

Networks and IDRC's Program Areas

Parallel efforts, policy impact

March 2006

In 2006, IDRC completed a wide-ranging evaluation of the support it gave to research networks during the decade 1995-2005. This assessment included a review of IDRC's documentation, interviews with key players, a learning forum, and a telephone and e-mail questionnaire survey addressed to hundreds of network coordinators and members.

The survey received responses from 110 coordinators to an array of questions about the 80 research networks these people represented. The questions focused on four of IDRC's program (or "subject") areas: *natural resource management (NRM)*, *social policy*, *economic policy*, and *information, communication, and technology (ICT)*.

Sometimes, the study found no significant differences among networks in terms of their associated program areas; that is, all four areas were found to exhibit more or less the same traits. In the case of statistically significant variations, some are so commonsensical (e.g., "coordinators focused on natural resource management are more likely to be natural scientists than social scientists") they can be ignored. Often, however, unexpected and provocative differences were indicated among program areas.

The survey explored, for example, the relationship between program areas and the institutional and geographical "homes" of networks, characteristics of network membership, and aspects of network coordination. These lines of inquiry turned up interesting results, all of which are detailed in the full survey report; this category of findings, however, is primarily descriptive. Instead we will concentrate on those results that relate more directly to IDRC's ultimate development goals, especially to the influence on public policy.

IDRC SUPPORT FOR NETWORKS: HAPPY PARTNERS

The nature of IDRC's role in networks seems to depend on the program area. NRM networks (66%) more commonly report IDRC as a "formal advisor" as opposed to ICT (32%), social policy (47%), and economic policy (42%) networks. On the other hand, social policy (93%) and economic policy (92%) networks are more likely to report that IDRC plays a "donor/funder" role as compared with ICT networks (75%).

Over all program areas, networks are "very satisfied" with IDRC involvement. Regarding administrative and management issues, economic policy (87%) and social policy (83%) networks are the most likely to say they are "very satisfied" with the organization's support, particularly when compared with ICT networks (58%). This finding is the same in the case of network content. Economic policy (70%) and social policy (62%) networks are "very satisfied" with IDRC support, while fewer ICT networks (41%) respond in that way.

IDRC involvement in network content is extensive. The organization helps with the dissemination of research, networking, research design and implementation, and so on. In terms of program areas, the only finding that stands out is that, at 43%, more NRM networks report receiving assistance in the area of professional development than do other types of network.

Networks were asked for suggestions on ways to improve IDRC support for network content. In terms of differences among program areas, one notable finding is that both economic policy and social policy (16% each) networks were more apt to suggest "more information" (that is, education, training, publications, books, etc) than were other types of networks.

COMMUNICATIONS: A WEALTH OF CHANNELS

Network members link with one another and with other parties by way of face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, or email or other electronic means. Different program areas exhibit different styles of communication.

Social policy networks (15%) report meeting face-to-face on a monthly basis more than do eco-

conomic policy networks (3%). On the other hand, 57% of economic policy networks are more apt to say they meet face-to-face “a few times a year” than are other types of networks.

One-half of NRM networks report speaking by telephone either monthly (23%) or “a few times a year” (27%). Among economic policy networks, 27% report speaking by telephone “a few times a year.” ICT networks (24% weekly) report having more regular telephone communications than NRM networks (9% weekly).

Only 5% of NRM networks communicate daily by e-mail or other electronic means. All the other network types communicate more frequently in this way: one-quarter of ICT (23%), social policy (25%) and economic policy (24%) networks communicate daily via electronic technology.

Among program areas, the most intense communicators are social policy networks, 13% of which link via all three modes on a monthly basis or more frequently.

Economic policy networks (58%) are likely to say that they experience no barriers to their communication, compared with 31% of ICT networks, 37% of NRM, and 34% of social policy networks.

