

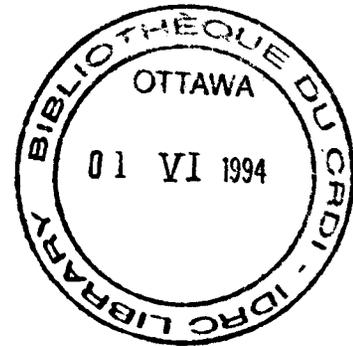
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## THE ROLE OF EVALUATION IN PLANNING

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\* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors; they do not necessarily represent the views of the International Development Research Centre. The authors work in the Office of Planning and Evaluation, IDRC, and hold positions of Deputy Director, Planning Officer and Director respectively.

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## INTRODUCTION

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is an autonomous public corporation created by the Parliament of Canada in 1970 with two principal objectives:

- (1) to initiate, encourage, support and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions;
- (2) to assist the developing regions to build up the research capabilities, the innovative skills and the institutions required to solve their problems.

The activities supported by the Centre are concentrated in the sectors of agriculture, food and nutrition sciences; health sciences; social sciences; information sciences; communications; and training. The Centre also funds cooperative research between Canadian and Third World scientists. IDRC is financed solely by the Parliament of Canada. However its policies are set by an International Board of Governors. The headquarters are in Ottawa, with regional offices in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

Perhaps the most important point of introduction is that the Office of Planning and Evaluation in IDRC was established nine years after the Centre itself was created. This does not mean that planning and evaluation did not take place prior to the establishment of the Office, nor does it mean that the Office took over these functions. The Directors of Divisions and their professional colleagues, including the Directors of the Regional Offices, have been and continue to be the main agents conducting planning and evaluation activities, as part of their managerial and professional responsibilities. The role of the Office of Planning and Evaluation is more oriented towards encouraging, facilitating and co-ordinating these activities, combining them into a more coherent system that is appropriate to the Centre's mandate and philosophy.

This paper concentrates on the lessons that the office has learned in attempting to fulfil this role over the last five years. Particular emphasis is placed on operating principles and procedures, as opposed to evaluation methodology.

The combination of the two functions\* of planning and evaluation under one responsibility centre is considered to be a source of strength. It certainly appeals to logic: in the light of the conventional wisdom about the need to feed back the results of evaluations into planning in order to improve resource allocation decisions, the tendency for organizations to institutionalize the divorce of the two functions by creating separate responsibility centres for planning and for evaluation has to be viewed with some scepticism. Delineation of evaluation as a separate field of specialization incurs the inevitable cost of creating barriers between it and the rest of the world, including those who should be the main beneficiaries and users of evaluation information.

At the project, or "micro", level in IDRC, planning and evaluation are conducted continuously by the same people: the researchers and the program officers. At the divisional, or "macro", level, the Directors responsible for managing the divisions also plan and evaluate simultaneously. The institutionalization of these functions into one office merely mirrors the existing realities in the organization, and in our view enhances considerably the relevance and utilization of the work.

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\* It is in fact three: OPE contains a silent "P" for Policy, since the office is also responsible for Centre-wide policy analysis.

