A HISTORY
OF RESPECT

An interview with Rex Nettleford on IDRC’s first 10 years

The Hon. Rex M. Nettleford, O.M., is Director of Extra-Mural Studies, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica, and advisor to the Jamaican Prime Minister on cultural affairs. A founding member of IDRC’s Board of Governors, he served on the Board during the Centre’s first 10 years. He was interviewed for Reports by Ian Boyne, a feature writer with the Jamaican Agency for Public Information and Sunday Sun newspaper.

Reports: What were the conditions that led to the creation of IDRC?
Nettleford: “I think it has to be seen in the context of the disappointing record of the first development decade, where the projected recipients of assistance from the developed world turned out to be the least of the beneficiaries, and, in fact, much of the help given to the Third World did not really reach the mass of the population. This, of course, was clearly understood and seen in the 60s to the extent that the Pearson Commission was set up in 1969 under the auspices of the World Bank and the chairmanship of the late Lester B. Pearson. That produced a watershed report in the literature of development strategies. 1

“My suspicion is that Mr. Pearson was impelled to return home and try to get something done as a result of that report. His tremendous influence in the Canadian political system at the time was brought to bear on the political directorate there and, together with people like Maurice Strong, they came up with this mechanism, the International Development Research Centre, which was designed, modestly, to plug some of the gaps that had resulted from the first development decade.

“The composition of this rather odd body was quite unprecedented in the history of developmental systems in that, although the entire thing was funded by the Canadian taxpayer, they included some 10 non-Canadians on the Board of Governors, people from the Third World largely, as well as from those countries that have had a long tradition of relationships with the developed world.”

Reports: What were the objectives of IDRC during those first few years?
Nettleford: “Broadly speaking, the way we like to put it is this: humanizing development systems to put emphasis on human resources and, above all, to build up the research capabilities of people within the developing world so that decisions are taken by their own people, in their own self-interest. And to determine their own destinies, they would be informed by a body of knowledge which is well within their grasp and whose formulation would be their responsibility. So it means that from the simplest form of action research — data gathering even — to the most sophisticated, the involvement of developing peoples would be encouraged with a view to policy decisions.

“Everybody takes this for granted now because that early IDRC resolve and orientation, although unique to IDRC and revolutionary in 1970, has now become the common stock and capital, if you like, of many development assistance agencies.

“IDRC was lucky enough to have as its first chief executive a fantastic human being, David Hopper, who brought a wealth of experience from his own involvement in the so-called Green Revolution in India. As an agricultural economist he had a tremendous knowledge of development strategies, of

The Hon. Rex M. Nettleford of Jamaica
scientific knowledge as it applies to development strategies in the Third World.

“He gathered around him a most effective professional staff, many of whom had gained a lot of experience, certainly on how not to do things from the very failures of the first development decade. So in that sense, the first development decade was not totally a failure because it bred a number of people who, through their insight, their own creative imagination, and their skill, could see what went wrong. Now they had an institution to put them right, supported by a Board of Governors. I remember to be very enlightened, very carefully chosen. The Canadians
The important thing is that it recognizes that in itself can be counterproductive. This criticism?

Nettleford: Reports: “What was your interest then when you sat on the IDRC Board?”

Nettleford: “I expected it to do precisely what it did: develop an understanding of the capacity of the developing world to take decisions in their own interest and manifest it in practical programs; encourage that degree of self-confidence among peoples in the developing world, with no strings attached; and demonstrate to the world that those who enjoy a certain amount of wealth can relate to those who are poor on the basis of mutual respect.”

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“Inaugural meeting of the IDRC Board of Governors, October 26, 1970. Left to right, front row: Sir J. Crawford (Australia), A.L. Dias (India), L. Engberg (Canada), the Rt Hon. Lester B. Pearson (Chairman, Canada), Lady Barbara Ward Jackson (England), Pat W. Unghakan (Thailand), C.F. Bentley (Canada). Back: A.F. Plumptre (Canada), the Hon. R.M. Nettleford (Jamaica), J. Brecher (Canada), H.A. Oluwasanmi (Nigeria), W.D. Hopper (President, Canada), P. Bauchet (France), R. Campos (Brazil), D.W. Medjuck (Canada), J.G. Bene (Canada). Absent: L. Berlingue (Canada), M. Dubois (U.S.A).”

