

Learning from Doing: Reflections on IDRC's Strategy in Action

By

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Part 1: Introduction to the Framework

1.1 Purpose of this project

IDRC has recently begun a corporate planning process to guide its work through 2015. As programs are the living manifestation of corporate strategy, the purpose of this paper has been to extract lessons from the IDRC program reviews conducted over the last 18 months, which shed light on how strategy is realized. Our hope is that observations made in this report might assist the planning effort as it takes shape.

The strategic analysis presented in this paper builds upon work we have been doing to build robust and appropriate frameworks to evaluate organizational effectiveness and program strategy in philanthropy. Over the last several years we have worked with over 30 of the largest foundations in North America participating in the Evaluation Roundtable, a group of foundation leaders dedicated to improving their foundation's impact and learning.¹ The focus of the last year has been *Evaluating Strategy*.

IDRC provided us the following documents that formed the basis of this report²:

- The IDRC Act
- Corporate Strategy and Program Framework 2005-2010
- Reviews of the following programs:
 - Ecohealth
 - Urban Poverty and Environment (UPE)
 - Economy and the Environment Program for Southeast Asia (EEPSEA)
 - Rural Poverty and Environment (RPE)

We also relied on two other documents for source material:

- IDRC Strategic Evaluation of Capacity Development
- Knowledge to Policy

Although the IDRC reviews we examined were independent of each other with different teams addressing fairly standard questions across different programs, patterns emerged, signaling the possibility that systematic influences other than those strictly related to each program's design and execution might be at play. The question driving the utility of this study is: How does program performance reflect strategy and how has strategy affected program performance?

IDRC's commitment to learning makes a project such as this possible. In its commitment to evaluative thinking, IDRC has demonstrated a willingness to think beyond the obvious suspects of failed logic models, or assessments of plan and program execution toward a systems based understanding about how strategy actually comes about. The issues raised in

¹ The Evaluation Roundtable is a community of practice of foundation management, program leaders and evaluation directors working together to improve foundation effectiveness and approaches to learning. The authors direct this effort. The Roundtable has been in existence since 1998 and funded by a consortium of 13 foundations.

² In addition, we reviewed prospectus documents for each program and other back ground documents. These served to provide context and were not the subject of this review.

this paper are only possible to observe because IDRC has made the effort to produce evaluative understandings of their projects and programs and has diligently shared this knowledge with others in the field.

1.2 Organization of the Report

We have organized the report to create a construct for thinking about the work of the recent past and to offer a framework to envision its application. It is not meant to be a comprehensive and exhaustive review of all potential observations about strategy articulation and execution. Our organization of the material is as follows:

- Part 1: Introduction to the framework: the framework and criteria for thinking about strategy
- Part 2: Surfacing perspective and position in IDRC strategy: initial application of the framework to strategy documents
- Part 3: Six Tensions: evidence of strategic tensions surfaced in program reviews
- Part 4: Concluding thoughts

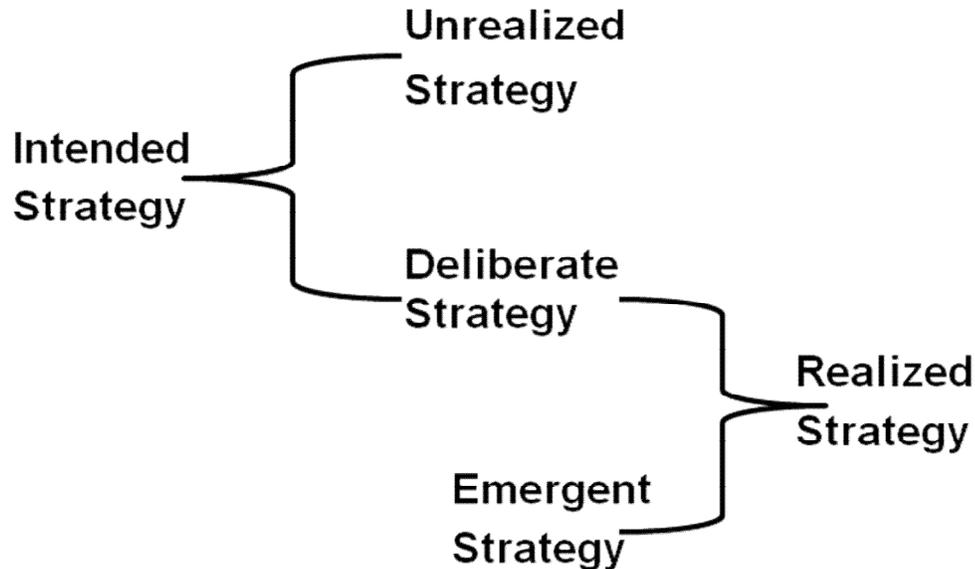
1.3 Conceptual framework informing our work

This review is not an evaluation of the current IDRC corporate strategy but rather an application of a strategic lens to existing evaluative material. We draw heavily from the work of Henry Mintzberg of McGill University in constructing our approach to this review. Mintzberg brings a particularly rich set of ideas about what corporate strategy actually is, how it evolves and how it affects the work we do. Among the many well touted writers on the subject, we find that Mintzberg is particularly applicable and well suited for the work of the public and non-profit sectors—both in his appreciation of the complexity of the challenges faced and the need to build strong learning and adaptive capacities in order to succeed in these arenas. Based on our reading of Mintzberg we bring the following understanding of strategy to this work:

- **Strategy is not what we say we do, it is what we do.** Strategy is usually defined as an analytic plan for a defined future. Mintzberg advises us to think about strategy going forward as “intended strategy” and the strategy that got you here as “realized strategy.” When examined, “realized strategy” (or what was actually done) reveals patterns of behavior and commitment, the ways that problems are framed and how an organization relates to the external world.
- **Strategy is always a combination of deliberate and unplanned processes.** There is no such thing as a perfectly controlled, deliberate process in which intentions lead to the formulation of plans, implementation, and the realization of intended results. As the graphic on the next page illustrates, realized strategy begins as intended strategy, but not all of what is intended is realized (becoming unrealized strategy). What remains, deliberate strategy, intersects with emergent strategy to become realized strategy.

Mintzberg on Strategy

Two types of strategy: Intended & Emergent



- **Separating strategy development from strategy execution is flawed.** In Mintzberg’s model, strategy is an ongoing process of venturing and learning that supports how an organization creates strategy over time. “Doing” is the precursor to “learning” and learning is the precursor to developing a robust vision for the work to be done going forward. Planning follows, hopefully based on a strong understanding of the organization—its competencies, how it works best, how it recognizes and appreciates opportunities, and how it gauges situations where goals might be reached. Problems arise when strategy formulation and implementation are treated as separate realities. Too often when a program fails to meet an objective we blame program execution when in reality strategy development, separated in time and place from the actual work is often the root of the problem.
- **Organizations are strongest when they employ cycles of venturing, learning and visioning** as part and parcel of how strategy is approached. Too often organizations start with the plan before they know what they can do well and before they have the experience to understand where and how they have succeeded.
- **Strategy is often experienced only as *planning*—that is the deliberate analysis of problems, opportunities, costs and environments in order to arrive at solutions.**

Mintzberg pushes us to recognize three other dimensions of strategy—*patterns* emerging from what an organization actually does, and what he calls *perspective* and *position*. In Mintzberg’s terms, these are the four P’s of strategy.

- **Strategy as perspective** reflects an understanding of “who you are” based on the big view of what your organization is fundamentally about (and how it understands itself.) **Strategy as position** is about “where you intend to make your mark.” In the area of development, strategic position should point an organization to specific sites or arenas to do specific things to achieve specific outcomes. **Strategy as pattern** is “realized strategy,” or what you actually do.
 - **Perspective is the core set of values and theories about how change comes about that shape what an organization is— reflecting its sense of how and where it can be effective.** Perspective in the non-profit sector is often based on its core ideas about how desired social change comes about. We often hear perspective articulated as: “going to scale,” or “comprehensive community change,” or “knowledge development and diffusion,” etc. We would posit that most organizations have perspectives—some weak or strong, but more often than not, largely undeclared and therefore unexamined and untested. Organizations with strong and clear *perspective* can use it successfully to make decisions about where it can work most effectively and how. Clear perspective allows an organization to think about the staff it needs, communicate more effectively with its partners and stakeholders, identify where it can work effectively (or not) and deploy its resources accordingly.
 - **Position is literally where an organization aims to have an effect and contribute to outcomes.** In the corporate world, position is where a company can establish a niche-based competitive advantage over others. Position, as such defined, is rarely useful in philanthropy and with non profits where few organizations have the resources to force the alignment of other parties to their agenda. To the contrary, most donors hope to attract others to their fields of interest and have deep interdependencies with other funders.
 - **Nonetheless, position can productively test how an organization deals with its understanding of its own potential to be effective.** Without position it is fairly difficult to even consider an outcomes framework, as it sets the terms of performance—where you will succeed, how much and in what way. Commitment to a position makes success or failure more obvious than in its absence.
 - **Recognition of patterns allows an organization to separate the rhetoric from the reality of their work.** Too often, philanthropies, in particular, are given to rhetorical commitment to unrealistic goals/positions, ignoring their own limitations or they posit outcomes based upon leveraging the efforts and resources of others. Again, these theories of leverage often go unrealized.

It is in this dynamic between perspective and position that many organizations trip up on in their efforts to be strategic. Perspectives and positions are often at odds as organizations often fail to take their own competencies as a serious factor in their goal achievement equation.

- **Position and perspective should align and by extension so too should outcomes, theory of change and organizational competencies.**

1.4 Process and application of Mintzberg's thinking:

- We looked to the Act and the Corporate Strategy document as the “intended strategy” and the best source material indicating perspective. The reviews provide “data” on the “realized strategy.”
- We examined the reviews, the Act and the Corporate Strategy for indications of perspective and position and looked for alignment within and across elements of each.
- We used our own review process to surface larger issues related to strategy based both on the evidence and the Mintzberg framework outlined above. Each, of our two person team, independently reviewed the material then discussed “findings” with the other to seek some level of validation. The most important test of the paper’s observations, however, will come as IDRC staff engage with the material and find it relevant and useful to their work.
- We appreciate and expect that material based on real programming would and should constitute an amalgamation of both deliberate and unplanned processes. We also appreciate that these processes always produce tensions, not just between the deliberate and the unplanned but also within each slice of reality (deliberate and emergent).
- We use the word “tension” to characterize issues that surfaced to communicate the long-recognized organizational wisdom that the pursuit of multiple and competing values, ends, and benefits inevitably gives rise to challenges about how to achieve balance. *Tension*, as we use it here, is a descriptive term, not meant to imply judgment. As we worked with the material, we came to understand that the pulls in different directions evidenced by what we saw, is best captured by the concept of “tension.” Identifying tensions and making them explicit creates an opportunity to learn from them and become more intentional and effective in managing them. Tensions are largely not resolvable; they exist because of pressures (internal or external) or vested stakes in their existence. Nor can *perfect or even optimal* balance necessarily be achieved as missions tend to drive organization sentiment around maximizing performance. Further, constrained resources limit balance and effectiveness. Indeed, what constitutes “balance” can change as conditions and situations change, so too with what constitutes effectiveness. Being alert to tensions and, importantly, their consequences, can enhance execution of strategy.