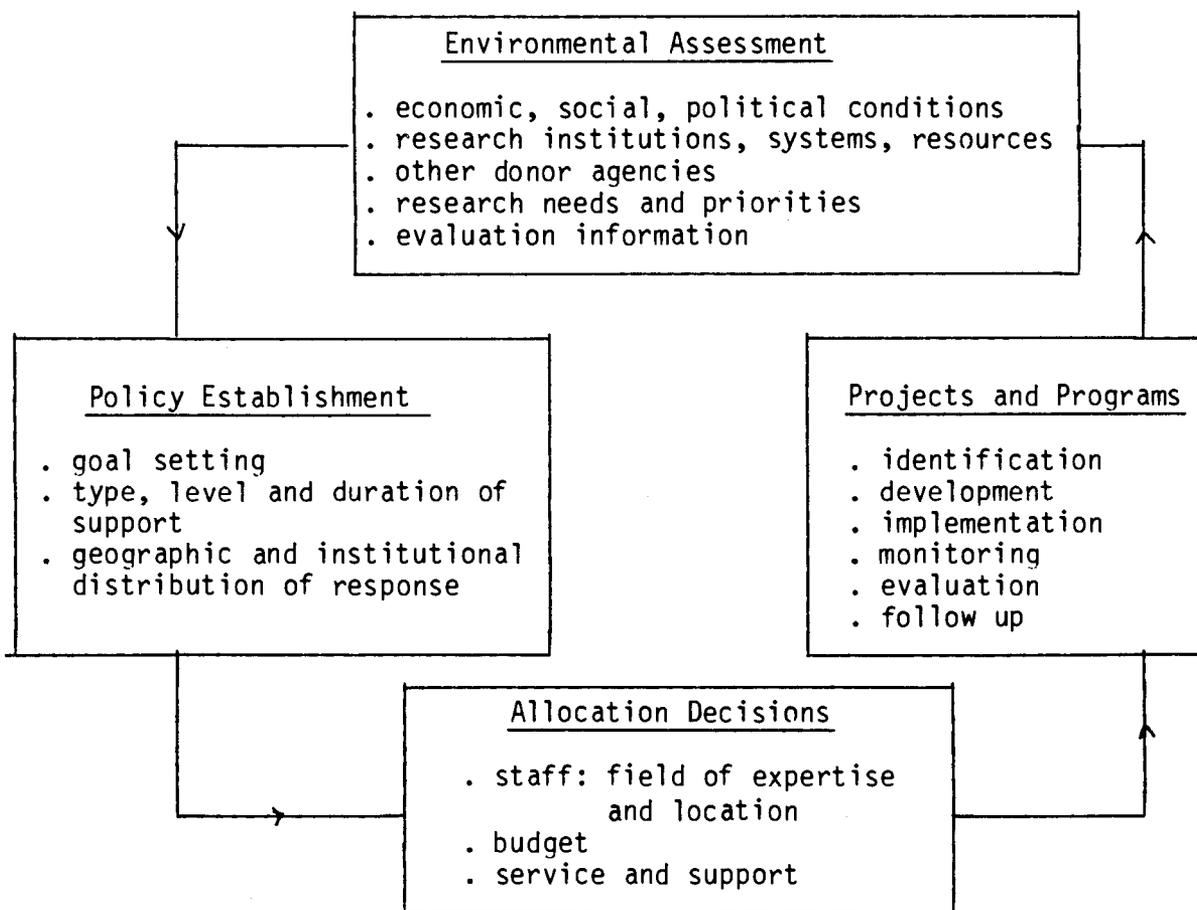
## THE IDRC CONTEXT

There are two main characteristics of the Centre that need to be described in order to set the evolving evaluation system in context.

- (1) IDRC deals with **research** and research-related activities. In contrast to (say) development programming for which, at least in theory, research has already been done and therefore the degrees of confidence about what will happen should be relatively high, research is, by definition, a process that seeks an answer which is not known in advance. This means that greater emphasis needs to be placed on the time and effort spent on **ex ante** assessment, ("of all the questions to which we might be seeking an answer, is this the right one and are we going about it the right way...?"), as opposed to **ex post** evaluation. It also means that "after the fact" evaluations should be geared to facilitating those **ex ante** planning and appraisal deliberations.
  
- (2) IDRC is a research **funding** organization: it has chosen not to conduct any research itself. The basic unit of operation is the research project that is designed, developed and implemented in a developing country, **by** scientists of that country, and according to the development needs and objectives of the country. In a real sense, the projects are "theirs", not "ours" (IDRC's). This has important implications for the management of IDRC. The corporate objectives make reference to the "problems of the developing regions of the world" and to the development of an indigenous capacity to tackle these problems. Therefore, whatever intermediate objectives IDRC may have for its programs, they are ultimately subsumed by those of the Third World: if **they** solve **their** problems, the Centre's mandate is satisfied. At the operational level, this means that each project activity supported by the Centre has two "program" contexts: first that of the IDRC program from which the activity is partially funded, and second, the research program of the institution(s) responsible for the management of all the resources used in implementing the project. In terms of fulfilment of IDRC's corporate objectives, the second program context is more important, since it is the local program that should be oriented towards the local development needs.

It is against this background that the Office of Planning and Evaluation has evolved an approach tailored to the particular characteristics of the Centre. It should be noted that the operating principles described below refer to only **one component** of a broader, complex and integrated system. To a certain extent, dissecting one component - namely formal evaluation work - for separate treatment already contradicts the principle of integrating all parts of the system, especially evaluation with planning. Time and space prohibit a full description of the total system, but Figure 1 goes some way to illustrating the main elements.

FIGURE I : IDRC'S PLANNING AND EVALUATION CYCLE



This diagram serves to emphasize the cyclical integrated nature of the system. Allocation decisions, be they at the project or divisional level are guided by policies and goals, which in turn are derived from information on developing country research needs and priorities, on what other donors are doing, and on past and current projects and programs. This information is obtained by travel and interaction of IDRC Program Officers with Third World researchers and policy makers, from trip reports, staff meetings, workshops, project completion reports and formal studies, including evaluation studies. This last item provides the main subject of attention in what follows.

