure that expert staff are maintaining their professional skills. This is, however, a compliance role, not a mentoring one.

Lack of continuity is a common problem

2.55 While there is guidance for ensuring that knowledge is handed over between staff leaving and starting new jobs, its implementation is inconsistent. This was a consistent message from all our interviews. The most extreme example was that of one interviewee with 17 years of experience in five jobs in DFID who had never had a handover briefing from any predecessor. ICAI's report on the Use of Contractors to deliver Aid Programmes noted examples of significant breaks in continuity when staff rotate between posts (either within country or between

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[87] See https://civilservicelearning.civilservice.gov.uk/static/files/learningmap.pdf for the different central courses that DFID staff have access to as part of the Civil Service.
[88] See http://my.civilservice.gov.uk/blog/2013/10/make-a-plan-dont-let-your-5-days-learning-go-to-waste/.
[89] The approach can be traced back to the Center for Creative Leadership. See http://www.ccl.org/Leadership/.
[90] A total of 102 comments in the Evidence Survey expressed an interest in 'Specific skills training through courses and improving qualifications.'

[91] See paragraph 1.4 and Figure 1 on page 2 for a description of what we mean by knowledge (how information is used to make judgements about the significance of characteristics, events or actions) and know-how (using such knowledge in an activity).
[92] A total of 83 comments in the Evidence Survey.

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countries).[93] We have also noted the positive impact of continuity on learning and effectiveness in DFID's offices in Burma, India and elsewhere. We are concerned that DFID does not sufficiently prioritise contextual preparation prior to posting, in contrast to practices in the FCO. We noted that DFID personnel in Montserrat had to rely on Government of Montserrat staff for their induction.[94]

Financial resources for individual learning are unevenly distributed

2.56 While DFID's commitment to learning and development appears strong, we found the sufficiency of allocation of resources to be mixed. For the period 2012-13, £4.3 million was budgeted to be spent on learning and development within DFID; in fact, expenditure was £2.1 million (50.3%). We are concerned that this underspend indicates that staff are not receiving the development opportunities for which DFID has budgeted. Most departments have budgets that are intended to support staff training and development. While for 2012-13 the average sum allocated for each staff member is £1,436, this amount varies from department to department within DFID (from nil to over £8,000). It is notable that, in 2010, the average for each staff member was £451 compared to an average for the Civil Service as a whole of £547.[95] We would expect there to be some variation (for instance, the £8,000 figure relates to staff in Yemen, who require specialist hostile environment training). It appears, however, that the allocation of resources to learning depends significantly on the advocacy of the head of department in negotiating the budget.

Impact   *Assessment: Amber-Red* 🔴

2.57 In this section, we examine the overall impact that learning has on DFID's decision-making. We discuss the findings of our case studies. We then use examples from the last three years to illustrate where we have seen that DFID has learnt well and where it has not. We go on to discuss some causes of this difference.

The inconsistent impact of learning on decision-making

2.58 DFID does not routinely assess the impact that learning has on the decisions it takes.[96] Our case studies considered the impact of learning on four types of decisions:

- making programme choices;
- creating theories of change;
- choosing delivery mechanisms; and
- adapting and improving implementation of activities.

2.59 Annex A5 summarises the 12 case study findings. There is no overall pattern; the impact that learning has on decision-making varies. DFID can use learning well and badly for each of the four actions set out above. The principal concern is the lack of consistency and the lack of means to ensure and encourage consistency. We use the case studies and other examples to illustrate this principle below.

Making programme choices

2.60 DFID's Humanitarian Emergency Response Review[97] directly influenced its 2011 activities in the Horn of Africa.[98] When planning programmes, DFID country offices sought to improve flexibility and long-term resilience. What DFID chose to prioritise in response to that famine (specifically, health interventions) was also influenced by DFID's engagement with external agencies. In Burma, DFID's global and local knowledge effectively informed what interventions the health programmes funded (the Three Diseases Fund and the Delta Maternal Health programme).[99] We

[93] *DFID's Use of Contractors to Deliver Aid Programmes*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/ICAI-REPORT-DFIDs-Use-of-Contractors-to-Deliver-Aid-Programmes.pdf.
[94] *DFID's support for Capital Projects in Montserrat*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/16-July-2013-ICAI-Montserrat-report-FINAL.pdf.
[95] *Identifying and meeting central government skills requirements*, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, NAO, 2011, http://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/10121276.pdf.

[96] Although its staff survey asks staff to report whether learning has improved what they do (see paragraph 2.9).
[97] *Humanitarian Emergency Response Review*, 2011, http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications1/HERR.pdf.
[98] *DFID's Humanitarian Emergency Response in the Horn of Africa*, ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-report-FINAL-DFIDs-humanitarian-emergency-response-in-the-Horn-of-Africa11.pdf.
[99]*DFID's Health Programmes in Burma*, ICAI, 2013,

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saw how DFID's support for the health sector in Zimbabwe drew on global best practice, to the benefit of the country programme.[100]

2.61 In contrast, our report on the Girls' Education Programme and Education Sector Support Programme in Nigeria found evidence of only limited innovation in programme choices.[101] In this case, DFID Nigeria had not sufficiently considered applying approaches successfully used elsewhere in Africa.

Creating theories of change

2.62 In Odisha, India, we saw how the outcomes of a large livelihoods project benefited from DFID's global lesson learning, from specific analysis of the local situation and from close consultation with local officials and potential beneficiary communities.[102] The programme was robust and very successful as a result.

2.63 We have also seen the opposite. For instance, DFID's wide body of knowledge on trade and poverty was not applied in the design and delivery of its TradeMark Southern Africa programme.[103] We found that staff responsible for the programme had a poor level of understanding of trade and poverty linkages. As a result, the programme was not sufficiently designed to benefit the poor.

Choosing delivery mechanisms

2.64 In Afghanistan, we saw how DFID applied lessons positively from its own work and from that of other donors, both globally and in the country. These contributed to the choice of delivery mechanisms that sought to minimise the risk of corruption (particularly as it related to procurement).[104]

2.65 In our report on electoral assistance through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), we noted that there had been a wealth of analysis of what works. Lessons, however, were not always taken on board in design or delivery of election programming. This meant that programmes were sometimes put in place too late. Other delivery partners (which may have been better than UNDP) were not used.[105]

Adapting and improving implementation of activities

2.66 Learning during implementation has had positive impact on delivery and engagement. We saw how DFID's oversight of the World Bank has evolved positively in the light of experience and good practice.[106] DFID Burma's health programme has shown significant improvement through time, using learning from previous programmes and the knowledge of its staff.[107]

2.67 The opposite also happens; until our visit, learning in Nepal's peace and security programme was poor. There was insufficient evidence that monitoring and situational analysis were being used to adapt DFID's approach, in spite of changing (and risky) circumstances.[108] When ICAI reviewed the work of the Conflict Pool, we found that it had little capacity to draw on wider experience.[109] There was no process for refining its approach to conflict prevention or to compare the work of the Conflict Pool with trends in international best practice.[110] This resulted in a lack of strategic direction and no concentration of resources on where the fund had comparative advantage.

http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/16-July-2014-ICAI-Burma-Health-Report-FINAL.pdf.

[100] *The Department for International Development's Support to the Health Sector in Zimbabwe,* ICAI, 2011, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/reports/dfids-support-health-sector-zimbabwe/.

[101] *DFID's Education Programmes in Nigeria*, ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-Nigeria-Education-report.pdf.