- We also considered the possible value of surfacing these tensions:
 - It allows IDRC to differentiate between problems of strategy and problems of strategy execution. Issues and questions arising time and again in program reviews provide the opportunity, if cast in a different light, to think about the features of corporate strategy that confuse intentions and send mixed signals to programs that inadvertently get in the way of program effectiveness.
 - It allows IDRC to consider what it does best and where it contributes value toward meeting its mission. In so doing, it can shed practices that may diffuse its likely impact.
 - It allows IDRC to identify where it is genuinely uncertain about its capacity to be effective and allow IDRC the opportunity to clarify where it needs to venture more so that it can learn more and learn with more specific intention.
 - It points to where IDRC may have opportunities to make clarifying decisions that may ease some of these tensions.
 - It may point to where IDRC might deliberately chose to take a stance filled with oppositional pulls, but do so with understanding that the source of the tension emanates from strategy.

We would add that we have not attempted to identify, analyze, and present all tensions we found. This report focuses on six major areas of tension that we think usefully illuminate the value of strategic thinking and that provide particularly ripe opportunities to learn and improve, building upon IDRC's accomplishments during its next period of strategy implementation.

1.5 Criteria for understanding IDRC strategy and its role in program:

The following are criteria we used to identify *perspective* and *position*. We applied these criteria in order to arrive at a plausible statement of what the IDRC perspective might be and to surface where IDRC has established position. What rationales were used? We sought then to examine whether there was internal coherence within each of these spheres of strategy and whether we could find coherence and alignment across perspective and position.

Criteria for identifying the IDRC perspective In general terms, perspective can be found in:

- What an organization values
- What it aims to do and how
- How and what it brings to bear to achieve success
- How it relates to partners, donors, grantees and governments
- How it informs the world about how it works, what it does and what it aims to achieve
- How it directs operations/programs about its purpose
- How it constitutes success

Criteria for identifying position In general terms, position can be found:

- Where an organization looks for outcomes—at what unit of investment: considering: individuals, organizations, fields, networks, nations, localities, regions, countries, international
- Where it chooses to invest and with what rationale: looking at themes, topics, audience, fields, place

Criteria for coherence and alignment The following indicates coherence and alignment in this paper:

- Perspective informs position—pointing to where an organization can best apply its talents, products and resources
- Position manifests perspective—organization works in arenas and efforts where it can lend value
- Perspective informs view on outcomes (what types of outcomes, level of success desired and level of evidence that will suffice); position points to where they can be evidenced.
- A plausible theory of change emerges based on organization capacities (direct or leveraged) applied to settings through programs where value can be maximized and effects can emerge

Part 2: Surfacing perspective and position in IDRC strategy

Our interpretation of IDRC corporate strategy is as follows:

2.1 IDRC perspective and position identified³

The corporate strategy document signals two main elements of what can be considered *perspective*:

- That sustainable and equitable solutions require knowledge and that credible scientific research of an interdisciplinary nature is a foundation for growth in developing countries. IDRC approaches this through grants supporting researchers from developing countries as well as through staff/ program office support, technical assistance, training, mentoring and through the support of networks.
- That this research must be relevant and useful to policy makers—local, national, international; that this should influence practices, technologies and laws that contribute to sustainable and equitable development. This is supported largely by training, mentoring and networking individual researchers, and training policy makers.

Our shorthand restatement of the dominant IDRC perspective is:

Power through knowledge; knowledge through building research capacity and influencing policy.

Other dimensions of the IDRC perspective are important as well, as they illustrate the way IDRC operates and the value it places on: technology as a means toward sustainable and equitable solutions, research agendas emerging *from* developing countries, the importance of involved and informed citizens, mitigation of bias, commitment to gender equity, partnership with other donors, participation of grantee researchers in international forums, tolerance for risk, building long term relationships and other factors.

We have created a set of graphic representations to highlight strategic tensions. In each graphic, two circles or ovals represent the each arena of tension (for example, perspective versus position). Within each circle we list key elements that define each strategic dimension (i.e., key elements of perspective in one circle and key elements of position in the other circle). Connecting the two circles is a large arrow that shows the two dimensions as inter-related; we have highlighted in red below the arrows how the specific dynamics of the tension are manifested.

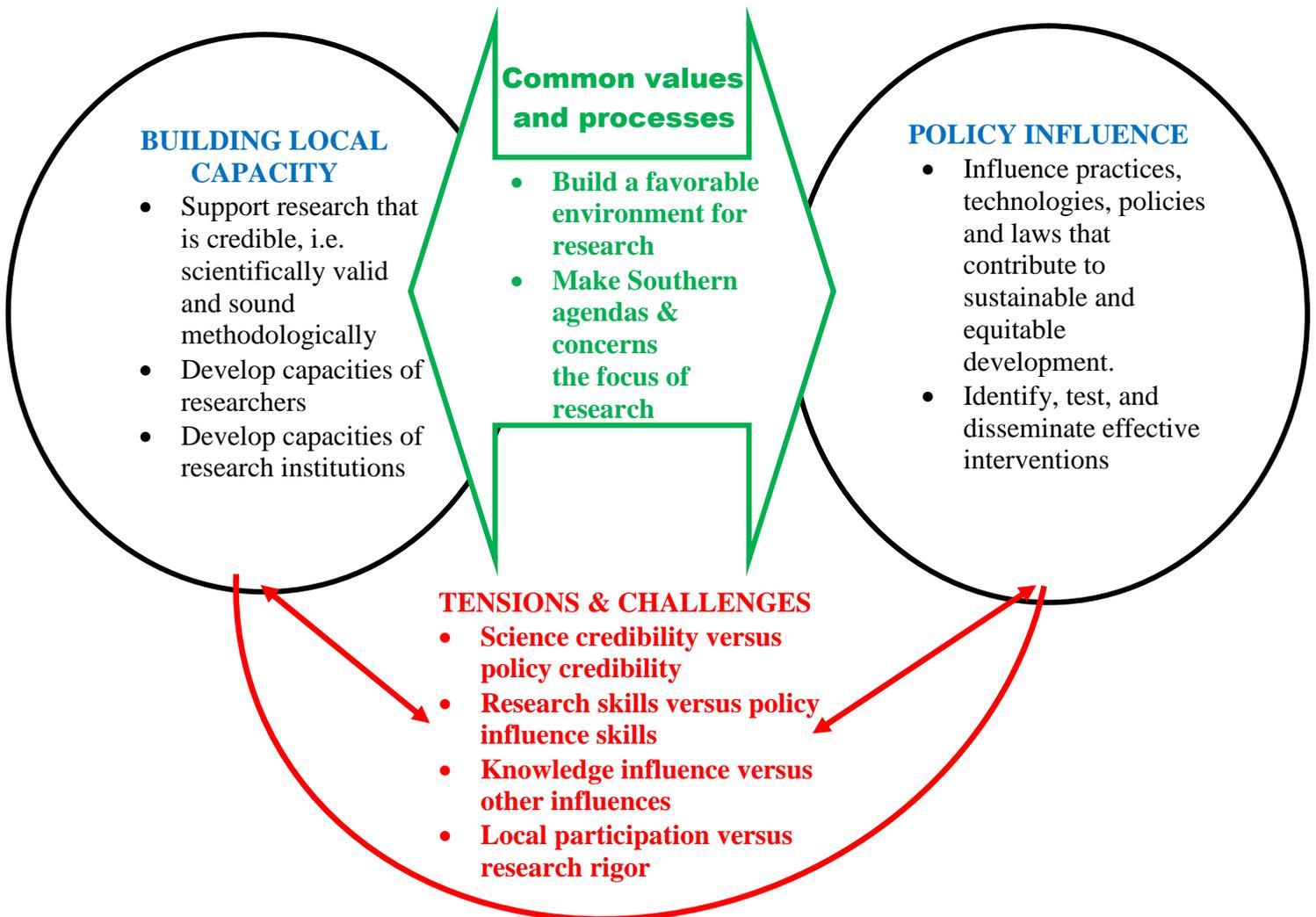
On the next page is a graphic representation of IDRC’s strategic perspective highlighting “Building Local Capacity” and “Policy Influence” as two central elements of the core institutional perspective. The graphic then illustrates the connections between these core commitments and the tensions that arise in trying to realize each.

³ The Corporate Strategy 2005-2010 and The IDRC Act were the main source documents for this section:

The tension can be noticed as programs seek to operationalize these sometimes competing core goals. A core question for IDRC Corporate Strategy then becomes: How does a program accomplish the goal of fostering credible science while attempting to build capacity to participate in the complex world of policy influence? The struggle to balance this tension surfaces in each of the four program reviews we examined.

