

Report  
on the  
2010 External Review  
of the  
International Development Research Centre (IDRC)  
Evaluation Unit

Ailish Byrne

Ian C Davies

A.K. Shiva Kumar

April 2010

## Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>I. Overview</b> .....	5
Assurance statement .....	5
Scope limitations .....	5
Overall observations .....	5
<b>II. Strategy</b> .....	6
Strategy implementation .....	6
Strategy shifts .....	6
Strategic evaluations .....	7
EU roles .....	7
Strategic considerations .....	8
<b>III. Quality</b> .....	8
Internal role.....	9
Programmes .....	11
<b>IV. Outcomes</b> .....	12
Use of Evaluation.....	12
Evaluative Thinking.....	13
Outcome Mapping.....	13
Evaluation Field Building.....	14
The Evaluation Community .....	15
<b>V. Key considerations and issues</b> .....	15
Issue 1 – Accountability for learning vs. for assurance .....	15
Issue 2 – Research and development .....	16

## Introduction

This report presents the assessment by the external review panel of key aspects of the performance of IDRC's Evaluation Unit (EU) over the period from 2005 to 2010.

This assessment, coordinated by the Policy and Planning Group, is part of IDRC's practise of reviewing all of its programmes on a regular basis and is intended, among other things, to inform the development of the EU's strategy for 2010-2015.

The report provides the external review panel's identification of questions and issues that, in its view, should be considered by IDRC as it maps out its direction, strategic intent and priorities for the coming five years.

The review panel was asked to consider four questions:

1. To what extent was the implementation of the Evaluation Strategy 2005-2010 appropriate?
2. Overall, was the quality of the work undertaken and research supported by the EU acceptable given the context and intended purpose?
3. To what extent are the EU's outcomes significant, relevant and valuable?
4. What are the key issues for the Centre's Board of Governors?

The panel used a case-study approach and collected both qualitative and quantitative information through systematic document review and semi-structured interviews of key respondents.

The panel was given full and unfettered access to the complete universe of IDRC documentation as well as to internal and external actors. The selection of documentation and respondents was done by the review panel with input on request from the Policy and Planning Group, the EU and other IDRC members as well as from external respondents, and with the support of a research assistant.

Members of the panel familiarised themselves with extensive IDRC documentation relevant to the review and selected and examined more specifically 31 project output reports covering the review period. Most of the projects had ended although the panel also identified purposely a few projects that were still ongoing and reviewed relevant documentation on these.

The review panel conducted 37 semi-structured interviews lasting on average 90 minutes each; 19 were conducted with IDRC staff, split about evenly between head office and regional personnel; the remaining interviews were held with 13 grantees and 5 expert consultants with experience of IDRC evaluation. The panel also had two half day meetings with the EU in Ottawa.

Findings were triangulated for reliability, organised according to the questions, analysed and, where applicable, assessed against the criteria given in the terms of reference for this review. The panel used expert opinion as a basis to arrive at its overall assessment and key observations.

Members of the external review panel were Ian C Davies (Paris), Team leader, performance and accountability specialist, Ailish Byrne (Nairobi), organisational learning specialist and A.K. Shiva Kumar (New Delhi), development research specialist. All three members of the review panel are professional consultants with extensive experience in evaluation and development.

The report begins by presenting an overview of key findings and observations followed by a highlight of relevant contextual factors, leading into four sections, each one dealing with a review question.

The review panel also looked at the EU report 2005-2010, the report on the 2005 external review of the EU and reflected on the review process itself with a view to suggesting improvements. The panel's observations and thoughts were shared with the EU in the course of its review and are contained in a short written companion piece provided to the EU.

The panel wishes to thank IDRC, its boundary partners and grantees for the openness and professionalism with which the review was met. In particular the panel thanks Adriana Gouvea for the excellence and quality of her assistance to the panel in conducting this review.

## **I. Overview**

### Assurance statement

Based on the data and information provided to it by IDRC and collected through the interviews it conducted, the review panel is of the opinion that, overall, the Evaluation Unit:

1. has implemented its Evaluation Strategy 2005-2010 coherently and appropriately,
2. has undertaken work and supported research of acceptable quality, and
3. has provided in the Evaluation Unit Report 2005-2010 information on outcomes that are significant, relevant and valuable.

