The past few months at IDRC have been a time of exploration and reflection as we prepare for a series of discussions on the Corporate Strategy and Program Framework for 2005-2010. Exploration, as we examine the changing external environment for research for development; reflection, as we reassess IDRC’s past and present response to that environment. We are referring to this reflection as “IDRC Futures” to encourage all concerned to think corporately, strategically, and long-term. What are the big trends in our operating environment — the context for our work, in Canada and developing countries — to which we should pay the most attention? What kind of institution should we aim to become by 2010?

Clearly, the environment in which IDRC operates has become increasingly unpredictable — even at times chaotic. This past year, for instance, we have witnessed civil unrest in countries as dispersed as Bolivia, Nepal, and Zimbabwe, and war in the Middle East and West Asia. All have had significant impacts on IDRC’s work.

Learning how to do business effectively in turbulent environments and manage risk is obviously a pressing concern. In the past year, IDRC management commissioned studies on the impact of conflict on the research it supports in Nepal and Palestine. Both concluded that it is possible to support and carry out research for development even amidst chaos. Both studies also showed that the very process of research can help to encourage greater openness among research institutions and within government agencies. And both confirmed the value of IDRC’s cautious but constant presence.

The question therefore is not whether IDRC should fund research in regions subject to conflict, but how to do so effectively.

For IDRC, the uncertainty and strife have reaffirmed the crucial importance of our mandate: to initiate, encourage, support, and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical, and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions.

The past months have also revealed another dimension of our activities. They have shown how talking about issues on the basis of evidence can lead to new understanding. Whether or not the hypotheses are proven or anticipated results achieved, the benefits of research accrue in terms of stronger institutions, better trained researchers, new leads and insights, new partnerships. And by bringing together people of like-minded interests to work on common solutions to shared problems, I also believe that the work of IDRC contributes to improved transnational understanding.

Maureen O’Neil
The Face of Research

Profile of Dr Onno Purbo

“I’m producing knowledge producers who, it is hoped, will produce knowledge producers themselves.”

This neatly sums up Dr Onno Purbo’s life mission: promoting the dissemination of knowledge through information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Indonesia, both as a professor at Bandung’s Institute of Technology Bandung (ITB) and as the author of nearly 1000 articles and close to 40 books. The goal is to empower people through ICTs, and to foster a movement that will see information and know-how being shared through the Internet throughout the geographically-fragmented nation.

Purbo’s enthusiasm, dedication, knowledge, and energy make him the perfect candidate for the task of changing the way a nation shares information. His method is two-fold: communicate with people through public speaking, articles, and books; and educate others to do the same.

Until five years ago, Purbo taught at ITB, striving to help his students become analytical thinkers and writers who could help shape Indonesia’s future. His students were required to produce articles and books of their own, therefore ensuring that written material was being made available in Bahasa Indonesia, something, says Purbo, that is far too rarely done. “We don’t have enough knowledge written in Bahasa Indonesia. We need to disseminate knowledge to people in the community. So we need to educate people on what you can do with ICTs, how to set up a telecentre, how to set up a proxy server, in simple language.”

It is this desire to educate the public that led Purbo to resign from ITB in 2000 to devote all his energy to promoting ICTs in Indonesia. Usually, he travels to two or three cities a week to give seminars on the feasibility of building infrastructure and to provide training. Most of his written materials can be easily accessed on the Internet.

(https://sandbox.bellanet.org/~onno/)

While people are very appreciative of Dr Purbo’s work, the Indonesian government has been reluctant to do anything concerning the new technology, says Purbo. “For years I’ve been working to get the government to promote rather than discourage the diffusion of new technologies.” The problem is that, lacking land connections, people must use wireless fidelity — or “wi-fi” — Internet connections that depend on radio waves. And while communities can legally purchase computers, antennas, and other physical equipment, radio frequencies fall into a regulatory grey area.

As a result, some people have been arrested and many have had their equipment seized, says Purbo, but people are willing to run that risk to get the information they want and need. Demand for this service is so high that people will often sell a few heads of livestock or part of their land to pay for the transmitters, which have a range of only a few kilometres.

“I am promoting a movement within society, so that all individuals can build and run their own infrastructure, for their own purposes. Built by the people, for the people,” says Purbo. “There are 2000 of us — you cannot stop everyone.”

Purbo’s work has long been successful at the community level — he credits the movement for most of the four million Indonesians now connected to the Internet. Now, after 10 years of advocacy, he is seeing results at the government level as well. A recent meeting with government officials led the Ministry of Telecommunications to begin drafting an Act for wi-fi regulation, which Purbo describes as “the biggest milestone” for him and others doing his type of work.