[102] *DFID's Livelihoods Work in Western Odisha*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/ICAI-Report-DFIDs-Livelihoods-Work-in-Western-Odisha2.pdf.

[103] *DFID's Trade Development Work in Southern Africa,* ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/reports/dfids-trade-development-work-southern-africa/.

[104] *The Department for International Development: Programme Controls and Assurance in Afghanistan,* ICAI, 2012,

http://icai.independent.gov.uk/reports/dfid-programme-controls-and-assurance-in-afghanistan/.

[105] *Evaluation of DFID's Electoral Support through UNDP,* ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/UNDP-report-FINAL.pdf.

[106] *The Effectiveness of DFID's Engagement with the World Bank,* ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-World-Bank-Final-Report_P1-7.pdf.

[107] *DFID's Health Programmes in Burma*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/16-July-2014-ICAI-Burma-Health-Report-FINAL.pdf.

[108] *DFID's Peace and Security Programme in Nepal*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-report-DFIDs-Peace-and-Security-programme-in-Nepal.pdf.

[109] The Conflict Pool funds activities that contribute to peacekeeping overseas and support conflict prevention and stabilisation. The FCO, DFID and the Ministry of Defence manage the Conflict Pool jointly.

[110] *Evaluation of the Inter-Departmental Conflict Pool*, ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/report-category/conflict-pool/.

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Why knowledge is used or not

DFID does not always ensure that learning has an impact

2.68 Our report on DFID's £350 million spending on support for Agricultural Research highlighted that research should clearly serve DFID's intended beneficiaries. While findings of this work were disseminated well outside DFID, the research programme did not work sufficiently with – or learn from – DFID's own country programmes and other departments. It also did not ensure that research outputs were delivered to the farmers who were the intended beneficiaries.[111]

2.69 We have also seen cases where DFID did not take lessons from successful projects and disseminate them. Lesson learning from the Western Odisha Livelihoods Project, for example, did not have an influence on programmes in other countries.[112] In Nepal, DFID did not learn from a police station reconstruction programme for a new (and subsequently abandoned) police reform programme.[113]

DFID's ability to influence has been strengthened by its investment in knowledge

2.70 DFID's investment in research and evaluation often has a positive impact on the design and implementation of its activities. It is often a key source of DFID's influence. We observed, for instance, how this led to DFID's high level of thought leadership and innovation across health and education programmes in India and in states such as Bihar.[114] We have seen this pattern replicated in many places where DFID works; the more DFID manages to synthesise and understand its own learning as an organisation, the more it is able to share and use that information to help and influence others.

Organisational learning depends on individuals

2.71 Above all, our research suggests that it is individuals that determine whether learning takes place within DFID. The examples above show that learning is not always taking place, in spite of the appropriate knowledge being available (through corporate systems and elsewhere). We also note that staff are able to learn, in spite of deficits in corporate systems, for instance, by searching out knowledge they need if it is not readily available within DFID or online.

2.72 We have seen individuals exemplifying learning behaviours that should be present throughout DFID. A senior health adviser in Burma played a key role in transferring knowledge between projects. It is notable that she had been in the post for seven years at the time of the ICAI review.[115] We have seen how a highly successful Learning Partnership has been established to support DFID's work with civil society organisations (CSOs). This emerged out of previous experience with Latin American CSOs and is substantially driven by a motivated individual. The head of DFID's Research and Evaluation Division has had considerable personal impact on changing the culture of his division by bringing in experience from outside DFID of, for instance, a practice of 'clinical audit' (see paragraph 2.98 below). He has explicitly initiated new behaviours without there being policies or procedures for them.

2.73 Staff have also taken risks to enable learning where the culture is less permissive. The transformative video on learning (see paragraph 2.17 above) was a local initiative of the DFID country team. While supported by individuals elsewhere in DFID, it was not a corporate initiative. The makers had to overcome internal worries about the film being made available (for instance, from those with responsibility for public communications). There was a fear its messages would be too negative to make public.

[111] *DFID's Support to Agricultural Research*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-Agricultural-Research-report-FINAL.pdf.
[112] *DFID's Livelihoods Work in Western Odisha*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/ICAI-Report-DFIDs-Livelihoods-Work-in-Western-Odisha2.pdf.
[113] *DFID's Peace and Security Programme in Nepal*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-report-DFIDs-Peace-and-Security-programme-in-Nepal.pdf.
[114] *Evaluation of DFID's Support for Health and Education in India*, ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-Evaluation-of-DFIDs-Support-for-Health-and-Education-in-India-Final-Report.pdf.

[115] There was also good evidence of evaluations being taken very seriously and of DFID commissioning people to address any particular concerns. *DFID's Health Programmes in Burma*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/16-July-2014-ICAI-Burma-Health-Report-FINAL.pdf.

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Evidence must not be selectively used

2.74 The 2013 Evidence Survey indicates that knowledge is sometimes selectively used to support decision-making. Thirty-four comments[116] of the Evidence Survey staff reported that they feel under pressure from managers to provide selective evidence that would justify decisions.[117] When questioned whether leaders in the organisation are committed to and prioritise the use of evidence, 64% of staff were positive and 36% were negative.[118] Members of focus groups for DFID's 'End-to-End Review', as well as some of our interviewed respondents, confirm this pattern.

2.75 Respondents linked examples of selectivity to the need to justify spending or support political priorities.[119] Interviewees (including heads of professional cadres) told us that it is common to find evidence to justify a decision, rather than use evidence to arrive at a decision. We have seen examples of this behaviour ourselves, for instance, in relation to DFID's budget support operations.[120]

2.76 In discussion, staff voiced the opinion that messages were sometimes filtered as they moved up the lines of authority. We are aware of specialist staff being told that they 'can't say that' about providing a piece of advice they know to be fact-based because their manager thinks it will be unacceptable higher up the organisation.[121]

2.77 Our view is that Ministers and those in authority should be told the facts so that they can make their decisions on the best available evidence. We recognise that not all decisions will be fully evidence-based. Decisions are often taken because of political or other pragmatic reasons. We note, however, that the Civil Service Code specifically emphasises the importance of objectivity. It directs civil servants to 'provide information and advice, including advice to Ministers, on the basis of the evidence and accurately present the options and facts'. At the same time, civil servants must not 'ignore inconvenient facts or relevant considerations when providing advice or making decisions'.[122] While it is Ministers' prerogative not to make decisions based on evidence alone, they (and senior managers) must be provided with it in order to weigh options.

The impact of ICAI's reports

2.78 Our case studies indicate that DFID has responded positively to ICAI reports and has shown willingness to learn from the process, despite some initial negative reactions (see Annex A5).[123] In a number of cases, DFID's responses have exceeded ICAI recommendations. These include a range of new strategies, guidance notes and approaches.[124] Respondents note that ICAI reports have helped to obtain high-level buy-in for change and for moving forward with lessons learned, for instance within Girl Hub (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: Learning in Girl Hub

Our review of Girl Hub noted that more should have been done to incorporate learning into it from the outset.[125] Girl Hub has changed its approach and strengthened its results framework as a result. Respondents told us that DFID found the ICAI report essential for getting the basics of Girl Hub right. Respondents also indicated, however, that learning from beneficiaries was still being kept within Girl Hub and not being sufficiently brought back into DFID as a whole. Respondents also indicated that there is more to be done to ensure that there is lesson learning across and between Girl Hub and other DFID departments whose work relates to the issues which affect girls.