### Scope limitations

The review did not examine financial records and statements, administrative, management or other documentation, or conduct interviews for assurance purposes on financial, compliance, risk or any other aspect outside of the purview of the panel's mandate as determined in the terms of reference.

The opinion given by the review panel is intended to provide review level assurance; it is not meant to provide audit level assurance.

### Overall observations

The value and uniqueness of IDRC's EU and of its work are widely recognised by partners, grantees and evaluators in the fields of development research and development evaluation. As such, the EU has made a sustained positive contribution to the public image and reputation of IDRC as a world class leader, both in respect of its support for development research but as well for its organisational effectiveness and the quality of its corporate governance.

The EU has implemented its strategy appropriately, produced and supported quality work and achieved meaningful outcomes. However it has not communicated what it does and its achievements, particularly within IDRC and to the Board, in a manner that does justice to the breadth, depth and innovative nature of its work.

The EU prioritises its support to IDRC by allocating systematically more of its resources to its internal service role than to its external programming role. For the period covered by the review it is estimated that allocation to the internal service role varied between 65% and 75% of total available EU staff and time<sup>1</sup>.

However, the review found that perceptions and expectations in this regard varied markedly among staff and management in IDRC. As a result there is a need for more clarity within IDRC about the role and priorities of the EU and more effective communication about what it actually does and achieves.

---

<sup>1</sup> The review panel attempted to reconstruct the allocation of EU time over the period 2005-2010 by considering overall workload and staff time. Because the attention of EU staff is driven by the nature of the workload at any given time, e.g. the EU is now undertaking five external reviews simultaneously, the panel found it difficult to determine a meaningful average over time. This is why a range is presented, bearing in mind that it is an estimate.

## II. Strategy

The EU's 2005-2010 strategy was formulated based on key principles of: utilisation-focused evaluation; development of capacity in evaluative thinking; evaluation standards<sup>2</sup> of utility, feasibility, accuracy and propriety; strategic choice of evaluations; value-added for those being evaluated.

Also, the EU had identified three corporate roles for itself in IDRC: contributing to IDRC accountability for the management of public funds; developing tools and methods to meet evaluation needs of IDRC and grantees; and supporting organisational learning and development through evaluation.

Intended strategies laid out in the 2005-2010 strategy were:

- Conducting and disseminating strategic evaluations.
- Carrying out capacity development in evaluation and evaluative thinking.
- Engaging in methodology development and tools for evaluation research and evaluation.
- Developing and implementing organisational learning processes.

### Strategy implementation

The review panel found that overall, during the period 2005-2010, the EU has implemented its intended strategy, in a manner that has been wholly consistent with the key principles it has formulated.

The panel further concurs with the statement in the EU report that the main shift from its previous strategy was a stronger focus on "the development of evaluative thinking as a core process within IDRC." (Evaluation Strategy 2005-2010).

Because strategy implementation should be adapted to changing contexts while remaining consistent with vision, mission and values, the review panel also looked closely at strategic management processes and how strategic level decisions were made over the period 2005-2010.

From its review of EU annual corporate evaluation reports, of minutes from EU strategic reviews and meetings dealing with aspects of strategy, as well as from interviews and discussions with the EU, the panel was able to appraise EU processes of strategic decision making.

These were found to be systematic and sound, taking into account evolving demands and trends in both internal and external environments, but as well and more importantly, drawing on the lessons learned and findings from strategic and programme evaluations, reviews and corporate learning activities.

### Strategy shifts

The review noted some other discernible and moderate shifts in the EU's strategic evolution over the period 2005-2010.

With respect to building capacity with research grantees the EU has progressively shifted from its approach to doing this to a significant extent through centres of Outcome Mapping and related training, to building the "field" of evaluation more generally. This has meant intent to identify and support Southern think tanks and practitioners of evaluation that can be built up.

---

<sup>2</sup> These are internationally accepted evaluation standards.

