

# Policy Brief: Independent Review of the Developmental Leadership Program Partnership (Phase 2) with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

## Introduction

The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research initiative established by the Australian Government which explores how leadership, power and political processes drive or block successful development. It is based at the University of Birmingham (UoB) in collaboration with University College London (UCL) and La Trobe University (LTU) in Melbourne for a second phase (March 2014 - August 2018) funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) (AUD\$8.6m with an additional AUD\$1m from other sources).

This mid-term review was undertaken by an independent consultant in collaboration with the DFAT Governance Team and DLP Management. It is based on extensive consultations with DLP, DFAT and external stakeholders during May-June 2016.

DLP employs 14 staff, including ten researchers with both qualitative and quantitative skills, as well as research associates working on 62 projects covering 27 countries across five research themes (Politically Informed Programming; Elites and Political Settlements; Reform Coalitions; Leaderships; and Attitudes, Values and Ideas) and cross cutting issues (corruption, gender, the interfaces of the state, and inequalities). In the first two years of its second phase, DLP has already delivered 14 research papers, seven state of the art papers, 18 other papers, ten peer reviewed publications, ten book chapters and three books.

## Achievements

DLP Phase 2 is a very successful research program which has already achieved its objective of producing “a body of high quality, rigorous, policy-relevant research to deepen understanding of the political processes and the role of power in development”. In just two years, DLP has gained an international reputation as one of the best programs on the interface between research and policy advice on power, politics and development. It is highly regarded by its target constituencies, mainly in the development policy world. It has deepened the understanding of political processes and the role of power in development, through both conceptual pieces (e.g. on political analysis; contribution of service delivery to state legitimacy; corruption) as well as country case studies (e.g. telecoms reform in Myanmar; women’s coalitions in Pacific).

DLP research is relevant. It has met DFAT expectations in terms of Asia-Pacific regional priorities. It has an explicit focus on gender as a cross-cutting issue and is seen by DFAT as delivering some strong products. It has generated a debate on the role of gender relations in governance processes. However, the extensive production and wide scope make it hard to identify DLP’s core focus and top messages.

The quality of papers was seen to be mixed by stakeholders which is not unusual for applied research programs given the range of projects and researchers. A push for academic publications in high profile journals would demonstrate quality and rigour.

DLP excels at policy uptake, the most significant improvement since Phase 1. Influence in DFAT ranges from stimulating thinking (e.g. new insights about Myanmar or corruption) to actually shaping policy and programs (e.g. new DFAT funded research on governance and gender; influence on DFAT’s approach to scholarships).

DLP has to engage with different DFAT audiences (e.g. with development or with diplomatic professional backgrounds) and helps them think about the political dimensions of their development policy and programming work. Face to face interactions, rather than papers, may be the most effective way through which DLP is able to have policy influence. Policy uptake has also extended globally well beyond DFAT, including in DFID, USAID, World Bank, UNDP, OECD and many others. DLP's visibility, research and policy agenda have benefited from its participation in the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice which has influenced international development policy. In turn, DLP has played a crucial role in the CoP effectiveness, acting as both a facilitator and a member able to shape global thinking.

The DLP-DFAT partnership is based on close collaboration, with trust and mutual appreciation between DLP and the DFAT Governance Team. The grant provides core funding with flexibility on how funds can be used to deliver the main objectives. Priorities are agreed through mutual negotiations at Annual High Level Meetings, where both DLP and DFAT present and discuss their respective priorities. Annual workplans rather than a detailed logframe, and funding for staff salaries rather than target days, create a secure yet flexible funding base. The DFAT Governance Team acts as an internal champion for DLP research and dissemination. The partnership becomes more complex beyond the Governance Team within DFAT, in particular managing other central or regional teams contributing to the program who would like to be more directly involved or commission work rather than core funded research.