PERSPECTIVE (Overall Strategy)

IDRC's mission: *Empowerment through knowledge*

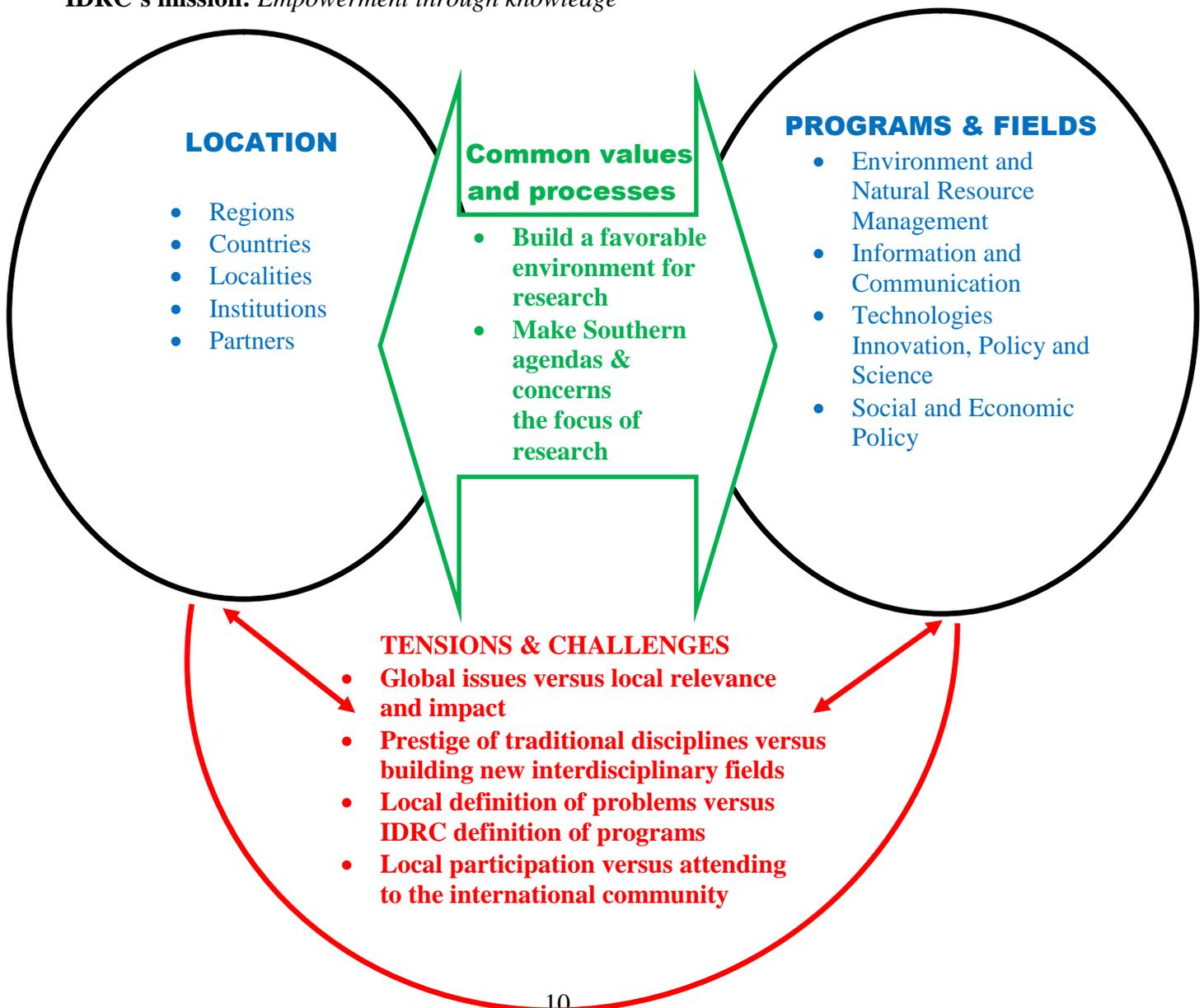


The preceding graphic portrays IDRC's **strategy as perspective** -- an understanding of who you are based on the big view of what your organization is fundamentally about as captured in core commitments and values. We now turn to **strategy as position**—where you intend to make your mark. In the area of development, strategic position should point an organization to specific sites or arenas to do specific things to achieve specific outcomes.

Below is a graphic representation of the tensions within what might be inferred as IDRC's strategic positions.

POSITION (Niche)

IDRC's mission: *Empowerment through knowledge*



The corporate strategy document does little to clarify how *position* might be established in the organization. It indicates a great deal of latitude in topic, field, geography and unit of investment. It articulates interest in science, especially biotechnology and nanotechnology, technology and interdisciplinary arenas as well as expressing an interest in innovation and in staying ahead of the curve in terms of new areas of development and research methods. Investment in Africa is emphasized but its commitment to four regions is established as well. These regions are identified as: Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, and Africa.

There is far less articulation of the scale and scope of impact it seeks and where it would be found except in global terms. The strongest statement in the corporate strategy is as it points to *fields* of development and “local research capacity in developing countries” articulated in the following:

- “IDRC will strengthen and help to mobilize the local research capacity of developing countries, especially in the program areas of Environment and Natural Resources, Information and Communication Technologies for Development and Social and Economic policy.”

But the focus provided by this statement is coupled with the far broader net cast by:

- “IDRC will foster and support the production, dissemination and application of research results that lead to changed practices, technologies, policies and laws that promote sustainable and equitable development and poverty reduction.”

The criteria to assess achievement of these is as follows: 1) building a favorable environment within which research can be carried out and which provides opportunities for individual researchers in the South; 2) supporting research that is credible, i.e. scientifically valid and methodologically sound; 3) influencing practices, technologies, policies and laws that contribute to sustainable and equitable development and poverty reduction; and 4) building explicitly Southern agendas into current international policy debates and developmental decision-making at all levels.

Part 3: Six tensions

The reviews surfaced what we believe to be six broad tension categories, under which most of our observations fall. All of these tensions derive in large part from oppositional pulls from either within or across IDRC perspective and position. We derived these categories after a close read and analysis of each report. They are:

- Perspective vs. position
- Capacity building vs. policy influence
- Strategy vs. execution
- Macro vs. micro views
- Unit of impact: individual vs. other
- Audience priority

The graphic of the hexagon on the next page depicts the tension categories as forces that assert influence in multiple ways; all emanate from tensions within and across perspective and position. The hexagon aims to display the tensions from an integrated systems perspective in which they interact dynamically within IDRC strategy and operations *as a whole*. Each tension is described below along with examples of how they manifest in specific programs (as reported and illustrated in the ENRM reviews).⁴

We hypothesize that they are not independent of each other and contribute to program reality in both predictable and unpredictable ways depending on the degree to which management, evaluation, program staff and audience emphasize one dimension or another. What is fairly certain is that programs stretch in often unproductive ways to meet the demands placed on them by these tensions. We shall return to this dynamic systems perspective and its implications in the conclusion.

We remind the reader that these “tensions” are not meant to signal easy remedies. They provide instead a way of talking about dilemmas and differences in strategic perspectives within an organization. These tensions, while not necessarily resolvable or certainly not easily resolvable, can be discussed and managed.

⁴ These tensions were not referenced in the reviews as such. Rather they were illustrated as independent issues of regarding program performance.

TENSIONS HEXAGON

- Strategy formulation competence versus execution competence
- Strategy clarity versus messiness of implementation challenges
- Assessing strategy failure versus implementation failure versus evidence failure (insufficient evidence to tell the difference)
- Program area and project patterns of behavior (implementation patterns) versus IDRC corporate strategy

- Decisions informed by strategic perspective vs. practical position needs
- Alignment and integration of perspective & position versus silos (each dealt with separately)
- Overall direction vs. concrete choices

PERSPECTIVE
versus
POSITION

- Conflicting outcomes: peer-reviewed scientific research versus policy-relevant, locally relevant research
- Capacity to conduct research & publish versus capacity to build relationships & influence policy
- Evidence of capacity versus evidence of influence
- Knowledge as influence versus other factors that affect policy and practice

STRATEGY
versus
EXECUTION

POLICY INFLUENCE
versus
CAPACITY

**IDRC
STRATEGY
DIMENSIONS
and
TENSIONS**

- Individual researchers versus institutions versus networks
- Building capacity of researchers versus building capacity of policy makers
- Focus on distinct units of impact (see above) versus the relationships among them
- New cutting-edge field-building versus traditional disciplinary credibility
- Knowledge outcomes versus development outcomes

IMPACT
of
UNIT
TENSIONS

AUDIENCE
PRIORITY
TENSIONS

MACRO
versus
MICRO

- Global problem definition versus local solutions
- Generalizable theory versus context sensitivity
- Top-down versus bottom-up strategy development and implementation
- Long-term versus short-term results

- International research community versus local policy makers
- Participation of partners versus participation of local beneficiaries
- Credibility within traditional disciplines versus new, emergent, interdisciplinary niche
- Policy elites versus needy beneficiaries

3.1 Tension: The Challenge of Aligning Perspective and Position

The dual (and dueling) perspectives of building capacity and policy influence surfacing in the corporate strategy raise issues in each of the reviews and allow programs to expand into multiple and simultaneous positions. Bringing these dimensions together surfaces more tensions. As programs grapple with the tension inherent within the IDRC perspective coupled with ambiguity in position, issues such as where to look for impact and why quickly surface.

The graphic on the next page depicts the relationship between strategic perspective and strategic position, and the tensions that arise in that relationship. The desirability of alignment between perspective and position raises a central question: How does strategic perspective inform strategic position? Reviewers seek to understand each program—what it is, what it intends to do, where it is executed in terms of program outcomes and impact but (for the most part) do not look beyond program execution to identify the sources of diffused intentions, resource allocation and actions—all emanating from tensions in strategy. Reviewers engage their task with the tacit assumption of finding an expected logic between the operational realities of a program and IDRC’s strategic perspective.

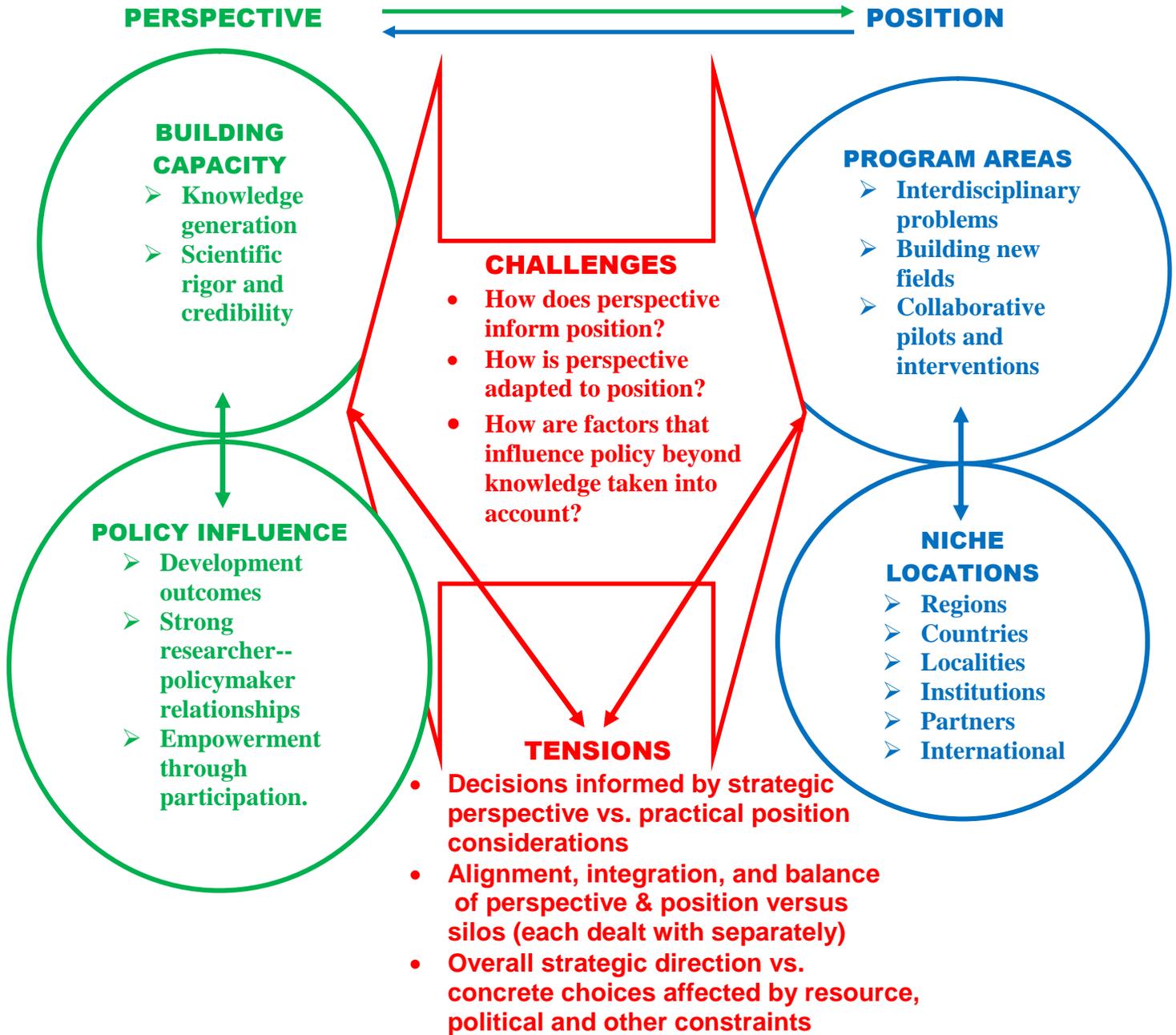
Alignment, the organizational literature shows, is never perfect. The issue is coherence and integration so that perspective and position are not in silos, or treated as discrete but only vaguely connected checklists, each relatively self-contained. In other words, alignment and coherence are demonstrated by how each program makes a plausible case for IDRC’s investment in capacity building and policy influence in terms of why, where and toward what end.