There has also been a thoughtful and effective effort to develop networks and virtual learning communities that can appropriate Outcome Mapping and sustain research and innovation through those that are using OM. As such, the EU has “divested” a significant part of its investment in OM in a sustainable fashion and it has been able to shift some of its focus to other aspects of its work. This artful “spin off” has been a way to deal effectively with growing demand for OM while not becoming a “training unit”.

The review panel also noted moderate and appropriate shifts in strategic orientation to adapt to evolving contexts and to evolutions in the evaluation field more generally. The development of tools and methods to address issues of complexity in evaluation, as well as research-supported contributions to key debates in the global evaluation community on questions of impact measurement illustrate well the EU’s responsiveness and innovative perspective.

### Strategic evaluations

The strategic evaluations carried out over the period 2005-2010 were considered interesting and useful by IDRC programme staff, management and senior management of IDRC. The processes by which the EU involved IDRC in discussing and choosing topics, as well as the thematic or cross-cutting nature of strategic level evaluations, were valued and viewed as effective ways of contributing to IDRC-wide organisational learning.

Of the seven strategic evaluations managed by the EU in the last five years the review panel found from its interviews with respondents that two stood out consistently as particularly meaningful for IDRC: Capacity Development and Policy Influence. This does not mean that the other strategic evaluations were not valued. Devolution, Networks and Strategy were three strategic evaluations also identified as informative, however not as consistently among respondents. While all strategic evaluations have been disseminated, the extent to which they are used and integrated into IDRC management considerations appears variable.

The intended strategies of capacity development and evaluative thinking, of development of methodology and tools, and of support to organisational learning processes, were all carried out appropriately. These strategies, through their activities and achievements, are addressed in the following sections of this report.

### EU roles

The review found that the EU has fulfilled the three corporate roles it had set out for itself in IDRC. However the role of contributor to IDRC accountability for the management of public funds warrants particular attention.

There were significant variations in IDRC in understandings or expectations of what the role of the EU should be in respect of accountability. One type of view generally expects the EU to be responsible for the development and provision of accountability information on IDRC performance to the Board and beyond. The other understands that the EU is there to act as a support to management and IDRC in fulfilling their accountability reporting obligations.

While the EU works under the latter paradigm and this seems to be well understood at all levels, some views at both senior management and board levels expressed a desire for more “aggregate” accountability information, as well as for content that could demonstrate value-for-money of IDRC operations.

In keeping with general principles of public management and consistent with the integration of evaluative thinking into IDRC management, the review panel considers that the provision of accountability information internally is first and foremost a management responsibility.

### Strategic considerations

Looking to the next strategic period in support of the IDRC Strategic Framework 2010-2015, the review panel thinks that a central issue for the EU is its ability to communicate effectively the broad, changing and innovative nature of its work both within IDRC and to external stakeholders.

While striving to maintain a useful balance between its internal service and programming roles, something the EU has to constantly navigate, the review panel thinks that a key issue for strategic consideration will be the ability of IDRC to maintain the intellectual, creative and resource space that provides the foundation for many of the EU's achievements.

### **III. Quality**

The review panel considered a wide variety and a significant number of EU outputs to inform our assessment. These feed the EU's credibility and legitimacy, internally and externally. Notable strengths and qualities of the EU are evident in their diverse and substantial outputs.

Widely perceived strengths of the EU include staying true to core IDRC principles and values, high intellectual calibre combined with a use orientation, risk-taking and pushing boundaries in the evaluation for development field, such that they are a respected authority in this area.

Their real-world grounding keeps the EU open to a large repertoire of approaches and methods, with a healthy bias towards those informed by complexity thinking and systems thinking. Their strategic orientation takes the EU well beyond the dominant but limited realm of tools and methods and fuels their focus on capacity development, evaluative thinking and field building.

Extensive documentary review highlighted the depth and quality typical of EU publications and resources, as repeatedly confirmed by select key informants within and outside IDRC. EU commitment to experimentation, innovation, documenting and sharing learning about use-oriented approaches, is appreciated. As are its flexibility, responsiveness, non-prescriptive approach and development of capacity, to – ultimately - enhance practice. EU commitment to field building, to Southern voice and building Southern capacity, is notable.

