

Evaluating Capacity Building: Building A Results Framework For A Development Agency

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1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, many development agencies, organizations and donors have grappled with the issue of how to assess capacity building initiatives. Many of these agencies have struggled with how to articulate and document the complex array of results of their capacity building activities. Part of this difficulty lies in the fact that there are few systematic reviews of how development agencies construct the concept of capacity building in order that they may systematically look at how this construction leads to results. While there is a great deal of information regarding development projects that have attempted to build capacity, there is a dearth of information regarding how development agencies approach the concept of capacity building. We know little about how development agency staff construct the concept, create a mix of activities, create a definition of what works, what doesn't work, or what situational factors affect how they approach capacity building etc. Finally we do not have much information on how different agencies' construction of capacity building affect the type of results they get. Similarly, to date there is relatively little in the literature on established or acceptable ways to measure development agencies' capacity results.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian development agency that supplies, among other things, funding and technical assistance to researchers in developing countries to carry out applied research on the problems and issues that southern researchers and policymakers have identified as crucial to their communities. To operationalize this mission the Centre has identified "local capacity building" as one of two strategic goals. Specifically, its goal is to "*strengthen and help mobilize the local research capacity of developing countries...*" (IDRC, 2005).

IDRC is a Crown Corporation that was established by the IDRC Act 1970 passed by the House of Commons, with the bulk of its funding coming from an annual parliamentary grant (2004/05 parliamentary appropriation was \$120 million). Guided by a 21-member international Board of Governors, IDRC reports to Parliament through the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

IDRC's Program Branch is structured around a number of broad programming themes: Social and Economic Policy (SEP), Environment and Natural Resource Management (ENRM), Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D), and Innovation, Policy and Science (IPS). These programming areas are operationationlized through Program Initiatives, which provide the technical support and funding for applied research in developing countries. The Program Initiatives are structured as multidisciplinary teams that managed over 500 research projects and 1000+ research support projects during the 2000-2004 time period for this study.

During the past fiscal year (FY 2004/05), the average size for a research project was \$390,000 and ranged in size from \$25,000 to \$2 million. Funding for research projects or project phases is

generally given for a three-year period, which means that approximately \$130,000 is available for each year the project is “active”.

2. The Study

Over its 35-year history of supporting researchers in the South, IDRC has gained considerable knowledge and experience in facilitating capacity building activities, projects and programs. Most, if not all, management and staff view capacity building as a central part of their work, although many of those we interviewed recognize that even though capacity building, individual learning, adult learning etc. are well-developed areas of social science, this is not their area of intellectual expertise. Moreover, senior managers are looking for better ways to understand the return on their capacity building investments.

As a result, senior management and program staff agree that there needs to be a deeper understanding of what capacity building means at IDRC and its results at IDRC. The desire is to undertake a study which is grounded in the IDRC experience of capacity building in order to better understand how capacity building is used within IDRC and the results being obtained. Six questions are guiding this evaluation:

1. How does IDRC staff construct their understanding of capacity building?
2. Whose capacities is IDRC building?
3. What capacities are being built?
4. How are capacities being built? Is there an implicit theory of change?
5. What factors contribute to or inhibit capacity building objectives in Centre-supported projects?
6. What are the results being achieved by IDRC’s capacity building investments

This evaluation was started in 2004 and is expected to take about 2 years. It is being managed by the Evaluation Unit of IDRC and is being carried out in four phases:

Phase I	Phase II	Phase III	Phase IV
8 background studies carried out Completed April 2005	Investigation of how IDRC understands CB and how they operationalize that understanding in their work Incorporation of background studies Interviews, lit review Developed conceptual framework Completed May 2005	Exploration to fully develop framework for describing results of CB activities Application of framework to 40-50 projects Interviews, file reviews Completion – Nov 2005	Carry out min of 5 case studies to explore issues of significance in more depth Completion – April 2006 Analysis of case studies Overall analysis

The evaluation is intended for use by:

1. IDRC senior managers in their monitoring of capacity building as one of IDRC’s key result areas;

2. IDRC staff and managers in designing, supporting and monitoring projects and activities intended to build capacities

In February 2005, as a result of internal staff changes, IDRC's Evaluation Unit commissioned Universalia Management Group (UMG) to work with them on phase II and III of this study. These Phases are almost completed. A preliminary report was written for Phase II (Universalia, 2005). We are now completing our interviews for Phase III with a preliminary report due by the end of the year.

The focus of this paper is to describe our progress to date and to set forth our understanding of: (1) how IDRC staff construct the concept of capacity building; (2) how staff describe what they do to build capacity; and (3) their ideas about change processes. We have also included in this paper a tentative conceptual framework of the result areas related to the interviews we have done for IDRC. This framework will be tested in phases III and IV as we engage in further data collection and analysis.