Considering IDRC’s perspective and position on the issue of technology is illustrative. IDRC’s Corporate Strategy document clearly illustrates a deep interest in investment in technology along with belief in its power to reach the goals of sustainable and equitable development. This is a perspective statement, albeit one that goes no further in defining how technology (demand) should be advanced, where, or in what ways. The reviews available to us were relatively silent on technology influence except to note that investment in technology was limited to technology adaptation and adoption. This silence prompts us to urge IDRC to make the role of technology more explicit in its corporate and program strategies.⁵

These tensions may become most apparent when an evaluative lens is applied to the IDRC programs particularly in light of the organization’s ambiguity in position. When looking to identify success, evaluators cast the net broadly but focus in on one dominant domain of effects. It became clear to us that in the absence of clarity on the relative weight to apply to the two arms of the IDRC perspective—influencing policy and building individual research capacity (and, we assert, also toward building research fields) that program and evaluation staffs and their evaluators default to applying the most available and clearest metric—the scientific merit of the research produced. We found this to be so in each of the reviews. But we also found evaluators struggling mightily for a better understanding of program intentions around building capacity to influence policy.

⁵ This could be an artifact of the focus of the four reviews available to us.

PERSPECTIVE—POSITION ALIGNMENT TENSIONS



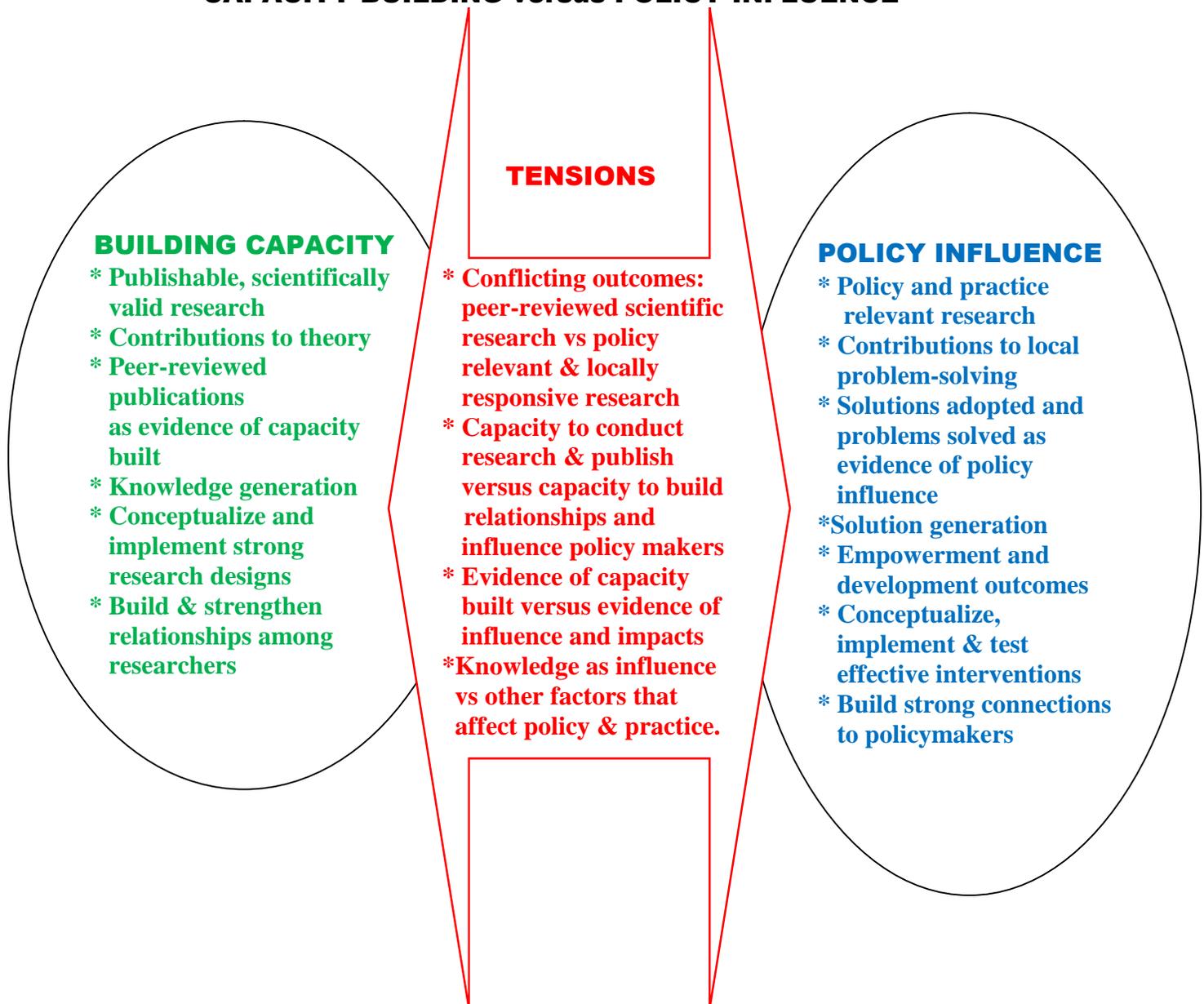
Tensions about resource allocation also emerge. Each review highlights limited staff time as they attempt to mentor individuals in the ways necessary to meet the standards of scientific rigor imposed by corporate strategy and evaluations. While perhaps an artifact of the terms of reference guiding each review, most of the reviews failed to struggle sufficiently with the inherent structural barriers that programs face as they attempt to address what turns out to be

a cascade of potential outcome expectations and perhaps obligations for each program to meet. This reflects the tension between the desirability of being guided by overall strategic perspective versus concrete choices necessary, in light of resource, political and other constraints.

3.2 Tension: Capacity Building vs. Policy Influence

IDRC attempts to straddle the demands of these two goals. We believe that this tension is perhaps the central force shaping program performance, affecting programs in many ways including how resources are deployed, communications with stakeholders and, most importantly, how programs think about and organize themselves toward success.

CAPACITY BUILDING versus POLICY INFLUENCE



Each program under review seeks to build capacity in research and by so doing affect policy in substantive ways. Each program seeks to affect change principally through the investment in individual researchers to build their research capacities and bolster their abilities to work with policy makers. In the reviews capacity building outcomes tend to take the form of traditional measures of scientific output. Evidence of policy influence was far more difficult to identify and program reviewers tended to seek evidence of any kind. One program alone used 13 major targeted areas by which to gauge success.⁶ Similarly large and widespread indicators were used in each review.

In the face of this challenge program reviewers placed a heavy emphasis upon indications of traditional academic success and by these measures the programs have done fairly well. Where achievement is questioned, caveats surface about modifying expectations because of short program time spans. The level of success is not found to be as high in programs with a greater emphasis on participatory action research, where the “research” is embedded in a non-traditional method of deep engagement with stakeholders.

Standards of research excellence invariably force a conflict for the individual researcher as opportunities for publication and promotion direct them toward more traditional lines of academic work.⁷ Program support for research in new and interdisciplinary fields or using participatory methods, in all likelihood runs in direct opposition to these powerful career forces.

If building research capacity is to aggregate into a sufficient sum of influence, we need to question whether individuals actually stay in the field supported and whether they continue with their interests in affecting policy. The Economy and the Environment Program in Southeast Asia has understandably experienced major problems in retaining its supported researchers in one country. The report states: “Ironically EEPSEA success in developing local economists’ skill generated its greatest challenge: the rapid movement of individuals out of environmental economics research into other fields or out of research altogether. The supply of Cambodians with economic analysis skill is small and the demand by the many international organizations located in Phnom Penh is high.” The report goes on to note that 60% of the Cambodians trainees are no longer involved in environment economics research.

⁶ The UPE program illustrates this problem. This one program, of relatively small size, with vast geographic scope is assessed on the following: reach and effectiveness at promoting the dissemination, communication and utilization of research findings, the contribution of the program to influencing policy, the contribution of the program to building or strengthening the capacities of researchers, organizations, research users and institutions, influence on technology development, influence on shaping relationships among partners and stakeholders, researchers and networks, impact on changes in environment conditions, state of urban poverty, impact on increasing understanding of gendered perspectives in the field, and effects and contributions of research to international, policy and academic debates, discourse and understanding. From Scope of Work document authorizing this evaluation.

⁷ Even when researchers in non academia based institutions are supported, reviewers applied standards evolving from norms of academic success.

So too, the Ecohealth reviewers notice a drift within the program toward more medically-oriented research rather than that originally emphasized by the program. The reviewers note: “Concern was expressed that the strength of the original emphasis on community based participatory research may be compromised by an increased focus by IDRC on more traditional concepts of health research (surveillance, prevention and control of emerging diseases, in particular vector borne) rather than health in its broader context particularly with regard to poverty and social empowerment.” Whether the reviewers are correct or not in their interpretation of this issue, applying a strategic lens leads one to consider whether the career market for those emphasizing interdisciplinary and non-traditional research approaches is more limited than that offered by more traditional forms of medical research, and therefore the strategic implications of this difference are noteworthy.