#### OPERATING PRINCIPLES FOR EVALUATIONS

1. Evaluations are oriented to meeting **user needs** and therefore to **utilization**. Just as Centre Program Officers interact with developing country researchers to define and refine research projects, so the Office of Planning and Evaluation interacts with other staff of the Centre and with recipients of Centre support, and responds to their information needs. When an evaluation proposal is received, attention is focussed on the basic evaluation assessment questions of: who is this for? (users); why do they want it? (purposes); what do they need to know? (information).\* The appropriate methodology then follows. There is frequently more than one user and more than one purpose. Furthermore, to meet user needs, often planning issues are built into terms of reference of evaluation studies to ensure the utilization of the findings.

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\* See for example M. Patton, Utilization-Focused Evaluation, Sage Publications 1980: where Patton argues that one of the first steps in evaluation approaches geared towards utilization should be the identification of the decision makers and the information users of the evaluation. Leonard Rutman Planning Useful Evaluations Sage Publications 1980 also underscores this need to identify the users of the evaluation and their information needs: "Evaluation is usually conducted to assist decision makers in allocating resources, exercising accountability, formulating policy, and improving programs. Program evaluation must therefore be relevant to the information needs of decision makers. Since the usability of the findings is a primary concern, the users of the evaluation and their information needs be identified and addressed by evaluation studies".

2. The level of **resources** allocated to this kind of activity is kept **modest**. The IDRC Board has endorsed the principle of purposive evaluation and feels that routine and comprehensive evaluation\* is (a) expensive and (b) unproductive, since it amounts to a series of fishing expeditions, which carry the prospect of catching something useful, but also of returning empty-handed. Overall, more Centre resources are devoted to **ex ante** than to **ex post** evaluation, and a significant proportion of **ex post** evaluation is done through "informal" mechanisms, such as workshops, project visits and staff meetings.
  
3. Directly related to this is the **non-confrontational** nature of evaluations: for the most part, the Office of Planning and Evaluation does not propose, it responds to requests from various levels of management.\*\* The demand has proved more than enough to consume the modest resources available.

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\* The need for financial control, accountability and systematic assessment is catered for by other parts of the system. For example, at the project level, payments are scheduled according to agreed stages of work and receipt of progress reports, with final payments made only upon receipt of a satisfactory final report from the recipient. Within the Centre, the responsible division prepares a project completion report at the end of each project activity. At the divisional level, a regular cycle of divisional reviews has been established, whereby each division has to prepare a review, containing both retrospective (evaluation) and prospective (planning) components, for the Board of Governors. Periodically, these reviews are scrutinized and supplemented by panels composed of members of the Board and external consultants. The Centre has its own internal audit group, and of course, the organization as a whole is subject to regular comprehensive audit by the Auditor General of Canada.

\*\* M. Patton in Utilization-Focused Evaluation (1980) Sage Publications has argued that the utilization of evaluation findings is determined by a series of factors such as the level of prior interest shown by the user in evaluation and whether the evaluation has been requested. Patton's proposals thus are congruent with the operating principle chosen by the Office of Planning and Evaluation in its conduct of evaluation studies. Therefore, the need for an evaluation as expressed by a user often ensures the utilization of the findings of the evaluation.

4. **Perspective** is more important than "objectivity". Since, by definition, values cannot be eliminated from evaluation\*, it is more profitable to make quite explicit the point of view being sought and to conduct the study accordingly. If a program manager evaluates a program, the study is done from his or her perspective. If the same program is evaluated by a Latin American economist, one obtains that perspective. Both exercises may be quite objective, but the perspective will be different. Given the importance of the developing country program context to the attainment of IDRC objectives, it is often appropriate that evaluations are conducted by developing country personnel, thereby deliberately introducing their perspective to the study.
  
5. The funding of research projects carried out by Third World nationals in their own countries contributes to the enhancement of indigenous research capacity. By the same token, the conduct of evaluation studies by developing country researchers contributes, through learning by doing, to **building indigenous research evaluation capacity**. This is a considerable incidental benefit, particularly because the enhancement of indigenous capacity is a major corporate objective of IDRC.
  
6. The **process** of conducting an evaluation is as important as the product. Or, to express it another way, if too much attention is focussed on the production of an evaluation report, after which the case is considered closed, the benefits are liable to be minimal. The users of the evaluation have to be involved in the process from identification of issues and possible consultants, assessment, implementation, reporting and follow-up.

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\* See for example E. Guba and Y.S. Lincoln, (1981) Effective Evaluation. San Francisco: Josey-Bass

In this way the relevance, usefulness and use of the study are more assured. If a developing country perspective is being deliberately solicited, the process becomes doubly important, since it involves learning by doing, and sophisticated quality is traded off against the value of perspective and the benefits of capacity building.

