



External Review of the Research for International Tobacco Control Program

September 2010

This findings brief is based on the reports: the “Program Report 2005-2010” by the RITC program, April 2010, and the “External Review of the Research for International Tobacco Control Program 2005-2010” by Burke Fishburn, Mira Aghi and Shirley Addies¹. The full reports are available from IDRC’s Evaluation Unit.

1. Overview of the Research for International Tobacco Control Program

The Research for International Tobacco Control program’s evolution within the Centre since 1994 has included being a multi-donor secretariat and an initiative within the Governance, Equity and Health program. The Research for International Tobacco Control supports research for the development of policies and programs that will minimize the threat of tobacco production and consumption on health and human development in developing countries. The program recognizes and promotes tobacco control as a multisectoral development issue.

During this reporting period, the program managed 176² projects, with recipient institutions in all regions of the world. Total project funding dispersed by the program was \$11.26 million including \$5.5 million from IDRC. Major donor partners were the Department for International Development UK and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The program aimed to develop bodies of knowledge around the following core themes:

- Poverty and tobacco
- Tobacco farming: the health, social, livelihood and economic impacts
- Healthcare systems interventions
- Globalization, trade and tobacco
- Alternative forms of tobacco use

A cornerstone of the program was also support for the ratification, implementation and evaluation of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. In the latter half of the reporting period, the program also embarked on the African Tobacco Situation Analysis, a project that aimed to explore the critical determinants of success for tobacco control in Sub-Saharan Africa.

¹ Shirley Addies is an employee of the UK Department For International Development (DFID). Her input to this evaluation/review was invited by the program following five years of DFID donor partnership with the program. It should be noted that the views expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of DFID.

² Total number of projects, including Research Support Projects and projects of small and medium grant competitions

2. Methodology

The approach to the program's external review included a 2005-2010 Program Report that followed the guidelines of the Evaluation Unit for final prospectus reports and a report by an external review panel of three independent experts.

The final program report outlines the program's strategy and evolution, key research findings, major program outcomes, and the main lessons drawn from the program's experiences. The program was a part of the Governance, Equity and Health program in 2006, and therefore did not have a separate prospectus. As this was a program-led evaluation and its purpose was in part to meet the evaluation needs of DFID, the terms of reference for the panel were slightly different than those of other external reviews. The panel was required to assess to what extent the program achieved the objectives of its 2005-2010 Program Strategy and to what extent research findings and outcomes—as reflected in the 2005-2010 Program Report—are significant, relevant and valuable. The panel was also asked to identify key issues for the future of the program, its funding partners, and IDRC. Less emphasis was placed on research quality as was the case for other external reviews.

The panel reviewed and analyzed extensive public and internal documentation; it surveyed a geographic and institutionally representative selection of the program's grantees and stakeholders, and conducted in-depth interviews with those stakeholders. The panel also reviewed and analyzed grants reports and other information to draw inferences about the relevance, quality, and reach of the research funded by Research for International Tobacco Control. Finally, the panel conducted a review of the global tobacco control environment to assess future funding, partnerships, and other opportunities for the program.

3. Research Findings

The program organized the main research findings from their supported projects into the five priority areas as listed above.

3.1 Tobacco Farming

Research for International Tobacco Control-supported studies have built much of the evidence that destroys the myth that tobacco farming is a lucrative livelihood or crop for small-holder tobacco farmers. Many studies, in fact, showed that tobacco farmers were in many ways worse off than farmers who did not farm tobacco in the same region. Detrimental social, environmental, economic, and health impacts were illuminated.

Three of the ongoing, larger projects (Bangladesh, Malawi and Kenya) are generating evidence that shows that there are more lucrative alternatives and these have begun to plot strategies to make that transition.

3.2 Poverty and Tobacco

The program has contributed to the international literature on the impact of smoking on household income of the poor and has also supported unique studies

exploring poverty in relation to tobacco farming and the social determinants of smoking among poor, marginalized youth. Studies in Argentina, Colombia and Palestine have shown strong associations between youth smoking and exposure to violence, discrimination, marginalization, and poverty.

3.3 Globalization, Trade and Tobacco

The projects in this area have dealt with smuggling, trade agreements, tobacco industry marketing and advertising, and analyses of tobacco industry strategies to obstruct and undermine tobacco control.