DLP Phase 2 success factors include:

- Personal factors: Strong personal commitments have positively shaped DLP's organisational culture and reputation, with supportive management, academic professionalism and intellectual independence.
- High quality DLP-DFAT partnership, enabled by DFAT organisational ambition, systems and staff personalities. DLP's style of engagement, with research seen as a joint endeavour between DLP researchers and its policy or practitioner audience, improves its relevance and policy impact.
- Good timing: DLP 2 arrived on the international stage when there was growing demand for its work on politics and development. It was able to make the most of this window and take it further with the right supportive style.
- Limited competition: There are very few organisations or research programs dedicated to politics and development also able to meet this new demand.

Factors that constrain its achievements include:

- Differences in expectations and perceptions. DLP does not yet appear to be a fully coherent program due to significant differences between DLP in Australia and in the UK (e.g. in terms of research topics, expertise or partnerships). The difficult start to DLP 2 (budget cuts, illness of senior staff) and the absence of an inception period prevented the three partner organisations from coming together and developing a truly shared and clearly articulated vision and strategy.
- Externally, stakeholders are confused between the UK and Australian parts of the partnership and different DLP staff institutional identities (UoB, UCL, LTU).
- Within DFAT, there are different expectations within the core grant between core research, commissioned research and consultancy-type work.
- Management challenges: a difficult start at a time of Australian aid structural changes and budget cuts, a broad workplan, limited administrative resources and university systems not always flexible or fast enough.
- Financial challenges: DLP has been operating in an uncertain financial environment (initial grant cut to AUD\$4.5m then raised over time to AUD\$8.6m).
- Value for money: DLP offers good economy and effectiveness but could improve its efficiency. Annual work planning is based on a flexible approach with built-in over-commitment. A third of its projects have been cancelled or put on hold.

## Lessons

The DLP-DFAT strategic partnership offers lessons for other research programs:

- The right attitude helps bridge research and policy: DLP has excelled at developing a relationship of trust between academics and development practitioners.
- Research findings have to be made accessible: short, timely products, with accessible language, face to face meetings or email exchanges.
- Internal champions are fundamental for policy uptake: the Governance Team is able to facilitate direct access between researchers and staff members, identify opportunities for internal influencing, and disseminate research outputs in a targeted manner.
- Independent research and commissioned work are both valuable.
- The funded organisation needs to clarify and manage expectations of its funder and, conversely, the funding organisation also needs to clarify and manage expectations internally, especially when different teams contribute resources.

The partnership also offers lessons for other donor-funded grants. First, give time for inception and do not impose consortium members without negotiations to create stronger partnerships. Second, basing programs on persons rather than organisations is a high risk strategy. Personal networks are important for success but dependence on key persons means the program could easily start to underperform.

## Recommendations

DLP is a very successful research program which has already achieved its main objective of producing a body of high quality, rigorous, policy relevant research on power, politics and development at the mid-term point of its second phase. It has the potential to become independent of DFAT and flourish.

To plan its future beyond the current DFAT grant, DLP management should: decide and communicate a vision for DLP post 2018; invest in ongoing support from UoB management for a continuation of a UoB-led DLP 3; clarify LTU Institute for Human Security and Social Change's own vision as part of DLP; make the most of existing resources to clarify DLP's message and reputation; and fund a more systematic Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning data collection.

In order to successfully complete the current grant, DLP management should: prioritise what can be delivered in the remaining period, including a focus on fewer but high quality synthesis papers which bring together research to date and push the boundaries of the agenda; consider different way of managing resources (especially workloads) to deliver priorities and improve value for money; increase its administrative capacity; improve its external communication about its component organisations; clarify DLP branding with a policy for commissioned work; and ensure all DLP core staff and collaborators live up to DLP's collaborative approach.

In addition, to improve the grant's performance in its last two years, the DFAT Governance Team should clarify expectations of DLP from across different DFAT teams. DLP, DFAT and the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice should also clarify the current and future role of DLP within the Community of Practice.

Beyond the current grant, DFAT management should decide its future collaboration with DLP post 2018 based on DLP's performance to date and DLP's future vision, and improve ways of managing funding from different DFAT teams. DFAT management can also proactively apply the lessons learned from this review to other research partnerships to improve policy uptake and find ways of meeting the needs of those parts of DFAT less used to working with external research or policy organisations.