The voice of the developing world in discussions to set the global economic agenda is the Inter-governmental Group of 24 – better known simply as the G-24. Created more than 30 years ago, the G-24 faced a daunting task in attempting to ensure that their issues were heard in deliberations of the larger G-77, dominated by the wealthy Northern industrialized nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Both the G-24 and the G-77 are creations of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and they continue to operate under the UNCTAD umbrella. Their role is to help set the policies of the Bank and the IMF in issues of international finance. However, from the beginning, the G-24 found itself disadvantaged at the conference table, lacking the capacity to research the complex issues in order to make its case effectively.

Initial technical support for the project, administered by UNCTAD, was provided by the UN system through the United Nations Institute for Training and Research. Financing was arranged though the UN Development Programme (UNDP), but because of a UNDP provision that prohibits financing beyond 10 years without parallel funding, UNDP funds came to an end in 1986. The Group turned to IDRC for assistance. The objective of the original three-year project in 1988 was to “assist developing countries in building up their capacity in international monetary negotiations and to strengthen their technical preparedness and their ability to participate in and contribute to all phases of discussion and negotiation within the framework of the IMF and the Bank.”

A wide-ranging program

Officially the project was called the Technical Support Service (TSS), although within the G-24 it was more generally known simply as the Research Program. The primary aims of the G-24 Technical Support Service are:

- to continue to strengthen the capacity of the G-24 to meaningfully contribute to the ongoing deliberations of the international financial institutions;
- to enable developing countries to effectively participate in various fora in the debates on reforming the international financial architecture;
- to reinforce developing countries’ capacities to design policies to help create a stable financial environment conducive to investment, and to reduce vulnerability to external shocks, particularly those arising from volatile world markets;
- to enhance the understanding of developing-country policymakers of complex issues such as the functioning of international markets and the inter-relationships between trade, investment, and finance;
- to raise awareness outside developing countries of the need to introduce a “development dimension” into discussions of international finance and institutional reform.

IDRC’s original commitment was for three years, but the Centre’s involvement with the TSS project has continued through four phases for close to 15
years. During that time, the Research Program became, in the view of most of the stakeholders, "the glue that held the G-24 together." Other support, either financial or in-kind, now comes from UNCTAD, the governments of Denmark and the Netherlands, and from the governments of the G-24 countries themselves.

The TSS has undertaken more than 100 research studies over the past 15 years. Among the more tangible products of the program are 11 volume sets of International Monetary and Financial Issues for the 1990s, and dozens of research papers published in the G-24 Discussion Paper Series. The aim of the studies was to provide solid technical analysis from a Southern point of view in the ongoing dialogue with the IMF and the World Bank – the type of research and analysis that previously had been almost the exclusive domain of those international financial institutions. The publications were also intended to alert members of the G-24 to emerging issues.

In addition to providing development-related research, the program has served as a source of fresh ideas for the international public policy community at large, as well as for academics and research institutes. From IDRC’s viewpoint, the program raised its visibility and reach among senior policymakers and institutions working in this specialized area of development.

Reaching out to policymakers

The renowned economist G. K. (Gerry) Helleiner, currently Professor Emeritus of Economics at the University of Toronto, was the research coordinator for the TSS for eight years, starting in 1991. Dr Diana Tussie, the lead evaluator of the project for IDRC, comments that Helleiner was “a very active project director,” attending meetings of the G-24 Deputies and Ministers, as well as its Governing Council. He was also a strong advocate for a larger role for the developing countries in world financial affairs.

Helleiner pointed out that in the mid-1990s the developing countries accounted for 44 percent of world output in purchasing power parity terms. “Developing countries as a group are generally projected to grow at roughly double the rate of the industrial world during the coming decade,” he said. “The developing countries (and other non-G-7 members) are economically as well as demographically important, and they are very rapidly increasing their importance in the global economy.”

As an example of this importance, Helleineer pointed out that “during the 1991 recession in the industrial world, three-quarters of the increase in world exports, which buffered their problems, went to developing-country markets.”

While he was effective at making the case for an enhanced role for the G-24 countries, Helleiner faced some more mundane problems in the day-to-day operations of the Research Program, particularly in the area of communication. It was found that the mailing lists used to distribute the research output were often out of date. Thus material was not reaching the right people. Dr Tussie also points out that there was “an erroneous assumption that by distributing the products to the Executive Directors, the rest of the national machinery would be in contact with the outputs.”

Many of these issues were overcome during the second phase of the project, from 1993 to 1996, and from the outset important steps were taken to increase “ownership” of the G-24 program by the member countries themselves. This included countries contributing to the funding, and the creation of new mechanisms for guiding research and gauging policy needs. Under this heading, the Technical Group (TG) was a key development, Dr Tussie says.

"By bringing the researchers together with the G-24 representatives in a formal setting, the TG acted as an intermediary between the Research Program and the G-24. It was a mechanism in which dialogue was expected to bridge the gap between research and policy.”

Changes in approaches

Further attempts to bring about closer contact between researchers and policymakers were made during the critical third phase of the project from 1996 to 2000. These included the establishment of a Liaison Office with the goal of providing better access to the Executive Directors. In addition, informal meetings between researchers and policymakers from the G-24 countries provided opportunities for direct policy input to the Research Program.

