Findings Brief
External Review of the Rural Poverty and Environment Program


The objectives of the Rural Poverty and Environment (RPE) external program evaluation were to assess the extent to which the RPE program is meeting its objectives; assess how risks to the achievement of the program objectives were identified and managed; and identify any evolution in objectives. The review evaluated the results of the program and analyzed their influence. The evaluation did not address budgetary issues or issues of efficiency.

The RPE program is transitioning. From being a collection of the merged research activities of four earlier research programs of the IDRC (Sustainable Use of Biodiversity; Managing Natural Resources in Latin America and the Caribbean; People, Land and Water; and Community-Based Natural Resource Management), RPE is turning into a unified program with clearer programmatic and geographic foci.

RPE approved 110 projects, totaling $45.7 million, from the beginning of this prospectus period (April 1, 2005) until the end of the data collection period for the external review (August 31, 2008).

1. Program Aims

The stated overall goal of RPE is: ‘… to support participatory action-research, policy analysis and institutional innovation and reform and contribute to the development of networks, partnerships and communities of practice, in order to strengthen institutions, policies and practices that enhance the food, water and income security of the rural poor living in fragile or degraded upland and coastal ecosystems.’

The RPE prospectus also contains a set of more concrete Outcome Areas, which are to support research that helps poor rural resources users to:

1. Decide upon, plan for, and participate in the development and implementation of programs and policies for environmental and natural resource management;
2. Uphold their access to and rights over water, land, fisheries, forests, plants and other resources;
3. Respond to and benefit from integration with wider social and economic systems, and social and economic linkages and dependencies between rural and urban areas; and
4. Adapt to climate change, environmental degradation and water scarcity, and supported by researchers, Environment and Natural Resource Management organizations and governments, employ adaptive learning approaches to increase local ecosystem quality and productivity.

RPE has established thematic niches in tools for participation action research, integrated natural research management, identifying and codifying traditional resource use customs and rights, and policy options for water management across scales.

2. Review Methodology

The review team undertook a mixed-methods review, including:

- Desk Reviews of program and project documents.
- Phone/Skype Interviews. Over 150 phone and Skype interviews were conducted with non-governmental organizations; students; research partners within and outside universities; local, municipal, state-level and national policymakers; collaborating research and donor organizations; and IDRC staff and management.
- Field Visits. Each review team member visited several countries in which RPE-funded projects were either ongoing or had recently been concluded.
- Bibliometric Assessment. A systematic assessment of ‘reach’ of the main written outputs generated by selected RPE-supported activities was undertaken using Google Scholar.
- RPE Website Evaluation. A formal, technical evaluation of the RPE website was undertaken to assess its use, to identify its users, and to its effectiveness for disseminating information on the RPE program and materials generated by RPE-supported projects.
- Survey Monkey Questionnaire. To broadly canvass RPE stakeholders and collaborators, the review team used a bilingual web-based survey.
- Project Selection. Among projects with RPE funding of over $100,000, each review team member selected projects from within a geographic area. A set of global projects was also selected.

3. Review Findings

Our overall assessment of RPE is positive. Wherever RPE has planted its action-research flag, policy-relevant knowledge has been generated, and human and institutional capacity to plan and undertake participatory research, and to use the results of this research to change policies, has been enhanced.

Worldwide, RPE partners are quick to point out the excellent working relationship they enjoy with the program and its representatives. RPE is viewed as an able and agile partner that is responsive to the needs of, and constraints faced by, partners. Project flexibility was lauded by all, since it allowed for innovation in response to changing circumstances and the ability to re-negotiate and ‘stretch’ project objectives to take advantage of important research/policy opportunities.
3.1 Capacity building