All programs fall short of meeting the kinds of policy effects implicated by the corporate strategy and by the IDRC Act and where policy effects are highlighted, for the most part, they are of a fairly limited or person specific nature. Where more significant success has emerged, government partners have had a major role in the process.⁸

Ecohealth reviewers call for the need for a theory of change applicable to policy influence. UPE reviewers point to the gaps in understanding as researchers involved in this participatory action research program become more involved in the demands of urban change on the ground. The evaluators note the complexity of policy change of this nature and the need to be conversant if not skilled in issues of urban policy such as finance, land access, and municipal government that surround urban environmental issues.

No one at IDRC would deny the complexity of the policy process and the enormous work involved, but we feel compelled to raise the hypothesis that programming built around the capacities of individual researchers to affect real change must either be so selective around policy change “readiness” that few opportunities for grantmaking exist or that the grant making must inevitably ignore the depth of challenges faced if working policy-research partnerships where policy makers lead the agenda, are to be forged. One review made the point clearly: “Working with policy makers implies new thinking and strategies and the capacity of FC (Focus City) teams in this regard is understandably low.”

Looking to Ecohealth, the reviewers sum up their critique along these same lines:

1. Lack of clear theories of change and measureable outcomes in the design of the projects especially related to achieving core objectives of health promotion, capacity building, and policy influence;
2. Insufficient engagement of policy actors (and in some cases the full range of multidisciplinary actors) in the design and implementation of the work
3. Uneven scientific quality of outputs and lack of a systematic peer review strategy;
4. Inadequate strategies for effectively capturing, analyzing, communication and dissemination of research and policy results.

⁸ RPE report: “Where RPE has partnered directly with government the investment has yielded tangible and robust outcomes at the policy and operational levels.”

While we might agree with the general direction of their conclusions, we question the implied lack of interdependence among these identified problems.

The nature of policy change is highly embedded in complicated political processes shaped by relationships, power, finance, values and knowledge. The UPE program review hints at what such a more sophisticated theory of change would require, going forward:

“If the UPE Program is to achieve policy influence in the future, then a clear process needs to be established at project appraisal. Invitations to participate in workshops are not sufficient. Successful stakeholder engagement across communities, researchers and government officials depends upon early buy-in whereby all stakeholders are assigned tasks and responsibilities over the entire process of the project. Responsibilities lead to ownership of the project and in the end, advocacy for policy change.”

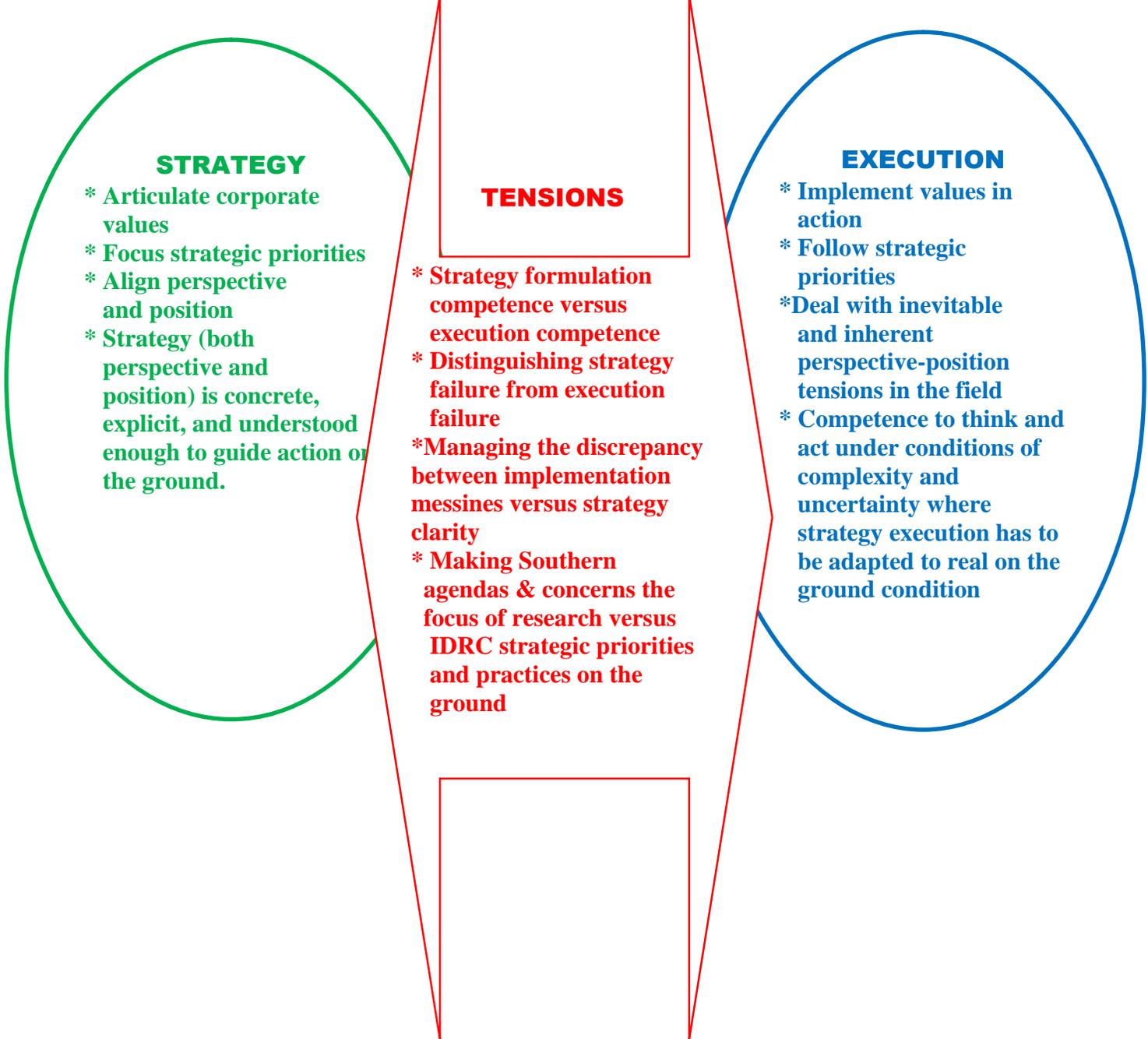
IDRC places a large bet on the power of knowledge to influence positive change in development. The context of the policy process, however, does not accommodate to research and the demands of its specific organizational culture; rather the reverse is true. This work is time consuming and requires its own set of high level skills to do well. This raises a central observation at the heart of IDRC’s work: spending time cultivating policy makers may be fundamentally at odds with the time and effort required and incentives built into academic careers.⁹

3.3 Tension: Strategy vs. Execution

The tension between “strategy” and “execution” in many ways might be considered the run-off from the tension between perspective and position, which is: how are programs meant to reflect corporate strategy? No review articulated the particular rationale for a program in as far as it was expected to advance corporate strategy. The graphic below illustrates a range of issues emerging from this tension.

⁹ We recognize that IDRC supports research in a range of institutions including NGOs and policy centers. We also recognize that academic careers may not be the path for some segment of the researchers supported. Nonetheless, all of the reviews attempted to apply standards of rigor that derive from academia and this standard is supported (in essence) a number of times in the Corporate Strategy document.

STRATEGY versus EXECUTION



IDRC's commitment to gender integration and analysis provides an example of the challenge of distinguishing between strategy issues versus execution issues. The Ecohealth program review notes that gender integration

“had been highlighted as a recommendation for attention in previous reviews along with increased attention to power relationships. The Review Team did not find a

coordinated or coherent approach to dealing with gender as an important differential in research projects. The treatment of gender varied across projects and interviewees. Gender issues were included well in some projects, and dismissed in others as irrelevant. In West and Central Africa, the Review Team observed that gender was visibility addressed as an important differential in the research process in 3 out of 10 projects visited even though all the interviewees supported the importance of gender in development research. In addition some interviewees in other regions felt that other factors such as ethnicity, migration and the aging of the population were equally important factors for closer attention.”

Is this a matter of strategy failure or execution failure? The field of evaluation has long distinguished between *idea failure* versus *implementation failure*, and emphasized the importance of being able to tell the difference. When something doesn't work, is it because it's a “bad idea” (e.g., poor theory or weak strategy) or because of “bad implementation.” When gender strategy execution is not working well, as raised in the Ecohealth review, is it because the strategy needs further work (gender integration is an example of strategic position), or is it because field staff lack the skills and commitment to execute the strategy (implementation failure), or, of course, some combination? We are suggesting that IDRC program reviews would contribute more to evaluating strategy if reviewers were attuned to and asked to distinguish between strategy versus execution issues.

Our review of the material illustrated four types of issues arising during program implementation:

1. The reviews had difficulty ascertaining what to value in each program and how much and to what end. As discussed earlier there was a proliferation of indicators that were at times logically conflicting. Too often problems like this emerge from strong differences between or among levels or units in an organization. These differences only pile up over time without real efforts to sort through disagreements and expose them to reasonable tests of “existence” proof. Rather than managing authentic tensions around what works, we see an accrual of interpretations of strategy that foil efforts at alignment and ultimately diffuse capacity to be effective. And in many cases, the issues may be execution rather than strategy.
2. There were multiple instances where reviewers and grantees pointed to problems in execution that very well may have stemmed from confusions in strategy. The question becomes: how to tell whether a problem is one of strategy or execution. While IDRC perspectives are acknowledged, they are executed with very different degrees of emphasis and in all likelihood different degrees of implementation quality. For example, no review had sufficient information to make reasonable judgments about the *joint* contribution of the two strategic arms of IDRC's work—capacity building and policy influence.
3. Constrained capacity to learn from success, mistakes or failure were noted. Too many indicators in too many arenas and at multiple levels will limit IDRC's ability to understand the value it brings to an enterprise, which undoubtedly it does. In the

absence of more clarity about its intentions, it is virtually impossible to do more than broadly speculate about progress. It is also difficult to make good assessments about emergent phenomena as actors likely find themselves without a reliable compass. The challenge becomes one of building competence to think and act under conditions of complexity and uncertainty but supported with enough capacity to have information, discern patterns and make reasonable guesses and then have the means to learn from these guesses.