## Internal role

EU contributions to programmes and corporate learning are significant and wide ranging. They include developing processes and tools to nurture a culture of evaluative thinking across IDRC and with external grantees.

### *Advice to programme staff*

In IDRC evaluations are determined at the level they are needed and used. EU collaboration with programme teams, which is part of the open-door, ongoing support they provide, enables this to work.

Programme staff value EU expertise in developing concepts and approaches, identifying external specialists and team members, devising terms of reference and ensuring quality control. Multi-year external reviews involve intense interaction between programmes and the EU. Thus the EU's role is critical: "We (EU) have a space at the table to be part of programmes and integrated into programme discussions... which is essential to IDRC work". The orientation of new IDRC staff to the EU's ethos and approach, or "evaluation hand-holding time", has been significant.

The benefits of constant programme involvement are far reaching. As a senior programme specialist expressed, "it's a philosophy, it's something that has become ingrained... we've been trained to think in an evaluative way. Just the whole process of getting a project together, you're constantly evaluating – what you expect, impact on the community, your own performance, whether you did a good job, all this evaluation is constantly going on. You're almost putting yourself in a tribunal every day. It's triggered also by the [EU staff]... all very strong intellectuals that have led us to challenging ourselves more and more, pushing us as we do things... in the recognition that evaluation is not only about learning, but also about accountability".

The various mechanisms that formalise EU support for IDRC's evaluation culture and work are considered below.

### *Corporate learning and accountability activities*

i. *Rolling* Project Completion Reports (rPCRs) were developed jointly with Programs in response to the more standard ritualized, static monitoring reports that were typically of limited use and value and were often completed late (PCRs, or "orphan PCRs"). The rPCRs, in contrast, help ensure that evaluation for learning is ongoing and actively feeds into decision-making processes. The joint activity was co-Chaired and steered by a DPA, a factor considered to be key to the initiative's success. The shift to *rolling* PCRs is widely appreciated and is evidence of the EU's ethos of practical problem-solving and innovation, to ensure sustained value. As a senior staff noted, "the [rPCR] interview schedule challenges, what were the problems... what did we do, what did we learn... you've got to have an organization that has enough self confidence to say 'that didn't work'".

However while the *rolling* dimension is positive, questions were raised about what happens between periodic rPCRs and whether they really foster evaluative thinking. Potential for improvement remains: "Questions can be fine-tuned so you really get to the learning, some need to be nuanced... [but] in terms of process it's OK".

ii. rPCRs inform the Annual Learning Forum (ALF), dedicated time for collective reflection and learning from emergent findings at the Centre, to enhance performance. The depth of EU thought and expertise evident in the planning and facilitation of ALFs is commendable. However there are mixed perceptions about their value. One director noted, "I'm still hesitant – the demand it puts on us versus the outcome it generates is not necessarily optimal. When it's an IDRC-wide day it is useful. But when it comes to programme level it's variable, very demanding on me and my staff, for generating information that is in the category of the common sense. The jury is still out".

iii. External reviews constitute the Centre's primary accountability mechanism at programme level. Managed by the EU, these reviews assist senior management decision-making and inform prospectus development. The EU recently strengthened the review process and produced an external review guide for IDRC. During the current review process EU discussions with the panel have highlighted ways in which the external review process could be improved and allow for more real time interaction between the review panel and the unit.

External reviews have consumed much EU staff time and effort in the past five years. When different external reviews occur simultaneously, as is now the case, they consume great amounts of EU time, which accounts for spikes and dips in the availability of EU staff for other aspects of internal and programming service provision.

iv. Strategic evaluations are informed by EU involvement with programmes: "Because we're [EU] really embedded within programmes, we hear things and talk and respond with what we can do and what an evaluation can offer". During this period the capacity building, research to policy and networks studies, were particularly valued and considered ground breaking.