## **FUNCTIONS, USERS, RESPONSIBILITY AND SCOPE**

Evaluation studies and other related evaluative activities fulfil several **functions** in the Centre's decision-making and planning processes. First, they provide a basis for setting and reviewing overall Centre operating policy and strategic decisions. In this context, evaluation case studies of activities which cut across all program divisions of IDRC provide a strong basis for strategic decisions and policy. Second, evaluations are used as tools to guide managerial decisions at the divisional and project levels through cyclical divisional reviews and specific evaluation studies of single projects or clusters of projects. Third, evaluation as an activity is a useful way of expanding corporate memory, for it summarizes the lessons and experiences learnt. With this, guidance for future activities can be obtained. In this light, coordination and a certain consistency in approach are needed to derive a **cumulative** experience from evaluation work. Research is a long term business, as is the task of learning how to provide effective support to research for development. Therefore, in order to avoid a series of **ad hoc** exercises, evaluation studies should accumulate over time to a stock of knowledge that, ideally, will exceed the "sum of the parts".

The **users** of evaluations fall into two broad categories: within the Centre; and outside it. Within the Centre, the main users are Division Directors and their professional colleagues, the President\*, and the Board of Governors. Outside the Centre, heads of research institutions and leaders of IDRC-supported activities are the most common users.

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\* A President's Committee, comprising the President and four Vice-Presidents has recently been created. This group will become an important user.

The **responsibility centre** for conducting formal evaluation studies varies widely. Some are carried out by developing country personnel in the same way as regular Centre-funded projects; some are done by outside consultants engaged by the Centre - either by the Office of Planning and Evaluation or a program division; and some are done in-house by Centre staff. It is important for the staff of an Office of Planning and Evaluation to conduct studies themselves on a regular basis to maintain and develop in-house capacity. In some cases, the whole process of selection, hiring and supervision of an outside consultant can be just as time consuming as doing the study in-house. Furthermore, rapidly diminishing marginal returns tend to prevail, i.e. it is often possible to obtain 90 percent of what the user wants from the first 25 percent of input to a formal study.

The **scope** of evaluations has ranged widely according to needs and purposes. Some examples are:

- . individual projects
- . groups or series of projects with common subject matter
- . complete programs (the IDRC context)
- . complete Divisions
- . activities that cut across all Divisions

#### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

To date, the Office of Planning and Evaluation has stressed the evolution of an approach to evaluation tailored to the particular characteristics of the Centre and integrated fully with a comprehensive planning and evaluation system. The Office believes it should now broaden out more, to review and draw eclectically upon the best work of other organizations.

As has been mentioned, methodology has been geared to fit each case, once the users, their purposes and the information needs have been identified. This has led to the adoption of a range of methodologies of varying degrees of rigour and

sophistication.\* Three conclusions emerge. First, that still more emphasis should be placed on *ex ante* evaluation, in particular the identification of key management information needs. Often this information can be collected almost costlessly if simple mechanisms are put in place in advance.\*\* If not, "after the fact" collection tends to be expensive and unreliable. Second, research evaluation methodologies in general are weak in the sense that they tend to be information intensive and fail to provide managers and decision-makers with simple, reliable or relevant guidance. Much of the most advanced work, e.g. analysis of economic rates of return, tends to support the notion that "research is good, and more research is better", but is of limited use for resource allocation decisions. With limited time and resources and, especially in the Third World, with weak data bases, simple methodologies, based on common sense and adaptation to suit individual circumstances, will continue to be the most effective. Third, evaluations are frequently confined to examining programs and projects within their defined operational parameters. Equally frequently, the research activities are based on hypotheses about which the evaluation will raise fundamental questions. Yes - this research project met the stated objectives effectively and efficiently and contributed to the body of knowledge on this subject; but this type of research is quite culture-specific and can one really expect common application across a number of countries to make a significant contribution to development in the short term? The answers to such questions may be of much greater significance than the results of an evaluation, and extensive "research on research" may be required to obtain them. It will be important to remain open to the possibility that independent evaluation research of this kind could make a greater contribution to corporate effectiveness in the long run than complete concentration on the user-oriented non-confrontational model described above.

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\* Methodologies used to date have included survey questionnaire, file analysis, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, citation index searches such as abstracts and existing data bases, for example, Canadian Register of Research and Researchers in the Social Sciences, and cost benefit analyses. In some studies, triangulation of various methodologies was used.

\*\* In this case, the recent draft publication of the Comptroller-General of Canada, Evaluation Framework Studies, Program Evaluation Branch, Discussion Paper 83-002, December, 1983, provides an approach which requires careful consideration, especially the collection of information for future evaluation studies.