

## Positive Relationship Work:

Organizational Case of Study of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) by Terri Willard

*Support and encouragement from IDRC has helped the Association for Progressive Communications face the challenges of the communications revolution.*

The partnership forged between IDRC and the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) in 1996 seemed a natural fit. APC began as a loose coalition of internet service providers seeking to give non-profit and civil society organizations in their countries access to the benefits of computer-based communications. IDRC—which has a long history of working in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) field—saw a clear affinity with APC, and an opportunity to help advance its goals.

But who could have anticipated the communications revolution that took both organizations on such an unanticipated journey? Throughout the 1990s, new technological innovations and rapidly falling costs created explosive growth in ICT use in industrialized nations—fuelling, in turn, an ICT for Development (ICT4D) movement that aimed to avoid the entrenchment of a global “digital divide” by encouraging new technologies to take root in the developing world. At conferences such as the 1996 Information Society and Development gathering in Johannesburg, and two World Summits on the Information Society; in publications such as the World Bank’s ‘Knowledge for Development’ report; and through worldwide networks, the need for equitable global access to ICTs became a theme with widespread resonance.

Change was unstoppable. Between 1996 and 2007, the number of global internet users grew from roughly 16 million to approximately 1.1 billion. Significant segments of this technological transformation occurred in the developing world: in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, massive increases in cellphone use (driven by \$25 billion in mostly private investment), continues to have implications for social and economic relations.

### Surfing the waves of change

It is against this landscape that IDRC’s relationship with APC must be seen. “The context of the relationship has been one of continuous change,” writes Terri Willard in her evaluation report.

But rather than merely *reacting* to the historic shifts around them, both organizations have emerged as leaders in their field. APC became more than just a grassroots organization, evolving into a globally-relevant voice in the debates over international communications policy. For IDRC, ICT4D has become a major focus, with the Centre assuming a role as one of the most respected supporters of research on the subject. Their journey together has provided both partners with mutual benefits and insights as they strive for equity in the new international communications environment.

In the case of APC, the numbers tell a remarkable story. APC's income, for example, grew from \$150,000 to \$3,630,000 between 1996 and 2006.

The case study report documents how such remarkable organizational shifts and growth posed significant challenges, and demanded of both organizations a high level of organizational planning, research, and management capacities. Findings also revealed little evidence that either organization was fully aware of the profound organizational challenges and changes facing the other over the ten year period. With most interactions between the organizations focused on either projects or trends in ICT4D, important conversations regarding organizational management were at times overlooked.

In the absence of an explicit discussion on organizational issues, IDRC still supported the development of organizational capacities within APC through a number of means. One of them has been the direct support of initiatives to bolster the organization's institutional and administrative strengths and to transfer skills to APC employees, and by sponsoring regional strategy and planning workshops.

## Multiple approaches to capacity building

But much of the capacity building that IDRC has encouraged within APC has come about informally—as an outgrowth of the two organizations' working relationships. IDRC has engaged APC as an *implementer* of the Centre's projects and as a *collaborator* on joint projects (e.g., through its relationship with IDRC's Bellanet Secretariat). The two have also worked together as *strategic allies* (that is, as like-minded thinkers on advocacy and planning, as exemplified in both organizations' participation in the Executive Committee of the Global Knowledge Partnership conference (GK3). IDRC and APC also have come together as *strategic partners* providing insights on the evolution of the ICT4D field through mutual participation in organizational planning meetings.

The study concludes that the multiple roles that IDRC has played in APC's development conforms to organizational analyst Mona Girgis' definition of "positive relationship work." In this type of partnership, the donor contributes to capacity building through "suggestive dialogue," and the collaboration is marked by a creative outlook, shared understandings, and mutual commitments.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, the relationship has provided avenues through which the two organizations have become "partners in learning"—challenging each other's perspectives, seeking to improve performance, and advancing the application of ICTs to further social justice and address development issues.

This does not imply that IDRC and APC have always been in complete accord. But when friction has arisen—for instance, over a perception of differing commitments to using open source software and a difference of opinions around the functioning of the multi-country Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment (GRACE) network—a history of cordiality and mutual respect has ensured the relationship's resilience. The two organizations also have differing research styles. While APC sees its primary strength as advocating for change, IDRC focuses more on generating evidence (through support of formal research) to inform advocacy. Current projects are attempting to find the complementarity between both approaches.

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<sup>1</sup> Girgis, Mona , 'The Capacity-building Paradox: Using Friendship to Build Capacity in the South', *Development in Practice*, 17:3, 353 - 366 (2007).

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One of the clearest examples where an IDRC-APC collaboration led to significant capacity building has been that of the Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM), a project undertaken by APC's Women's Networking Support Program. Arising from a mutual interest by IDRC and APC in evaluating the specific impact of ICTs on women, the GEM team distilled the experiences it gathered from field-testing, and used the results to construct a tool for evaluating the gender impacts of ICT initiatives.

With GEM, APC moved beyond its earlier mandate as an internet service provider, to develop new capacities in research and analysis. One former APC consultant told Willard that: "It (GEM) was a real fork in the road ... If you look at the capacity trajectory, the APC went from being an organization with strong technical capacities, to being an organization with the ability to manage complex, important and abstract projects."

APC defends and promotes the Internet as a powerful tool and space for promoting and facilitating social change. Concerns for ICT policy making began to emerge simultaneously from within the APC Africa network and from global networks. In 1999, IDRC stepped in to support APC's efforts to expand the emerging Internet Rights movement to Africa and Latin America, through the collection and interpretation of policy information. Working in the ICT policy arena stretched APC's capacities in multiple ways and taught both APC and IDRC important lessons regarding the importance of sequencing organizational human resource development to keep up with fast moving demands for policy advocacy.

## Looking ahead

With regard to the future—and the lessons to be built upon—the report advises that the sort of advances that occurred spontaneously in the past might be achieved in a more formal way, with organizational capacity-building strategies guided more by conscious design and discussion between both organizations.

**The International Development Research Centre (IDRC)** is a Canadian crown corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building indigenous research capacity. Because strengthening and mobilizing research capacity is a cornerstone of IDRC's work, in 2005 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation on capacity development focusing on the processes and results of IDRC support of its Southern partners. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: [www.idrc.ca/en/ev-70623-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-70623-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)