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[116] These 34 individual comments (all from different individuals) can be linked to the theme 'How well does knowledge and learning support decision-making in DFID?' (based on the evaluation questions in the Terms of Reference). In total, there were 143 comments that could be related to this theme. The survey had a total of 461 respondents.

[117] Such as the approval of business cases.

[118] ICAI analysis of Evidence Survey comments.

[119] An additional 16 comments in the Evidence Survey discuss the need to balance political initiatives, financial planning, practice and evidence.

[120] *The Management of UK Budget Support Operations*, ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ICAI-Budget-Support-Final-Report-32.pdf.

[121] We have seen evidence of this from comments of many staff in two internal surveys and heard direct reports of this from staff in interview.

[122] *The Civil Service Code*, Presented to Parliament pursuant to Section 5 (5) of the *Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010;* see http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/about/values.

[123] These are online at https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/dfid-progress-updates-on-implementing-icai-recommendations.

[124] Annex A of *Independent Commission for Aid Impact: Annual Report to the House of Commons International Development Committee 2012-13*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/ICAI-Annual-Report-2012-13.pdf.

[125] *Girl Hub: A DFID and Nike Foundation Initiative*, ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/ICAI-Girl-Hub-Final-Report_P1-5.pdf.

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Learning

Assessment: Amber-Red 🔴

2.79 This section considers how systematically DFID integrates learning into the life cycle of its work. After discussing how DFID learns during the design, monitoring and evaluation of projects, it focusses on how learning takes place during the implementation of activities.[126]

How DFID learns during its activities

2.80 Figure 14 represents the key processes of learning (the outer ring), while DFID delivers aid (the inner ring).

Figure 14: Summary of how DFID learns
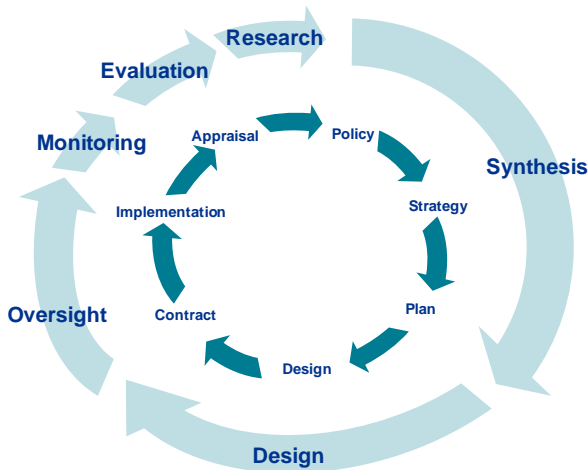

Source: ICAI.

2.81 The integration of learning throughout the life cycle of projects should be a priority. For comparison, Figure 15 shows how the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation characterise this process.

Learning and design

DFID has sought to improve the design phase

2.82 In recent years, DFID has put much effort into improving its key design and approval document: the business case. In 2011, DFID established a Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) to review large business cases, seeking to make sure that they are founded on research and evidence. The QAU appears to have been effective in doing its job. For instance, we saw how new business case

procedures have introduced greater rigour into assessing expected results from budget support operations.[127] The number of business cases (over the value of £40 million) requiring substantial revisions to their theories of change[128] reduced from 69% (20) in 2011 to 27% (8) in 2012 and to 13% (6) in 2013.[129] We note, however, that business case procedures have become unwieldy and overly bureaucratic. We were told that there are 120 different guidance documents that staff could consult when writing one.[130] Compliance of individual business cases with expected standards has improved. This does not, however, necessarily improve how DFID demonstrates learning over time.

Figure 15: Continuous learning in the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

'The strategy lifecycle is a framework that guides our work. We develop strategy, allocate resources, make grants, capture and share data on progress, reflect on lessons learned and course-correct, as necessary. Essential to this process is ongoing dialogue with our grantees and partners, early in the planning process and throughout the strategy lifecycle.'

Source: Bill & Melinda Gate Foundation.[131]

Learning and monitoring

Annual, mid-term and project completion reviews should explicitly support learning

2.83 DFID's reviews, which are the principal tool for regularly monitoring a project's performance, do not sufficiently support lesson learning (see Figure 16 on page 22). It is mandatory for the performance of every project being implemented to be reviewed annually. In addition, most projects and programmes have a mid-term review and all should have a project completion review. These all

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[126] Our assessment of DFID's use of research is covered in paragraphs 2.24-2.29 of this report. How DFID synthesises lessons is a theme throughout.

[127] *The Management of UK Budget Support Operations*, ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ICAI-Budget-Support-Final-Report-32.pdf.

[128] A 'theory of change' is a logical model setting out how a planned intervention will deliver its intended impact.

[129] Figures from DFID's QAU.

[130] This has been highlighted by DFID's 'End-to-End Review' and has been the subject of recommendations aimed at reducing the number of these documents, which we support.

[131] See http://www.gatesfoundation.org/How-We-Work/General-Information/How-We-Develop-Strategy.

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report project performance. Most reviews are undertaken by DFID staff with or without assistance from partners and third parties. These reports follow formats that are (in the main) set corporately. Many are now publicly available.[132] Such reviews are undertaken and utilised to report whether a project's implementation complies with its planned activities, not learning.

2.84 This confirms our view that DFID is not making the most of the reviews. We are particularly concerned that the learning section of annual reviews was removed during the last three years. Staff in DFID could not tell us why this happened. Experienced staff told us that they, however, still complete the reports as if they included the learning section.[133]

Figure 16: The Quality of DFID's Reviews

During 2013, DFID and the NAO undertook a joint 'stocktake' of the quality of Annual and Project Completion Reviews. Findings were presented to DFID's investment committee. It found, among other things, that

- 'The reviews were not undertaken on a consistently rigorous basis.'

- 'In a sizeable minority of cases there was insufficient evidence to justify the conclusions reached.'

- 'Existing quality control arrangements appear to be inadequate. There are no clear arrangements in place to follow up previous recommendations or to hold staff to account where this is not done.'

- 'While lessons may be disseminated informally by the review or project team to colleagues, the Department currently does not have a more co-ordinated method of communication in place to share this information across the organisation.'

Source: DFID Investment Committee Paper, June 2013

Reviews need to be better used to support organisational learning

2.85 We think annual, mid-term and project completion reviews are a potentially rich but under-utilised resource. While findings of reviews often result in

changes to individual projects, they do not sufficiently support corporate learning. Staff in QAU (who check whether business cases include lessons learned) told us that they found it hard to identify lessons from reviews. There is no easy way, for instance, to search all reviews to identify patterns or common trends. No central single point in DFID continuously receives, collates and disseminates lessons from reviews. When this task is undertaken, it is inconsistent and done by individuals or policy teams on a case-by-case basis. DFID has, in the past, considered establishing such a function. We also understand that there may be plans to provide more systematic quality assurance of these reviews in the future.

