

External Review of the Connectivity and Equity in the America / Institute for Connectivity in the Americas Program

September 2010

This findings brief is based on the reports “Connectivity and Equity in the Americas Program Initiative Final Report” by the CEA program, April 2010, and “External Review of the Connectivity and Equity in the America/Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (CEA/ICA) Program” by Mr Manuel Acevedo Ruíz and Dr Martha García-Murillo with assistance from Adriana Gouvêa¹, August 2010. The full reports are available from IDRC’s Evaluation Unit.

1. Overview of the Connectivity and Equity in the Americas / Institute for Connectivity in the Americas Program

The Connectivity and Equity in the Americas / Institute for Connectivity in the Americas Program was launched in April 2006, the result of the integration of the former Pan Americas Program and the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas which has been financed by the Canadian International Development Agency. The program aims to build research capacity for the development, adoption and use of information and communication technologies in Latin America and the Caribbean, and to influence policy. It explores the possibilities of information and communication technologies use for entrepreneurship and income generation, better access to health and education, and strengthening democratic governance. Between April 2006 and March 2010, the program allocated \$25.8 million over 91 projects in Latin America and the Caribbean. Of this total, 49% went to research institutions, 23% to policy institutions, 22% to civil society organizations, 1% to the private sector organizations and 5% to IDRC administered projects.

The program objectives during the 2006-2010 period were to:

- Foster information and communication technology use and appropriation to: promote entrepreneurship and decent employment; improve provision and access to education and health services; and strengthen democratic governance for more equitable socio-economic conditions.
- Better understand: the positive and negative impacts of adoption and use on low-income and vulnerable communities; gender differentiated access to information and communication technologies, particularly among disenfranchised women and girls.
- Support the development of information and communication technologies initiatives and processes to promote sound public policies and the development of

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appropriate technologies that respond to the needs of those most affected by the region's inequity.

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 relied on mixed methods using qualitative and quantitative data collected through a systematic document review, interviews with 34 IDRC staff, partners and external experts, web research and citation analysis. Findings pertaining to outcomes and research quality are based on a purposive project sampling approach. Two project samples were structured to enable both the identification of patterns and continuity, and in-depth analysis.

3. Research Findings

The program organized the main research findings from their supported projects into five headline statements. Listed below are some of those findings:

3.1 Information and communication technologies are contributing to growth in Latin America, but there is a need for a wide range of innovation in policies for creating an inclusive information society.

- Econometric research using harmonized household and enterprise data sheds new light on the relationship between information and communication technologies, economic development and equity in the region.
- There is a strong connection between information and communication technology investments and productivity improvements. However, the lower the Internet diffusion, the higher the inequality of that diffusion, suggesting the need for diffusion strategies to spread the benefits of new technologies.

3.2 Information and communication technologies appropriation is driving new models of production, diffusion, and consumption of digital content in the South.

- Emerging open business model networks offer alternative arrangements of production illustrating how cultural business in the developing world could be carried on in the digital age.
- Research on piracy helps civil society participate in legislative debates on regulation; this promotes better access to media goods.

- 3.3 Information and communication technologies are empowering individuals and communities through increased transparency and participation.**
- Information and communication technologies are empowering people to improve their lives by overcoming asymmetrical access to information and knowledge, a principal driver of social inequality in the region.
 - Innovative e-government initiatives are indicative of the power of technology to enhance transparency and citizen participation across diverse domains of public life
 - Strong political leadership in support of e-government initiatives is the main ingredient in overcoming most implementation barriers.
- 3.4 Appropriately adapted information and communication technologies are expanding and improving services to underserved communities.**
- Teleworking overcomes barriers such as inadequate infrastructure and holds significant potential for people with disabilities.
 - In Brazil, expanding possibilities for computer ownership to low-income families is resulting in an increase in LAN-houses which provide a wide variety of public services at very affordable prices.
 - The provision of personal digital assistants to nurses save time and increases access to clinical information, resulting in important efficiency gains.
- 3.5 Information and communication technologies can be a powerful catalyst for engagement of youth and entrepreneurs**
- Information and communication technologies are a powerful driver of youth re-engagement in social life.
 - Private capital for funding for early stage entrepreneurship is rising; in some developing countries, private venture capital is overtaking development aid.
 - Technology based models for scaling micro-credit delivery are successfully identifying the strengths and weaknesses of different micro-credit models.

4. External Review Panel Findings

The external review panel concluded that the program was largely successful in prospectus implementation. The Connectivity and Equity in the Americas / Institute for Connectivity in the Americas program took appropriate risks. The external review panel complimented the program on making substantial investments in partnerships and relationships, resulting in new knowledge and capacity development. It did so while confronting numerous internal and external difficulties. The overall assessment was that the program made an important difference to the work of its partners in the little understood field of information and communication technologies for development. The regional policy landscape for this field would be different from what it is today without IDRC's contributions. At the same time, the external review panel identified aspects for

improvement in program implementation/management, research quality/relevance and the attainment of expected outcomes.

4.1 Prospectus Implementation

The external review panel concluded that the integration of the Connectivity and Equity in the Americas / Institute for Connectivity in the Americas programs was successful but noted challenges and benefits: confusion among informants about the program's name undermined establishing a strong identity; adoption-type projects encountered research capacity challenges and tended to lag behind; the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas connection increased access to high level policy circles enhancing opportunities for influence; integration better positioned this field research into regional multilateral agencies whose traditional focus was adoption. Results were mixed in integrating cross-cutting issues (gender, policy innovation, appropriate technologies); the successful integration of emerging issues suggests good adaptability. Concern was expressed about the pressures generated by human resource limitations, the effects of which were felt across the board of implementation issues. Program level monitoring and evaluation was limited.

