Workshop on experience in IDRC-funded grant making by developing country institutions research programme management

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Workshop facilitator’s notes

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Photograph by Joyce Tan
Grant making programme models

These notes will focus on the different approaches towards research grant making presented by the participants of the workshop. The detailed management procedures discussed by the participants have been documented in the manual written by Michael Graham and will serve superbly as the workshop record on these issues. Documentation of the outputs of the working sessions held during the workshop are also available for reference.

The participants presented an interesting number of programming models which appear to range across the full spectrum of the R&D process. They seem to fall under the following three broad categories:

**Programmes to scope the field**

Competitive small grants have been used astutely to encourage Asian researchers to apply for support of activities they deem most worthy in a field of research. This approach eases significantly IDRC’s involvement in determining the direction of R&D in the particular programme. The smaller quantum of each grant also enables programme funds to be disbursed to a larger group of researchers. In this way IDRC is able to scope the field and discern interests and trends in R&D work in new areas of investigation and experimentation. This is a relatively high-risk approach as new small-grant recipients are often unknown to the programmes, the work attempted is often novel, and the odds of not fully achieving research objectives is relatively high. However, these risks are well managed by the low monetary value of individual grants and the broad spread of recipients across a particular segment of the research community.

**Programmes to build R&D capacities**

In this model promising researchers are identified and mentored by senior researchers through training activities and informal one-on-one coaching. The mentoring (lasting a year in some instances) lead up to the preparation of a proposal and eventually the conduct of R&D. A participant suggested that senior Asian researchers seem to make the most effective mentors while non-Asians are sometimes perceived as taking a blunt approach which is uncomfortable to those been mentored.

**Programmes to support policy-making and dialogue**

Some of the programmes support policy research. The participants recognized that research must be effectively plugged into the broader policy-making process to ensure that research results are used. Policy dialogue should ideally precede research work to verify research objectives and methodologies, and to mobilize policy-makers behind the research. Policy dialogue must also follow completed research to feed research results into the making of policies.
Matching implementing institutions with goals

The presentations by the participants on the first day of the workshop and their discussions on subsequent days revealed institutional profiles and attributes which appear to match the different goals of their programmes:

Projects to scope the field are ideally implemented by organizations with managerial capacity to mobilize experts to steer project activities and lend credibility to competitions for grants.

The administrators tend to have the capacity to process a large number of grant applications and disburse a high number of grants. The institutions need to be based in a country with an efficient banking system which enables funds to be remitted with ease.

Projects aimed at building capacities should ideally be based at institutions with the capacity to conduct advanced training, including the organizing and hosting of frequent meetings and workshops.

And finally policy research projects should ideally be run out of organizations acceptable to policy-makers and respected as credible sources of policy-intent data and recommendations.

Programme models and budgets

Programmes to scope the field tend to disburse a very large part of its budget to the researchers who have their proposals approved, with relatively small amounts of the budget spent on management and administration.

Programmes to build capacity tend to use a significant proportion of their budgets at the coordinating level. These expenditures are for resource persons and the conduct of training activities. A relatively smaller share of the budget is disbursed to successful grant applicants to implement actual research at the grantee level.

The pattern of expenditure for policy research projects could not be clearly discerned from the workshop but one could suggest that the ideal pattern maybe about a third of the budget being disbursed to grantees to conduct research, about a third allocated to policy dialogue to define research directions before the start up of research work, and another third for the dissemination of research results and advocacy after research is completed.

Evolving the programmes

Discussions during the workshop hint that programming models need not remain constant. For example, a programme which began as an initiative to scope the field could evolve into a capacity-building programme in a subsequent phase, and then on to policy research later on. This is a simplified example to illustrate a point; programmes may iterate through the different models, in a combination of different steps, so as to meet a set of objectives or to respond to a particular R&D and policy environment.
It was not clear from the workshop if IDRC has a carefully considered strategy for setting up the externally managed programmes. It is also not clear if the centre has any plans to iterate these programmes between external and in-house management. For example, is there programmatic value in initiating research in a new field with an externally managed small grants programme aimed at scoping the field which then evolves into a centre-administered programme aimed at building and consolidating the field, which in turn morphs into an externally managed programme to build research capacity and conduct policy research. This example can be reconfigured in many other permutations to fit a field of research and match a set of development imperatives.

Are there other strategic advantages in turning to externally managed research programmes apart from one of costs and institutional accounting considerations?

**Unplanned and under-budgeted activities**

The workshop clearly identified two sets of activities that are frequently not designed and not budgeted for in the programmes. The first is grant monitoring and evaluation. There was a good debate about the justification of doing expensive on-site monitoring of small grants. The second is the dissemination and advocacy of research results.

**Dissemination of research results**

The participants were unanimous in the importance of planning for the dissemination and utilization of research results right from the beginning – at the proposal stage. This involves not only the publication of results on completion of research but also the deliberate choice of R&D methodologies which involve potential users of research results from the beginning and during the research itself to validate the work being done and to provide potential research result users with a sense of ownership of the research, and by doing so, to prepare the ground for the eventual adoption and utilization of the results.

**Grantees are institutions**

The participants confirmed that all existing projects make grants only to organizations and institutions. No R&D grants are ever made to individuals. This merits further reflection, especially in the case of competitive small grants aimed at catalysing innovative research in evolving new areas of research, when often it is individuals who provide the leadership and institutions may actually be the obstacles resisting change and innovation.

**Arrangements for joint funding of projects by multiple donors**

There appears to be two sets of arrangements now in use. The first is for IDRC to receive the contributions from the other donors and take on the responsibility of coordinating the implementation of the co-funded projects and reporting back to the other donors.

The second arrangement is for IDRC and the other co-funders to select an implementing institution and sign separate project agreements with the selected institution. This can be an onerous arrangement for the implementing institution since it has to file separate
reports to the group of donors who may have special conditions of what they will fund in a programme. The main advantage of this arrangement comes from the programme being able operate free of governmental conditionalities required of the various donors (e.g. country clearances).

It is important, in both arrangements, to agree in advance upon a clearly-defined and well-coordinated monitoring plan involving the implementing organization and the donors. Grantees, especially the ones with successful projects, run the risk of being overloaded with repetitive monitoring by the different donors in the absence of such a plan.

**Endnote: Context of participants’ inputs and workshop documentation**

The workshop organizers decided not to require participating grants programmes to prepare detailed presentations/papers because many of the participants are busy professionals with no time to research and write full workshop papers. Participants were invited instead to prepare a two-page brief on their project activities.

This arrangement set the scene for participants to make spontaneous contributions during the workshop rather than carefully articulated interventions, which systematic reflection, required in the preparation of a workshop paper, would have facilitated. The spontaneity of the discussions (together with what was perceived by some as a lack of depth in points raised) is therefore a natural result of the process designed for the workshop.

The documentation of the flip-charts prepared by the ten breakout working groups and the mind maps of the five plenary sessions are austere distillation of much richer debates and discussions which the synthesis do not reveal.

The participants of the workshop are the implementers of the programmes which they now manage and administer – they did not conceive nor did they design the programmes which evolved out of preceding IDRC programmes. Similarly the participants were all adhering to an administrative model prescribed by IDRC and other co-funders. This “history” behind the programmes meant that participants were able to discuss the implementation of the programmes but not the fundamentals and assumptions behind their design and structure.