Continuous monitoring is not fully developed

2.86 Monitoring in DFID is not consistently appropriate. For instance, in its work with CSOs, we saw how DFID's approach to monitoring and evaluation has been bureaucratic, overly complex and poorly adapted to the strategic nature of the Programme Partnership Arrangements (PPAs). Scrutiny had, at times, been disproportionate and could usefully involve beneficiaries more.[134]

2.87 DFID is not always circumspect in how it uses monitoring information for decision-making, particularly in fragile states. Our report on DFID's programme in Afghanistan noted how DFID rightly treated many data sources with caution, since the quality of information was variable. The report also noted, however, that DFID's plans did not sufficiently take into account the risks that flow from reliance on poor-quality data.[135]

2.88 We have seen that examples of DFID learning and adapting well often relate to DFID's humanitarian work. The culture of overseeing the implementation of such aid appears to take more account of unstable and quickly changing circumstances. For instance, we saw how DFID Pakistan invested in a

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[132] DFID's Development Tracker, http://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk.
[133] We note that the guidance for the annual reports still says that the conclusions for the annual and project completion reviews should include '*What lessons have we learned about what is going particularly well, including lessons that will affect future project design.*'

[134] As a result of ICAI's recommendations, DFID has now improved its approach. *DFID's Support for Civil Society Organisations through Programme Partnership Arrangements*, DFID, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-REPORT-DFIDs-Support-for-CSOs-through-PPAs.pdf.
[135] *The Department for International Development: Programme Controls and Assurance in Afghanistan,* ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/reports/dfid-programme-controls-and-assurance-in-afghanistan/.

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new framework for continuous monitoring of humanitarian programmes, including on value for money, giving it flexibility to adjust programmes in real time.[136] We note that DFID's annual review process is not intended or able to perform such continuous monitoring.

Learning and evaluation

The need for learning to take place alongside delivery

2.89 Learning during implementation is substantially different from learning from research or traditional evaluations that are conducted after projects have completed. Findings from DFID's 2013 Evidence Survey, focus groups of the 'End-to-End Review' and our own interviews indicate that DFID is poor at valuing such learning and that some staff are frustrated that there are few mechanisms to capture it.

2.90 Evaluations have, in the main, provided a retrospective view of the achievements of projects.[137] We noted the limitations of this in our report on DFID's work with the Asian Development Bank, where more concurrent evaluation was required to improve effectiveness and value for money.[138] Since 2011, DFID has developed new guidelines for evaluation and sought to increase the number that take place alongside implementation.[139] Many of its evaluation advisers, who now have to be accredited to specific standards, have been posted into delivery departments rather than remaining centrally.[140]

2.91 We confirm that, in our view, linking evaluation more clearly to implementation is important. We have seen for instance that, while a macro-evaluation of DFID's empowerment and accountability programming will not report until

2016, yearly interim findings are intended to inform continuing programme development.[141]

2.92 DFID staff report that evaluations still, primarily, inform the design stage of the programme cycle, specifically the business cases. DFID's QAU (see paragraph 2.82) has a role to stimulate departments to take better account of evidence held within evaluations when drafting business cases. They reported to us that DFID's departments are not fully doing so, although this is improving.

Learning and oversight

DFID needs to engage with delivery agents and beneficiaries

2.93 We have seen that DFID needs most to improve learning during its oversight of projects.[142] We would expect DFID to make clearer the role that its staff have in overseeing implementation. Staff comments in surveys, focus groups and interviews indicate confusion about their role.[143] DFID funds and commissions others to deliver UK aid. Our view is that DFID remains responsible for ensuring that aid is delivered and to the right quality. It can only do so if staff engage with DFID's delivery agents and beneficiaries, when appropriately overseeing implementation.[144]

Learning during implementation will require new approaches

2.94 Our evidence base suggests that building in constant learning during the implementation stage of projects is good management practice. DFID's 2013 'End-to-End Review' suggested changing

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[136] *Evaluation of DFID's Bilateral Aid to Pakistan*, ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-Pakistan-Report_P1.pdf.

[137] For instance, the evaluation of Public Sector Governance Reform referred to in footnote 13 took a ten-year retrospective view, reporting three years after the last year it considered.

[138] *The Effectiveness of DFID's Engagement with the Asian Development Bank,* ICAI, 2012, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-The-effectiveness-of-DFIDs-engagement-with-the-Asian-Development-Bank-FINAL.pdf.

[139] *International Development Evaluation Policy*, DFID, 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/204119/DFID-Evaluation-Policy-2013.pdf.

[140] Evaluations were previously managed out of a central department, based in East Kilbride.

[141] *DFID's Empowerment and Accountability Programming in Ghana and Malawi,* ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Empowerment-and-Accountability-081013-FINAL.pdf.

[142] A study by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) from 2010 considered how DFID learnt from research and evaluation. Like us, ODI found that DFID is more comfortable working with the findings of research and evaluation than learning during implementation. It said that DFID is poor at the capture and dissemination of short cycle information. *Strengthening learning from research and evaluation: going with the grain,* ODI, 2010, http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/6327.pdf.

[143] For instance, there were 20 detailed comments in DFID's Evidence Survey to this effect.

[144] See, for instance, our conclusions of the lack of oversight of CSOs in ICAI's report on *Support for Civil Society Organisations through Programme Partnership Arrangements*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-REPORT-DFIDs-Support-for-CSOs-through-PPAs.pdf.

2 Findings

how DFID undertakes project implementation towards 'adaptive programming'.[145] We agree that learning and adapting during implementation are vital. We are concerned that theories of change are too simplified and do not reflect the complex realities in which DFID works.

2.95 Adaptive programming assumes that no project can be perfectly designed. It seeks, therefore, to put in place mechanisms for constant learning, so that lessons can be fed back quickly and action taken rapidly. This implies staff being clearly engaged in the projects' oversight. Adaptive programming is likely to be particularly appropriate for unstable environments, since it starts from the assumption that not everything can be known at project outset. DFID is considering how it might apply such an approach in the future, following on from the 'End-to-End Review'.

The need for know-how

2.96 DFID will have to focus more clearly on building specific skills to increase its ability to respond and adapt rapidly. One of our interviewees identified a 'researcher-practitioner split' when discussing the staff in her department. Practitioners were those staff who have managed or delivered projects or activities. They had a greater depth of know-how. Researchers were those whose primary experience had been academic or in policy-making. A move towards adaptive learning will require DFID to emphasise know-how. This could affect DFID's recruitment and the skills that are prioritised. We note that, in the recent recruitment of private sector advisers, DFID sought to find practitioners, albeit we heard from them that they found it hard to use their prior learning (particularly their know-how) in DFID since this was not fully recognised.

Building learning into doing

Skills for learning are not sufficiently nurtured

2.97 While some staff have the skills and techniques constantly to reflect on what they are learning day-to-day, not all do. Staff, for instance with an engineering or public health background, are used

to diarising learning to maintain their professional accreditation. We saw examples from DFID staff of this being done both well and poorly. Such reflexivity is not fully part of DFID's culture. We believe that this or a similar technique needs to be ubiquitous. Similar approaches may also be applied to projects − capturing events and actions which 'tell the story' of DFID's activities − with a view to capturing lessons in real time.

DFID does not sufficiently prioritise learning while doing

2.98 Many report that they are not sufficiently provided with the time and incentives to learn from success and failure while they are doing their jobs. DFID's Chief Scientist has introduced into the Research and Evidence Division continuous learning practices, based on his experience as a senior health professional. These are closely based on the practices of 'clinical audit' (a process used in healthcare to ensure the quality of care).[146] Other parts of DFID also use mechanisms to create time and spaces where staff can review performance and their actions free from blame. 'After-Action Reviews' are a technique borrowed from the military and agencies, such as USAID (see Figure 17). DFID's Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Department (CHASE) use a similar approach to After-Action Reviews which it calls Lessons Reviews.