3. The Methodology

Using a theory of change approach, we looked at IDRC's "espoused theories", that is what they say they do, and the theories of action, that is the capacity building projects and activities that IDRC invests in.

The primary methodology for the evaluation is qualitative. Some quantitative analysis was done to describe the population of capacity building projects within IDRC. The methodology was developed collaboratively among IDRC's Evaluation Unit, an IDRC Advisory Committee and Universalia. The specifics of the study design emerge as each phase of the study is completed; however the general structure still holds. Specifically the phases are:

3.1 Phase I: Background Studies at IDRC

IDRC commissioned several background studies as part of this strategic evaluation. These studies provided IDRC with a variety of empirical, descriptive and conceptual information about capacity building activities carried out by the Centre (see Box 1).

Box 1: Background studies commissioned by IDRC for the strategic evaluation on capacity building

Bernard, Anne (2005a). Adult learning and capacity building in IDRC: A concept paper, Evaluation Unit, IDRC, Ottawa.

Bernard, Anne (2005b). Mapping capacity building in IDRC, Evaluation Unit, IDRC, Ottawa.

Bernard, Anne and Greg Armstrong (2005c). Framework for evaluating capacity building in IDRC, Evaluation Unit, IDRC, Ottawa

Bernard, Anne (2005d). References to the field of adult education and learning, Evaluation Unit, IDRC, Ottawa.

Bernard, Anne (2005e). Situating Capacity Development in IDRC: Some Policy Considerations, Evaluation Unit, IDRC, Ottawa.

Gillespie, Bryon (2005). Exploring IDRC understanding of capacity building and identifying "theories of change": Background study to focus a review of literature on capacity building. Draft report prepared for IDRC's Evaluation Unit, February 2005.

Maessen, Odilia (2005). Intent to Build Capacity through Research Projects: an examination of project objectives, abstract and appraisal documents, Draft Report, prepared for IDRC's Evaluation Unit, April 2005.

Maessen, Odilia. (2004). Characterization of the Capacity Building Content in Twelve Evaluation Reports: Tables and Remarks, Report prepared for IDRC's Evaluation Unit, November 2004.

3.2 Phase II: IDRC's Staff construction of Capacity Building

Building on the work of Gillespie (2005) who conducted 17 interviews with staff and managers, an additional 27 interviews were conducted with individuals from all parts of the Centre. The intent of these interviews was to gather the various views and perspectives on capacity building within the Centre, and focused on the way IDRC staff and managers understand capacity building, and how they operationalize that understanding in their work.

Additionally, a review of the literature, including a review of the capacity building activities, projects and programs by other development agencies (for example, see recent reports by the Rockefeller Foundation, 2005; Overseas Development Institute, 2001) was done to provide context for work being done in this area.

Results from Phase I (background studies) were incorporated with these interviews and resulted in the production of a synthesis report, which described IDRC's construction of capacity building.

Finally, a preliminary conceptual framework for describing IDRC's understanding of capacity building and the results achieved was developed using the data obtained during this phase of the study. Three primary outcome areas of capacity building are espoused in the literature: individual, organizational (or entity) and institutional/systems level. In addition, we identified four dominant interventions or activities used by IDRC to support capacity building initiatives: training, mentoring/coaching, networks/networking, and face-to-face interactions. This resulted in a tentative framework that helped us to identify some possible result areas.

3.3 Phase III: Developing a Framework for Capacity Results

The central issue of this phase is to better understand the capacity building results IDRC is getting from its projects. What kind of capacity building results does IDRC expect to obtain and what capacity building results are they obtaining? What facilitates these kinds of results?

Phase III of the study revolves around an in-depth investigation into approximately 45 IDRC supported research projects, including a review of the files and interviews. A key component at this stage of the study is the inclusion of telephone interviews with the agency's partners involved in the selected projects in order to obtain their views of capacity building and the results obtained.

Data collected from the files and interviews will be analyzed using the tentative framework in order to test the efficacy of this results framework and to make any further changes or refinements necessary.

4. Capacity Building at IDRC

Capacity building at IDRC is strongly valued within its organizational culture. A number of interview respondents stated that capacity building at IDRC "*is fundamental and underlies everything we do*". It is central to how the Centre operates. For IDRC, development is about people and is based on an approach that places high importance on partnerships, local ownership and participation as being crucial to sustainability. This approach to development embraces the notion "learning by doing" and provides the flexibility and long-term commitment that is seen as necessary for change to occur.