- Smuggling was grossly over-estimated by tobacco industry-sponsored studies.
- Research demonstrated the complexity of the smuggling issue, as it operates on many different levels – from major organized crime operations to the involvement of residents of poor border communities who rely heavily on smuggling of cigarettes for their income. Smuggling is a key component of British American Tobacco’s market entry strategy in Lebanon.
- Projects in Argentina and Lebanon illuminated strategies pursued by the tobacco industry to influence and block national policy decisions on tobacco control.
- Studies in Argentina, Guatemala, Poland and China among others, explored the sophisticated strategies of transnational tobacco companies to penetrate and increase their market.

3.4 Alternative Forms of Tobacco Use

The program’s support to research on waterpipe use (also known as narghile) through a series of related projects in Lebanon has generated ground-breaking and globally relevant results. Narghile use is a growing phenomenon throughout the world and false perceptions prevail with regard to the relative safety of this form of tobacco use compared to cigarette use.

- Narghile smoke delivers in a single session as much tar as an entire pack of cigarettes. Narghile smokers are subject to the same health risks as incurred by cigarette smokers and narghile second hand smoke poses a serious health risk for non-smokers with pregnant women and the foetus being particularly vulnerable. Heavy water pipe smokers were three times more likely to develop coronary artery disease than those who never smoked.
- Availability, accessibility, affordability, innovations in product design, and lack of a policy regulation framework were perceived as contributing factors to the popularity of narghile.
- Despite the popularity of narghile smoking and the level of ignorance about its health effects, substantial support exists among the public for a wide variety of narghile (and other tobacco use) control policies.

3.5 In addition to the findings under the core research themes above, the **African Tobacco Situation Analysis** initiative has generated the first waves of action and intersectoral communication on addressing the tobacco epidemic within 12 Sub-Saharan countries and regionally. It has also provided, through a participatory process of context mapping and situational analysis, a wealth of information on

countries' priorities for action and research, data needs and the capacity for action.

4. External Review Panel Findings

The reviewers found Research for International Tobacco Control was generally successful in achieving its stated outcomes and that despite limited resources it made significant, relevant and valuable contributions to global tobacco control during the 2005 – 2010 period. Findings here are reported according to a) program strategy & project portfolio and b) program outcomes.

4.1 Program strategy and project portfolio

The panel provided its findings according to the following categories: Strategic Framework, Organization, Grants and Global profile and Leadership. As a result of the controversy that emerged around the Board Chair during the period of the review, the panel paid specific attention to this issue and the implications for the program and the Board.

- 4.1.1** The panel found it difficult to systematically, logically or objectively assess findings and outcomes, based on the 2005-2010 Program Strategy due to a lack of articulated measures or benchmarks, or clearly defined objectives in the Program Strategy. The panel did substantiate the reported findings and outcomes, however, and made recommendations for future planning, monitoring and evaluation.
- 4.1.2** The panel found that the Research for International Tobacco Control grants program—and associated capacity building activities—were intensely and effectively managed and produced good outcomes on an individual project basis. The panel found that the program achieved these outcomes through an emphasis on a “Southern-led” approach, active engagement with developing country researchers and a core component of “responsive” funding. This approach seemed to attract new funding, but also incurred sizeable transaction costs—namely, time and resources for management and administration—for a small team with limited resources.
- 4.1.3** The panel found that within IDRC, Research for International Tobacco Control has unique expertise and experience operating a multisectoral research program, as tobacco control involves health, economic, agricultural, social and cultural, broad development issues.
- 4.1.4** The panel found a perception that the program has a significantly lower global profile than it did in 2005. Most stakeholders have a historical understanding and respect for the Research for International Tobacco Control program. However, they now appear to be largely unaware of the program's current work, unaware of recent research results, or the program's recent contributions to global tobacco control. Important exceptions include the program's global leadership on the African Tobacco Situation Analysis. The implication of the program's reduced global profile is that stakeholders are not using and recognizing Research for

International Tobacco Control's important contributions. Furthermore, the program may have difficulty attracting new donors, resurrecting and developing important new partnerships. In addition, several stakeholders noted a significant gap in global tobacco control research leadership in terms of providing and coordinating a global forum for discussing research priorities, needs and funding. Although it is understood that Research for International Tobacco Control has transitioned from a secretariat to a program, many stakeholders strongly suggested that the program is well placed and has the experience to again take on a global leadership role.

