

# Preparing Program Objectives

March 2004

The purpose of this guideline is to provide direction to IDRC programs (PIs, Secretariats, and Corporate Projects) in preparing program objectives for their prospectus or approval documents. This guideline replaces the 1997 “Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation of Programme Performance”.

All of the evaluation guidelines and highlights referenced are available on the Evaluation Unit’s website at: [http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-32492-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-32492-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)

Program objectives have an important place in IDRC’s program management and evaluation system. They articulate the intended direction and focus of the program and provide a means of assessing program effectiveness. The lack of measurability and consistency of IDRC program objectives was commented on by some of the 2004 external reviewers and in the 2003 Special Examination by the Office of the Auditor General. To inform IDRC’s response, the Evaluation Unit commissioned a review of the literature, current thinking, and practices of other organizations on program objectives.<sup>1</sup> From this review, it became clear that IDRC programs need objectives that respect the complexity in which programs work, encourage innovation, and reflect the importance of process. In order to be useful, objectives need to manage three tensions:

- **Commitment**  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  **Risk**: A program’s need to commit to what it will accomplish as well as a recognition that the context is ever-changing, uncertain, and unpredictable.
- **Focus**  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  **Flexibility**: A program’s need to give focus to its work as well as have the flexibility to be responsive to unexpected opportunities.
- **Planning**  $\leftarrow \rightarrow$  **Evaluation**: A program’s need to engage in team planning to identify a clear sense of direction as well as to identify measurable results.

As a result of the need for these balances, IDRC programs cannot be limited to the commonly accepted “SMART” criteria (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time bound) for development of objectives.

## Program-level Objectives and Corporate-level Goals

The Corporate Assessment Framework (CAF) is a tool that has been developed by Senior Management Committee (SMC) and the Evaluation Unit to assess the degree to which IDRC is progressing towards its mission as a corporation. There should be coherence between the corporate and program levels although it is not intended that program level results will be such that they can be aggregated to show the extent to which IDRC has met its corporate-level goals. Senior management will give feedback to programs on their draft prospecti with the CAF in mind. Information about the CAF is available from the Evaluation Unit’s intranet site at [http://intranet.idrc.ca/en/ev-45356-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://intranet.idrc.ca/en/ev-45356-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html).

## Program Vision and Objectives

Clear objective statements have 3 basic characteristics – they should be technically clear and free of jargon, reasonable, and ideologically transparent (Iverson 2004). In order for a program to be clear about its intentions, its prospectus should include both a vision and objectives. The vision describes the large-scale development changes to which the program will contribute. The

<sup>1</sup> For the full report, please see Preparing Program Objectives: Current Theory and Practice by Alex Iverson, September 15, 2003 at: [http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-54262-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-54262-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html).

program is not held accountable for achieving these changes. The objectives describe the changes that the program will help bring about and against which the program's success will be assessed. Taken together, the vision and objectives encapsulate the theory of change underlying the program.

Program teams should take the time to construct a vision and objectives that reflect its values, expectations, and intentions. Clarifying the program's vision and objectives provides a good opportunity to prioritize what it considers important and hopes to accomplish. The facilitation questions offered throughout this guideline are intended to help this process but do not all have to be asked and answered. They are suggestions.

Upon submission of the prospectus to PPB management, the Evaluation Unit will review each draft and provide feedback on its strengths and weaknesses and make suggestions for improvement.

## Developing a Vision

The vision expresses the ambitious thinking underlying the program. It situates the program in relation to the larger development and research field(s). Achievement of the vision lies beyond the program's capabilities, however the program's activities should contribute to, and facilitate, that end. The overall purpose of the vision is to orient the program towards the improved well-being and innovations that it hopes to help bring about. The vision can be formulated as a short slogan or a longer paragraph. It is up to the program to determine the appropriate format.

### Facilitation Questions

- If our wildest dreams of success were to come true, how would the situation be improved?
- Imagine the context in five years when our program has been very successful, what would be different?
- In a few sentences, state what our program is ultimately trying to help bring about.
- Are these changes consistent with IDRC's mission and mandate? How?

## Developing Objectives

Objectives describe the results that a program intends to help bring about over its life cycle. A program's "results" are not the same as its research results. Rather program results are the external effects of the program (outcomes, reach, and impact). Taken together, the objectives represent the contributions the program will make to the vision. At the outset of a program, the results included in its prospectus are assumed to be both intended and positive, but unintended and negative results may be identified through evaluation during or following its implementation.