A major impact of RPE has been through capacity building and these investments have enhanced partners’ abilities to develop and deliver knowledge that can influence policy. RPE is strong at engaging people at the local level. The program’s focus is on working closely with researchers to influence the way they do business by providing the tools and the support needed to adopt more participatory and inclusive research approaches. It does this by establishing and strengthening site teams and partners through training workshops, mentoring, learning and knowledge sharing, and producing and disseminating guides and briefs. The focus of many recent investments has been on the refinement and application of particular toolkits, some of which were developed by RPE or the programs that were merged to form it. The RPE team has also developed novel capacity development strategies that integrate key concepts and methods in existing action research practice; in some cases, these strategies can actually replace toolkit approaches. Some MSc and undergraduate training programs have significantly enhanced the lives and careers of program participants, some of whom have taken positions within important stakeholder organizations, but to date these programs have not generated the types or amounts of impacts on policy process or policy outcomes as many other RPE-funded projects that focus on capacity strengthening.

RPE (and its predecessor programs) has made significant and positive contributions to establishing, changing, and strengthening many institutions. Specifically, RPE-supported institutions include: agricultural extension in China; Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development in Nepal; the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development in Nepal; the Renewable Natural Resources Research Centre of the Ministry of Agriculture in Bhutan; natural resource management departments in state and district government in Nagaland, India; the Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) Learning Institute in Cambodia; the Latin American Center for Rural Development – RIMISP; le Centre de suivi écologique au Sénégal; university programs such as the Centre for Applied Social Sciences in Zimbabwe and the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies in South Africa; and the Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy at the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

The program has established and strengthened a range of networks, partnerships, and communities of practice. In some regions, it has drawn on wider IDRC-supported initiatives such as the work of the Consortium of Regional Councilors in West Africa. Some of these networks, such as the African Network for Soil Biology and Fertility and CBNRM-Learning Institute in Cambodia, have improved the focus and quality of research, and facilitated the distillation of policy messages from research results and the delivery of results to policymakers.

Gender and equity feature consistently as a statement of intent at the scoping, design, and appraisal stages of RPE projects, but are harder to track as the research progresses.
In some regions, RPE supports the training of researchers in social and gender analysis, primarily at the proposal development stage.

Most research partners report that these approaches have helped change the way they do business (e.g., how they prepare proposals, recruit research teams, and include women in field level discussions) and made them more aware of, and up-to-date on, key gender and equity-related issues. However, despite the output of RPE-funded scoping studies on this topic, many partners point to the difficulty of operationalizing these concepts in the field in a systematic manner in order to (in the end) demonstrate some meaningful changes in poverty or environmental outcomes. Meaningful work on gender, as is the case with many other themes, is driven by personal interest from individual program officers.

3.2 Policy influence

RPE-funded projects have also influenced policy. In most cases, policy engagement has been intense at the local level, and in many cases practical policy messages derived from RPE-supported projects have contributed to policy change at national and even at international levels. Examples of very impressive RPE-supported policy effects include the work of Agua Sustentable and its collaborators in the water policy research in Bolivia and Peru, the Regional Water Demand Initiative in the Middle East and North Africa project, CBNRM work in Mongolia and Bhutan, the Nagaland Environmental Protection and Economic Development project in Nagaland, the water governance work in Burkina Faso, the accomplishments of the Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy, the China Agricultural University, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, and the CBNRM Learning Institute in Cambodia.

The choice between government and civil society partners is also a choice between supporting project partners with the capacity to undertaken policy reforms but with whom IDRC does not have as much leverage, and partners whose work can be influenced but who have less policy change capacity. Where RPE has partnered directly with government the investment has yielded tangible and robust outcomes at the policy and operational levels. Where policy influence has been less successful, it was often due to a lack of understanding of policy processes at higher spatial scales, and the mechanisms needed for linking micro-level community initiatives to higher-level policy processes.