On the first Board were eager and willing to learn. And you had some people who had come with a reputation who again brought their own enthusiasm to the proceedings.

From the very beginning, we set ourselves tasks and subjected ourselves to a kind of seminar or tutorial session where we literally looked at the problems as they presented themselves. We decided that, of course, we should concentrate on aiding the world’s poor, and that emphasis should be placed on rural development, specifically in such areas as agriculture, food, nutrition, population and health sciences, social sciences and human resources development and, not long after, information sciences. Since then, science and technology policy has been added and developed, and energy is now being seriously considered. But the concentration on these areas we felt should guarantee the benefits of self-confidence among peoples in different parts of the developing world who will ensure that the projects benefit the large mass of people.

Reports: You were yourself on the Board of Governors of the IDRC. When did you join the Board and what were your expectations of the IDRC then?

Nettleford: “I was in it from the beginning — I’m a charter member and a founding member, and participated in helping to shape how the thing would develop and what our main concerns would be.

My own interest is largely the full quest of maximizing the resources of the human being, our creative imagination, our creative intellect. I believe very strongly that, in the final analysis, it is the capacity of the human being to act, to think, to do, that will make anything work.

“What has happened, of course, is that I have learned a tremendous lot about the world, both the developed and the Third World. It has strengthened my own views of the world’s inescapable interdependence, based on mutual respect and understanding by all people.

Reports: What were your expectations then when you sat on the IDRC Board?

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Reports: How has IDRC evolved over the years?

Nettleford: “It has evolved as a high-powered professional body. It has gotten worldwide recognition and is, therefore, in many sorts of development assistance consortia.”

“There are also new dimensions. For
IDRC has effectively challenged the old philosophy and pointed a way of how to help people help themselves.

example, the North-South dialogue. It did give some money to the Brandt Commission and, although there were reservations on the Board, generally they felt that this was the thing to do. As it turned out, a report which is being hailed all over the western world has been produced. But the idrc itself is not satisfied with that. It is very much concerned about how you implement some of those recommendations and is very much part and parcel of a kind of task force to look into this so that the report doesn’t become another classic in the literature of development rather than a basis for action.

"Also of late, Canadians, quite rightly, have been taking an interest in external affairs and how the Canadian dollar is spent. This, many of us who are non-Canadians on the Board, appreciate, and have encouraged in the past because there needs to be a greater knowledge among Canadians of what is possible and what contribution they can make to developing a better and more equal world. The new idrc president, Ivan Head, is, I think, ideally suited to spearhead this new phase of the development without abandoning the old commitments, while also encouraging a sense of interdependence based on mutual respect—not on anybody domaninating anybody else, but, in fact, in a surge of sharing. The Canadian public can be drawn into this."

Reports: In the idrc’s 10 years of existence, what would you say have been successes and milestones? Nettleford: "In all fields there have been significant achievements. But more important, I think, it has effectively challenged the old philosophy, which was rooted in domination, in the patronizing of the South by the North, and it has pointed a way of how to help people help themselves—not in a kind of old-time aid society way, but in terms of getting projects off the ground. It has had multiplier effects on many of the development assistance agencies in the world."

Reports: Would you say that perhaps the work of idrc has had some impact on the philosophy and concept of assistance? Nettleford: "I know that has happened because Robert McNamara, World Bank president, in fact, was very much in contact with David Hopper (who is now a vice-president in the World Bank) and he was impressed with the orientation and the approach. None of these things are mutually exclusive. But we must be very careful that 'aiding the poorest' doesn’t become a fad because you then deprive the Third World of the necessary cadre of people to do the thinking, the continuing reflection, the evaluation. If you do, you will have the Third World remaining the hewers of wood and the drawers of water, while the developed world continues to be the brains for the rest of the world.