SKILL-BUILDING: GENERAL ENHANCEMENT

The study examined the effect of network involvement on building 10 different kinds of individual skills. NRM networks (88%) report a “great” or “moderate” influence on building leadership skills more than do economic policy networks (73%). In terms of fostering computer and technical skills, ICT networks (52%) and NRM networks (51%) report greater network influence than do social policy networks (33%).

Most coordinators in economic policy networks (87%) are “very satisfied” with the influence the network has had on their career. In ICT networks, meanwhile, 66% of coordinators report that level of satisfaction, and in NRM networks, 68%.

Many coordinators say that “networking” itself is the attribute of networks that most influences their home organization. Economic policy (23%) and social policy (22%) networks are more likely to cite the increased visibility from network involvement as a positive influence on their organization, as compared with ICT networks (7%).

Approval of the influence of networks on home organizations is very high. Compared with NRM networks (55%), social policy networks (74%) are more likely to say they are “very satisfied” with this influence.

Economic policy networks (86%) are more apt to state that network involvement enhanced the quality of research conducted by members as compared with social policy networks (70%) and ICT networks (64%). When the extent of this influence is measured, it is found that economic policy (45%) and ICT (46%) networks are more likely to say that their quality of research has been “greatly enhanced” by network involvement compared with social policy networks (21%) which are more inclined to report a “moderate enhancement.”

FROM AIMS TO ACHIEVEMENT

Economic policy networks (90%) are more likely to cite “policy and advocacy” as purposes than ICT networks (72%). Economic policy networks (91%) are also more apt to mention “building the research capacity of members” as one of their purposes than are ICT (65%), NRM (73%), and social policy (75%) networks. “Enhancing the quality of research available in an area” (as opposed to among members) is more common in economic policy (74%), social policy (65%) and NRM (59%) networks than in ICT networks (37%).

Among the entire survey sample of networks, 58% report being “very successful” at achieving their stated purpose. When program areas are considered, 69% of economic policy networks say they enjoy this level of success, while the lowest level – at 50% -- is cited by ICT networks.

INFLUENCE ON POLICY: BROAD BALANCE

Networks *intend* to have different types of influence on policy: to broaden the knowledge available to policy makers, to expand the capacities of researchers to carry out policy-relevant research, or to affect directly policies, laws, and government structures. When program areas are looked at, the only significant finding is that ICT networks (47%) are less likely to report

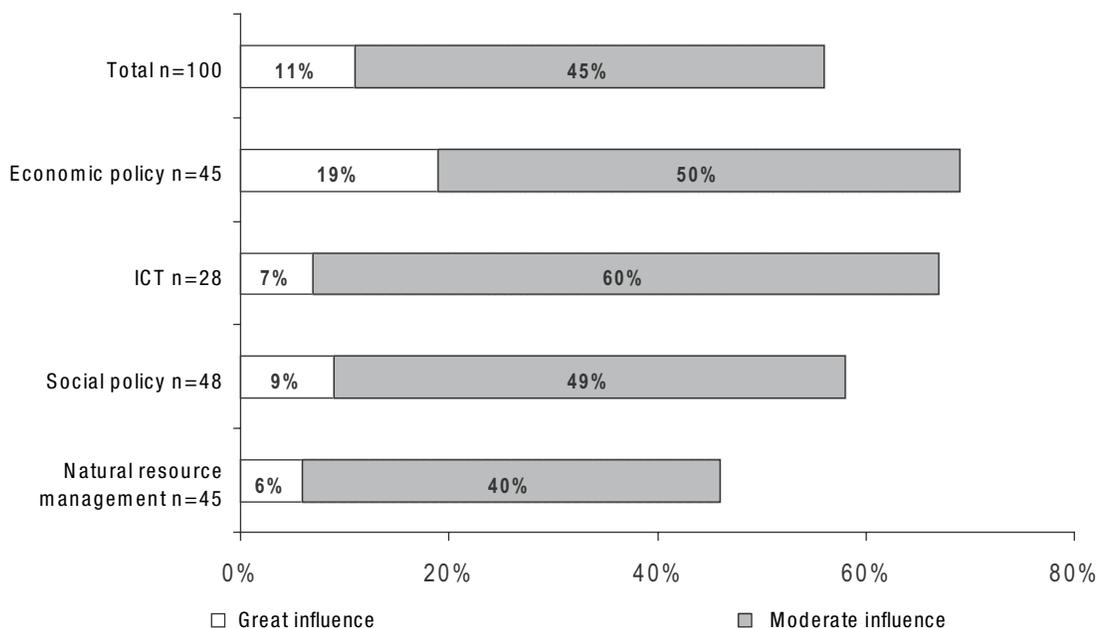
an intention “to expand the research capabilities of their members to do policy-relevant research” than are social policy (70%) and economic policy (85%) networks.