4. As the Mintzberg framework emphasizes, intended strategy as planned is never fully executed as planned. Realized strategy is a combination of some aspects of what was intended plus what emerges along the way. Mintzberg and other organizational theorists are quite emphatic about this point. Intended strategies are never fully implemented as planned – and cannot be and, no less importantly, they should not be. These facts of strategic life make it all the more important to be able to distinguish appropriate and perceptive change in strategy implementation from those that result from flawed execution, lack of skill, resistance in the field, or even incompetence. The skills to implement programs and projects are quite different from the skills needed to be a fine researcher. (One has to look no farther than any university to appreciate the different skill sets involved between administration and research, and the consequences of failing to appreciate the importance of administrative training to support high quality strategic execution, especially in managing tensions.) In our reading of program reviews, the reviewers tended to treat problems as conceptual (e.g., need a clearer theory of change) and looked for conceptual solutions (more clarity) as opposed to surfacing execution problems as such..

“Execution trumps strategy, every time,” is the title of a speech given to the Evaluation Roundtable by Dr. Steven Schroeder, a former foundation executive, as he recounted his efforts to eradicate tobacco use in the United States. His greatest lesson in his work on this campaign was his recognition that *a priori* strategy along with post hoc evaluation had little to do with the decisions that were made during implementation. Strong execution backed up by solid information was his key to decision making in his ground-breaking work at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The tension between strategy versus execution has long been the subject of attention and debate in the business world. For many years, the importance of strategic planning and strategy development received primary emphasis. But recent business books have emphasized execution, as in these best-selling titles:

Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done by Larry Bossidy, Ram Charan, and Charles Burck (2002)

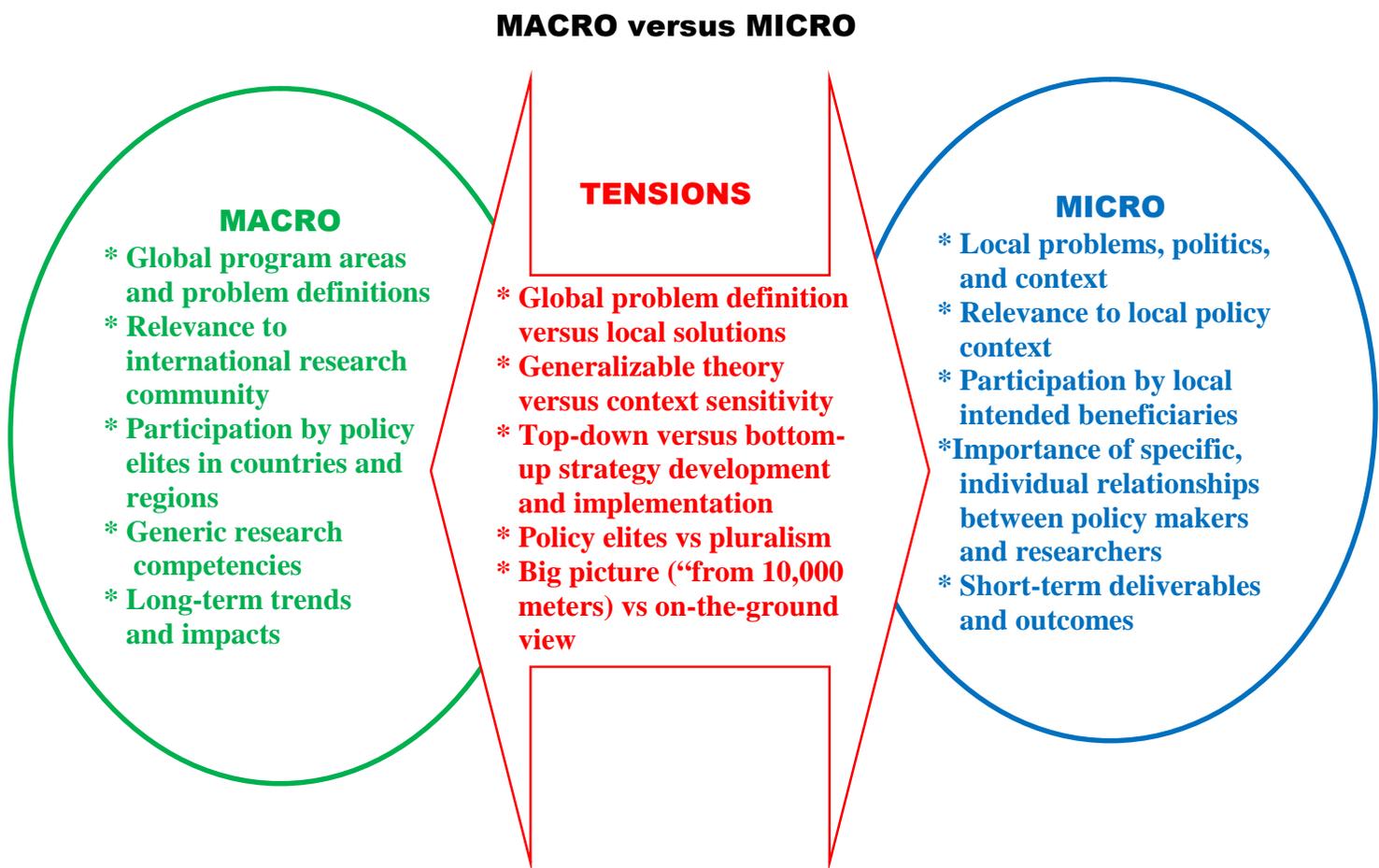
Execution Premium by Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton (2008)

Execution Revolution: Solving the One Business Problem That Makes Solving All Other Problems Easier by Gary Harpst (2008)

One lesson from these experts is that execution is not a lower-down-in-the-organization issue while strategy is the purview of senior management. Senior management, they argue, has to attend to execution every bit as much as strategy. Therein lies the tension. How to attend to both? This often manifests itself in another tension we want to highlight, that between macro and micro perspectives, to which we now turn.

3.4 Tension: Macro vs. Micro

In introducing the terms “macro” and “micro,” we are not referencing only the traditional economic distinction. By “macro” we are referring to big picture, global strategy commitments (the view from 10,000 meters) in contrast to the on-the-ground, in-the-trenches experience of strategy. The global corporate strategy offers insight into the many and deep problems of the developing world. Programs, however, support relatively small and numerous projects throughout the world. This creates programmatic and evaluation confusion regarding aims and progress, especially with regard to translating macro strategic commitments into concrete, context-specific project activities at the micro level. The graphic below summarizes the macro versus micro strategic perspectives, and examples of the tensions that arise in navigating between them. The next page offers concrete examples of this tension extracted from program reviews.



An example of the macro versus micro tension is the challenge of gender integration and analysis cited earlier. The macro strategy makes a strong commitment to “gender justice” but at the micro level, “gender issues were included well in some projects, and dismissed in others as irrelevant” (Ecohealth Program Review). There is clear tension between the macro commitment and the micro variation in which local projects determine priorities.

Another example, we believe, is the common recommendation in program reviews that project processes and pilot interventions be better modeled. Aligning overall program theories of change with specific project models of change arises as an issue in all program reviews. Ironically, IDRC’s work on Outcome Mapping as an approach to modeling interventions is widely appreciated and used by many development agencies, and would have much to offer in strengthening program and project modeling, but appears relatively little used within IDRC based on the lack of citations in the program reviews. The macro perspective on the complexities of development incorporated in Outcome Mapping seems to have had quite mixed reception and use at the micro level within IDRC.

Participatory research approaches show similar variation, from exemplars of participatory action research to projects with no participatory component. Such variation is to be expected and we are not suggesting that IDRC should impose uniformity; quite the contrary. It is precisely because of the commitment to local sensitivity and adaptability that tensions will arise about how to interpret and implement macro strategic commitments.

To get to the next level of strategy evolution, IDRC has the opportunity to do a better crosswalk between the organization’s obviously deep understanding of the large scale forces affecting development and the specific programs funded that operationalize those understandings at the micro level. Tensions can be turned to advantage when guidance is offered at the micro level about how to prioritize, optimize, and execute macro commitments.

Questions to guide considerations of macro-micro tensions include:

- How do IDRC’s international partners and audiences learn from how IDRC moves between macro commitments and micro considerations and sensitivities?
- How does IDRC leverage its resources by making macro commitments then bringing others to the table to invest in or better understand an important issue within a particular context?
- How does the agenda on field building in new and cutting edge fields advance the mission of IDRC while creating opportunities at the local level before those fields are well-established?

The macro-micro tension leads to yet another related tension: alternative, competing or even conflicting *units of impact*. Impact at the macro level looks quite different from impact at the micro level (e.g., elimination of a global disease like polio versus adopting a specific ecohealth practice locally). Different evaluation criteria, measures, and methods pertain because macro and micro changes focus on different units of impact, our next topic.

3.4 Tension: Unit of Impact

In large part, the issues noted here reflect the absence of a more unified theory of change at the corporate level then again at the level of each program. This is not to say that IDRC should aim to develop and execute each program in a uniform manner or that every program should pursue the same ends. Each program, however, would gain from pursuing more clarity about their basic theory of change and how funded projects reflect that. The reviews tended to pursue outputs and “outcomes” in a checklist and grant by grant fashion with virtually no aggregation up into reflections on overall program strategy. Output achievement was often “counted” and reported by percentages looking across the entire set of grants and without context that would allow the data to make meaningful sense. It is not clear to us whether this is a problem emanating from the reviews (how they were structured and /or conducted) or that the problem reflects a lack of clarity within the programs. Our experience tells us that strategy clarity on this issue goes a long way toward evaluation (review) clarity and following the maxim that “nature abhors a vacuum” reviewers filled the vacuum with what they could surface, what was “countable,” and what seemed to be more rather than less clear such as counting publications.

While this conflation of unit of impact affects evaluation in important ways, it is far more significant to the decisions made by program leaders. Take for instance the degree to which a program aims to advance a *field* of research and endeavor. What then is the role of an individual project toward advancing this overarching goal? We can imagine many different answers to such a question but they all reflect upon the unit of impact of the *field* and not on project by project outputs per se.

On the question of impact, for instance, how does a program decide whether sufficient funds have been invested to achieve an outcome or to reach its goal and what to emphasize within projects when they hit the inevitable wall of having too much to do and too little time and funding to do it? As is the case with the vast majority of North American foundations, an important corporate question is: how do the programs add up to a realization of its goals and mission. The programs too, face the analogous question: how do the projects add up to advance its aims.

The reviews offered their strongest insight into this kind of tension when raising questions such as those cited about the Cambodian market for economists. Our take away from the point raised in this review was that program staff need to consider career market dynamics not just for their specific field of endeavor, in this case environmental economics, but the dimensions of the country specific human resource pool (different sizes of population) and then how the demand for the home discipline (economics) might compete with the goal of bringing entrants into the field of environmental economics. The same points could be made about the drift evidenced in the Ecohealth program from health-oriented research to medical model research.