4.2 Research Quality

The external review panel identified two types of documents: traditional academic-type research and policy-type papers. Overall, research outputs were judged of good quality. However, the external review panel did have some concerns: for academic-type research outputs, results were mixed. The research was strongest in data collection and analysis, and weaker in advancing the literature, explanation of methods, and transferability of findings to other fields. There were some outputs of exceptionally high-quality, not necessarily because of methodological rigour, but because of their impact potential in policy and academic circles. The quality of policy-type papers varied significantly. The most evident weakness here was the lack of consideration of previous research. Almost half of the policy type papers did not have clearly stated policy recommendations. In both academic and policy-type outputs the methodology section was the weakest. Stronger communication efforts could have exerted stronger policy influence.

4.3 Outcomes

The program highlighted five program-level outcomes. The external review panel examined four of these, addressing the fifth one under the research quality discussion:

- The program has contributed to the development and dissemination of new ideas resulting in their adoption into the regional development research agenda field building in the region.
- The program has made a significant contribution in developing research capacities to adopt and effectively use information and communication technologies for development.

- Program supported work has generated evidence informing the design and reform of institutions, policies, regulations and laws in Latin America and the Caribbean (policy influence).
- The program has played a key convening role in the region, creating valuable institutional spaces for multi-stakeholder collaboration and knowledge sharing.

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

4.3.1 IDRC has been one of the leading actors feeding and strengthening the information and communication technologies for development research agenda in Latin America and the Caribbean. It has contributed, albeit to a lesser extent, to expanding the field of **information and communication technologies for development** in the region, partly through its support to research projects and adoption-type projects. The program's actions to support research agenda-setting and field-building have been relevant to the region's priorities and needs and significant in their contributions and influence. Most achievements were in the thematic pillars of e-Citizenship/ Governance and Education, with less influence in other pillars.

4.3.2 The program made some contributions to building research capacities and use/adoption skills in development processes, but research capacity building was not the program's main strength. Targeted research capacity building did not appear to have been systematically pursued. Developing capacity for the use of information and communication technologies is typical of adoption projects; while such capacities were gained in many of the projects, there was no clear way to distinguish the program from other Information and Communication Technologies for Development programs in this respect. The conclusion was that research capacity building achievements were relevant to the region's situation, but not as significant as they might have been.

4.3.3 In the broad outcome area of policy influence, the program's achievements were relevant to the needs of the region and were highly significant (both institutionally and through support to partner organizations) in key policy processes at the regional level. The political positioning of Institute for Connectivity in the Americas strongly contributed to this outcome. Grey areas remain, however, including (i) inadequate dissemination of research results, leading to limited awareness by policy-makers, a consequence of limited communication capacities among projects and Program staff; (ii) diminished support to civil society organizations for direct policy-process engagement; and (iii) under-leveraging of adoption projects as effective policy vehicles.

4.3.4 Through this program, and the previous Pan Americas program, IDRC has become one of the best-known and well-regarded organizations in the region in

the field of information and communication technologies for development and (more widely) the Information Society. Much of this can be attributed to IDRC's convening capacity with key actors in the region. Four factors come into play: (i) sustained work (nearly 10 years); (ii) a unique political entry point brought by the Institute of Connectivity in the Americas; (iii) openness to working with a variety of stakeholders and domains; and (iv) a regional and multi-country orientation. The external review panel was very positive about this outcome which reflected the highest level of achievement: highly relevant to the region's needs and highly significant in its contribution to a fairer and more equitable Information Society in the region. The external review panel did, however, flag approaches to network support and management as an area needing improvement. They also expressed concern that IDRC's comparative advantage in convening could suffer from the uncertainty among organizations about the future presence of IDRC in the region in the information and communication technologies for development area.

5. Issues for Consideration

The external review panel identified six issues that merit further reflection and consideration:

5.1 Program integration was a difficult but worthwhile process.

Whatever the difficulties encountered, IDRC made the right decision in bringing the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas under the Connectivity and Equity in the Americas program wing. **There are lessons to be drawn and more in-depth study of this process and similar experiences may be useful.**

5.2 Serious human resource constraints compromised the success of the Program.

Critical understaffing during some periods affected a number of program functions. As a program's most important asset, human resource capacity should be adequate at all times.

5.3 Towards a more engineered approach to collaboration.

While the program used networking modalities often and with reasonable results, unmanaged networks were often unstable. Corporate knowledge on networks should be better applied. IDRC should explore a more deliberate approach to network-based development.

5.4 Effective mainstreaming of the program's assets in IDRC.

IDRC should continue leveraging the program's more valuable partnerships in the region and avoid giving the impression that it is leaving the field of information and communication technologies for development.

5.5 Better research capacity building for development.

IDRC should continue to support the development of research capacities in government, development agencies, civil society organizations, and even the

private sector, where rigorous approaches to research/analysis are not necessarily the norm.

5.6 Better communication for policy influence.

IDRC needs to consider how it will strengthen institutional capacities in research communication, an integral part of the research-to-policy process.

Evaluation Unit