

Evaluation of the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC): Executive Summary

Upper Quartile (UQ) has undertaken an independent evaluation of the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC). FAC is an international alliance of research organisations coordinated by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). FAC seeks to provide information and advice to improve agricultural policy and practice in Africa in order to reduce poverty and strengthen growth.

FAC was set-up in 2005 with funding from the Department for International Development (DFID) in response to increasing interest in learning how to promote policy reform to stimulate pro-poor and pro-growth agricultural transformation in Africa. FAC does this by contracting pieces of research, by convening conferences and research exchange events on topical issues, synthesising research into policy useful formats, hosting a variety of research outputs on its website and actively communicating information to decision makers. FAC's research is characterised by a **political economy approach**; providing a framework to understand the policies that are "*politically feasible*" in different contexts, why decisions are made and with what effect.

Over time, the geographic and thematic scale, management and governance arrangements for FAC have evolved. FAC now comprises an international secretariat (based at IDS) with three African Regional Hubs (based at Tegemeo Institute of Agricultural Policy and Development; the Institute of Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies; and the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research) and a network of over 130 researchers working across ten research themes.

The focus of this evaluation was on understanding the pathways from high quality outputs to policy and practice change outcomes and impacts, and what can be learnt from the FAC experience in relation to these. The objectives of the evaluation were to:

- Assess the relevance of FAC's policy research and communication work to agricultural policy in Africa;
- Document lessons from FAC, and accordingly, make recommendations and/or outline options for commissioning agricultural policy research; and
- Assess FAC's performance with respect to the achievement of logframe indicators.

The evaluation was commissioned by DFID at the end of a nine year period of core funding. The period covered by the evaluation is 2008 - 2013, but the evaluation team recognises that some outcomes and impact in this period may be due to prior periods of FAC activity, while others may be realised after 2013.

The evaluation Inception Report (Upper Quartile, 2014) clarified the evaluation terms of reference (TOR) (rephrasing focal areas and evaluation questions, and making explicit that the scope of the evaluation did not extend to assessing FAC against comparators). The evaluation sought to answer 11 priority evaluation questions (EQs), with a further six subsidiary questions to be addressed if sufficient evidence was available.

The evaluation methodology tested an ex-post theory of change (TOC) developed with FAC. This complements the overarching theory-based approach with case studies of eight specific 'impact events'. The evaluation used mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, combining desk-based secondary data with desk- and field-based primary data collection and analysis. The evaluation methodology for primary data collection was based on RAPID Outcome Assessment (ROA)¹. The evaluation involved primary research in five countries: the UK, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and South Africa.

The evaluation team experienced several challenges in the implementation of the evaluation and identified various limitations of the approach (specifically the need to adapt the ROA method, limited number of identified impact events, contextual differences between cases, and low response rate to one of the surveys). Overall the team feels that these challenges have limited, but not undermined the robustness of the findings reported.

Part B of this report addresses each of the evaluation questions in turn, presenting a synthesis of the evidence base across all strands of the research and linking this back to the programme TOC. Headline findings are presented in Table E1 below.