Currently, Purbo is a Research Fellow with IDRC’s ICTs for Development (ICT4D) program area, meeting policymakers in developing countries to discuss new technologies. In the coming months, he will visit numerous countries in the hopes of selling the idea of ICTs as a tool for development, and wi-fi as an inexpensive technology.

Bolstered by his success in Indonesia, Purbo hopes that other governments will also be receptive. “It now seems that I have significant ammunition to talk to governments about how to shape a country’s approach to new technology,” he says. “The message we’ve been delivering for years is finally being received, but we still have a long way to go.”

In early 2004, IDRC is planning to publish two English-language technical manuals written by Onno Purbo. “For years Onno has been receiving emails from people all over the world who want to have material in English about his expertise,” says Nancy Smyth, Senior Program Specialist at IDRC. “We hope that these books will fill that need.”
In the fall and winter of 2002-2003, IDRC and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada sponsored a series of campus discussions about increasing universities’ research role in international development. In May, they culminated in a national roundtable on new directions in international research in Canada, Research Without (Southern) Borders: The Changing Canadian Research Landscape. We interviewed Chris Smart, now-retired director of IDRC’s Special Initiatives Division, who was an instigator of the consultations.

**Why is this the time to raise the issue of internationalizing Canadian research?**

A renovation of the Canadian research system has been underway since we came out of deficit-cutting and the government began to re-invest. The evidence is a pledge to go from fifteenth to fifth position in the international standings for countries that invest in science and technology. Research councils are getting more money, as are new structures such as the Canada Foundation for Innovation, the Canada Research Chairs, and Genome Canada. Most recently, increased support for graduate students was announced.

Then there was the report of the Expert Panel on Canada’s Role in International Science and Technology. It said that we do a lot of international research, it’s important, and it will be more important in the future. But, in reference to the contribution Canada’s science research could make to international development, it also said “not our issue — that’s for CIDA and IDRC to deal with.”

For me, that was a trigger. IDRC’s president, Maureen O’Neil, spoke to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada and to colleagues across the university community, and we realized that we needed a national consultation on how, in an increasingly interconnected world, Canada’s S&T research might make a more tangible contribution to the solutions we seek for sustainable and equitable human development in the disadvantaged regions of the world. The campus-level and national roundtables came from that.

**What did the roundtables achieve, most significantly?**

I hope we brought discussions to a point where Canada’s research leaders realize that the challenge of linking Canada’s mainstream S&T research to international development is a real issue, it’s timely, it’s something they can do something about. The roundtables basically say: “We know what the issues are. We accept that acute national needs and challenges determining our priorities for investments and program choices will be increasingly linked to chronic global needs and challenges. Now, let’s get down to business.”

**What was the level of interest during the campus meetings?**

Almost all the universities want to have stronger international programs because they improve their teaching. Many now use the expression that “they pledge to graduate global citizens” as a key marketing message.

One way of doing that is to have their students go abroad. Another is to welcome foreign students onto their campuses. Another is to have faculty actively engaged in international research — and we want this engagement to recognize the research that contributes to international development.

**Can Southern countries play significant roles in these exchanges?**

That’s the big issue for IDRC. With all this renewed interest and Canadian national investment in international research, where’s the South? Are people realizing that there are very solid reasons to seek collaborations with Southern researchers and to not constantly look to CIDA and IDRC as the sole instigators and funders of that kind of research?
Increasingly, research that is important for Canadians can only be conducted with collaborators in developing countries. Consider health security for Canadians and the matter of AIDS. There’s a lovely example of an international project that the Canada Foundation for Innovation funded to build a state-of-the-art laboratory in Nairobi to study AIDS. Canada is doing it because the only way it can do this critical research on behalf of Canadians is to have access to experimental settings and data that are only available in Kenya.

Other research domains — environment, for example, and increasingly some of the social science domains such as immigration, justice, defence, security — also involve issues that can be better researched if you understand the processes of development. You can only understand these if you go and do research and create knowledge with people who are living the problems of development.

**Knowing that, what currently limits Canadian researchers’ and universities’ international participation?**

For me, the most disturbing is a sense that if you're a young academic, it will be difficult for you to make a career if you go into research for development. Younger scholars find that if they leave the well-trodden disciplinary tracks for tenure and promotion — individual research and publication in well-recognized journals — “making it” takes longer.

