



“IDRC at the dawn of its 30 years”

Speech given

by

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“IDRC at the dawn of its 30 years”

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon,

It gives me great pleasure to be here with you today to talk about the International Development Research Centre. IDRC will celebrate its thirtieth birthday in three years. Although it was given life by Parliament on May 13, 1970. It was created at the end of the decade which made famous the slogan “Don’t trust anyone over thirty”. Consistent with the times, it was, as one of the founding Governors, Rex Nettleford of Jamaica, said, “a revolutionary, if strange institution”.

Why revolutionary? Why strange? And should we still be trusted?

IDRC was revolutionary in that it turned development back to people in developing countries, albeit very particular people: the small band of trained scientists dedicated to finding solutions to problems which plagued poor countries as they emerged from colonialism.

Why strange? Well it was certainly strange for a public corporation to be created with a governing Board that was almost half non-Canadian, a governing Board that would be making decisions about the expenditure of Canadian taxpayers hard-earned dollars in an institution not subject to the Government of Canada Financial Administration Act. Indeed, one governor was marveling at this just a month or so ago. IDRC was very much a legacy of Lester B. Pearson, whose centenary we celebrate this year.

Pearson’s report on international development was the first of that important trilogy which defined development co-operation -- Pearson, Brandt and Brundtland. This report was the world’s way of acknowledging that neither political independence, foreign aid, nor industrialization provided adequate answers to the problems of underdevelopment, and that new approaches, including indigenous research, had to be taken. IDRC was created to do just that.

The Act has stood the test of time remarkably well. Its objectives, 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 are still valid; the flexibility of supporting mostly developing country researchers, but not ruling out support to Canadians is still appropriate.

IDRC has been an expression of international solidarity around the application of science and technology and other knowledge to the eradication of persistent inequality. IDRC has had many successes--and allow me to give you but a few examples:

- improving crop yields
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- software to assist developing countries manage their foreign debt
- finding community solutions to excessive levels of mercury in water.

As well, there have been breakthroughs in fighting malaria through bednets impregnated with anti-mosquito compounds, and many more. From the start, the Centre placed a high priority on exploring the potential of new information technologies for development.

IDRC stands at the juncture of two worlds, research and development, both of which are easily misunderstood by citizens. However, it is hard to influence the priorities of Canadians. After all, only after a consistent message about deficits for ten years did Canadians warm up to deficit reduction. We must be much more active in explaining to Canadians why development assistance is important and why support for developing country research and researchers is a key part of that assistance. And we must work effectively with other institutions in so-doing.

IDRC has natural partners in Canadian universities. Since 1970, there has been a quantum leap in the numbers of Canadian universities working with developing country institutions. (Mind you, there are a lot more universities as well!) Not to mention community colleges. Today the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) has 90 member institutions. Sixty-nine (77%) are involved in international development projects. Nonetheless, as we head towards the magic age of thirty, a better understanding of how to extend collaboration work with Canadian universities will be key.

A splendid example of good cooperation is our work with Ferdinand Bonn, recently honoured by the Vietnamese government for his work together with Vietnamese researchers in environmental monitoring of Viet Nam's Red River delta. Dr. Bonn, a professor at the University of Sherbrooke in Quebec, is founder of the Centre d'applications et de recherches en télédétection - CARTEL (Centre for Applications and Research in Remote Sensing). The goal of the research project was to develop an information system using various technologies such as Geographic Information systems and remote sensing. Now, Vietnamese officials will be able to better prepare scenarios for environmental management of the delta and bring remedial action more quickly and effectively.

Another is the Eco-plata initiative in Uruguay which involves the collaboration of scientists from three Canadian institutions: Dalhousie University, the Bedford Institute of Oceanography, and Acadia University's Centre for Estuarine Research. This long-term program will provide key information and policy recommendation for the sustainable management of the Uruguayan coastal ecosystem .

IDRC has prided itself on its way of working with developing country researchers. This is not just institutional mythology, although we are a proud institution. Not long ago, former IDRC Project Leaders were asked in detailed interviews about what they had gained from their association with IDRC. In the words of one of them:

"As a project leader I was confident in being able to execute the project due to support received from IDRC Program Officers. This support included assistance in the identification of a Canadian partner for the provision of a two-way exchange of information and experience.

Although our Act stipulates clearly that the Centre is not an "agent of Her Majesty", the reservoir of goodwill in more than 120 countries among key people is a resource for Canada that should not be underestimated. We count more than 10,000 among our alumni. In Latin America there is an even more poignant connection -- some researchers feel that they owe their lives to IDRC, when their views kept them from jobs and the Canadian logos on their papers, confiscated by the secret police, sometimes prevented imprisonment.

A very big difference between now and the late sixties is the admission, the understanding, that the sort of government a country has, and its human rights record really do have a bearing on that country's chances of creating the conditions for sustainable human development. In the late sixties there was not very much criticism of developing country governments, even if they were non-democratic. In some cases, the colonial experience was just too close and guilt hung over the ex-colonizers. There was a tendency to impute moral superiority to the oppressed. This, as we can see so clearly now, was a great error. Often they were far from morally superior, even if they were or had been oppressed. And there was the cold war and its consequential aversion to look closely at regimes which "supported" our side. There is no need to rehearse again the moral hazard that created and the unsavory regimes which benefitted. And in Latin America there were unsavory regimes.