4.1.5 Assessment of research quality was not a focus of this review; however, the panel did carry out an assessment of significance, relevance and value of the findings and outcomes. The panel found that the program has made significant contributions to global evidence on tobacco control, especially related to development issues in low- and middle-income countries. In addition, the program has developed its own strong research and knowledge base on important tobacco control issues on previously neglected policy research areas, such as water pipe use and gender issues. However, the panel also concluded that there is scope to demonstrate increased cohesion across Research for International Tobacco Control work and for it to derive greater value and significance through strengthened global dissemination of results.

4.1.6 During the review period, the panel learned that a board member of Imperial Tobacco Canada chaired IDRC's Board of Governors. Several organizations have now terminated funding relationships and other associations with IDRC, the Research for International Tobacco Control program, and specific IDRC staff members.

The panel reported that several stakeholders indicated that IDRC did not appear to take the issue seriously through immediate, clear, and direct action. The panel also expressed their impression that IDRC does not see the program and tobacco control as an integral part of the "IDRC family" and therefore were not concerned about damage of the revelation and potential tobacco industry influence on IDRC decision-making or on the Research for International Tobacco Control program. The majority of interviewed stakeholders outside of IDRC also expressed their opinion that the Chairman should resign from the IDRC board.

Based on strong stakeholder opinions on this issues, as well as World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control guidelines regarding tobacco industry interference with tobacco control and public health policy, the panel found that the situation has had a severe impact on the program's and IDRC's reputation and credibility. This is severely hampering the program's ability to effectively deliver its program and may represent a very real threat to its sustainability.

4.2 Outcomes

In the 2005-2010 Program Report, four outcomes the program considered most significant were highlighted:

- **New Frontiers:** the program was a pioneer in critical but neglected areas of research
- **Regional Strength:** the program strengthened the development of regional capacity for collaboration to address barriers to tobacco control
- **Expanding Policy Capacities:** the program has broadened the capacity for policy influence and increased the supply and demand for policy relevant information
- **Global Influence:** the program has had broad policy influence at the global level

4.2.1 The panel found that these were substantiated by the review of documents, as well as responses from grantees and interviews with stakeholders. Research for International Tobacco Control has been generally well organized and well managed in the face of significant challenges during a difficult transition period that has seen management changes and organizational uncertainties.

4.2.2 The panel found significant contributions from the program to global evidence on tobacco control, especially related to development issues in low- and middle-income countries. In addition, the program has developed its own strong research and knowledge base on important tobacco control issues on previously neglected policy research areas, such as water pipe use and gender issues.

4.2.3 The panel also found that the program has effectively facilitated networking amongst researchers, advocates and policymakers, and capacity building amongst researchers. Strong progress has been made across the portfolio with some notable successes around policy influence at country level. This is noteworthy considering the relatively small size of the program team, its limited financial resources, and the demands of operating within a demanding multisectoral environment during a continued period of program transition.

5. Issues for Consideration

The panel concludes that Research for International Tobacco Control has made significant, relevant and valuable contributions to global tobacco control efforts during the 2005-2010 period. However, much remains to be done. With appropriate organizational support and resources, the program can strengthen and expand its role to maximize its country-level and global impact, revive its global profile and reinstate itself as a global leader in tobacco control research, and ensure the sustainability of its work. In summary, the panel recommends that IDRC support further research programming as presented in the 2005-2010 Program Report, and also consider:

- Continuing its critical work in funding research in low- and middle-income countries, with a development focus and addressing neglected but critical issues;
- Establishing a new program strategy that includes clear objectives and indicators to monitor and measure performance;
- Building on extant grantee relationships to maximize investments in research and capacity building;

- Strengthening and effectively disseminating meta-analysis of research;
- Strengthening engagement and information sharing with global partners;
- Establishing the program as a lead, catalyst, or knowledge center for future IDRC work on chronic disease issues.
- Conducting internal review and stakeholder outreach activities to help resolve perceptions of tobacco industry interference with the program's work.

5.1 Specific recommendations concerning the Board of Governors

In light of the conflict of interest controversy, the external review panel presents the following recommendations to the Board of Governors:

- Conduct an internal review of IDRC board decision-making on Research for International Tobacco Control and tobacco control issues. Make this report publicly available.
- Associated with the above, conduct "lessons learned" report that would be shared with global tobacco control, public health, and development community. This could also be a significant contribution to the global work on implementation of Article 5.3 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.
- Contact funders, NGOs and grantees and undertake confidence and credibility restoring measures. Identify efforts needed to restore specific funding relationships and associations.