And this is a critical time because by far the strongest and most numerous contributors to development research in Canada at the moment are older professors, and they're retiring in greater numbers. The estimate in Canada is that over the next 10 years we will have to replace 40,000 professors. We'll have a younger professoriate, a large portion of whom simply will not look at international development very favourably in terms of career enhancement.

**Those are very practical considerations. Did the roundtables identify reasons why younger Canadian academics should consider international research?**

Two ideas from the national roundtable have stayed with me. The first was a wonderful phrase by someone from Dalhousie University: “research diplomacy.” If Canada is thinking about revitalizing its foreign policy, it should think about making scientific cooperation a centrepiece.

Forming relationships around the search for knowledge becomes a wonderful way of establishing and guiding international relations. Canada could lead in this area. We can use the parts of our reputation that most people recognize: we don’t have an axe to grind; we can be very collegial; we believe in public goods; we don’t do research to enrich individuals, we do it to help the larger group of people in the world. Those make us a strong player.

The other idea is a very practical, very encouraging vision offered by a senior manager in the National Research Council of Canada. To move up from fifteenth to fifth place will require an enormous investment. To justify putting trillions of dollars into the research system, you have to sell trillions of dollars worth of its product. The market for much of that is in the developing world. This is really exciting because it means research that should be done will produce products that matter for the developing world — vaccines against tropical diseases; low-cost and sustainable sources of energy; sustainable sources of transportation — all those things that are needed to bring about favourable conditions for human development.

**How do we achieve this vision?**

People have to just go out there and do it. A couple of universities need to commit themselves to building good, measurable parts of their international research programs on relationships with developing countries. That’s going to happen. You already get a sense that India, China, Brazil, Chile, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and Taiwan, for instance, are countries with which we can have growing research relationships. For all intents and purposes, they are close to, or crossing, the development barrier. Then we hope that the research we do in collaboration with them can benefit their neighbours.

**There were scientists from developing countries at the roundtable. What did they have to say about this vision for internationalizing research?**

They pointed out a truth: if you want to strengthen science in the developing world through collaboration, you’ve got to strengthen the institutions in those countries. And you have to produce high-quality people.

In Canada, part of our reinvestment in science and technology is to reinvest in people, to produce well-trained, skilled scientists and technologists. The same is true of developing regions.

New ways of building institutional capacity and human capacity are the challenge. What’s needed is some really fresh thinking on how we do that. If we open up our systems to collaboration with developing countries, we get Canadian universities linked to universities in developing countries. Once we’ve got the institutions and we’ve got the people, everyone has a chance at a better future.

*After 24 years of dedicated service to IDRC and the cause of international development, Chris Smart retired this past July. Tim Dottridge has taken up the reins as Director of IDRC’s Special Initiatives Division.*

*More information, including the national roundtable’s final report, is available on AUCC’s Web site at www.aucc.ca.*
A DIALOGUE ON ICTs AND POVERTY

THE HARVARD FORUM

In September 2003, IDRC brought together 30 experts from around the world to Harvard University, Boston, to discuss how information and communication technologies – ICTs — can help to reduce poverty.

Participants included Nobel Prize winning economists Amartya Sen and Michael Spence, and leading ICT specialists, academics, and development practitioners from both North and South. It was the first time that such a varied group met to assess the true contribution of ICTs to poverty reduction, and to signal the way forward.

The discussion focused on three main themes:

- the importance of a regulatory environment to foster social and commercial development of ICTs in the South;
- the need for alliances between ICT developers and coalitions working to ensure better health, gender equity, education, and democracy;
- the role of digital social entrepreneurs, technologies, and services — particularly affordable technologies — and the need to scale up successful approaches.

Underlying these themes was a realization of the potential of poor people to use these technologies to improve their lives.

The discussions will help to inform IDRC programing in this area. To view a seven-minute video of the highlights of the meeting and individual interviews with participants, visit www.idrc.ca/wsis.

STRENGTHENING RELATIONS WITH SOUTH AFRICA

From November 3 to 5, the President of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, visited Canada. On November 4, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and South African President Thabo Mbeki witnessed the signing of a Joint Declaration of Intent between the Government of Canada and the Government of South Africa that will further strengthen bilateral cooperation and expand dialogue on key bilateral and multilateral issues. IDRC appeared quite prominently in this Joint Declaration: five IDRC-supported programs and projects were included.

IDRC was also privileged in welcoming Mrs Zanele Mbeki, wife of President Mbeki, and a small delegation. During her visit, Mrs Mbeki was briefed about IDRC’s work in the areas of gender, health, and ICTs in South Africa, all subjects of particular interest to the First Lady.

