External Review of the Pan Asia Networking Program

September 2010

This findings brief is based on the reports "Pan Asia Networking (PAN) Prospectus Review 2006-2011" by the Pan Asia Networking program, and "Pan Asia Networking External Panel Review" by Beth Kolko, Tim Unwin, and Dieter Zinnbauer with support of Emily Taylor, August 2010. The full reports are available from IDRC's Evaluation Unit.

1. Overview of the Pan Asia Networking Program

The Pan Asia Networking program is in its third prospectus period (2006-2011). The program has three main themes: policies, technologies, and effects. It uses three principal means of delivering programming: supporting the development of research networks, building country programs, and establishing competitive grants.

Between the start of 2005 and April 2010, the program allocated $31,886,517 to 81 projects (and 34 supplements). Of this total, 54% was to technology projects, 22% to policy projects, and 18% to projects on socio-economic effects. The remaining 6% was allocated to corporate activities and projects with other program initiatives.

The Pan Asia Networking Program Initiative's mission is to "empower communities to address their key development challenges through effective access to information and communication technologies." It has three objectives:

1. Building evidence and promoting dialogue to inform policies that enable knowledge societies in Asia;
2. Applied research and piloting of innovative information and communication technologies applications for development; and,
3. Research and build capacity for understanding the socio-economic effects of information and communication technologies on Asian communities.

2. Methodology

External reviews of programs at the Centre begin with the program analyzing its own achievements, followed by an assessment of program performance by an external review panel made up of independent experts. The program's final prospectus 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 external review panel report judges: the appropriateness of the prospectus implementation; the quality of research outputs; and the relevance, value and significance of the program outcomes. The external review panel report also identifies key issues for consideration.

The external review panel adopted both quantitative and qualitative approaches, seeking in particular to explore what the Pan Asia Networking program team members, grantees,

and other stakeholders had to say about their experiences of the program. Six main methods were used: 1) review of core program documents; 2) interviews with 45 members of the PAN team, grantees, and other experts; 3) review of 35 of the 115 projects and supplements supported by PAN; 4) scoring the quality of the 40 monographs and peer-reviewed journal publications produced by program staff and grantees; 5) a web-based survey, for which only six replies were received; and, 6) analysis of web-statistics relating to the program provided by IDRC.

3. Research Findings

The final prospectus report of the Pan Asia Networking program provided an overview of research findings emanating from projects supported in its three themes. A few examples are given for each. Research findings were only included if they were considered significant (for example, cited in the media or in the academic literature) and/or were of peer-reviewed quality.

3.1   In terms of telecommunications, research revealed that:
- While ownership of phones is low at the "bottom of the pyramid" (20% to 50%), access to phones is much higher (about 90%) due to heavy use of shared, borrowed, and public phones.
- Bottom of the pyramid mobile-phone users adopt various cost-cutting techniques, including making "missed calls," using a mobile phone exclusively for incoming calls, making only mobile-to-mobile calls, and phoning at off-peak hours (LIRNEasia 2009).

3.2   Research on how information and communication technologies make a difference on livelihoods found:
- Electronic Networking for Rural Asia/Pacific scoping studies demonstrated a measurable impact on income and savings through the use of information and communication technologies (ENRAP, 2010). For example, market information transmitted via mobiles helped farmers in Bangladesh reduce transport costs by 33%. In India, advice on crop status using digital photography reduced farmers' transaction costs by about $60 per acre.
- In a pioneering study, de Silva (2008) was able to quantify the "cost of information" to show how information asymmetries in agriculture markets result in high transaction costs for farmers. By estimating that the cost of information constitutes 11% of farmers' total costs from the time of deciding what to grow to the time of selling (costs incurred as a result of poor information availability along the agriculture value-chain), the study underscored how information and communication technologies tools can help farmers make more informed decisions.