Figure 17: After-Action Reviews

'An After-Action Review

…is a dynamic, candid, professional discussion of the event, activity or program itself. Everyone can and should, participate if they have an insight, observation or question that will help identify and correct deficiencies or maintain strengths...

…is not a critique or a complaint session. No one, regardless of rank, position or strength of personality has all of the information or answers.'

Source: USAID.[147]

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[145] See blog by Pete Vowles for a summary of DFID's thinking on this topic: http://blogs.dfid.gov.uk/2013/10/adaptive-programming/.

[146] 'Clinical audit is a quality improvement process that seeks to improve patient care and outcomes through systematic review of care against explicit criteria and the implementation of change.' See: http://www.nice.org.uk/media/796/23/BestPracticeClinicalAudit.pdf.

[147] *After-Action Review: Technical Guidance*, USAID, 2006, http://www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/after_action_review/USAID_AAR_Guide.pdf.

2 Findings

2.99 Such approaches, techniques and attitudes are not used throughout DFID. They are not yet fully part of DFID's standard procedures or culture.

Learning from others

Learning from the experience of all staff

2.100 We heard evidence from staff in several country offices that junior and (even senior) locally employed DFID staff generally 'only give our opinion if asked'. Approaches such as clinical audit and after-action reviews emphasise giving all staff the opportunity to contribute their knowledge. Generalist, administrative and locally employed staff are not being listened to sufficiently by DFID's specialists. They often have much experience of how aid is delivered: know-how. We hope that the development of a new programme management cadre will help to overcome this deficit, especially if the focus is on know-how. DFID staff do not appear to prioritise how they listen to others. This applies to learning internally and from external sources.

Learning from partners delivering aid

2.101 DFID's use of the Evidence Survey indicates that staff believe that DFID remains too much in a mode of trying to manage or change others rather than listen to and support them. For instance, we have noted in our reports that contractors delivering programmes generally have far greater insight and learning about their programmes than does DFID.[148] Our reports have noted how the knowledge and learning collected by partners and contractors is usually not extracted by DFID. This is a key deficit.

Learning from beneficiaries

2.102 ICAI's methodology places a priority on engaging with beneficiaries in order to assess impact of UK aid. Five of our 12 case studies identified significant deficits in how DFID learns from beneficiaries. The worst example we heard of was a project that had received no visit from a member of DFID staff in five years. We have encountered similar examples regularly while undertaking our reviews. The best examples were where offices ensured that regular visits took place and sought out details; and where back-to-office reports, indicating what staff have found, were circulated widely. DFID needs to make these good practices ubiquitous.

2.103 DFID is currently piloting approaches that more directly seek to capture beneficiary feedback from those directly affected by aid programmes. To do this, it has established a beneficiary feedback team.[149] DFID has also prepared a 'How to Note' on beneficiary participation in its monitoring (including in annual reviews). These efforts are valuable and we would expect more focus on this.

2.104 There is no substitute, however, for DFID staff seeing how aid is delivered on the ground. This is the most immediate and, we believe, relevant form of learning. DFID respondents regularly told us of the transformative impact of speaking directly to beneficiaries, both on them and on programmes. For instance, we heard how an entire HIV/AIDS intervention was redesigned after an adviser had spent time in a village talking to the young people it was meant to help. Previous reviews and monitoring reports had not identified that their needs were not being met. This was one example among many of direct contact between DFID staff and beneficiaries fundamentally changing the decisions that staff have already made. Without this level of real learning, the task of scaling up, delivering in fragile environments and achieving lasting impact will be all the more difficult.

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[148] *DFID's Use of Contractors to Deliver Aid Programmes*, ICAI, 2013, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ICAI-REPORT-DFIDs-Use-of-Contractors-to-Deliver-Aid-Programmes.pdf.

3 Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

3.1 We have seen how DFID demonstrates both good and poor learning. DFID allocates huge budgets for knowledge generation and learning, committing over £1.5 billion in total for these activities between 2011 and 2015. We believe that DFID has the potential to be excellent at organisational learning, if the best practices we have seen become common and systematic. There should be no material barriers to this, given the scale of the funds available. DFID should be able to clearly identify what return, in terms of impact, this investment in learning achieves. That it does not do this raises the question whether it is investing in the right sort of learning to have the biggest impact.

3.2 DFID's senior staff are allowing positive changes to take place in how DFID learns. DFID's learning strategy has broadly the right objectives for its needs. The strategy is necessary – but not sufficient – to ensure that DFID learns well. The Learning Council, as it is currently functioning and composed, is not the appropriate mechanism to drive the strategy forward.

3.3 DFID has not clarified how all the elements that contribute to organisational learning fit together. The individual parts of the learning system (individual learning; learning during implementation; monitoring; evaluation; research; synthesis and design) are not managed as a whole. The different ways that DFID collects and manages its knowledge and know-how are not designed and managed to integrate together.

3.4 DFID staff learn well as individuals. They are highly motivated and DFID provides sufficient opportunities and resources for them to learn. As a result, DFID staff perform well in demonstrating personal development when compared with their peers across the Civil Service. The emphasis placed on individual learning and organisational or corporate learning, however, needs to be more equal.

3.5 We believe it is right that DFID (in line with wider Civil Service changes) is increasing the emphasis on learning from experience. Skills for such learning are not yet sufficiently nurtured and

practices that enable continuous lesson learning are not yet commonplace.

3.6 DFID is not sufficiently maintaining know-how: the knowledge that staff have built up through experience. Practices, such as mentoring and handover between postings, are patchy and need reinforcing. This is all the more important given staff turnover and focus on fragile countries.

3.7 DFID demonstrates better organisational learning over long time frames. It invests in the production of high-quality knowledge products, such as research and evaluation. This investment and the recent focus on improving the quality of evidence have been effective. We support efforts to link this knowledge more clearly to implementation. The message that results cannot be achieved unless organisational learning takes place needs to be reinforced. In particular, DFID needs to make sure that it is learning rapidly, over short time periods, so that its learning can effect change and improvement.

3.8 DFID has, however, outsourced much of its knowledge production. Of the £1.5 billion for knowledge generation and learning, it has committed at least £1.2 billion to fund others outside DFID to produce knowledge it can use (specifically research, evaluation and PEAKS). Staff are now primarily consumers of knowledge products rather than producers of knowledge itself. We note that there are risks to this model; staff may not have the practical experience that allows them wisely to use this knowledge to make programming decisions.

3.9 More effort is required to get the incentives right. Managers need to be held to account for ensuring that staff support knowledge sharing and team-based learning. Staff frequently informed us that they do not have time to learn, particularly from each other. Those parts of DFID that demonstrate better practice should be exemplars for the rest of the department. We note, in particular, the positive learning culture and practices among DFID's conflict and humanitarian staff.

3.10 Efforts being made to improve the accessibility of information (for instance the EPE sites) seem to be consistent with needs. The increasing

3 Conclusions and Recommendations

transparency of DFID's documentation is likely to assist with learning. We note, however, that this remains a work in progress. We are concerned that available knowledge is not fully or appropriately used. Efforts to improve the accessibility of knowledge products appear to be beginning to have an impact. We are concerned that, in some cases, DFID staff are dissuaded from using evidence for decision-making.

3.11 We are concerned that DFID does not know how much it spends on evaluation. We are also concerned that DFID does not track what impact evaluations have on what it does. There is no way to identify how DFID's performance is improved as a result of learning from evaluations. As a result, DFID is not able to assess the value for money of its evaluation activities. Equally, we believe that many evaluations are not sufficiently concise or timely to affect decision-making.