"This imbalance must go. We must all think, and we must all new wood, and all draw water. We need thinkers and doers in the Third World.

"There are several ways of doing this. This is where the collaboration with developed-world research institutions and with Canadian research institutions is important. This new dimension is very much coming to be part of our thinking at idrc."

Reports: Has idrc itself been imbalanced by putting too much emphasis on knowledge and research needs, rather than on meeting practical needs? Nettleford: "No, because that has a kind of logical priority in terms of the needs of the Third World. They were never mutually exclusive, because the kind of projects we have been emphasizing are the ones that include intellectual and action content, the one drawing on the other. It’s theory out of action not the other way around. In fact, everything I am saying calls for a particular entrepreneurial skill, the skill of being able to identify the right kind of projects and being able to encourage Third World people in their own self-perception as to where they might go."

Reports: Looking in the future, Prof. Nettleford, do you think idrc is suited to meet the challenges of the 80s? What changes do you think idrc should undergo during this decade? Nettleford: "Ask me what the problems of the 80s are and I will answer, 'What were the problems of the 70s?'. The notion that you solve things every decade is a myth that human beings indulge in merely to have a cushy way of looking at existence. The problems of the 80s are the problems of the 60s, or the problems of the 50s. We have not solved them at all. The innovative urge that idrc had in 1970 continues to be of tremendous relevance.

"Yes, there has been a shift around—into a surge with energy now, it has to concern itself with alternative sources of energy. But the old commitment to build up capabilities for decision-taking and for discovering and storing appropriate knowledge which will lead to appropriate technology is something that will have to happen in the 80s.

"Maybe then one can say that the idrc could pay more attention to delivery systems, to helping Third World countries use what has been discovered... the wheel, once invented, can be put to many uses.

"There are, of course, other things besides getting people to understand, to get at the storehouse of knowledge in science and technology and in human organization. The idrc should help the Third World in building its own institutions and its own mechanisms, the frameworks within which it can actually take action.

"One last thing. In the whole question of the North-South dialogue, the idrc has got to have a responsibility in helping the Third World to bolster effective advocacy. And I think that the New International Economic Order, in its effort to bring about the kind of world where there is some distributive justice and mutual respect between the different contributors to the world system, is something that idrc could continue to make a greater contribution to and of which it could be more conscious."
SPECIAL REPORT
IDRC's first 10 years
April Reports
I found myself reading nearly every item of the April issue with interest. The ten predictions of the New Internationalist are stimulating discussion-starters. It took Dr El-Sawy an unconscionably long time to get the damissas plant accepted to fight bilharzia. One wonders how many other good answers to unsolved problems are held back by the 'tyranny of the status quo'. Dr Laquian in "Jambo" was able to break the shackles of the conventional wisdom. 
As an amateur propagandist for birth control over many years, I liked your emphasis on age at marriage in "The family factor". I have always found it a common ground-starter with church leaders. I first used it about 15 years ago with the Archbishop of Costa Rica who pushed it and paternidad responsable so I feel much in tune with your article.
I have been to Bangladesh, but not seen before your figures for higher death rates for girls under five. What a shocking corroboration of the masked infanticide which has been so hard to put a figure on!
Rupert Buchanan
St Catharines, Ontario
Canada

Women's status
As someone somewhat concerned with feminist issues in education and science, and as a visitor to Turkey where I have lectured and been a consultant on science policy, I am curious about the Turkish data referred to in "The family factor" (April 1980). You may not know, but Turkey is a peculiar pathological instance in statistics of professional females. It has, in fact, the world's record largest proportion of women in university faculties, and even a near equality of women with men in full professorships.
I was long curious about the emancipation scenario in a very non-liberated country, until I discovered it was partly due to a prejudicing Atatürk revolution against letting women into Jewish-dominated businesses and male-dominated trades. The only places the women could go were the higher professions, especially education. Furthermore, the large proportion of peasantry in the cities gave Turkey a larger access to servants and babysitting than in most other developing countries. It follows from this that you can't always trust the statistics to tell you about the true status of women.
Derek de Solla Price
Avalon Professor of History of Science, Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut
USA