Overall, IDRC is committed to contributing to a range of results that relate to our mission of "Empowerment through Knowledge". We have categorized these below in order to assist IDRC programs in thinking through the range of possible results to include in its objectives:

- Contributions to scientific, research, or knowledge innovations
- Changes in the behaviours, actions, or relationships of researchers or research institutions
- Changes in the behaviours, actions, or relationships of research users or those affected by the research process or findings<sup>2</sup>
- Influence on technology development, adoption, or adaptation

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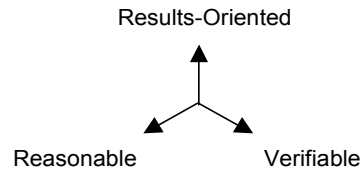
<sup>2</sup> Evert Linquist breaks down policy influence as: 1) Expanded policy capacity of researchers, 2) Broadening policy horizons, and 3) Affecting policy regimes. For more detailed account of this typology, see [http://web.idrc.ca/uploads/user-/10359907080discerning\\_policy.pdf](http://web.idrc.ca/uploads/user-/10359907080discerning_policy.pdf)

- Changes in state (e.g., improved health status of a group of people, improved environmental conditions)

Since IDRC programs are highly diverse, there is no single formula for writing program objectives. Objectives define the specific mix of results the program expects to influence and the particular balance that is appropriate in its context.

Regardless of the substantive focus of the objectives, they should meet three criteria: they should be results-oriented; their achievement should be verifiable; and, they should be reasonable given the program's sphere of influence and its available resources. The following sections outline what is meant by each term and how programs can develop objectives that meet these criteria.

**Box 1. Three criteria for objectives**



**Are the Objectives Results-Oriented?**

Generally, results refer to changes in state or changes in behaviour. Results that are far out of the reach of the program's sphere of influence or beyond its timeframe are better placed in the vision so that they can serve as a signpost rather than something to be achieved during the course of the program's implementation. Objectives should state the results to be achieved, and not the actions of the program. In some cases, programs will want to include results that refer to changed research practices or processes. This is acceptable so long as the person, group, or organization that will change is also identified.

**Are the Objectives Verifiable?**

**Facilitation Questions**

- What contributions to the research field do we expect to make?
- At the end of working together through the program, how will the researchers be behaving or relating to others differently? (i.e., what will they be doing?)
- What influences is our program likely to have on policy or technology?
- What changes do we expect to see amongst research users or those affected by the research process or findings?
- What changes in state can we realistically say will result from our work?
- How will our program influence policy or technology?
- Do our objectives reflect the contributions we want to make to the vision?
- Do our objectives contradict our vision?

A question that a program should bear in mind when writing objectives is: how will it demonstrate progress towards achieving these objectives? Thinking ahead about what sort of evidence will be required will help ensure that a program writes objectives around which evidence can be gathered.

### **Facilitation Questions**

- What is the observable evidence to indicate that the objectives have been achieved or the extent to which they've been achieved?
- Would the evidence be considered reliable by an external reviewer, senior management, and the Board of Governors?
- Could the evidence be triangulated? (using multiple sources of evidence)
- Are there qualitative or quantitative indicators that could be useful for the external review?

Verifiable objectives are written in such a way that they permit the use of evidence to assess the extent to which intended results have been achieved. This is important in enabling the program to identify how it is doing and how far it has gone in accomplishing what it set out to do. Writing objectives in this way will increase their utility for two evaluation processes at IDRC: 1) evaluations within the program; and, 2) the external reviews commissioned at the end of the program cycle by senior management. Although external reviewers will gather new data on results achieved at the end of a program cycle, the team should also consider the evidence available in project reports, monitoring and trip reports, PCRs, and evaluations as well.

### **Are the Objectives Reasonable?**

Although ultimately it is IDRC program staff, management, and the Board of Governors who will determine the program's objectives, it is important to ensure that different perspectives are heard and the vision and objectives are shared with the people the program is expecting to influence and those with whom it will be partnering. Reasonable objectives are those that are consistent with the vision and values, plausible within the context, congruous with the human and financial resources available, compatible with the strategies, and worthwhile.

### **Facilitation Questions**

- Will the achievement of the objectives show contributions to our vision?
- Are the objectives consistent with our vision and values?
- Given the context in which we're operating (social/cultural, economic, political, research environment, research field, partners, etc.), are the objectives reasonable?
- Is there an adequate balance between what we're trying to accomplish and the timeframe and the human and financial resources available?
- Do we have adequate strategies to work with our partners to achieve these objectives?

PIs, Secretariats, and Corporate Projects can call on the Evaluation Unit for support in developing or revising program objectives at any stage. The Evaluation Unit provides technical input, facilitates planning and implementation processes, and provides print and electronic resources to support the ongoing evaluation work of IDRC programs.