3.3   **Research on how information and communication technologies affect Asian society showed:**
- A survey in rural Pakistan underscores the drastic differences in levels and quality of information and communication technologies access that remain between men and women despite the exponential increase in the availability

of information and communication technologies (Siegmann, 2009). The study found that more than 40% of all female respondents needed permission from their husbands, fathers and brothers, who typically owned the information and communication technologies equipment. Negative perceptions of women's technological skills were also evident: interestingly, female respondents have an even more negative perception of their own technological abilities compared to male interviewees. The iReach project in Cambodia found that women used information and communication technologies hubs less frequently than men in part because of the presence of monks, as women showed a reluctance to sit close to them (Grunfeld & Hak, 2009).

- Another study, investigating the impact of business process outsourcing on call centre workers in the Philippines, found significant physical and psychological effects, including lack of sleep and exercise, and increased susceptibility to colds and flu. Urinary tract infections were also widespread because the workers' access to restrooms was restricted to scheduled breaks (Hechanova, 2009).

4. External Review Panel Findings
Overall, the external review panel concluded that the Pan Asia Networking program prospectus was implemented in a coherent and appropriate manner. The outputs were numerous and, while they range in quality, they reflect a varied grant making focus and the effective mix of research and advocacy activities that Pan Asia Networking has fostered. The outcomes have been significant, and they have reflected traditional research and policy programs, vibrant and wide-ranging networks and the more risk-taking funding streams.

4.1   Prospectus Implementation

Regarding the implementation of the prospectus, the external review panel noted:
- The flexibility and agility of the team was widely respected and enabled it to support and implement appropriate and timely projects within the rapidly evolving information and communication technologies for development field.
- The open, collegial, and transparent management style within the Pan Asia Networking team enabled diverse approaches and expertise to be used to best effect in delivering the program.
- The team established effective and supportive relationships with most of its grantees, partners, and recipients.

4.2   Research Quality

Using eight key indicators to assess the quality of the publications (conceptual framework, methodology, analysis, novelty value, utility, citation count, readability, and, where applicable, publication type), the external review panel concluded:
- Few publications reached the highest level of strict academic quality but, on average, the scientific quality was acceptable. They fulfilled the objective set

in the prospectus and demonstrated a marked improvement over the previous programming cycle.

- Publications typically scored higher for quality indicators that went beyond measuring narrow academic excellence and included utility, readability, and novelty value.
- The overall mix of research strategies, topics, and output formats was very conducive to meeting broader objectives of quality, influence, ownership, capacity building, and innovation. These are not easy to balance.

4.3 Outcomes

The program highlighted four program-level outcomes it considered most significant:

- influencing the reform of information and communication technologies policies by supporting research and advocacy;
- catalyzing technological innovation for social benefits by scaling innovations and creating a learning environment for successful innovation;
- building research capacity in information and communication technologies for development through generating more credible knowledge and expanding the capacities of information and communication technologies for development researchers; and,
- contributing to strengthened gender integration in information and communication technologies for development.

The external review panel came to the following conclusions about these outcomes:

4.3.1 Influence on telecommunications policy reform has been one of the strongest areas of the program's outcomes, at least in terms of explicit causality, specifically from the work of LIRNEasia. According to many informants, however, LIRNEasia, is a special case given the organizational culture, the numbers of people devoted to working almost exclusively on policy issues, the specific policy arena in which they work, and the strong personality at the center of the group. While LIRNEasia successes are notable, the external review panel urges the program not to set LIRNEasia as a standard for outcomes, since their achievements would be difficult to replicate elsewhere.

4.3.2 Two longstanding relationships – with Internet activist Onno Purbo and the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation – have for some time produced valuable outcomes congruent with Pan Asia Networking objectives. These relationships are grounded in the program's tradition of working with change makers regardless of their participation in traditional academic conversations.

4.3.3 The program and IDRC should consider the small grants program as a "high risk, high impact" program, similar to the ones that granting agencies such

as the US National Science Foundation adopt for emerging, cross-disciplinary areas, where risky investments potentially generate high impact.

4.3.4 There is no doubt that networks supported by Pan Asia Networking (PAN Localization Network, PAN Asian Collaboration for Evidence-based e-Health Adoption and Application, PAN Distance Learning Technology) have a positive impact on individuals, organizations, and the region. The bodies of knowledge and expertise that reside within these networks can be pointed to as one the program's significant achievements.