New Journal
Reports readers may be interested in the Canadian Journal of Development Studies, a forum for encouraging the dissemination of new ideas and alternative strategies in all fields of development studies. The first issue of the bi-annual Journal was published in May 1980 by the University of Ottawa Press. It is designed to serve scholars and professionals engaged in development studies in Canada and developing countries, and is particularly focused on the policy applications of innovative theory and research for the promotion of international development, and the role of countries such as Canada in fostering a more equitable world order. We are now calling for papers and subscriptions. Preference will be given to thought-provoking papers based on empirical research, field work, or case studies having significant implications for development planning and policy in the following problem areas: poverty; basic needs; regional disparities; agrarian reform; unemployment; technology transfer; population; manpower and educational planning; development administration; trade; aid; and industrialization.
While English and French are the principal languages of the Journal, papers in other languages may be published occasionally.
For information, please write: International Development Studies Group, Institute for International Cooperation, University of Ottawa, 190 Laurier East, Ottawa, Canada K1N 6N5.
Maxime A. Cremer
Ozay Mehmet
Co-editors
Canadian Journal of Development Studies
Ottawa, Canada

Hope for change
What a wretched world this is that so many people have to depend on cassava to survive. Not only does it appear to be poor in protein and vulnerable to the attacks of insects and diseases, but now it is implicated in goitre and mental deficiencies. I think your organization deserves credit for efforts to improve the crop, but I wonder if people in the Third World aren't still being gypped somehow. Why should they have to eat what is a pretty poor potato, no matter how much it is improved, while the rest of us grow fat on meat and wheat?
And it's hard not to be cynical about aid when Barry Nestel traces the origins of Canadian support for work on cassava back to the opposition of grain producers in this country to other plans that might have bolstered Third World cereal production.
But I guess miracles are still possible in a world where ex-Chancellor Willy Brandt and his fellow ex-heads-of-state on the Brandt Commission can become "born-again" development believers. After all, they were pretty determined to side-step the problems when they were in power and could have done something about them. Maybe there is hope for change yet.
Linda M. Kulesha
Willowdale, Ontario
Canada

Letters from readers are welcomed, and should be addressed to:
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The inaugural meeting of IDRC’s Board of Governors took place October 26, 1970. In the 10 years since, the Centre has supported close to 1000 projects in over 100 countries. In our Special Report, “10 years for tomorrow”:
- Rex Nettleford retraces the Centre’s origins and evolution;
- Ivan L. Head looks to the next decade;
- four developing-country journalists visit Centre-supported projects (pages 14, 16, 20, and 22);
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The International Development Research Centre is a public corporation created by the Parliament of Canada in 1970 to support research designed to adapt science and technology to the needs of developing countries. The Centre’s activity is concentrated in five sectors: agriculture, food, and nutrition sciences; health sciences; information sciences; social sciences; and communications. IDRC is financed solely by the Parliament of Canada; its policies, however, are set by an international Board of Governors. The Centre’s headquarters are located at 60 Queen Street, Ottawa, Canada (P.O. Box 8500, Ottawa, Canada K1G 3H9). Regional offices are located in East Africa (P.O. Box 30677, Nairobi, Kenya); West Africa (B.P. 11007, C.D. Annexé, Dakar, Sénégal); Asia (Tanglin P.O. Box 101, Singapore 9124, Republic of Singapore); Latin America (Apartado Aéreo 53016, Bogota D.E., Colombia); and the Middle East (7 Aflatoon Street, P.O. Box 685, Hurria, Helietopolis, Cairo, Egypt).

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Cover: Caqueza, Colombia. Improving the well-being of the rural poor has been a focus of IDRC-supported projects during the Centre’s first 10 years. This emphasis will continue in the coming years. Our special report, starting on page 9, reviews some of the work accomplished to date and looks ahead into the 80s.