1 Developed by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).



Table E1: Evaluation findings

Relevance and engagement	<p>FAC's research themes, political economy orientation and activities closely fit the expressed needs of users. There is more limited, but still sufficient evidence, triangulated across different sources, to conclude that in the main these fit the needs of policy makers and practitioners. Continued review and revision of communication formats and FAC priorities are needed in order to maintain relevance. More attention could be paid to meeting the needs of practitioners within the private sector along with innovative ways for including more 'farmer voice'.</p> <p>There is evidence (although not consistent, programme-wide evidence) that organisations are using FAC knowledge products in their own advocacy work, in project design, to guide their own policy and to complement their own research and internally derived evidence. Often FAC is valued for providing a wider (multi-country) evidence base and interesting perspectives and framing. The perception is that the products are of high quality.</p> <p>FAC has contributed to filling nationally important knowledge gaps, provided new site specific evidence and contributed to new or different framing of key issues. FAC has brought new knowledge from experience elsewhere to national policy debates, although the knowledge may not always be 'new' in a global sense.</p> <p>FAC has worked well with other actors and networks and, in some cases, has been particularly effective in bringing together different actors and organisations in specific events that have sought to reframe policy issues. FAC has provided inputs to a wide variety of other actors and networks, and there are significant opportunities to build and deepen the current relationships.</p>
Policy Processes (outcomes)	<p>The TOC is a valid description of the policy processes observed operating in practice within FAC. FAC's influence on outcomes has been observed to be stronger in some parts of the process than others. Weaknesses were found in the cycles of engagement and reflection with a stronger monitoring and learning system required at outcome level.</p> <p>FAC has built significant capacity among its researchers, fellows and grant recipients. In most cases this capacity is not only sustainable but is growing as researchers use the experience with FAC to further develop their careers and themselves mentor new researchers.</p> <p>The majority of research work currently done by FAC is by Southern based researchers and their influence within the network (as theme convenors and members of the coordination team) is growing. The majority of FAC's policy influencing is led by African FAC members and this has been positively noted by some African policy makers. A major outcome for the researchers is improved job prospects and consultancy opportunities – which further contributes to their influence.</p> <p>Mainstreaming of gender and social difference (GSD) in FAC has not been systematised, nor backed by sufficient authority and resources to have consistent results. The 'demand-led' approach and variable level of focus and expertise of theme convenors and FAC researchers on GSD have contributed to limited integration of GSD in outputs and outcomes. "Mainstreaming" in capacity building has been effective in ensuring a good representation of women as ECF and grant holders, but women remain very under-represented among more senior FAC researchers, especially in some countries.</p> <p>Earlier EQs show FAC to have achieved significant and sustainable research capacity outcomes, and with research and influencing increasingly led by southern researchers. Data from FAC knowledge product users, although not statistically representative, show increasing levels of uptake; with many considering that their knowledge of agricultural policy and ability to engage has increased. Theory-based analysis shows that FAC is influencing policy processes at the outcome level, but current monitoring is not sufficient to quantify this at programme level. Individual impact case studies do show outcome level policy change.</p>
Influencing policy (Impact)	<p>Evidence from the impact case studies show that the FAC TOC is operating at the impact level. The evaluation identified one case of current impact and six cases of limited current impact; in four of these there was significant potential for future impact. Some attribution is possible at the 'influence of evidence' and 'capacity to use PE thinking' level of the TOC. At the 'adoption of policy and practice' (super-impact level of the TOC) contributions from FAC can be identified. Quantifying the contribution, or using the null hypothesis to estimate what would have happened without FAC, remains difficult.</p>
Lessons from FAC experience	<p>Starting as a consortium provided the appropriate springboard for FAC to develop into a predominantly African-based network of researchers, coordinated through a number of hubs. The network approach provides value for money by enabling productive research and capacity building relationships with individuals, without the significant transaction costs of developing formal relationships with 50+ organisations across Africa. Decentralisation remains a work in progress, with increasing African ownership and decreasing reliance on DFID core funding. In the past two years FAC has had significant success in attracting project funding; recognition of FAC's value to a variety of organisations.</p> <p>FAC shows significant use of evidence in African policy making, but also that the relationship between research derived evidence and policy making is not simple. Evidence is used to justify existing policy choices and to convince others that the policy being promoted is supported by evidence. Evidence is also used to improve delivery and to counter criticism in the media or elsewhere.</p> <p>FAC has followed the key recommendations of previous reviews within the funding available. A hub structure hosted by African organisations has been implemented as recommended and the limited experience to date appears to be successful. Progress is being made with links to NEPAD and the AU. However, in the last year the ECF and the role of country coordinators has paused due to lack of funding. DFID has not followed recommendations for increased quantity and certainty of funding, and FAC is struggling to manage a rapid transition to project funding.</p> <p>DFID provided FAC with the security and flexibility to develop into an increasingly African capacitated network delivering significant value. Evidence for this comes from two MTRs and the current final evaluation. FAC is increasingly succeeding in winning project funding but still relies on DFID for core funding; although this has reduced from 100% to under 40% in the last two years. Delays in DFID launching a competitive call for policy research has created uncertainty that is proving difficult to manage while trying to maintain the value and viability of the FAC network. Lessons include formally responding to external review recommendations and managing changes in funding regimes in ways that minimise uncertainty. Building network capacity takes time. To maximise returns on DFID investment, the timing for withdrawal of core support should be objectively assessed and proactively managed.</p> <p>Evidence from the impact case studies show that limited investment in a researcher network model of delivery seems capable of producing quadruple wins in terms of: quality research output, communication, policy influencing and capacity building. VRM is increased through the non-financial incentives possible with such a model and paying attention to organisational culture and relationships. It is necessary to experiment with monitoring and learning systems able to track outcomes and contribution to impact in a complex environment. Additional value may be released by increasing collaboration between DFID staff, other programmes and the FAC network.</p>



Table E1: Evaluation findings (continued)

