

Executive Summary

Capacity Development for Research: Strategic Evaluation

Positive Relationship Work: Organizational Case Study of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

by Terri Willard

Background

IDRC's Evaluation Unit (EU) is conducting a multi-phase strategic evaluation to investigate the Centre's contributions to the development of capacities of those with whom the Centre works. The evaluation aims to provide IDRC's own staff and managers with an intellectual framework and a useful common language to help harness the concept of capacity development and document the experiences and results the Centre has accumulated in this domain. Specifically, it focuses on the processes and results of IDRC support for the development of capacities of its southern partners: what capacities have been enhanced? Whose? How? How effectively?

Phase 4 of the strategic evaluation focuses on the elaboration of six organizational case studies intended to help the Centre better understand how it can best plan for, implement, and evaluate support for its partners' capacity development.

Research for Development Context

The Association for Progressive Communications (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's long history of work in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) field pointed to a clear affinity between the two organizations, and was a chief reason IDRC began supporting APC in 1996.



APC's mission is to support and empower organisations, social movements and individuals in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The background and context of the two organizations' relationship is one of dynamic and continuous change. 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.

Despite the dot-com bust of 2000, the availability of cheap fibre-optic capacity already in place ensured that change was unstoppable. Between 1996 and 2007, the number of global internet users grew from roughly 16 million to approximately 1,993 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 massive implications for social and economic relations.

This process of rapid growth was also mirrored within APC—its income, for example, grew from \$150,000 in 1996 to \$3,630,000 in 2006. In addition to this formidable growth, the communications revolution brought to both APC and IDRC a transformation of the organizations’ roles and scope of expertise. APC evolved from being solely a grassroots organization (concerned mostly with technical issues

involved with providing connectivity to its members), to become a globally relevant voice in the debates over international communications policy. Similarly, ICT4D has become a major focus for IDRC, with the Centre assuming a role as one of the most respected supporters of research on the subject.

These increases in size and shifts in roles have demanded that both organizations achieve higher levels of organizational planning, research, and management capacities. Those are significant challenges, which had major impacts on the IDRC-APC relationship over the ten year period scrutinized in this report. Both organizations have attained mutual benefits and insights as they strive for equity in the new international communications environment.

Expectations and capacity development strategies

Throughout the case study period, IDRC explicitly has sought to build the institutional capacity of the APC both as a network and an organization. This has been attempted through a combination of grants for project implementation, for collaboration, and specifically for institutional strengthening, and through the development of positive peer relationships between key staff of the two organizations. Largely, the APC-IDRC approach to capacity building has been an informal one, where the relationships—characterized by a spirit of professional

friendship—have been the key determinant of how capacity building has been possible and successful.

One major effort to support institutional strengthening within APC was IDRC's contribution to the APC Women's Network (WNSP), administered through the Centre's 'Gender and IT' and 'Lessons Learned' projects. Aimed partly at enabling WNSP to develop mechanisms for financial sustainability, this support led to the creation of three regional and national women's programs (which now attract funding from a range of agencies), and the creation of the Gender Evaluation Methodology (GEM) gender analysis tool, which has become the basis of workshops offered to international organizations, and which now serves as a

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source of income for WNSP. Support for APC's African Network similarly contributed to the development of a strategic framework designed to keep those networks in business. Support for APC Latin America network enabled APC to hold workshops on business practices and to develop a business toolkit with applications in areas such as revenue generation and organization. IDRC's INSPRO project has also focused on organizational capacities including financial and personnel management.

In addition, IDRC has made targeted contributions aimed at developing APC's research capacities. In 1999, for example, 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.

However, much of the capacity development that IDRC has encouraged within APC has come about informally—as an outgrowth of the two organizations' working relationships. The two organizations have joined forces in several distinct ways. IDRC has engaged APC as an *implementer* of the Centre's projects, and as a *collaborator* on joint projects (e.g., through their relationship with Bellanet). IDRC and APC have also worked together as *strategic allies* (that is, as like-minded thinkers on advocacy and planning, as exemplified by both organizations' participation in the Executive Committee of the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP3). The organizations have also come together as strategic partners in providing insights on the evolution of the ICT4D field through mutual participation in organizational planning meetings. All aspects of the relationship have served to support the two organizations to become "partners in learning," challenging each others' perspectives and advancing the field of ICT4D.

The study asserts that the multiple roles 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.

APC has interacted with several divisions of IDRC: the ICT4D program area, the evaluation unit, and the Special Initiatives Division.

Major findings

The relationship that has emerged between APC and IDRC has been complex and multifaceted. Although contact between key staff of the two organizations has generally been characterised by mutual respect and cordiality, there have also been complications arising largely as a result of challenging circumstances exerting pressure on the relationship. For example, the rapid pace of change in the ICT field (described earlier) sometimes made it difficult to anticipate events and plan proactively. Major internal reorganizations within both organizations also led to some confusion and made it difficult, at times, for the organizations to communicate clearly and directly. Inevitable differences of approach and opinion have also arisen: for example, over issues such as the organizations’ respective commitments to open source software, and over the functioning of APC’s multi-country Gender Research in Africa into ICTs for Empowerment (GRACE) network.