The EU's communication of strategic evaluation findings was praised: "Fred's group is doing a fantastic job to summarise the external evaluations. Both in terms of evaluation criteria and of summing up very complex reports".

v. The Corporate Assessment Framework (CAF), introduced in 2005, had a mixed reception. While the EU considered it a powerful tool for involving managers in critical learning and dialogue processes, this view was not widely shared. As management never found it useful or convincing, it was abandoned in 2009. The CAF experience testifies both to EU innovation and to its responsiveness to intended users: "We [IDRC] think it's interesting, it gives us evidence for claims. But it's not for us, it's for management".

vi. Annual Corporate Evaluation (ACE) reports – These reports are produced by the EU for presentation to the Board of IDRC every year around June. They highlight the key aspects of evaluation for IDRC, consistent with the driving principles that underpin the EU's work and the broad strategic orientations of IDRC.

The review panel found that, given the constraints of reporting length and format, the ACE reports generally conveyed well the reality of evaluation in IDRC and with external recipients, while presenting a fairly balanced assessment of strengths and weaknesses.

As well, the ACE reports were found to be useful in giving a sense of future direction and intended activities. The panel noted a marked improvement in the overall quality and presentation of the ACE report from 2005 to 2009, which suggests improved reporting effectiveness.

As a Board member stated, "Their reporting... is clear and down to earth. Their level of communication [to the Board] is good, it's not too technical or over academic".

### Programmes

i. The EU's publications and resources are outstanding and the EU is known for its thorough documentation and sharing of "new" evaluation approaches. An external boundary partner's experience is broadly representative: "We [a national Evaluation Association] borrow a lot from IDRC resources and Evaluation Unit resources. Part of what we're doing is to be a reference point for evaluators in the country. With new methods we see what works, what doesn't, what works for you in your context". In this period the strategic evaluation findings have drawn particular praise, both within IDRC and outside.

ii. Regarding tools and methods development and use, Outcome Mapping (OM) remains the best known and the most closely associated with the EU. OM is effectively running on its own momentum and is no longer a focus area for the EU, although their continued support is appreciated. OM training and the online learning community are flourishing, with diverse global case studies on the increase.

The appeal of OM is notable: "Most donors take the approach of 'this [logical framework] is what you have to apply to get our funding'. On the contrary, through a flexible outcomes-oriented approach [OM] and developing critical thinking, by putting the emphasis on the journey as much as the destination, they [the EU] are working on long term development" (IDRC grantee). OM fills a gap for so many development actors who seek viable alternatives to limited mainstream evaluation approaches and tools. As a recipient noted, "OM... opens your eyes to the complexity of change, to the non-linearity of change".

Critiques of OM, including that it complicates the common sense, or that it has assumed much EU attention to the detriment of other approaches, are muted in comparison with its widespread enthusiastic reception and the insatiable appetite for OM training. While the EU may have become a victim of its own OM success and itself actively promotes a mixed methods approach, new applications of OM continue and can open other doors, e.g. in Transitional Justice.

OM is interesting for another reason. Although it is no longer an explicit focus or priority area for the EU, it continues to assume centre stage and to overshadow other EU efforts. Externally, OM is often "the face" of IDRC's evaluation related work, such that other quality outputs like organizational assessment might be appreciated, but are less readily identified by stakeholders. This is unsurprising given the strong interest globally in evaluation tools and methods. However, it does serve to highlight an area of EU weakness which was a recurrent theme during our review process, i.e. the challenge of effectively communicating exactly what the EU does, both in whole and in detail, with and to diverse audiences.

iii. Capacity building is integral and critical to the EU's work, with added impetus to redress North-South imbalances in voice, opportunity and expertise. The EU makes a conscious effort to include Southern experience in their work, writings and priority setting. Commitment to getting Southern voices heard and to researchers in the South taking charge of their own research agendas and knowledge production, is evident in EU/IDRC publications and processes. Southerner training opportunities and EU-sponsored participation in regional and international gatherings are met with acclaim.

iv. The EU continually seeks to advance innovative evaluation methodologies and tools and is a recognized international leader in this field. However, challenges inevitably remain: "Methodologically they're still grappling with how best to capture the impact of programmes, like Ecohealth and the Rural Poverty and Environment group. They are better at project level".