Lessons from FAC experience (continued)	<p>The VfM of FAC at activity level is good, with a significant volume of publications produced with modest resource. It has not been possible to rigorously assess VfM or return on investment at outcome or impact level. There is qualitative evidence that the processes followed by FAC do deliver VfM, albeit, management controls may be tightened to ensure accountability and maintain productivity. Limited data from some impact case studies show very small FAC expenditure in relation to very large potential benefits. Therefore, even a very small contribution to change could represent significant benefits compared to costs.</p>
	<p>Despite exhaustive enquiries, few unintended consequences came to light. Lessons include the importance of risk analysis and continuation of flexible planning to be able to make use of surprises.</p>
	<p>A proportionate and cross-cutting focus on CAADP processes was appropriate, with opportunities available for FAC to add value; although, how important a user of evidence and influencer of policy and practice CAADP actually is at national and regional level is contested. The approach to CAADP as initially envisaged and implemented by FAC was, however, not appropriate and some opportunities were missed. More recently, decentralisation of FAC has increased its legitimacy with CAADP and its capacity to engage in the CAADP continental processes. To date the influence of FAC's work on AU/ CAADP processes has come about mainly through FAC building an evidence base on themes of relevance to AU/CAADP policy makers, and then generating demand for further evidence within AU or CAADP institutions through on-going direct engagement with key officials and existing policy forums. This strategy is coherent with the FAC TOC and PE approach.</p>

Part C of the report draws attention to a number of additional or cross-cutting issues for discussion. Many of these would need further work to confirm findings and to reflect in detailed recommendations. Part C makes a small number of recommendations for both FAC and DFID.

Issues for discussion on FAC organisation

FAC's flexible and researcher-driven planning process keeps it relevant. It may need to be combined with a more rigorous approach to prioritisation of themes to avoid spreading resources too thinly and to ensure adequate reflection, monitoring, adjustment and follow through.

To improve outcomes and impact, FAC should focus its contribution on particular policy processes, using its TOC combined with internal political economy analysis of each engagement opportunity, in order to identify FAC's core comparative advantage in relation to other actors. This process should be backed-up by more explicit and documented cycles of engagement and reflection.

To maintain and increase relevance, FAC could develop co-creation mechanisms for inputs in the process of defining, commissioning, generating and peer reviewing knowledge products by forward thinking and ambitious end-users amongst policy makers and practitioners.

With FAC moving into a phase of greater reliance on project funding, there is a danger that effective capacity building through Early Career Fellowships (ECF) will get squeezed out. FAC may wish to consider ways to integrate a flexible ECF scheme into project funding, with ECF opportunities advertised in relation to specific projects.

Communications through new and traditional non-specialist mass media (especially television which is important for influencing politicians and higher level policy makers) matters. FAC should continue to invest in communications capacity as this will add value to FAC's overall impact.

Mainstreaming gender and social difference (GSD) across FAC will require a commitment from all senior staff, as well as systems for ensuring incorporation of GSD in planning, implementation and peer review. This will require additional human resources, preferably decentralised to Africa. Systems for monitoring the progress of mainstreaming GSD in each theme and as a cross-cutting issue should be developed.

FAC delivers most value through synergy between themes/ disciplines and systematically incorporating political economy across them. This can be further deepened. Geography is also important with much agricultural policy being driven at national level. Creating FAC organisational capacity and synergy at country as well as regional hub level is a future challenge for FAC that provides the opportunity to increase overall impact.

Insufficient monitoring capacity as well as lack of funding for annual reflection workshops has left FAC with a weak evidence base on both outcome and impact. Although monitoring outcomes and impact from research and policy influencing work is not straightforward, more should be done. There is a need for FAC to experiment with ways of monitoring and learning (M&L) linked to a clear TOC, building on FAC's earlier use of the Participatory Impact Pathways Analysis (PIPA), or ROA methods.

FAC has produced significant outputs with a very limited institutional and management footprint. To



an extent this has relied on the goodwill and above contracted hour commitment from key staff. With the move towards increased multi-donor project funding, the management load will increase in both winning funds, managing an increasingly complex portfolio and reporting to multiple donors. Judicious additional investment in management, M&L and organisational capacity is needed, while remaining lean and networked in order to maintain FAC's comparative advantage, value for money and sustainability. With DFID core funding coming to an end, project funding will have to contribute more towards the core costs and there may be a temporary overheads deficit that needs to be managed. A clear business plan is required.

The evaluation's impact case studies revealed some insight into policy influencing 'enablers'. Although these did tend to be context specific, some enablers are common across a number of impact events:

- Involvement of dynamic and committed individuals, who are interested in using evidence, in decision making positions;
- Availability of pre-existing research evidence and political economy analysis;
- Involvement of experienced and respected capacity to support the process; and
- An appropriate '*moment*'.