4.1 How Do IDRC Staff Construct the Idea of Capacity Building?

There is no commonly understood definition of capacity building within IDRC to help guide staff and managers in carrying out their work. While some felt comfortable with capacity building as an umbrella term for their project activities, others found this broad conceptualization problematic. Although a corporate definition of capacity building may not be useful for staff and managers in their work, a shared understanding of what capacity building entails is critical to articulating a shared understanding of capacity building results and what they are.

In general, capacity building was seen as something that is quite broad in nature, encompasses a wide set of activities from training in research methodologies or tools to getting partners to think differently about research (“think outside the box”) or to do research differently, for example multidisciplinary research, or including gender analysis in the research. Some of the respondents referred directly to IDRC’s Act and/or mandate when they spoke about capacity building. In this context, they referred to capacity building as supporting people to create their own solutions to the development issues that affect them the most.

Related to the issue of a lack of a corporate level definition of capacity building is that it also results in an inconsistent approach to categorizing capacity building work at IDRC. This makes file reviews, analysis and learning difficult. It also makes tracking and monitoring “local capacity building” as an organizational result to report on extremely challenging.

4.2 Who’s and What Capacities

As one would expect, many of the staff we talked to indicated that the interventions implemented in their projects occurred at multiple levels. In terms of “who” or the target of these capacity building initiatives, most of those we interviewed talked about building the capacity of researchers and the teams they worked with, although some also discussed research organizations as a target. During the interviews, staff discussed the need for building individual and group research skills such as: writing a problem, improving research methodologies, linking researchers and users, improving research dissemination practices, etc. Some also discussed the fact that the researchers and their teams needed organizational units to support them; otherwise their work and that of IDRC would not be sustainable. Thus working with research organizations became another target.

With respect to research organizations, IDRC generally funds functional capacity building activities. For example, staff identified financial management, resource mobilization, communication and/or dissemination activities, and human resource management as the types of organizational capacities that were required or wanted by their project partners. IDRC’s approach to capacity building is normally instrumental or functional in nature and focuses on professional competencies, capabilities and the tools needed to conduct research. When targeting individuals, IDRC talks about capacity building in terms of the “ability to do something” that was missing before.

Interviewees stressed the importance of working with networks, beneficiaries and influencing policy (the state). By incorporating more data from the interviews, file reviews and some discussions with other experts, the initial results framework described above was refined even further to include two additional outcome areas that IDRC staff/managers talk about: networks and the state (government). The following describes this 5X4 framework:

Individual

- Skills, competencies (function, process)
- Attitude (motivation, incentives)

Organizational

- Function, process (e.g., financial management, decision-making)
- External legitimacy (e.g., seen by other organizations as being legitimate, provide valuable products, services)
- Internal confidence (e.g., products and services in demand)

Networks (regional/global)

- Skills, competencies (functions, processes)
- Attitude (motivation, incentives)
- External legitimacy (e.g., seen by other networks, individuals, organizations as being legitimate, provide valuable products, services)

State

- Policy influence (expanding capacities, broadening horizons, affecting regimes)
- Technology influence, innovation
- Expanded incentives (e.g., developing countries now funding own R&D)

Societal (users of research including, but not limited to: policy/decision makers and other public sector actors, business and other private sector actors, lobbyists, advocates, etc.)

- Policy influence (expanding capacities, broadening horizons, affecting regimes)
- Technology influence, innovation
- Expanded incentives (e.g., developing countries now funding own R&D)

Putting this framework along with the tools or approaches used by IDRC (training, mentoring, etc.) into a matrix we hope will stimulate both IDRC staff and their partners to more fully and systematically describe and reflect on their experiences with a project.

Although staff and managers identify a wide range of activities they use to build capacity, no process, or set mix of activities were identified that would indicate an approach to capacity building. In addition, many of those interviewed think that IDRC needs to re-establish its foundational support to Masters and PhD degrees as a key tool for building research capacities.

4.3 Does IDRC Have An Implicit Theory of Change?

How does IDRC approach change at the individual, team, organizational, network, state and beneficiary level? How does IDRC staff think about the change process they are investing in?

At an instrumental level we looked at the corporate level project data and tried to identify the type of capacity building tools or approaches used by IDRC staff. In general, we found that, like most donors, IDRC staff have a wide array of modalities they use to engage in capacity building

activities to build research capacities of their target groups. The type of approach used seems to be determined by the set of circumstances linked to the context, needs, project designers and prevailing ideology. Many IDRC staff focus on their program-based themes and thus utilize approaches that can provide resources that are linked to help individuals, agencies, and networks improve the capabilities of those working on the theme. For instance, IDRC's program themes are multidisciplinary in nature and thus many of their projects implement activities that develop skills in multidisciplinary research areas such as, for example, environmental economics. Other interventions relate directly to the obvious functions of organizations (finance) thus their major approaches are related to organizational and institutional functional development.