3.12 DFID is not building in sufficient opportunities for continuous learning as part of day-to-day oversight and management of tasks. This should be a priority, since DFID is increasingly prioritising its work towards places that are unstable. In such contexts, the ability to learn and make decisions rapidly is essential. Good practices, such as after-action reviews and the audit practice in the Research and Evidence Division, show what is possible.

3.13 We note that annual and project completion reviews are resources that are not fully supporting DFID's learning. We are concerned that the lesson-learning section was removed from the standard format of these reports and is no longer required. Lessons from these reports are not being systematically collated and that there is no central resource regularly quality assuring reviews.

3.14 While it is important that DFID has a results framework, focussing only on results can have a distortive effect. It can reduce the emphasis placed on seeking to understand the bigger picture and to apply best practices.

3.15 There is evidence that DFID staff are sometimes using evidence selectively. It appears this is often driven by managers requiring support for decisions. While such selective use of evidence is not the usual practice across the department, it appears to be occurring with sufficient regularity to be a concern. It is clearly unacceptable.

3.16 Managers themselves are not yet being held to account to ensure that DFID learns well. There is wide variation in practice between departments in DFID, particularly between country offices. There is especially a lack of consistency about how staff appointed in country are able to contribute.

3.17 DFID needs, above all, to increase the opportunities to learn continuously from how aid is implemented. It is not yet demonstrating sufficiently that it consistently learns from all stages of the delivery chain. In particular, it is not learning enough from its partners and contractors.

3.18 This requires greater role clarity among staff on how oversight should take place and a more consistent approach to learning from beneficiaries and at the point of implementation.

Recommendations

3.19 These recommendations focus on changing the implementation of how DFID learns; in other words what is actually done by DFID's staff as they do their jobs. They are not intended to result in additional strategies.

Recommendation 1: DFID needs to focus on consistent and continuous organisational learning based on the experience of DFID, its partners and contractors and the measurement of its impact, in particular during the implementation phase of its activities.[150]

3.20 All elements that contribute to organisational learning (oversight, monitoring, research, evaluation, synthesis and design) need to be managed as a single integrated system. DFID's strategic and day-to-day approach to learning should be driven forward by top management, heads of divisions and departments. The Human Resources department and the Learning Council should not be solely responsible for DFID's learning strategy. DFID's senior staff (the executive management committee) should be more clearly

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[150] This recommendation is broadly consistent with that of DFID's End-to-End review, which proposed more adaptive programming.

3 Conclusions and Recommendations

driving how DFID learns. The pace of changes underway to improve organisational learning in DFID should be accelerated.

3.21 DFID needs to deliberately and continuously listen to and use the knowledge and know-how of partners, contractors and beneficiaries to improve the impact and value for money of UK aid. Regular opportunities for feedback and adaptation should be built in throughout the delivery chain. DFID should keep under review whether it wishes to outsource knowledge production (for instance by PEAKS) to the current extent.

Recommendation 2: All DFID managers should be held accountable for conducting continuous reviews from which lessons are drawn about what works and where impact is actually being achieved for intended beneficiaries.

3.22 Learning needs to specifically contribute to improved performance and impact. The contribution that (in particular) evaluations and reviews have on DFID's performance and impact needs to be more clearly identified and assessed. The Civil Society Department's work on mapping the link between learning and impact should be further developed and expanded across DFID. Techniques already demonstrated within DFID, such as After-Action Reviews (practised by CHASE and referred to as Lessons Reviews) and audit (practised by Research and Evaluation Division) should be implemented throughout DFID.

3.23 A clear message should be given to managers, that the time taken for continuous team learning is not a luxury: it is essential, productive and should be protected. Managers at all levels need to ensure that they fully understand the linkages between learning, improved value for money and impact. The return on investment in learning needs to be made more explicit. Division and department heads need to be formally and specifically held accountable to ensure that continuous learning is one of their top three priorities. This will need to be monitored to ensure that it takes place.

3.24 DFID should seek to maintain a cumulative list of lessons learned throughout a project or programme lifecycle, including technical and management issues and significant events. At appropriate times, significant lessons learned which capture the knowledge gained throughout the project lifecycle should be published. DFID has mechanisms (annual, mid-term and project completion reviews) that can contribute to this process, though they do not explicitly do so and are periodic rather than continuous. Learning needs to be more explicitly the purpose of those reviews. A mechanism for tracking and reporting on action against the recommendations made in evaluations and each project and programme review should be put in place to ensure that lessons are acted upon.

Recommendation 3: All information commissioned and collected (such as annual reviews and evaluations) should be synthesised so that the relevant lessons are accessible and readily useable across the organisation. The focus must be on practical and easy-to-use information. Know-how should be valued as much as knowledge.

3.25 In particular, lessons from annual, mid-term and project completion reviews should be continuously collated and disseminated. It is recommended that there is a single point of contact that staff can go to for this information. This will require dedicated resources. There should also be a rolling process in place that assures the quality of such reviews.

3.26 DFID should continue to improve the accessibility of information through synthesis and signposting – for instance, in the EPE. QUEST – or its replacement – needs to be fit for purpose, particularly the search facility. In particular, QUEST – or its replacement – should be developed explicitly to support organisational learning, not only for document storage. It should support the ability of staff who have had no previous experience of a programme or project to rapidly gain an understanding of, among other things, its background, key events, stakeholders, challenges and achievements. DFID should seek to ensure that lessons are easily digestible and to increase the use of new media to communicate (for example, using video to communicate messages from evaluations).

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Recommendation 4: Staff need to be given more time to acquire experience in the field and share lessons about what works and does not work on the ground.

3.27   DFID should consider increasing the 10% time it allocated for its 'cadre staff' for learning across the department. We strongly recommend that all staff should have a similar allocation of time, not just those in specialist cadres. We also recommend that, if possible, the minimum of five days learning and development should be increased.

3.28   DFID should continue to support both designed networks (such as the cadres) and emergent networks (such as the Urban Virtual Network). Where appropriate to DFID's objectives, these should be resourced and supported.

3.29   Staff should have the skills to identify how projects and programmes are developing and help to course-correct if necessary. DFID should build practices where individuals will learn reflexively as part of everyday tasks. DFID should ensure that handover between staff in post is prioritised. Handover should be more specifically managed and resourced; it is currently too haphazard. All staff should have the opportunity to receive and provide mentoring, based primarily on learning from experience.

3.30   We note that some departments have learning advisers. There are also evaluation and results advisers. These staff could be tasked to facilitate more actively the learning agenda in their departments.

Recommendation 5: DFID needs to continue to encourage a culture of free and full communication about what does and does not work. Staff should be encouraged always to base their decisions on evidence, without any bias to the positive.

3.31   DFID should reinforce amongst its staff the value placed on objectivity in the Civil Service Code. Managers should not choose evidence that justifies decisions, rather they should use evidence to arrive at decisions. Ministers and senior staff must have access to all available evidence in order to make decisions. Staff should not be pressurised to provide selective analysis that does not take account of all available evidence.

3.32   All staff should be encouraged by managers to have their voices heard. In particular, the 40% of DFID staff who are appointed in-country must consistently be able to contribute their knowledge. Blame-free team learning in 'safe spaces' should be commonplace. Managers need to have their ability to support such learning measured. Similarly, how well managers (particularly departmental heads) learn from and accommodate failure needs to be measured and the results captured. The performance against these criteria needs to be reported and weighed alongside other, more traditional programme performance measures. Skills to enable such open communication need to be more deliberately developed and built.