The impact case studies also provided some insight into policy change 'inhibitors'. These inhibitors are also context specific and were commonly a disruptive external event or difficult to influence political system. Political economy (PE) analyses of the influencing context, working with the appropriate people within the system and being sufficiently nimble to deal with surprises, were all found to be useful in reducing the influence of policy change inhibitors.

The FAC Africa Hub model appears to be working, with the advantage of the current arrangement being that hub hosts can be changed if the synergy on either side is no longer beneficial. The hubs can evolve through increased African leadership and further decentralisation of capacity, but this will need funding confidence. Hubs may need a local legal status in order to qualify for some funding opportunities.

Issues for discussion on DFID support for agricultural policy research

DFID started by funding a consortium of UK-based research organisations. This has developed into a network of 130+ evidence producers, 2,000 regular and 65,000 occasional evidence "consumers", with increasing exposure in the African media and success in winning project funding. This underscores the value of FAC as a network (over and above the value of each individual consortium member), and raises the question of how important it is for FAC to be sustained as a network, whether FAC can survive without DFID or other core funding and whether DFID has particular opportunities or responsibilities in this regard.

FAC's researcher led network approach has a number of features, including flexibility and non-financial incentives based on organisational culture with consequent lower costs, which make it good value for money (VfM). As a researcher led network, FAC has a comparative advantage in getting topical, policy-relevant evidence rapidly into the public domain, in providing alternative framing² to issues, in convening debate and in building African policy researcher capacity while doing this.

While providing core support to FAC, DFID has avoided micro-management and created space for researchers to prioritise themes and activities. This has positively reflected on the relevance of FAC outputs to many users.

It is important that FAC is an increasingly African dominated network and this should not be compromised. However, there are under-exploited opportunities for more synergy between FAC evidence and Africa based capacity on one hand and DFID advisers in country on the other. Realising this synergy will require raising awareness of opportunities for collaboration on both sides.

Tables E2 and E3 set out the evaluation's recommendations for FAC and for DFID.

² See Glossary of Terms for a definition.



Table E2: Recommendations to FAC

1. Invest in an outcome and learning focussed M&L system with adequate capacity. This could be linked with innovative approaches to measuring and learning about outcome and impact, with a focus on enablers and inhibitors in different contexts. This could profit from the experience of ODI.
2. Invest in additional limited high quality management and organisational capacity. This should be linked to a clear business plan with project funding contributing sufficiently to the core costs.
3. Continue to evolve the hub model and further reinforce African leadership, input and output. The additional capacity recommended in recommendation 2, should be located in one or more of the African hubs, providing virtual input across all hubs, similar to what is currently being successfully practiced on communications. The appropriate legal status of the hubs should be further investigated.
4. Develop ways of integrating the ECF scheme in a flexible way into a largely project funded portfolio to maximise synergy between evidence generation and capacity building. Dedicated funding for ECF capacity building should also be sought.
5. Look into ways of co-creating evidence to ensure relevance and ownership of policy makers and practitioners. Develop institutional mechanisms for end-user input into research generation and peer review.
6. Mainstream gender and social difference by developing appropriate organisational systems, including for planning and peer reviewing work, and provide the resources required to back these up.

Table E3: Recommendations to DFID

1. Having invested in the creation of a network with future value, DFID should manage its exit from core funding in ways that minimise risk of value loss and maximise potential future returns from the investment made.
2. If the exit strategy from an accountable grant includes an opportunity for replacement with competitive funding, this should include realistic assessment on the timescale for DFID launch and contracting and formal consideration of contingency risk management actions if the timetable changes.
3. While not making recommendations on criteria for a future competitive tender, the following lessons from FAC suggest that consideration should be given to:
 - a. The specific advantages of a researcher led structure in terms of flexibility, getting information rapidly into the public domain, convening and framing debates; it would make sense for a proportion of future research funding to be researcher-led;
 - b. The potential VfM of creating synergy between policy research, communications, capacity building and using the evidence to influence policy;
 - c. Ways of combining African ownership which is valued by policy makers with access to global thinking and communications;
 - d. Organisational culture, relationships and individuals matter and help deliver value; therefore support organisational models that build and increase VfM through non-financial incentives.
4. Develop institutional mechanisms to enable DFID staff, country offices and partners to engage creatively with centrally funded research, evidence generation, communication and policy processes, thus releasing the latent opportunities for synergy.