Although IDRC has not so far developed programs that directly address issues of democratic development and human rights, in our work on community-based natural resources we are borrowing from Canadian experience in bringing together researchers officials and the men and women in communities to consider research priorities and results. Research on better decision-making in natural resources can be used to resolve or manage conflicts between communities, and between different, competing users of a natural resource such as a watershed, mineral resources or public forest. We support case studies on decision-making and synthesis of lessons learned regarding conflict management in Central America, Southeast Asia and the high Andes.

I would like to come back to the issue of new communications technologies. This is definitely an area where the world has changed significantly since 1970. It is also an area where IDRC is well-placed to make a contribution, and is doing so. I mentioned earlier that IDRC has a long history in the area of information technology. First that meant libraries, then connectivity, now an exploration of the transformative power of the technologies themselves for health, education, community organization.

Allow me to give you one example of our many initiatives.

In Africa, our so-called ACACIA initiative is based on the proposition that the new ICTs are transformational in character; that communities can appropriate ICTs for their own ends, given the right conditions. We are developing research projects in South Africa and Mozambique, Senegal and Uganda, some of which, we hope will also engage the Canadian private sector.

Lest this brief example leave you with the impression that these ICT activities are technology driven, let me underscore that the starting point is always a development need. We have moved definitively towards a multi disciplinary approach to problem-solving and recognize that unless technology is subordinate to social, economic, cultural and governance considerations, it will not serve people effectively.

While ICT's are leading edge technologies, for the last fifteen years, IDRC has also worked to improve ancient practices of managing and utilizing bamboo and rattan. The result is the first international organization based in China.

INBAR is a novel forum created by Canada's International Development Research Centre for research and cooperation among producers and users of bamboo and rattan, a \$14 billion industry that benefits many of the world's poorest people". (1)

IDRC continues its work as do other development organizations with declining resources. Unfortunately, the 0,7% GNP target for foreign aid recommended by Pearson has never been

reached by Canada. Since 1989 the dramatic slide in the ODA budget has left Canada with a contribution of less than 0,3% -- the lowest point since the creation of the aid program. IDRC has felt the cold wind of deficit reduction as its budget fell from \$114 to \$81 million between 1988 and 1998 — \$81 million which is only \$60 million in 1988 dollars. This reduction of resources of CIDA and of IDRC compromises Canada's ability to meet it's responsibilities of global citizenship.

In cutting development assistance, Canada was not alone. Most donors did. Only the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands maintained their significant commitments. It is important to stress that often these cuts were much more drastic than cuts to domestic programs not because of a loss of faith in development but simply because it was easy to do. Development budgets were not tied up in statutory programs.

¹Gordon Smith, Chair of IDRC Board of Governors, in an article in *Time*, November 17, 1997, p. 39.

Development assistance has nevertheless resulted in significant accomplishments: since the 1960's, child death rates have been cut in half, people have more food to eat and the percentage of the population with access to clean water has doubled to 70%. In the last 50 years, more people have escaped from poverty than in the last 500.

So, now is the time to push hard for restoration of ODA.

The NGO community made an articulate plea in the recently released "Reality of Aid", Brian Tomlinson wrote the chapter on Canada. He drew attention to "strong signals that government officials are rethinking assumptions about priorities and channels for Canadian development assistance. Some of this thinking stems from a return to a foreign policy which is more activist in seeking active roles for Canadians in shaping solutions to global problems and recognizes the essential interdependence of all humanity: domestic and foreign policy are indistinguishable.. Tomlinson (and recently the *Globe and Mail*) point to the vigorous agenda of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Hon. Lloyd Axworthy. He has created opportunities for the voluntary sector and academics to make their views known.

How can Canada draw on developing country researchers to assist in carrying out this extensive agenda? What advice might they have? What conclusions from their research that might aid both bilateral and multilateral donors?

While I am certainly a biased observer, I believe that through the researchers we support and have supported, IDRC is well-placed to continue to make an important contribution to global development, to finding solutions, to creating the means to find solutions to the problems that continue the inequalities which sap human dignity and retard human development. We are well-placed because we have invested in the generation of knowledge from day one. Indeed, our goal is *Empowerment through Knowledge*.

Last year IDRC, the North-South Institute and the International Institute for Sustainable Development acted upon a shared conviction that information and communications technologies are presenting new challenges to Canadian foreign policy and new opportunities for Canadians to contribute to tackling global issues. We invited a group of eminent Canadians, chaired by Maurice Strong, to explore these issues. Their report, *Connecting with the World*, concluded that there is a strategic niche for Canada as a bridge between North and South in the knowledge-driven world that is emerging.

In conclusion, I am tempted to say that we haven't gone from strength to strength -- rather, we have gone from Strong to Strong. Does that make sense? Only if we recall the pivotal role that Maurice Strong played in the conception of IDRC in the late 60's, and now, again, this

contribution to updating Canada's place in the current search for global fairness.

I would like to leave you with the words of one of the cagiest and charming women who shamelessly lobbied heads of state on development issues, including Lester B. Pearson and key actors like Strong. I am referring to Barbara Ward, one of our first board members, associate editor of *The Economist* and opera-singer manqué. (She followed her father's advice and went to Oxford instead).

Ward once said to a colleague, after all the logical arguments about reducing inequalities in the world had been made, "You know, we must never discount the capacity of people to be swayed by the argument of goodness.". At IDRC, we try hard in the name of the people of Canada, to do the right thing.

As to IDRC and their staff, thanks to numerous actions, they have succeeded in carrying over their generosity well beyond our borders, thus contributing to establish for Canada the reputation that so many countries are rightly envious of.

But for all that, IDRC doesn't intend to rest on its laurels. It will continue against all the odds to lead the way on behalf of knowledge dissemination and development, in the name of the Canadian people, and the benefit of mankind.