Annex

This Annex provides more detailed background information to the review. This includes the following:

- Annex A1 shows ICAI ratings for learning in our reports published to date;

- Annex A2 shows where DFID staff are posted across the world;

- Annex A3 shows the number of DFID staff in professional cadres and as illustration the location of health advisers, as at September 2013;

- Annex A4 shows the surveys of DFID staff that, among other things, contributed evidence to this review;

- Annex A5 summarises ICAI's assessment of learning in 12 case studies used as evidence for this review. It shows ICAI's initial assessment and how DFID has learnt subsequently; and

- Annex A6 sets out the analytical approach that was used to inform this review.

Annex

Annex A1: ICAI ratings for learning in reports published to date

The following table sets out how we scored the learning section of all our reports to date. The underlined reports were used as specific case studies for this report.

Rating	ICAI Study
G	3. DFID's Climate Change Programming in Bangladesh 4. DFID's Support to the Health Sector in Zimbabwe 6. The Effectiveness of DFID's Engagement with the World Bank 11. Evaluation of DFID's Support for Health and Education in India 14. DFID's Humanitarian Emergency Response in the Horn of Africa 18. DFID's Livelihoods Work in Western Odisha
G A	2. DFID's Approach to Anti-Corruption 7. DFID's Programme Controls and Assurance in Afghanistan 13. The Effectiveness of DFID's Engagement with the Asian Development Bank 15. Evaluation of DFID's Bilateral Aid to Pakistan 17. DFID's Oversight of the EU's Aid to Low-Income Countries 19. DFID's Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Programming in Sudan 21. DFID's work through UNICEF 26. DFID's Health Programmes in Burma 25. DFID's Support to Capital Projects in Montserrat 27. DFID's Support for Palestine Refugees through UNRWA 28. DFID's Empowerment and Accountability Programming in Ghana and Malawi 31. DFID's Bilateral Support to Growth and Livelihoods in Afghanistan 33. DFID's Contribution to the Reduction of Child Mortality in Kenya
A R	5. Girl Hub: A DFID and Nike Foundation Initiative 8. Evaluation of DFID's Electoral Support through UNDP 9. The Management of UK Budget Support Operations 10. DFID's Education Programmes in Three East African Countries 12. Evaluation of the Inter-Departmental Conflict Pool 16. DFID's Education Programmes in Nigeria 23. DFID's Use of Contractors to Deliver Aid Programmes 22. DFID's Support for Civil Society Organisations through Programme Partnership Arrangements 24. FCO and British Council Aid Response to the Arab Spring (N.B. not focussed on DFID) 29. DFID's Support to Agricultural Research
R	20. DFID's Peace and Security Programme in Nepal 30. DFID's Trade Development Work in Southern Africa

The case studies sought to identify the impact learning had on the four key activities that DFID undertakes (see Annex A5):

- ■ making programme choices;
- ■ creating theories of change;
- ■ choosing delivery mechanisms; and
- ■ adapting and improving implementation of its activities.

ICAI's first report was titled ICAI's Approach to Effectiveness and Value for Money. It did not, therefore, include any rating of DFID's performance and so is not included here. ICAI's 32nd report, Rapid Review of DFID's Humanitarian Response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines,[151] did not have a particular score for learning and is also not included. This latter report did, however, say that 'DFID had actively and thoughtfully responded to learning from previous humanitarian crises, especially in relation to DFID's 2011 Humanitarian Emergency Response Review.

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[151] *Rapid Review of DFID's Humanitarian Response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines,* ICAI, March 2014, http://icai.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/ICAI-Philippines-report-FINAL.pdf.

Annex

Annex A2: Countries where DFID staff are posted

The tables below show where DFID staff are posted. DFID uses full-time equivalents (FTE). This table, therefore, does not indicate the actual number of individuals.

(September 2013)

Location[152]	Number of FTE Staff Posts	Location[152]	Number of FTE Staff Posts
United Kingdom	1497.6	Tajikistan	11.0
Nigeria	112.0	Republic of Congo	9.0
India	106.7	Italy	7.0
Pakistan	100.0	Yemen	7.0
Bangladesh	98.0	Montserrat	6.0
Ethiopia	97.9	Switzerland	5.0
Kenya	95.8	Jamaica	4.0
Afghanistan	84.0	France	3.0
Democratic Republic Of Congo	64.0	Libya	3.0
Nepal	59.0	Brazil	2.0
Tanzania	56.0	Luxembourg	2.0
Malawi	53.0	Thailand	2.0
Uganda	51.0	Colombia	1.0
Ghana	45.9	Egypt	1.0
Zambia	44.6	Germany	1.0
Sierra Leone	43.0	Guyana	1.0
Rwanda	42.0	Jordan	1.0
South Africa	41.0	Liberia	1.0
South Sudan	41.0	Lithuania	1.0
Mozambique	36.0	Mali	1.0
Zimbabwe	32.8	Philippines	1.0
Sudan	28.0	Saudi Arabia	1.0
Burma	24.0	St Helena	1.0
Jerusalem[153]	21.0	Turks And Caicos Islands	1.0
Belgium	19.8	**Total**	**3,041.0**
Vietnam	18.0		
Barbados	16.0		
China	14.0		
United States	14.0		
Indonesia	12.0		

Source: DFID.

[152] Posts in locations such as Belgium, Italy, Switzerland and the United States relate to DFID's work with international organisations, such as the European Union, bodies of the United Nations and the World Bank.
[153] Covers DFID's work in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Annex

Annex A3: Cadre posts

The following tables indicate the number of DFID staff who are members of particular cadres. DFID uses full-time equivalents (FTE). This table, therefore, does not indicate the actual number of individuals.

Table A3.1 shows all specialists. DFID is in the process of putting in place a programme management cadre. Table A3.2 indicates, as an example, the countries in which members of an individual cadre (health) are posted.

A3.1 DFID's specialist cadre FTE posts (Sept 2013)

Cadre	HCS	HCS Overseas	SAIC Overseas	Total
Economics	73.5	58.0	14.0	145.5
Governance	38.1	60.6	22.0	120.6
Social Development	30.5	29.0	15.0	74.4
Health	23.7	26.0	17.0	66.7
Private Sector Development	23.3	19.0	16.0	58.3
Evaluation	31.7	16.0	7.0	54.7[154]
Climate and Environment	22.9	16.0	10.0	48.9
Generalist[155]	17.0	14.0	10.0	41.0
Livelihoods	19.8	13.0	3.0	35.8
Statistics	16.5	16.0	2.0	34.5
Conflict	19.3	13.8	1.0	34.1
Infrastructure	15.3	15.0	3.0	33.3
Education	7.3	18.0	8.0	33.3
Humanitarian	10.8	8.0		18.8
Total	**349.7**	**322.4**	**128**	**799.9**

Source: DFID.[156]

A3.2 Location of Health Adviser FTE posts (Sep 2013)

Location	HCS	SAIC	Total
Burma	1.0	1.0	2.0
China		1.0	1.0
Democratic Republic of Congo	1.0	1.0	2.0
Bangladesh	1.0	2.0	3.0
India	1.0	2.0	3.0
Nigeria	2.0	1.0	3.0
South Africa	1.0		1.0
Ethiopia	1.0		1.0
Ghana	1.0		1.0
Indonesia	1.0		1.0
Kenya	4.0	1.0	5.0
Malawi	1.0	2.0	3.0
Mozambique	1.0	1.0	2.0
Nepal	1.0	1.0	2.0
Pakistan	1.0	1.0	2.0
Sierra Leone	1.0	1.0	2.0
Switzerland	1.0		1.0
Tanzania	1.0		1.0
Uganda	2.0	2.0	4.0
UK	23.7		23.7
Zambia	2.0		2.0
Zimbabwe	1.0		1.0
Total	**49.7**	**17.0**	**66.7**

Source: DFID.

