

Capacity Building Strategic Evaluation

Summary of Findings of Phase 1 and 2

April 2006

Background to Study

The evaluation aims to clarify what IDRC actually means by “building capacity,” then looks back at the organization’s real work to gage whether – in its own terms – it has succeeded in doing so.

The core elements of the evaluation have been:

- interviewing staff members and management to lay the ground for a conceptual framework expressing IDRC’s collective notion of capacity building;
- examining the pattern of IDRC’s funding practices in light of these findings; and
- looking closely at the actual results of a sample of IDRC-supported projects.

In order to ground the concepts and issues in empirical data, the evaluation examined a carefully-selected sample of 43 projects. Project documents, plus in-depth interviews with both IDRC staff (managers and program officers) and project staff provided most of the information. A valuable by-product of this method was the inclusion of research partners’ thoughts about IDRC’s capacity building efforts.

In 2006-2007 case studies will be carried out in order to base the evaluation in specific, detailed experiences.

IDRC’s Conceptual Framework for Capacity Building

For IDRC staff, capacity building is an essential variable in their approach to development, and individual relationships are key.

Capacity building “is fundamental and underlies everything we do.” Underlying this view is the conviction that development is basically people-centred, placing high importance on partnerships, local ownership, and participation. The focus is on process and on learning-by-doing, and especially on sustaining long-term personal relationships. IDRC is fixed on the value of the individual partner as the key component in capacity building.

IDRC talks about change occurring as a result of capacity building at the problem or research area level, rather than at the institutional or systems level.

Interviewees cited the perception that change happens within the domain of the research. Capacity building means working with partners to conduct better research in that domain. In other words, it is a means to build up research and development skills through individuals, rather than through organizations. As one person put it, “The starting point is the problem, not the institution.”

Despite the bias toward the individual, a significant number of those interviewed want to focus at an institutional and organizational level.

The application of a “trickle up” theory, where support for individuals stimulates a transformation within the institution, is dominant within IDRC capacity building activities. As projects moved forward, behavioural change in individuals often “multiplied” to foster changes within institutions. Typically, this multiplier effect happened by way of trainers who were tasked with building the capacity of others, or by way of newly-created networks.

IDRC's approach to capacity building is normally instrumental or functional in nature, and focuses on tangibles, such as professional competencies, capabilities, and the tools needed to conduct research.

In IDRC's background literature, capacity is considered in broad terms, involving changes in norms, values, relationships, and motivation, and is equated with such intangible notions as confidence, credibility, recognition, prestige, and trust. The interviewees, however, talked instead about “the ability to do something”, a practical skill or aptitude that had been lacking. These skills include the ability to identify research problems, to design and implement projects, to monitor and evaluate, to achieve good financial management, to link with other researchers and with donors, to publicize results, and so on.

By far the most significant of the positive factors are IDRC's *persistence and flexibility*, particularly when IDRC is contrasted with other donor organizations.

IDRC's patience with projects and recipients and its willingness to make prolonged commitments, is often cited by project partners as the Centre's most positive attribute. Some distinguished between IDRC's focus on funding long-term research as opposed to funding projects. As one person said: “IDRC funds research for a longer period of time than most other donors. Other donors will fund research institutes, but there's a particular deadline, and once the deadline comes, the money ends and the researchers don't know if the funding will be renewed or not. IDRC will fund a project for two or three phases. It's in it for the long haul.”

IDRC exhibits important agility in its ability to shift programs and budgets in reaction to new ideas on the ground.

Many felt that IDRC's responsiveness is a direct result of its willingness to take chances. One respondent commented that IDRC is like a “venture capitalist,” prepared to take risks in support of individuals and institutions.

The intense hands-on involvement of IDRC's program officers with their partners is another advantageous characteristic.

IDRC's program officers demonstrate a preference for frequent and regular **face-to-face contact** with partners. For both IDRC personnel and IDRC's partners, capacity building is seen as being about developing a relationship that engages partners in solving key challenges. Partners appreciate the competence of IDRC staff coupled with their personal approach, which is contrasted with that of other donors who “just give money and then expect results without really understanding the issues.” As one respondent put it, this “is what makes us real partners, not just funders,” and distinguishes IDRC from other large donors.

What IDRC is Actively Funding

Research projects classified primarily as “capacity building” represent 26% of the total number of IDRC projects approved (146 out of 561), and these account for 31% of total funding.

This is not to say that other projects lack a capacity building component; in fact, when abstracts of all projects are examined, over 75% are found to have capacity building as a central concern.

Among the 146 projects specifically targeting “capacity building”, the distribution among IDRC’s three programming areas¹ – Environment and Natural Resource Management, Social and Economic Policy, and Information and Communication Technologies for Development – in terms of activity was found to be balanced.

IDRC targets project funding for capacity building more at the individual than the institutional level.

Nearly one-half of those projects examined targeted capacity building activities at individuals. And among those individuals, nearly half are “researchers” and another one-quarter are “policy-makers.” Fewer than 20% of projects are aimed at institutions or organizations.

The Results of IDRC’s Capacity Building

The 43 projects generated a store of short-term, tangible outputs.

The most frequently reported were trained researchers, new training materials, the dissemination of research through papers and conferences, and the development of databases.

The projects also uncovered a wealth of information about longer-term outcomes.

These outcomes were in the form of changes in the skill-sets or the behaviour of IDRC’s partners, whether these are individuals or organizations. One project, for example, illustrated both types of outcome: it helped individual women develop more self-confidence in decision making, but at the same time this new skill led to changes in the relationships between these women and service institutions such as banks and clinics.

One surprising finding is that IDRC’s direct partners – those organizations that receive the funding and carry out the research – reported that most of the capacity building efforts, and therefore the outcomes, actually take place between them and their grassroots collaborators.

This means that identifying the outcomes of IDRC’s capacity building requires researching further down the chain of results.

¹ The design of this study pre-dates the formation of IDRC’s fourth Program Area, “Innovation, Policy and Science”.

Why IDRC's Capacity Building efforts work

The success of IDRC-supported projects in capacity building is often due to the Centre's role as a legitimating agency for research and development, and its use of peer learning.

IDRC funding provides not simply a financial benefit, but also a normative one, boosting respect for their knowledge and experience. Partnership with IDRC offers an association with a large global centre, plus access to the many other networks that IDRC sponsors. Said one partner: "IDRC accesses big names in the field – when I work with them this helps to legitimize my work and to add to my reputation". Partners value the importance of IDRC support to their own personal reputations and to those groups with which they work.

Interviewees identified IDRC's "matchmaking" skills as an important part of its capacity building selection process.

IDRC is adept at bringing the right people together, especially those who might not otherwise be aware of one another. In many cases, these relationships persist long after the initial introduction, and often lead to new ideas or initiatives.

IDRC's process for capacity building is consistent with the OECD's Principles and Best Practices for Capacity Development.

Among these principles are patience, respect for local value systems, the establishment of positive incentives, engagement even under difficult circumstances, and so on. One partner remarked: "IDRC is quite flexible. They are willing to see the researcher's point of view... They still respect what we think."