The following table describes many of the approaches to capacity building used by donors. The activities used by IDRC are similar to the ones here:

Table1: Approaches Used for Capacity Building Activities

APPROACH	COMMENT
Technical Assistance	This is the most common and involves long- and short-term experts imparting knowledge and skills on site through consulting, coaching and training activities.
Mentoring and "Apprenticeship"	These are capacity building approaches where senior staff members take on junior staff to improve their capabilities and/or counsel them in their careers.
Training Programs	The concept of a training program is used for both long- and short-term learning activities. It includes everything from a workshop to a degree program. With respect to skill or capabilities it involves the subject and management competencies. Training can be classroom-based, field based, laboratory based etc. It covers a wide spectrum of activities.
Workshops	Workshops are a special type of training that is usually short-term (under six months).
Conferences	Conferences and meetings are gatherings for people to discuss issues, research findings and to personally network. These are normally topic driven.
Study Tours	These are one of many experiential learning activities being used today. In study tours, participants are able to see in action the things they want to implement in their own setting.
Institutional linkages, partnerships, and/or twinning arrangements	These are normally organizational relationships aimed at improving the capabilities of the institution. They normally involve a wide variety of exchanges, learning activities, training events, etc. Mutual benefit is usually a key component of such arrangements.
E-courses and programs	This is a recent attempt to utilize technology to improve processes of capacity building.
Networks	Recently, donors have been supporting groups of individuals groups of individuals and organizations to engage in capability development. This involves new forms of relationships and interactions and usually involves e-technology as well as face-to-face meetings.
Infrastructure support	This is capital infrastructure needed in any research/development endeavour. Normally, infrastructure support requires the organization to have some sort of maintenance budget or system. If not, it will not last. Infrastructure support could include buildings, libraries, utilities and the internet.
Base budget support	Unlike infrastructure, base budget support is a capacity intervention aimed at sustaining the on-going recurrent costs of an organization.
Awards, scholarships, fellowships, internships	A wide assortment of incentives used to encourage individuals to engage in capacity building. These awards can be given for local or international activities. They can be given to those who have done exceptional work or who have the potential to do exceptional work.
Publications and publication resource support	This too is a wide array of capacity building tools that help disseminate research work.

While we were interested in what people were actually doing for capacity building our intent was to try to see if there was a common theory of change. One interesting finding for us was that for most IDRC staff, the entry point for change is at the individual level. In general, staff felt that

that if IDRC chose the right individual or group of individuals, they would be able to affect the other target groups. Choosing individuals did not mean to staff that you were avoiding other target groups. Rather, IDRC staff focus on working with particular individuals who they feel can take the leadership role to use a new or different methodology, or champion the use of research data to feed into the policy arena.

Essentially then, IDRC's theory of change is to work with individual researchers (and their teams) over the course of several years, to provide them with opportunities for training(s), to go to conferences and present papers, or to network with others who work in the same/similar field of research, and to provide them with ongoing communication and intellectual support so that these individuals can affect change with those that they can influence.

4.4 What Factors contribute to or inhibit capacity building

The majority of respondents in our interviews suggested that IDRC's long-term approach to capacity building, coupled with the Centre's flexibility, both in terms of funding arrangements as well as programming design, are two of the most important factors that contribute to their program's or project's capacity building objectives.

Many respondents recognize that capacity building does not happen overnight. It is a long-term process that requires **persistence** and a commitment to resources.

Flexibility was also frequently mentioned. They felt that as a relatively small donor organization, the programming and budgetary flexibility they have gave them opportunities to respond quickly to new ideas on the ground.

Other factors that were mentioned as contributing to capacity building were: face-to-face interactions, IDRC's history and experience with networks, the range of expertise that IDRC's staff and managers have, mutual learning, and the provision of support beyond "one-off" training sessions.

These success factors however, must be seen in parallel with those factors described as inhibiting capacity building objectives. Several interviewees noted staff turnover at partner organizations as a continual challenge, especially when dealing with organizational capacity building objectives.

A number of respondents felt that the Centre does not provide adequate support, particularly from the non-programming areas (e.g., library, communications), to program staff to meet some of the capacity building objectives. Some of these respondents also felt that some of the non-programming units and divisions have mandates that conflict with those of the program initiatives.