3.3 Monitoring outcomes

Many RPE projects (even those that are quite successful as regards policy influence) do not measure or monitor poverty and natural resource outcomes together, and therefore are not well prepared to assess the effects of the policy changes being promoted and the human welfare and natural resource outcomes of interest. This is important to note in part because the results of efforts to create and promote policy changes may occur after RPE support to specific projects has ended.
Assessment of outcomes is a challenge that all groups engaged in sustainable rural development must face, a challenge made even more difficult when the focus of research and policy interests shift from a given natural resource to an ecosystem, and when the heterogeneity and dynamics of the environment and of rural poverty are considered. But approaches and tools exist for wrestling with these issues. Indeed, some RPE projects are beginning to contribute to the international literature on these issues. With better support from RPE to develop data analytic capabilities, and a directed focus to understand the relationships between interventions and outcomes, these projects could help RPE meet the challenge of demonstrating its contributions to a better understanding of rural poverty-environment linkages, and ultimately to reducing poverty and improving environmental outcomes in developing countries.

3.4 Influence on technology development

Several examples of successful technology development efforts can be identified, though most of RPE’s efforts have dealt with technology adoption rather than technology development. Examples include water harvesting in Zimbabwe, cropping techniques, and helping research and extension officers in Africa use scenario-modeling and geographic information systems analysis as decision-making tools.

3.5 Outputs

RPE has supported many prolific partners whose written output has influenced thinking and policy action related to rural poverty and the environment locally, regionally, and in some cases even internationally. The most common types of products are conference papers, research methodologies, policy briefs, books, journal articles and websites. The most common dissemination mechanisms are project workshops, project reports, national and international conferences, interactions with policy makers and websites. Much of this output is in the native languages of research partners, thereby making the new knowledge generated more accessible to the local stakeholders they represent. RPE has placed less emphasis on publishing in outlets that are easily accessible to the international research community.

4. Issues for Consideration

4.1 Thematic and geographic focus

The goals and geographic scope of the RPE program, as currently set out in the Prospectus, are too broad given its current modus operandi and level of funding. In narrowing the focus of its research portfolio, RPE may want to more effectively and succinctly delineate avenues of action research to be pursued. Given its relatively small size, it will be useful for RPE to define its Outcome Areas more sharply and distinctively, and identify for itself a niche that is not already occupied.
Clear and conscious efforts have been made in many regions to prioritize the location of RPE projects. Globally, however, the RPE strategy is less clear and needs to be more sharply defined.

4.2 Outputs

As a consequence of placing less emphasis on publishing through international journals and publishers, the accomplishments of RPE-sponsored projects are under-recognized and under-utilized by the international research community. Its projects and project outputs can benefit from the guidance that the international scientific community can provide in testing RPE-supported research findings.

4.3 Monitoring

While there is some evidence to suggest that the lives of the rural poor and the natural resources they depend upon and manage have benefited from RPE-funded projects, measures and monitoring of rural poverty and natural resource outcomes have not been adequately and systematically built into most projects. Therefore, RPE is not well-positioned to demonstrate the impacts of its investments on these fundamental development objectives.

4.4 Synergies and collaboration

The many and varied projects funded by RPE have generated an array of insights, tools, and impacts, but the synergies associated with these outputs and outcomes have not yet been effectively examined or brought together. Recent investments in cross-project syntheses will help address this issue.

Most of the important problems related to poverty and natural resource management in developing countries are complex and require interdisciplinary approaches. Some RPE-sponsored projects could benefit from greater attention to the best available research methods and approaches, and/or a richer disciplinary mix. This would need to begin at the project design stage and be carried through to the distillation and delivery of final results to policymakers.

There may to be untapped potential for collaboration across Program Initiatives within IDRC. For example, much of the rural poverty work being undertaken by RIMISP will involve urban areas and issues, and, much of the water work in Bolivia involves rural and urban stakeholders – elements of both of these projects could fit into the mandates of other Program Initiatives.

List of Acronyms

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>CBNRM</td>
<td>Community-Based Natural Resource Management</td>
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<td>RPE</td>
<td>Rural Poverty and the Environment</td>
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<td>IDRC</td>
<td>International Development Research Centre</td>
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<td>RIMISP</td>
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