But in the end, is public policy influenced by research networks? Many networks do report that policy is affected, in varying ways and degrees, by their actions. When the program areas are examined, however, it is found that all seem to have more or less the same influence. The charts below bear this out.

Building capacity

While a strong level of influence in building the capacity of researchers is reported in every program area, economic policy networks are the most likely to cite this outcome and NRM networks are least likely (the graph doesn’t show it, but 41% of NRM say “little or no influence”).

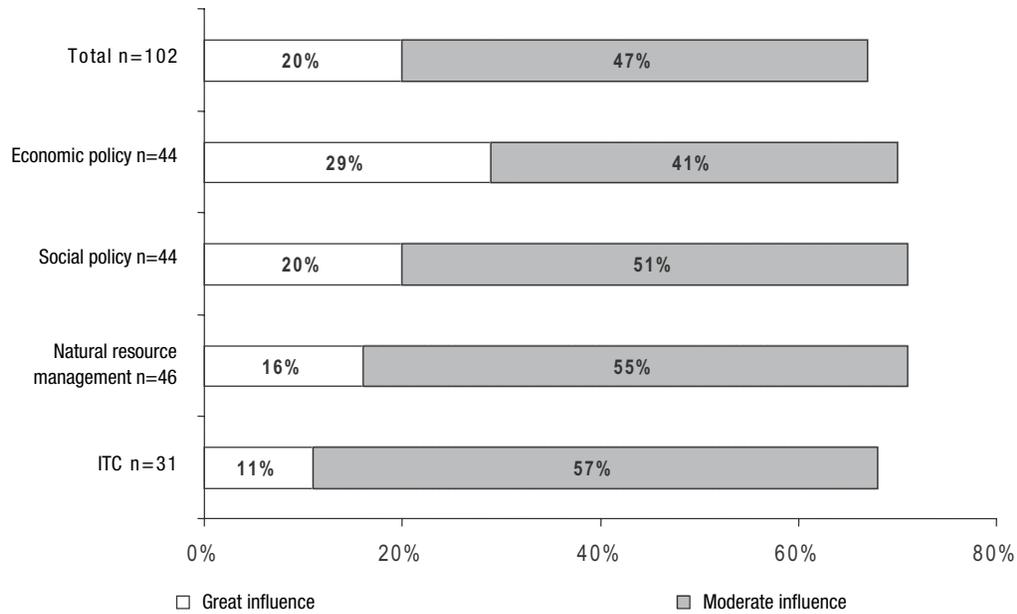
Success of Network in Building Capacity of Researchers to Carry Out Research by Subject Matter Focus



Broadening knowledge

As the graph shows, the four program areas report success in broadening the knowledge and perspective of policy makers more or less equally. Roughly seven out of ten networks in each area cite success. Note however that while almost three out of ten economic policy networks report a “great influence” in this outcome, only one in ten of ICT networks do so.

Success of Network in Broadening Knowledge and Perspective of Policy Makers by Subject Matter Focus



Affecting policy, programs, and legislation

Overall, between 45% and 50% of each program area’s networks report some level of influence in affecting policy. Economic policy networks, however, are more apt to report “great influence”.

Success of Network in Affecting Policy, Legislation and Programs by Subject Matter Focus