5. The Development of a Results Framework

As we move from Phase II into Phase III we are struck by the difficulty IDRC and other development agencies have in articulating the results of capacity building activities, projects and/or programs. To help us in coming forward with a methodology to assess these kinds of development results, we developed a framework, which *emerged from the empirical data within IDRC* (Phase II) to test in Phase III.

Phase II of this study conceptualized what, where and how IDRC invests in and contributes to capacity building in the South. Three primary outcome areas of capacity building are espoused

in the literature: individual, organizational, institutional/systems level. Data from our interviews also suggest that IDRC staff and managers primarily talk about these three outcome areas, but data from the interview and background studies also suggest that interventions also occur through networks, as well as by the state and society. The results framework developed for this study integrates what the literature states, and what we found so that there are five outcome areas: individual, organizational, networks, institutional/state, and societal or users of the research. Additionally, findings from the previous phase identified four dominant interventions or activities used by IDRC staff to support capacity building initiatives: training, mentoring/coaching, networks/networking, face-to-face interactions. By developing this 5 by 4 matrix we are able to identify some of the possible capacity results that can occur in an IDRC-supported project. The following table presents the framework that illustrates some of the capacity results IDRC might obtain from its partners in successful capacity building initiatives.

		EDUCATION & TRAINING	MENTORING/COACHING	NETWORKS/NETWORKING	FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION	
CAPACITY BUILDING FUNDING	Individual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills • Competencies • Attitudes/Values • Personal & Professional networking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying learned research/evaluation methodologies • Using new approaches to research (gender, participatory research) • Building long-term skills through scholarship, small grant funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust improving • Receiving recognition from others • Gaining confidence in their professional work • Thinking outside the box 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking with other researchers (same field, different context) • Producing higher quality research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking advice from IDRC staff on monitoring visits • Increase interacting and networking with peers, other actors at workshops, conferences, etc. • Responding to probing questions in a sophisticated manner 	OWN SOLUTIONS TO DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS
	Organizational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Strategy • Organizational functions/systems • Relationships/Linkages between organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying financial and other HR management skills to the organizational operations • Using communications skills to influence policy, linking with other organizations • Applying knowledge from strategy sessions (SWOT) to the organization • Applying knowledge from OM to the organization (P, M & E) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using organizational learning/reflection for organizational development • Seeking advice/opinions from experts on organizational development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking with like-minded organizations • Initiating and/or participating in joint ventures with other organizations or donors • Establishing partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing/maintaining relations with IDRC • Receiving/accepting invitations to events 	
	Networks (regional/global) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governance/Leadership • Strategy • Skills • Competencies • Attitudes/Values • Personal & Professional Networking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying learned research/evaluation methodologies • Using new approaches to research (gender, participatory research) • Building long-term skills through scholarship, small grants funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer learning, mutual support among development researchers, practitioners, etc. • Establishing relationships based on trust • Receiving recognition from others • Gaining confidence in their professional work • Using organizational learning/reflection for organizational development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with others on a regional/global level • North-South collaboration and exchange among actors • Producing higher quality research • Sharing/exchanging with others within own organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with others on a regional/global level • Seeking advice and opinions from others, experts, etc. 	

C		EDUCATION & TRAINING	MENTORING/COACHING	NETWORKS/NETWORKING	FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION	O
	State/Institutional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulatory Frameworks • Policies • Conditions (context) • Receptive culture to research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using research findings/results and/or new processes to influence policies • Recognizing the need for policy/decision makers to know more about using research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking advice/opinions from experts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with policymakers & decision makers directly on the project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with policymakers/decision makers directly on the project 	
	Societal (users)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using research findings/results and/or new processes to influence policies • Recognizing the need for policy/decision makers to know more about using research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with researchers to establish relevance, use, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking with researchers, other users (lobbyists, advocates, business, public sector, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking with researchers, other users (lobbyists, advocates, business, public sector, etc.) • Influencing others to reform/change policies 	

6. Concluding Comments

Capacity building is and will remain a central feature of work in the area of international development. It is fundamental to all development activity. Unfortunately, relatively little attention has been given to creating an empirical base for understanding the results and the factors supporting the results of development agencies. To date we are trying to understand the concept as applied to idiosyncratic projects not how it is used by agencies..

Does it matter that there is no common or shared understanding of what capacity building (as a concept) is or means within an agency? Should agencies develop their specific approach to capacity building? What results should agencies expect from capacity building interventions? What are the effects on partners when there is no common or shared understanding/definition of what a capacity building result is or looks like.

To date there is little empirical work on how agencies engage in capacity building and the results they obtain. We hope over the next year we will be able to begin to build on this preliminary work and discuss what we found and how one development agency IDRC is responding.

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