Networks are not without their challenges. Grantees and the program team alike identified several systemic issues with networks, including difficulties grouping unfamiliar colleagues onto research projects, setting shared expectations of work habits across multiple cultural contexts, and managing widely divergent capacity across a network. In addition, there were mixed experiences among grantees regarding the ease with which networks were able to replace non-productive members or add new contributors. Also, digital networks have been challenging; grantees might benefit from strategic consideration of emerging computer-supported cooperative work research.

Pan Asia Networking provided new programming to make networks more sustainable, including workshops on communicating effectively with policymakers, capacity building for self-evaluation, providing structures for networks to grow organically and add productive members, and fundraising. Given the usefulness of program evaluations to direct productive changes of direction, it is surprising that most individual projects do not conduct external evaluations. The external review panel supports recent moves by the program to provide grantees with tools to conduct their own project evaluations.

4.3.5 The prospectus goal that all projects include a gender analysis was not substantiated from the interviews conducted with grantees and reviews of project documentation. There is wide variation in the extent to which gender was incorporated. According to interviews with experts in gender and information and communication technologies not associated with the program, the Gender Evaluation Methodology, which was developed with Pan Asia Networking support, is well known in the larger community. Overall, it is evident that the team takes gender seriously. There was more focus on gender in later stages of implementation; however there is variation in the extent to which projects incorporate gender-based analyses.

5. Issues for Consideration
The external review panel agreed with the strategic lessons identified in the program's final prospectus report and added to them.

5.1   Giving information and communication technologies a strong presence across core areas of programming is more important for IDRC's mission and objectives than ever.
Building a strong information and communications technologies component into IDRC's other programming areas is essential and offers opportunities for insights and innovations in view of empowering through knowledge. Mainstreaming information and communication technologies for development can also offer opportunities to bring in new partners and break down some persistent communication silos across program areas.

5.2   Retaining a strong information and communications technologies competence hub is essential for innovation and cross-pollination.
Comparing, synthesizing, and leveraging what has been learnt and is being done with information and communications technologies across thematic areas is essential for cross-pollination and leveraging evidence for continuing innovation. At the same time, many important information and communications technology policy issues such as privacy, censorship, or digital intellectual property rights have implications across different application areas but merit a consolidated research approach. Only such a hub and spoke architecture and strong linkages among components will allow IDRC to stay on top of what information and communications technologies contributes to development research and impact.

5.3   Cross-regional programming provides a fertile ground for fresh comparative perspectives – yet this should not detract from much needed focus on least developed countries and marginalized communities.
Building empowerment through knowledge might face the greatest challenges in such environments, yet it also offers the greatest rewards and value for these communities. The external review panel's analysis has found a number of formidable Pan Asia Networking research projects that embody this spirit and laudably tread where few others dare. Yet, the external review panel also discerned some more recent dynamics in the broader programming environment that may distract from such a focus. Pressure to produce and demonstrate quick wins may further amplify this challenge to retain a focus where IDRC's impact could be most needed and eventually add most value.

5.4   The range of viewpoints reflected in Pan Asia Networking's portfolio is commendable and a key asset for IDRC's reputation of independence and openness.
Pan Asia Networking's programming accommodates a remarkable diversity of ideological viewpoints, from free market supporters to critical scholarship on globalization and gender. Enabling such a spectrum of viewpoints and open spaces for experimentation through small grant programs could serve as a model for broader IDRC programming strategies.

5.5   **The role of the private sector could be considered more strategically.**
At the moment the Pan Asia Networking program seems to view private sector actors mainly as funding partners. The program might benefit from a broader, more strategic and creative appraisal of business as a potential target audience for policy influence, a potential ally in advocating on specific policy issues, and as a source for and collaborator in producing empirical evidence, developing innovations, training, and capacity-building.

5.6   **Demand-driven research could be taken a step further.**
The model of research helpdesks might be worth considering. It might be worth exploring the possibility for established IDRC partners, networks or even IDRC program teams to adopt such a helpdesk model in specific areas of competence and for specific target audiences in the policy community.

Evaluation Unit