The above testify to a Board member description of the EU team as "very professional competent people, what they do seems to be of very high quality... I respect their level of competence and high level of intellectual calibre". As a programme staff noted, "because of EU strengths, our partners are aware that we take monitoring and evaluation seriously and we expect results that are useful. Both as an issue of accountability and of learning". Overall the quality of EU work is high and reflective of their commitment to principles of participation, equity, integrity and use-oriented evaluation.

#### **IV. Outcomes**

The EU Report 2005-2010 identifies four expected outcomes corresponding to use of evaluations, evaluative thinking, outcome mapping and evaluation field building. A fifth unexpected outcome has to do with EU's influence on the evaluation community.

The EU's contribution to the outcomes is notable especially given the small size and the limited financial resources of the EU as well as the complex, dynamic and competitive development context in which IDRC and the EU operate. In fact, the review panel finds that, in many places, the cautious and restrained narrative of the EU in its report fails to do full justice to its contributions to evaluation in IDRC and internationally. It is also important to bear in mind that what matter more than the 'quantity' or 'amount' of contribution are the quality and timing of the contribution as well as leadership, motivation, encouragement and innovation. And in this respect, the EU has made a marked contribution.

The review panel's more detailed observations follow.

##### Outcome No. 1

###### Use of Evaluation

The panel endorses the *general* outcome statement that evaluations are used at multiple levels within IDRC and that the EU has designed useful strategic evaluations. It also finds sufficient evidence of the adoption of utilization-focused evaluation throughout IDRC's decentralized system. A sincere effort is made to maintain high quality and relevance. The EU Report offers good evidence of use for design, corporate learning and programme and recipient use.

Review findings affirm that the EU has had a strong influence in building evaluation results into decision making within IDRC. The culture of using evaluation is particularly strong at the senior management level. Discussions with program managers confirm the positive role of the EU in better integrating evaluation at the program and project level. Though the main outcome flags the use of evaluation within IDRC, the text also discusses the use of evaluation by recipients.

Having said this, the panel finds that there is considerable variation across divisions and program managers on the use of evaluations. It has also been difficult to assess the extent to which evaluation has got more embedded within IDRC particularly over the past five years. The narrative does not give a sense of “market penetration” or the significant shifts in the use of evaluation among recipients in recent years. The panel’s assessment is that the strengthening of evaluation practices among program grantees remains mixed.

## Outcome No. 2

### Evaluative Thinking

The Centre staffs clearly demonstrate a strong commitment to evaluative thinking and to organisational learning – not typically found to this extent in other organizations. Many of the external partners and recipients that were interviewed regard the high degree of evaluation knowledge and expertise as a distinct feature of IDRC. The EU should be recognised for this outcome.

Evidence of contribution is found in the EU Report as well as in the testimony of others who were interviewed. As noted earlier, programme managers commented on the usefulness of the rPCRs, ALFs and other activities initiated by the EU. Even where there were mixed reports about the usefulness of the CAF, many felt that it was a worthwhile exercise initiated in response to an important question that the Board was keen to answer: To what extent and how effectively is IDRC fulfilling its corporate mandate? The panel is of the view that the CAF exercise has contributed to organizational learning processes as well as to the broader literature on evaluating organization effectiveness.

However, the review did not come across sufficient evidence to support the second part of the outcome statement: ‘This contributes to programming effectiveness by IDRC staff and partners.’ While this is a reasonable assertion (and one that the panel broadly supports), the precise meaning of programme effectiveness is not clear. Neither does the report provide specific evidence in support of this claim. At the same time, the panel is also conscious that ascribing improvements in evaluation thinking to improvements in programme effectiveness is not easy.

## Outcome No. 3

### Outcome Mapping

The EU has, since its creation in 1992, been active in developing tools and methods appropriate to development research evaluation (for example, work on Organisational Assessment development). Over the years, it has produced several publications and case studies to highlight important methodological developments.

The book on Outcome Mapping (OM) as an approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation was published in 2001; and since then, the EU has been propagating the use of OM. Attention paid by the EU to disseminating and devolving OM between 2005-2010 has resulted in its increasing use by IDRC and by other organizations across programs and regions. Today, OM is practiced by an active community of evaluators. Many recipients appreciate the OM resources that the EU shares and the related support it provides, especially through the online community.

