

Global Food Security Programme (GFS) Public Panel Evaluation and Impact Review

Executive Summary

Overview

The Global Food Security programme (GFS) established a UK public panel in February 2015 to act as a sounding board for GFS, by providing an “ongoing, flexible and responsive mechanism to engage with the public on food security issues and to inform the development and directions of GFS’s research priorities”.

3KQ – a consultancy providing independent public and stakeholder engagement expertise – was commissioned as the independent evaluator for the project. 3KQ’s final evaluation report was published in March 2016, coinciding with the end of the initial funding period for the panel.

In September-October 2016, 3KQ was asked to carry out a short piece of follow-up work on behalf of the GFS programme, with the aim of reviewing the effectiveness and impacts of the GFS public panel engagement activities. Undertaking a review at this stage (six months after the close of panel activities) offers the potential for reports to be fully digested, impacts to become clearer and learning identified – with a degree of hindsight and perspective beyond the practicalities of the final stages of project delivery.

The review drew on a number of evidence sources, including existing outputs of the public panel activities, interviews with key stakeholders, online and academic searches for references in documents or websites to each of the panel activities and the panel overall. It focused on the panel activities led by GFS partners, covering topics including: insects as animal feed, food systems, urban agriculture, innovation, sustainable intensification, and buying British. For each activity it examined the current or expected impacts and reviews the effectiveness of the method used.

Key findings

Un-incentivised engagement activities. Information collected via ‘ad hoc’ panel engagement activities is of limited use for seeking or compiling views on specific topics, due to the unstructured, unmoderated method of collection. It does, however, have the potential to aid engagement and retention.

Other similar processes should be very clear about why any non-incentivised activities are being undertaken. For example, if there is expectation that this type of interim engagement activity will deliver more robust data, it should probably be incentivised, and enough time should be taken to ensure the process and questions deliver useful outputs (as with any other incentivised activity).

References and reach. References to specific GFS public panel activities and the panel as a whole beyond the panel section of the GFS website and the relevant dialogue page of the Sciencewise website were very limited. It is probably too early to expect academic references to the GFS public panel to appear, but the lack of online references from relevant organisations indicates that either the panel outputs have not travelled much further than their immediate users, and/or that the outputs did not present accessible and repeatable key messages. Discussions with key stakeholders suggests that there was an element of both these factors impacting the final reach of the panel outputs.

In future similar processes, more emphasis should be given to confirming clear communication protocols with the stakeholders closest to the process and their organisations, and involving more stakeholders from partner organisations and other interested parties (including those who have

limited experience of public engagement, to enable first-hand experience of this kind of process). The production of very short high-level summaries of key findings would enable researchers and policy makers to easily see the main messages emerging from a specific activity or set of activities.

Methodology. The detailed design and methodology for each panel activity was, on the whole, credible, effective and of good quality. Where issues arose, these tended to relate to four key areas of context and design:

- **Scope.** A stronger focus on specific issues and relevant real-life examples (rather than broader topics) may have elicited clearer outputs with more explicit impacts.
- **Time.** The availability of time was a commonly restricting factor – either because of the various delays in panel delivery constricting the period available for undertaking activities, or because panel responses were feeding into a specific piece of work with a fixed deadline.
- **Reporting.** More succinct summaries provided separately from the main reports would have potentially been a valuable communication tool for wider stakeholders.
- **Avoiding bias.** Although the overall level of balance in materials and discussions appears to have been good, interviewees expressed a couple of specific concerns about potential bias. Two actions may have alleviated this: more time and a concerted effort to involve the full range of views in material development and at events; collection of “uninfluenced” participant views on specific topics at the beginning of activities.

The panel model offers something that traditional commissioned surveys do not provide: participants with increased background understanding that are able to make considered responses to complex issues. The panel model can provide a useful way of bringing in public views to discussions where they had traditionally not been present, for doing quick (unrepresentative) dipstick tests on specific time-crucial topics, and for learning how increases in knowledge might change attitudes and behaviour. But it should be used as part of a wider set of information, rather than a single source to define ‘what the public thinks’.

The GFS panel led to a lot of learning about process and public views, though it is difficult to pinpoint the precise value of the panel as a model due to the issues with delivery and delay that were experienced across the period of its delivery.

Impacts. Six months after the close of the panel, the various different activities have led to a range of reported impacts. Cross-cutting messages about these impacts based on observations and interviews are as follows:

- Many of these impacts are softer impacts such as “informing” or “reinforcing”, but there are also some more concrete examples of specific things happening that may not otherwise have happened or been considered – for example the inclusion of a specific recommendation in a report.
- The full impacts of many panel activities have probably not yet been realised – particularly where there is currently limited activity around the relevant topics.
- All of the panel activities were intended to shape thinking as one form of input, alongside the policy and business inputs that are commonly considered by GFS and its partners. The most concrete impacts tended to occur where the topic was clearly focused and fed into a specific piece of decision-making.
- Impacts from specific activities (and indeed the panel overall) could potentially have been increased by: enabling more time to plan and report on specific activities; targeting panel activities on specific emerging policy or research issues; running multiple activities of relevance to particular key stakeholders or organisations; holding small launches, presentation events or workshops to increase visibility of outputs.