

## Jon Bennett, ONIC Presentation Notes

The 'anxiety' around evidence is self-induced. It's a reflection of two things: (1) the increasing demand for accountability, stoked by public opinion on aid in general; and (2) the fact that the aid business produces increasing numbers of desk-bound 'experts' who need to make their mark by defining or reinventing methods.

The anxiety over evidence coincides with a general move away from 'hands-on' intervention in the 1980s-1990s towards the intermediary, and to some extent regulatory, role played by international experts and organisations in the new millennium. A corollary to this has been growing academic specialisation and a new generation which, lacking a breadth of field experience, compensates with increasingly sophisticated methodologies seeking to derive and interpret knowledge. Notwithstanding the debate over the quality of evidence thus gathered, the quest for and acquisition of evidence-based knowledge has in many circles led to 'overload'. Hence the amount of Executive Summary reading only, and even that within a very limited number of people.

My key points:

1. **Evidence for whom?** The evaluation of the UK's governance programme in Syria was keenly followed by FCO, MoD and other departments of government keen to acquire elusive field knowledge of the situation on the ground. The developmental outcomes (DFID's sphere of interest) were – at least in Whitehall circles - a thin veil for more pressing geopolitical interests.
2. **Evidence for what?** Ostensibly, the DFID-supported "Tamkeen" governance programme in Syria was to improve accountability and transparency of local government. In reality, most project recipients were only interested in the short-term grants that came with the programme. They were in 'humanitarian' mode while the programme promoted a 'development' mode. The two narratives rubbed together uncomfortably.
3. **Sanitized evidence.** Remotely managed evidence gathering – the passing of evidence through at least three levels of interpretation before it reached the client - involved a great deal of smoke and mirrors. For example, it took only a few months for local governments in Syria to begin talking of 'gender sensitivity' in their donor proposals and to avoid any reference to outlawed militarized factions that roamed their streets.