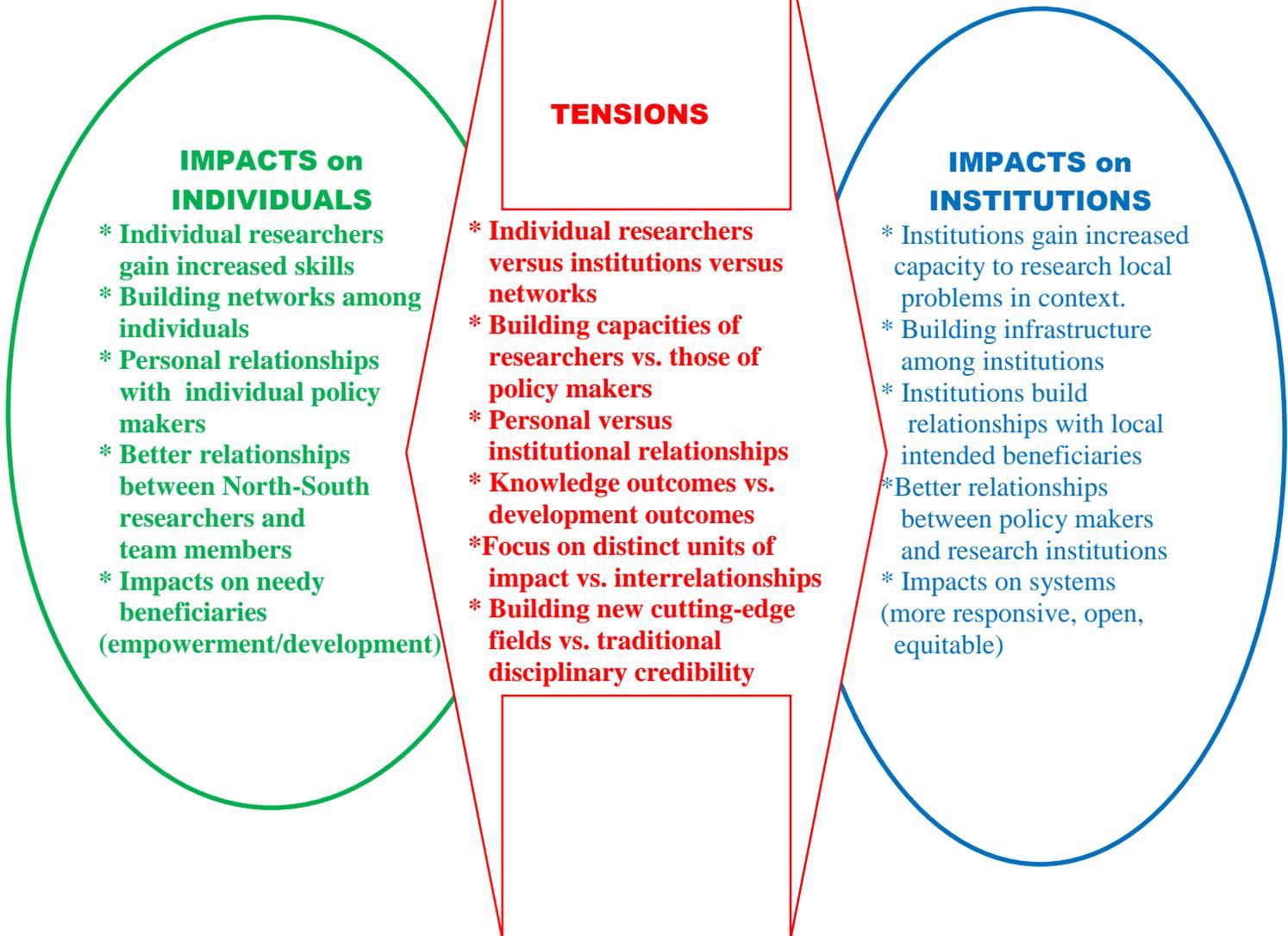
In the UPE and RPE programs, where participatory research methods dominate, the unit of impact tension plays out in a different, although just as important, manner. Here IDRC necessarily migrates from individual researchers to a collective process involving

organizations, citizens, and policy makers. It was not clear from the reviews that the theory of change shifted to accommodate the greater complexity, different organizational types and the longer time frame needed for change to occur. Measures of success were mostly the same as those applied across the board. The UPE review did, however, push for more thought about the nature of urban change and the need to incorporate the skill and thinking that this domain requires in order to be effective.

We fully understand that IDRC staff knows well that different settings and problems require different solutions, approaches, resources, hand-holding, skills and time frames. The heterogeneity of the developing world is well acknowledged in the corporate strategy. However, in implementation, (at least as reflected in the reviews) uniformity is valued. Our experience with North American foundations tells us that this kind alignment issue may arise from several sources: goal ambitions may outstrip resource availability, including funds and program staff; strategies (and resources) to support individuals might not transfer in whole cloth to efforts where the central actors are organizations; also programs supporting research may have been exported into a policy change agenda without accommodation to the full demands of policy change. Our experience tells us that different organizational stakeholders have different interests and rather than being managed or tested, their interests tend to accrue into programs with the potential outcome of diluting effects in all areas of interest.

The challenge here is not to layer on new themes or to develop numerous theories of change reflecting generic action, but to struggle to wed the core IDRC perspectives in a coherent way and grapple with how the perspective might work in the settings chosen. From this, programmatic theories of change can emerge with more appropriate and aligned ways to measure success and learn while doing. We encourage IDRC to think through how strategy is likely to bring about desired change and to monitor “realized strategy” attuned to the clarified purpose and settings of each program.

UNIT of IMPACT TENSIONS



The graphic above is illustrative of just one of unit of impact tensions, that between individuals and institutions. We have noted others as well: efforts that espouse to change communities, call up quite a different set of interventions than that used to change individual behavior. The same can be said for change in international agendas, change in population health, changes in the vibrancy and effectiveness of “fields” etc. These targets of change require both different and different magnitude of intervention and also very different measures of success and approaches to evaluation. An example of unit of impact tensions is highlighted in the cross-case study of capacity undertaken by IDRC. This important analysis notes that:

“In IDRC’s view, change occurs first and foremost at the individual, not the institutional, level. Several case studies remark that working along problem or thematic lines, at the level of individual research projects, with individual researchers and their research teams, has become IDRC’s niche – it is what IDRC does best.”

The report goes on to note that “this reveals an interesting dissonance between what IDRC does and what it says it does” for “according to IDRC corporate documents, the Centre identifies organizations as principal targets for capacity development support.”

The tension between achieving individual capacity outcomes versus organizational capacity outcomes is quite palpable in the program reviews. On the face of it, these two levels of outcomes intersect and ought to be mutually reinforcing. In point of fact, as the extension evaluation literature on the subject shows, changing individuals and changing organizations involve fundamentally different theories of change, different execution skills, different timelines, and different measures of success.

The cross-case analysis study also shows how unit of impact tensions intersect with the overarching tension between capacity versus policy influence that is at the heart of IDRC’s strategic perspective. The report concludes:

“IDRC has paid closer attention to, and has therefore achieved more substantive results in, strengthening the capacities of organizations to conduct and manage research, with comparatively fewer results in strengthening the capacity of partners to use research results and to create or mobilize research links to systemic policy formation or change.”

These different types of results (capacity versus policy influence) flow directly from IDRC’s strategic perspective and involve *different units of impact*: researchers versus policy makers. Both are clearly important. But different theories of change are involved, including different skills and relationships. Projects are expected to show results in both areas. As priorities are established, choices have to be made about where to place the emphasis – and therein arises the tension.

Another unit of analysis tension arises in the aim to achieve results with partners and people in communities, the ultimate intended beneficiaries of development initiatives. The UPE program review observes that:

“Participatory practices can be assessed at two levels. Effective partnership among stakeholders is a vital element in the success of a project, and active participation of the beneficiary community is a prerequisite for its sustainability. The *Focus Cities* projects, being larger and more complex, exemplify the importance of participatory practices and effective stakeholder engagement, a great deal of which depends on the institution leading the project.”

Elaborating on these different units of impact, the report continues:

“Due to the direct intervention in the field approach adopted by UPE, the issue of participation and partnership assumes greater importance than in the more conventional modalities of development projects. This issue and the way it should be approached links closely to cultural attitudes of the community and call for

strengthening project elements that aim at better understanding the beneficiaries from a socio-cultural aspect.”

What emerges is a mixture of units of impact in IDRC’s work that includes individual researchers, research organizations, fields, other development partners, community-based organizations, direct beneficiaries, and, of course, policy makers. These are all targets of capacity development while at the same time being targets of practice change. In its early days, IDRC appears to have been founded on a fairly straightforward and simple theory of change: that capacity development would lead to knowledge change which would lead to practice and policy change. The tensions revealed in the program reviews and cross-case analysis suggest that, based upon years of experience and achievement, to go to what we’ve been calling “*the next level*,” IDRC would benefit from a more sophisticated theory of change, one that explicitly posits and takes into account the multiple and complex factors that actually produce sustainable change.

The RPE program review was particularly incisive about the impact tensions and trade-offs involved:

“The choice between government and civil society partners is also a choice between supporting project partners with the capacity to undertake 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.”

This conclusion captures succinctly the interaction between impact and priority audience and provides an excellent segue to the final tension we offer for analysis: ***audience priority tensions***. All of the tensions overlap and intersect, and audience priority tensions follow closely from unit of impact tensions. The difference is that unit of impact draws our attention to consider what results are of greatest strategic importance.

This final tension emerges from the central role and function of scientific knowledge as a prized output at IDRC. Knowledge has to be directed to someone, understood by someone, consumed by someone, and used by someone. Audience priority tensions emerge because there are always multiple “someones” – multiple knowledge consumers and users,

3.5 Tension: Audience Priority

As just noted, IDRC inevitably has many important audiences. By virtue of its charter, its role as a quasi-government agency and the nature of development work, IDRC necessarily must straddle the multiple audiences of international development organizations, governments and field based organizations. IDRC’s values and perspectives derived from its authorizing act and further developed by its corporate strategy, staff and programs compel the organization to take seriously its aims to support processes that reinforce pluralism, self-determination and diversity.

Given what IDRC is, these audiences cannot, nor should they, go away. But tensions among the range of audiences are real and in the real world decisions are inevitably made that favor one or another. One reviewer captured a clear example when looking at the tradeoff between the greater rate of success evidenced when projects worked with governments versus the time and uncertainty of access, readiness and success when working with civil society organizations. There is no fiat that can resolve this tension. It does, however, warrant ongoing consideration of program and project aims and how they advance corporate aims.