[154] DFID has recently undertaken an assessment of its embedded evaluation capacity. It now reports that it has 25 specialist evaluation posts and a further 12 posts with an evaluation component.
[155] DFID uses the classification 'generalist' in its own human resources management, albeit this group does not have a professional head or act as single group.
[156] These are development experts who have usually come from a technical background but are now deployed flexibly.

Annex

Annex A4: Staff surveys used in this review

The following table sets out the DFID surveys that were, among other sources, used to provide information for this report.

Title	Sponsor	Purpose	DFID Respondents
DFID Evidence Survey,[157] 2013	DFID, Research and Evidence Division	Examined how evidence is used across DFID and 'How DFID Learns'.	461
Learning and Talent Management, 2013	DFID	Introduced the Civil Service's 70:20:10 approach & explored the range of different learning options used by DFID staff.	130
Government People Survey, 2012	Cabinet Office	Fourth annual stock take of all 297,000 civil servants looking at the institutional health of their units.	2,285
DFID Use of 10% of Cadre Time Survey, 2011-12.	DFID, Research and Evidence Division	Assessed how individuals' time was allocated for professional development through their professional cadre.	150 (2011) 422 (2012)
DFID Advisory Induction Programmes Survey, 2011-12	DFID	To ask advisers for their views on how DFID can best provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to get up to speed quickly with their new jobs.	56 (2011) 80 (2012)
Strengthening Learning from Research and Evaluation, online survey, 2010	Independent Advisory Committee on Development Impact, Evaluation Department & Overseas Development Institute (ODI)	To provide a broader look at perspectives on lesson learning in DFID. 'Tested' insights and hypotheses that had emerged from earlier interviews.	254

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[157] *Evidence Survey Results Report*, DFID, November 2013, http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/Misc_InfoComm/61188-DFID_Evidence_Survey_2013_report_FINAL.pdf.

Annex

Annex A5: Summary of learning in the 12 case studies

The table below summarises how well DFID demonstrates the impact of learning against the four key decisions (set out in the Terms of Reference). It uses evidence from ICAI's original assessment to identify the impact of learning at the time of our initial report. It also shows where there is significant or partial evidence of learning as a result of ICAI's report. To arrive at this assessment, we revisited our original evidence, drew upon our monitoring reports of how DFID had responded to ICAI recommendations and interviewed our ICAI team leaders and DFID staff in-country. We called for further evidence as required. In no case did we find that learning had not taken place after our report was published.

Case study	Decision — Overall assessment of learning	Creating Theories of Change — ICAI Report	Creating Theories of Change — Subsequent Action	Making Programme Choices — ICAI Report	Making Programme Choices — Subsequent Action	Choosing Delivery Mechanisms — ICAI Report	Choosing Delivery Mechanisms — Subsequent Action	Adapting and Improving Implementation of Activities — ICAI Report	Adapting and Improving Implementation of Activities — Subsequent Action
Humanitarian Emergency Response in the Horn of Africa	(G)	N/A		(G)	P	N/A		(G/A)	S
Livelihoods Work in Western Odisha	(G)	(G)	Project ended	N/A		(G/A)	Project ended	N/A	
Approach to Anti-Corruption	(G/A)	N/A		N/A		(G/A)	P	(G/A)	S
Programme Controls and Assurance in Afghanistan	(G/A)	N/A		N/A		(G/A)	S	(G/A)	P
Oversight of the EU's Aid to Low-Income Countries	(G/A)	(G/A)	P	N/A		N/A		(G/A)	P
Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Programming in Sudan	(G/A)	N/A		(G/A)	P	(G/A)	P	N/A	
Health Programme in Burma	(G/A)	N/A		(G)	S	N/A		(G/A)	S
Girl Hub: A DFID and Nike Foundation Initiative	(A/R)	(A/R)	P	N/A		N/A		(A/R)	P
Management of UK Budget Support Operations	(A/R)	(A/R)	P	N/A		(A/R)	P	N/A	
Education Programmes in Nigeria	(A/R)	N/A		(A/R)	P	(A/R)	S	N/A	
Use of Contractors to Deliver Aid Programmes	(A/R)	N/A		(A/R)	P	(A/R)	P	N/A	
Peace and Security Programming in Nepal	(R)	(R)	S	N/A		N/A		(R)	P

Key: P Evidence of partial learning since ICAI report;   S Evidence of strong learning since ICAI report

Annex

Annex A6: Analytical approach

The literature shows that organisational learning requires innovation, creativity, openness and commitment.[158] This needs to be balanced with stability and continuity, as well as focussing on achieving the organisation's aim.[159] We think these characteristics all need to be in place if DFID is to excel at learning. To help understand how DFID works as a system, we identified six characteristics of effective organisational learning. We used the following to help diagnose where DFID was successful and where blockages to learning might lie:

- **Clarity:** whether DFID has a clear understanding of why learning is important to achieving DFID's objectives;

- **Creation:** where and how new ideas are created, from where they emerge and how they are acquired;

- **Capture:** how knowledge becomes learning;

- **Connectivity:** how knowledge flows across DFID;

- **Communication:** how the right information gets to where it is needed; and

- **Challenge:** how DFID ensures that staff apply learning to improve delivery and impact.

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[158] Knowledge Management is 'the attempt to recognise what is essentially a human asset buried in the minds of individuals and leverage it into an organisational asset that can be used by a broader set of individuals on whose decisions the firm depends' Larry Prusak, Head of Knowledge Management at IBM, cited in Sarah Matthews and Nigel Thornton, *Doing the Knowledge: How DFID Compares with Best Practice in Knowledge Management,* DFID, 2001.
[159] Mija Skerlavaj, Ji Hoon Song and Youngmin Lee, *Organisational Learning Culture, Innovative Culture and Innovations in South Korean Firms*, 2010.

Abbreviations

CEIL	PEAKS – Climate, Environment, Infrastructure and Livelihoods
CHASE	DFID's Conflict, Humanitarian and Security Department
CSO	Civil society organisation
DFID	Department for International Development
EPE	Evidence and Programme Exchange
EPS	PEAKS – Economic and Private Sector
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
GEFA	Global Evaluation Framework Agreement
GSDRC/GSDCH	PEAKS - Governance, Social Development, Humanitarian and Conflict
HCS	Home Civil Service
HEART	PEAKS – Health (including Nutrition) and Education Advice and Resource Team
ICAI	Independent Commission for Aid Impact
IDC	International Development Committee
NAO	National Audit Office
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee
PEAKS	Professional Evidence and Applied Knowledge Services
PPA	Programme Partnership Arrangement
PSGR	Public Sector Governance Reform programme
QAU	Quality Assurance Unit
QUEST	DFID's electronic document and records management programme
R4D	Research for Development
SAIC	Staff Appointed in Country
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
TQA	Technical Quality Assurers
UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development