This phase of the project also saw Helleineer’s retirement and the appointment of a new research coordinator, Dani Rodrik, Professor of International Political Economy at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. Rodrik set out at once to improve the dissemination and outreach of the Research Program’s output. Dissemination by
way of the Internet was implemented—a major step in making the Research Program’s product globally available. There was also an attempt to make the material more accessible by complementing some of the detailed research papers with shorter position papers on strategic topics. Papers were no longer published as volume sets because of the lag time involved; instead they were published jointly with UNCTAD and Harvard as stand-alone discussion papers.

Equally significant was a change in approach—an attempt to reach a wider audience and influence public policy at the global level, while also contributing more to the academic debate on international monetary and financial issues. As the proposal for the fourth phase put it, future studies would be published “with a view to contributing to the wider international discussions on financial and monetary issues from a development perspective in political, intergovernmental, and academic circles, and the civil society at large.”

This was a key departure from the previous nine years, when the focus of the Research Program had always been on the Executive Directors of the G-24 countries as the primary target audience, says Dr Tussie. The change in emphasis resulted in some tension between the research coordinator, who advocated long-term change, and the Liaison Office, which favored more demand-driven research.

Even more fundamental, the extent of the research coordinator’s responsibilities and the roles of the other actors in the project—never formally defined—became a matter for debate. Unlike Helleiner, who stressed the G-24’s ownership of the project, Rodrik saw himself as accountable primarily to UNCTAD that, for its part, saw the project as a technical assistance project to the G-24 similar to other technical assistance it provides.

The differences stem in part from differing perceptions of the policy process, Dr Tussie believes. “Traditionally, policymaking is viewed as a linear process where papers and positions are prepared and presented to policymakers who use them in negotiating and taking policy decisions,” she says, adding that it is a view that has largely been discarded today. In the early years many of the G-24 stakeholders had faith in a linear approach, believing that research papers could directly influence policy. Even today there is still “at least some hope that the Deputies and Ministers would read them and be influenced in their position by what they read.”

The alternative to the linear approach to influencing policy is what has been termed “enlightenment,” where research indirectly influences the “circulation and percolation” of ideas over a period of time. Helleiner compared this approach to the action of water that drips and drips on rock until the rock slowly gives way. Rodrik, on the other hand, commented that while the linear approach is more immediate, “enlightenment” is oriented more toward policy change as a result of changing perceptions.

The actual use of the Research Program’s output is unclear, and various participants have differing views on who used it, and how. Aziz Ali Mohammed, with the G-24 Liaison Office, felt that the papers produced by TSS were most likely to be read by those at the lower levels of the policymaking machinery. On the other hand, Rodrik believed that Executive Directors and assistants were primary users of the material.

A former Executive Director from Nigeria, Patrick Akatu, thought the papers were of high quality, but did not penetrate the policy community at the level of the Bank and the IMF. He says the research “is helpful to understand the context in which policy is made, but not helpful at the time to negotiate specific issues that are in the daily agenda.”

However, Dr Tussie concludes that the G-24 having an official Research Program lends a certain seal of approval to developing-country issues. Further, the fact that the Managing Director of the IMF and the President of the World Bank attend G-24 meetings gives the issues they raise more legitimacy than those raised by other international bodies. And finally, the fact that the Research Program receives funding from multinational donor institutions lends it a further seal of approval.

Assessing policy influence

The study of the Research Program’s influence on policy, carried out by IDRC, identifies three types of policy influence:

- **Expanding policy capacities**—this includes improving knowledge, supporting the development of innovative ideas and the capacity to communicate them, and developing new talent for research and analysis. Requests for detailed policy briefs are cited as one indication of the need for additional knowledge on specific issues.
Expanding policy horizons ~ similar to the “enlightenment” approach as a means to influence policy, the resulting form of influence is often in terms of new concepts being introduced, new ideas on the agenda, and researchers and others educated to take up new positions with broader understanding of issues. This is considered to be one of the most important forms of influence attributed to the Research Program.

Affecting policy regimes ~ referring to a fundamental redesign or modification of programs or policies. This is considered to be a long-term goal for the Research Program, although there are few instances where change can be seen to have been brought about through the influence of the Research Program alone.

Some lessons

- The research agenda should follow the negotiations, with particular attention to timeliness in order to maximize its potential use by the Executive Directors.

- A formal mechanism that brings the researchers together with the representatives of the developing countries is necessary to bridge the gap between research and policy.

- The longer and more academic the research papers, the less likely they are to be useful.

- Enhancing knowledge, supporting recipients to develop innovative ideas, improving the ability to communicate information and ideas, and developing new talent for research and analysis, have all been shown to be effective in expanding policy capacity.

- Ultimately, research is likely to be useful only if there is a clearly defined plan to disseminate the results to the people most likely to be able to use the material.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian public corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building an indigenous research capacity. Because influencing the policy process is an important aspect of IDRC’s work, in 2001 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation of more than 60 projects in some 20 countries to examine whether and how the research it supports influences public policy and decision-making. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation/policy