The UPE review raised a concern about the tension experienced as projects encounter participant expectations about receiving the benefit of a development intervention as opposed to contributing to development research.

The RPE review points to a direct tradeoff between audiences:

“ The choice between government and civil society partners is also a choice between supporting project partners with the capacity to undertake 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.

How issues like this are managed is central to the IDRC mission and drives home the need for more careful work aligning capacity building with policy influence and how IDRC communicates its intents.

Within capacity building, standards of research excellence, discussed earlier, favor an academic audience, whereas standards of “good enough” might reflect the needs and demands of policy makers. Of course, this will vary by setting and project. High stakes decisions with associated high costs may require more and better knowledge than would lower stakes decisions where “good enough” might apply. The point is that the nature of the policy, the culture of information use, the time demands-- in essence the nature of the particular audience can best determine what kind of policy research is best suited to the need.

Digging deeper into the concept of audience, one review raised the point that environmental economics was not a high priority in SE Asia as environmental concerns are seen as taking away from broader economic development. In Ecohealth the reviewers note that the original concept of supporting efforts to foster community-based health seemed to resonate more in Latin America than in other areas and that this might reflect the region’s long term history with these ideas. This point raises for us the issue of understanding the market for IDRC programs beyond that of interested individual researchers. In other words, is there a sufficient champion base to assure IDRC that investment in a project reflects its strongly held principle of self-determination. We have not seen much discussion in the reviews of IDRC’s advocacy stance as it invests in newer fields.

The point of this discussion is that audience tensions need to be managed as a whole rather than one by one and that the time demands of influencing policy versus that of academic research are likely to be very different. Without explicit attention, decisions will still be made but the consequences may be far from what is desired.

AUDIENCE PRIORITY TENSIONS

TENSIONS

RESEARCH and PARTNER AUDIENCES

- * Scientific credibility in the international research community and in traditional disciplines
- * Relationships with partners and funding collaborators
- * Helping research collaborators

- * International research community versus local policy makers
- * Participation of partners versus local beneficiaries
- * Credibility within traditional disciplines versus new, emergent, interdisciplinary niche
- * Pluralism versus policy elites
- * Focus on separate audiences vs. their interconnections
- * Getting things done short term vs. taking time to build long term relationships.

POLICY and BENEFICIARY AUDIENCES

- * Credibility with local policy makers and practitioners
- * Relationships of trust with intended beneficiaries
- * Helping disempowered, marginal people, and the disadvantaged

Part 4: Concluding thoughts

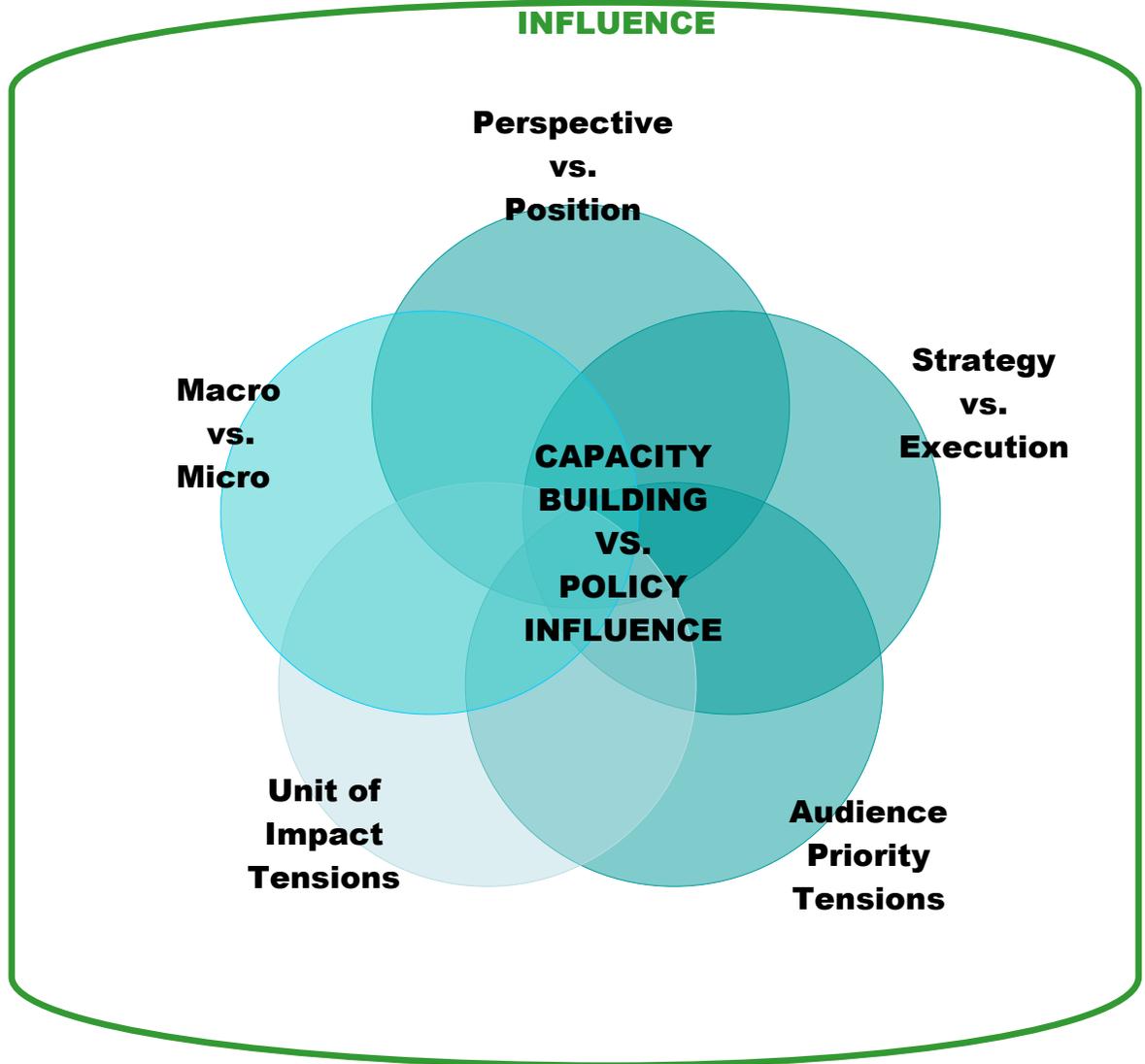
Nobel Prize winning social scientist Herbert Simon said: “The series of decisions which determines behavior over some stretch of time may be called a *strategy*.” Henry Mintzberg credits this observation with having put him on the trail of investigating strategy. In his most recent book, *Tracking Strategy* (2007), Mintzberg reported business case studies focused on how organizational behaviors (not just plans, intentions, and decisions, but *behaviors*) revealed strategy and explained results.

In this analysis we have been *tracking strategy* at IDRC as revealed in the patterns of actions and behaviors captured and reported in program reviews and related strategic and evaluation documents. We want to emphasize that this analysis was only possible because IDRC has been consistently rigorous in commissioning independent program reviews and seriously evaluating the implementation and outcomes of IDRC’s strategic framework and global initiatives. These reviews and evaluations document considerable success. We have positioned this analysis as offering the possibility of building on past successes and learnings to go to the next level of excellence and performance in the further evolution of IDRC as a world class institution.

As we identified and tracked IDRC’s strategies and their implementation as revealed in program reviews, tensions surfaced among competing outcomes and ways of doing development work. We began, using Mintzberg’s framework, with the tension between strategy as perspective vs. strategy as position. A key challenge here is to align perspective and position rather than treating them as separate and discrete elements (essentially silos). Looking then at the tensions between capacity building versus policy influence, we surfaced implications for how IDRC might look at the different kinds of skills and competencies needed to conduct scientifically rigorous research versus building strong, credible, and influential relationships with policy makers and practitioners. We then turned to a key distinction in the management literature between strategy and execution, and the importance of being able to distinguish inadequacies or failures in strategy from those emanating from weak implementation and execution. Program reviews consistently failed to make this distinction when identifying strengths and weaknesses, and we suggest that attention to the distinction between strategy formulation and strategy execution would be illuminating as IDRC looks to the future. The final three tensions surfaced address how problems are framed in macro terms while programs and/or the means by which they are executed tend toward micro interventions. We believe too that it is worthwhile to consider more deeply how different units of impact require different strategies and different measures of success, and how the demands and needs of different audiences (the international research community versus local policy makers versus needy intended beneficiaries) might shape IDRC future decisions.

At the center of these tensions was an overarching tension at the level of strategic perspective: *Capacity Building versus Policy Influence*. This tension, we posit, is the central overarching tension played out through the intersecting, integrated system of overlapping and interacting sub-tensions illustrated in the graphic on the next page.

CAPACITY BUILDING VS. POLICY INFLUENCE



We found that the variety of issues surfaced in program reviews could be better understood and illuminated when viewed through the lens of strategic perspective: alignment and tension between the two central vehicles by which IDRC delivers its value, Capacity Building and Policy Influence. As we have illustrated above, it is difficult to think about audience without thinking about “for what?” and the audience for policy and the audience for research are not the same, nor do they judge success in the same way (unit of impact and micro/ macro), nor do they work on the same time lines and in the same manner (strategy vs. execution). We

believe that if the strategic process that IDRC is about to embark on gives serious attention to this core tension, many of the other tensions observed will slacken or will become more manageable.

The relationships among the tensions are complex and dynamic because the global development environment within which IDRC works is complex. Complex adaptive systems manifest characteristics of high uncertainty, dynamism, and emergence – dimensions that are at the heart of Mintzberg’s insistence that intended strategy, as planned, is never fully realized but always intersects with emergent and unanticipated factors that change strategy execution on the path to what is eventually realized.

We highlight this in closing to emphasize our opening discussion of tensions, in which we suggested that the focus should be on *managing, navigating, and negotiating tensions*, not resolving them or even choosing among them. This also means not ignoring them. Ignoring them won’t make them go away. It just means that their effects won’t be as quickly, or ever, understood. Without recognition of these tensions, and guidance and support from senior management, IDRC staff in the field will continue to make it up as they go along and program reviewers will report confusion and concerns about the disparities between plans and what actually occurs on the ground, between high hopes for multiple outcomes and the challenges experienced about which outcomes deserve priority, and at every level and every stage, tensions between capacity building and policy influence as overarching strategic goals.

From our experience working with many funders in North America, the kinds of strategic tensions we have discussed in this paper are far from unusual. In fact, the issues discussed here, although different in content, are quite similar to most foundations. What is different is that, in many ways, IDRC is advanced over other foundations in its commitment to doing a few things well and evaluating what results. We have no question that IDRC is in a strong position to build on its past history and *take strategy to the next level of excellence*.