NEW DIRECTOR, ENRM PROGRAM AREA

On November 3, 2003, Jean Lebel assumed the position of Director of the Environment and Natural Resource Management (ENRM) Program Area. Dr Lebel was selected to replace Peter Cooper, who remains with the ENRM program until summer 2004 to assist with the transition to new leadership and to participate in selected program development.

An environmental and occupational health specialist by training, Dr Lebel taught at l’Université du Québec à Montréal and worked in the private sector with Union Carbide and Northern Telecom Electronics. Before joining the Centre in 1997, he was also associated with IDRC-supported projects on health and gold mining in Venezuela and on mercury in the Brazilian Amazon. He has led the Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health Program Initiative since April 2001.

NEW DIRECTOR, POLICY AND PLANNING GROUP

On February 1, 2004, Lauchlan Munro will assume the post of Director, Policy and Planning Group (PPG). He replaces John Hardie, who is retiring after 23 years of dedicated service to IDRC. A social sector economist with more than 15 years of management and research experience, Dr Munro joined the Centre in May 2003 as Senior Policy Analyst, PPG.

Prior to joining IDRC, Dr Munro was Chief of Strategic Planning at UNICEF where he led the development and roll-out of UNICEF’s medium-term strategic plan for 2002-2005. His research has ranged from poverty and social security issues in Zimbabwe to technology choice in Bhutan, as well as fiscal policy under structural adjustment and the liberalization of agricultural markets. He completed his BA (Hons) in Political Science and Economics and his MA in Development Studies at the University of Toronto. He also holds a PhD in Economics from the Institute for Development Policy and Management at the University of Manchester, UK.

NOTEWORTHY VISITORS TO LACRO

On Monday, July 7, Mr Denis Paradis, Secretary of State for Latin America, Africa and Francophonie, visited IDRC’s Latin American and Caribbean Regional Office. During his visit the Honourable Denis Paradis and his delegation participated in a roundtable in which IDRC’s program in Latin America and the Caribbean was presented.

As part of an extensive visit to several Latin American and Caribbean countries, including Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, the Honourable Peter Milliken, Speaker of the House of Commons, visited IDRC’s offices in Montevideo on August 13. Mr Milliken was accompanied by three of his colleagues: Mr Gary Lunn, Member of Parliament for the riding of Saanich-Gulf Islands in British Columbia; Mr Mac Harb, former Member of Parliament for Ottawa Centre in Ontario; and Mr Michel Guilmond, Member of Parliament representing Montmorency – Côte de Beaupré – Île d’Orléans in Québec.
NEW RELEASES

SEEDS THAT GIVE
Participatory Plant Breeding

by Ronnie Vernooy

Agriculture today is like a huge inverted pyramid. Globally, it rests on a precariously narrow base: less than three percent of the 250,000 plant varieties available to agriculture are in use today. The top-down system of agricultural research, where farmers are seen merely as recipients of research rather than as participants in it, has contributed to this dependence on a relatively few plant varieties. This trend, and the increasing industrialization of agriculture, are key factors in what can only be called genetic erosion.

A new approach to agricultural research and development is needed to conserve agricultural diversity, improve crops, and produce food of quality for all. This publication — part of IDRC’s In_Focus collection — examines this new approach to agricultural research in light of 10 years of IDRC support for projects that promote agricultural biodiversity and participatory plant breeding. It examines key issues in detail, from the research questions and design of on-farm research, to farmers’ and plant breeders’ rights. It argues for the development of new, supportive policies and legislation. (IDRC 2003, ISBN 1-55250-014-4 paperback 100 pp., $15)

Visit the In_Focus, Seeds that give online dossier at www.idrc.ca/seeds. Full text of the book is also available online in English, French, and Spanish. A Mandarin version has recently been launched in China and the book is being translated into Arabic.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES FOR DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA
Volume 1: Opportunities and Challenges for Community Development

By Ramata Molo Thioune

This volume — the first of three planned publications — deals with the introduction, adoption, and utilization of ICTs at the community level and explores the issue of community participation in various contexts — geographical, technological, socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional. Examining how communities in sub-Saharan Africa have reacted to the changes brought about by the introduction of these new technologies, the book details both the opportunities and the challenges that ICTs present for community development. The book will be useful for both researchers and development practitioners active, or just embarking upon, an ICT for development program. It will also be a very useful reference tool, not only for academics, but also for policymakers, decision-makers, and development professionals interested in the issue.


For more information, visit IDRC’s Booktique at www.idrc.ca/books

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