While the enthusiastic global uptake of OM testifies to its strengths and broad appeal – a reflection of the dissemination efforts of the EU - a consequence is that the EU has little or no control over the quality of OM trainers internationally, or over how OM is introduced and presented. It is, therefore, not surprising that some of the external grantees that were interviewed were lukewarm about OM. While acknowledging many of its positive features, they felt uncomfortable about accepting it as *the* way of doing things. Although the EU is explicit about the fact that OM is not IDRC's approach to evaluation, and promotes methodological diversity, it has not yet been fully understood by some respondents in the evaluation community at large.

The panel does recognise that the emphasis on OM is likely to diminish over the coming years as the EU begins to address new and emerging challenges.

Last, it might have been more appropriate to designate this outcome area as "development of tools and methods" rather than as Outcome Mapping, given that the EU itself 'did not want to become the "Outcome Mapping Unit" as this is only one method for the evaluation of development research.' The EU could have commented on the many new and interesting efforts it has been making to break new ground in methodology in recent years. This is important in light of what was said about OM in the Outputs and Quality section.

#### Outcome No. 4

##### Evaluation Field Building

In the panel's assessment, the EU is emerging as an important and innovative player in evaluation field building in the South. Also keeping in line with IDRC's philosophy, the EU actively encourages Southern led evaluation practice and research to address knowledge gaps and development challenges in specific contexts. Many of the external recipients and individuals interviewed appreciate the EU's contribution which is often characterized as 'respectful, low key and significant.'

The EU's field building efforts in South Asia in response to new opportunities that have arisen in the region in recent years are particularly worth recognizing. Also, the systematic manner in which the EU has been using small amounts of financial resources to mobilize and catalyze action for capacity development in the region among evaluators is notable<sup>3</sup>. It is nevertheless difficult to comment on the outcome as this exercise is admittedly in an experimental stage.

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2009, a workshop was held in Sri Lanka with a select group of individuals involved in evaluation at different levels within Afghanistan. The group included NGOs, training organizations, and government ministries. The goal of the meeting was to better understand the context of evaluation in Afghanistan, to foster linkages with other evaluation field building initiatives IDRC and others are supporting in the region, and to open the door for future collaboration and work on evaluation field building in Afghanistan that is driven by Afghan priorities and needs. IDRC organized and convened the meeting as part of a broader program of support to evaluation field building work in South Asia. The Afghan participants were also supported to attend the Sri Lankan Evaluation Association Conference and professional development workshops that preceded the meeting.

## Outcome No. 5

### The Evaluation Community

An unintended outcome of the EU's work over the past five years has been its contribution to the broader evaluation community. In its own words, "The Evaluation Unit contributes to greater acceptance of, and advocacy for use-oriented evaluation in the wider international development evaluation community. The Unit contributes to enhancing the role and positioning of Southern evaluators in development research evaluation.

The Unit has an influence on donor evaluation systems and thinking. The Evaluation Unit is an oft-tapped resource by Canadian and international NGOs, universities and agencies for advice and guidance on evaluation. Publications on evaluation contribute to the Unit's influence both within the Centre and beyond."

The panel fully endorses this contribution by the EU. Its efforts have resulted in greatly enhancing IDRC's reputation both in the field of evaluation as well as in the broader world of development research.

To sum up, the EU's contribution to outcomes is strong particularly in light of the limited human and financial resources it has. At the same time, the panel is of the view that a more systematic recording of the changes over time would help better assess the EU's contributions. While acknowledging that this is not an easy task, the panel thinks that the EU is well equipped to attempt it.

### **V. Key considerations and issues**

In its Evaluation Strategy 2005-2010, the EU presented as its three corporate roles 1. Management of public funds, 2. Evaluation research and 3. Organisational learning and development.

From its review the panel determined that these roles have been fulfilled appropriately by the EU.

#### Issue 1 – Accountability for learning vs. for assurance

In its analysis however, the panel concluded that the "Management of public funds" role would benefit from more clarity from a corporate accountability perspective.

The panel suggests that IDRC senior management and the Board consider accountability from two distinct yet related perspectives:

One is accountability for purposes of assurance, i.e. are IDRC's programmes and operations consistent with its mission and values, are policies and procedures followed, are risks identified, managed and mitigated, is the Board getting the information it requires to obtain assurance that things are under control and to fulfill its due diligence obligation?

The review panel is of the considered opinion that, in matters of accountability for assurance purposes, the internal control and audit function is better suited to fulfill this role.

Questions of risk management, value for money and accountability for the sound management of public funds and protection of public assets clearly are better dealt with through the use of the approaches, techniques and tools of internal, financial and management control, risk assessment and audit.

The review panel recommends that IDRC revisit where the primary responsibility for “Management of public funds” reporting, i.e. provision of assurance information, should be located in its organisation and how it should be fulfilled.

The other perspective is of accountability for purposes of organisational learning and development, i.e. how are programmes, strategies and policies, contributing to IDRC’s mission and what are ways in which IDRC can improve and progress.

This function is wholly consistent with the “Organisational learning and development” role of the EU. The responsibility for providing evaluative information for learning rests with management for programme based learning (with the support of the EU) and with the EU for strategic and corporate level learning.

## Issue 2 – Research and development

IDRC’s EU is a leader in the field of both internal and development evaluation. That it has managed to balance the priority it gives to its internal service role with effective contributions to evaluation practise internationally, testifies not only to the EU’s competence but as well to IDRC’s commitment to organisational excellence in support of innovation and research for development.

In political and socio-economic environments that demand meaningful accountability for public expenditures, the Board of IDRC faces a singular challenge that warrants consideration: How to make sure that, within IDRC, the EU is supported in such a manner that, while fulfilling well its internal service and programming roles, the space and freedom it needs for innovation and risk-taking are protected.

The current and dominant public accountability paradigm demands a reporting on results. While there are “results” undoubtedly attributable to a significant extent to IDRC and EU activities, the sustainable research capacity and capabilities that IDRC seeks to develop in developing economies, require a focus on process, perseverance, patience and a commitment to long term engagement.

However the dominant accountability paradigm creates severe limitations on reporting for organisations like IDRC and its evaluation unit: it imposes a simplistic annualised linear causal accounting of the relationship between funds allocated and the achievement of “results”, e.g. value for money, and the aggregation of such accounting at the organisational level to justify levels of funding.

This approach to accountability, and the usual tools that go with it, are in the best of circumstances a well intentioned but limited attempt to apprehend what are usually complex human interactions and interventions. For most public interventions, and most of the time, this paradigm and its tools are ill suited: does anyone really think that change occurs in proportional annual instalments and should be reported on as such?

The review panel has found that IDRC's EU has taken a leadership role and been instrumental in addressing this critical issue, most notably when few have risen to the challenge. To the review panel's knowledge, globally no significant international organisation has done so.

Not only does the EU perform its evaluation support and capacity building functions to high levels of quality, but it does breakthrough work in supporting the development of performance management and accountability practises, as well as in research and development evaluation.

The innovative nature of the EU's work together with its holistic, flexible, responsive and process based approach, explain its effectiveness in developing the evaluation culture in IDRC and the global recognition it gets for the quality and usefulness of its evaluation work.

The risk now is that the EU become a victim of its success: the EU and its staff are subject to ever increasing demand both within IDRC, e.g. for greater availability to program and project staff, to consult with program management, to support corporate learning, to manage reviews, to report to the Board, etc., and from partners, recipients and the broader evaluation community, for project support, capacity building, training, development of methods, support to multi donor initiatives, participation in, and contribution to, work on evaluation issues in development, etc.

If not dealt with in a clear and organised manner by IDRC these pressures could progressively constrict the research space and intellectual freedom, i.e. the research and development function, that have allowed the EU to nurture and produce the cutting edge work that contributes so effectively to IDRC's mission.

It should also be made clear, and well understood, that the benefits of research and development by the EU accrue first and foremost to professional staff and management of IDRC, i.e. beneficiaries of EU's internal service role, and to external grantees and partners in the improvement of evaluation capacity and practise.