Overall, the report found that the relationship between IDRC and APC was at its best when certain key conditions were in place. For example, with respect to the capacity development process, it was observed that:

- An understanding of a peer to peer relationship is essential. IDRC teams should consciously engage in strategic discussions with partners as equals about new developments in their field, about research planning; and about organizational capacity.
- Building and maintaining a relationship during a period of continuous external and internal change pushes the limits of an informal approach to capacity building. However, such an approach can yield positive results so long as open and honest communications between the two organizations is maintained.
- Communications must not only cover substantive issues (projects and trends in the field of work), but also explore organizational priorities and management, on both sides.

Meanwhile, with respect to institutional strengthening, it is clear that individual IDRC project support—together with a specific institutional strengthening grant (INSPRO)—have contributed to key elements of APC organizational capacity. The McKinsey Capacity Assessment Framework proposes that there are seven closely inter-related elements—aspirations, strategies, organizational skills, human resources,

systems and infrastructure, organizational structure, and culture—that constitute “capacity” in a non-profit organization.

Following this model, it becomes apparent that IDRC has helped to influence APC’s

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aspirations (vision, mission); to assist with strategies (for leadership and financing); to build organizational skills (particularly in the area of performance evaluation); to support human resource development (enabling, through project funding, an increase in staffing), and to strengthen systems and infrastructure (direct and solid support through an institutional strengthening grant). Regarding the remaining elements in the McKinsey framework, organizational structure and culture, the study found no evidence of IDRC contribution, although clearly the two organizations share many cultural values and reinforce those through the positive peer relationships.

Other principal observations in relation to institutional strengthening are that:

- There is a need for more engagement (needs assessment, capacities existing and gaps) and mentoring on organizational capacity during the planning phase of a specific capacity building and institutional support investment.
- There should be a differentiation between the purpose of core funding (supporting existing systems) and institutional capacity building (requiring the investment of staff time to develop and implement new systems and procedures).
- Institutional strengthening grants cannot necessarily resolve challenges with specific projects, particularly where value differences may be at the root of conflict.
- The peer to peer relationship should be encouraged to include discussion of organizational management issues, not just substantive issues. The opportunity for such discussion was particularly valued by APC.

The issue of research capacity is complicated by the fact that IDRC’s outlook changed over the course of the relationship. During the study period, 1996 to 2006, there was a shift in the IDRC ICT4D program from research through experimentation towards more formalized research with a policy agenda. This shift impacted on the expectations of IDRC for research performance by APC.

Of particular note is the finding that, with the exception of the Gender Evaluation Methodology work, IDRC has not funded APC to undertake research. It is therefore difficult for IDRC, and this study, to comment upon APC's capacity to conduct research, and whether and how that has been strengthened through IDRC's interventions.

Investments have more specifically been made in project design and management, in three discrete areas of shared interest: women / gender and ICTs; community networking; and ICT policy. The study identifies several areas where existing capacity for project management, network building and knowledge generation and brokering was strengthened through IDRC project investments and collaboration:

- Understanding how to evaluate women's involvement in ICT4D
- Creating innovation in community connectivity, strategic uses of ICTs by civil society, networking and collaboration
- Building civil society awareness and engagement in ICT policy issues as they affect social justice and human development.

The study also identifies a number of circumstances in which existing capacity can be undermined rather than strengthened, through:

- Mandated collaborations on projects
- Conflicts over values in research project management

- Misalignment of research approaches (between academic and practitioner research) and capacity building methodologies
- A lack of attention to the multi-skilled nature of ICT4D project management, and an overlooking of opportunities to build that capacity

This survey of both positive and negative outcomes in the IDRC-APC relationship during the study period underscores three primary areas where there are lessons (which may be helpful in building a capacity development component into future relationships):

1. Living up to good practices: IDRC is currently developing a list of good practices for capacity building. In applying these practices to the APC relationship, IDRC has demonstrated persistence in sustaining the relationship for 10 years; flexibility with funding; resilience in spite of periods of miscommunication and differences of opinion; relationship building through working side by side on projects; mutually strengthening strategic intelligence in the ICT4D field; and has built on existing capacity. In the good practice area of ensuring a locally driven agenda, there is some divergence between IDRC's embracing of the more economics-motivated ICT4D agenda, and APC's grounding in the social justice and rights movements.

2. Positive relationship work: The Girgis model includes three key instruments for relationship work: negotiation, suggestive dialogue and helping. The study shows a slight trend within IDRC away from dialogue

and helping to more structured negotiations around APC's capacities and roles as an IDRC partner. Whether this is a cause or an outcome of areas of conflict in recent years is unclear. However, APC indicates a strong desire to offset the negotiating approach with an increase in dialogue and helping. In terms of Girgis' ideal attributes, the study confirms that where these have been present in IDRC—i.e. sensitivity, creativity, shared understanding and commitment—APC's capacities have flourished.

3. Challenges facing IDRC: IDRC may need to consider the following as it shifts towards a more explicit focus on organizational capacity building: Conscious investment in capacities can lead to results; IDRC should strengthen its understanding of what constitutes "organizational capacities"; IDRC needs to be more conscious of the difference between supporting an organization to achieve its own goals versus supporting an organization to achieve IDRC's goals; challenges in a relationship may be related more to communications gaps between the organizations rather than capacity limitations on the part of one or the other; brokering relationships between partners in order to build capacity of one or the other or both carries real risks of conflict, and failure must be recognized as a possible outcome; IDRC needs to promote opportunities that it can provide for individual capacity development as part of institutional capacity building; and finally, IDRC needs to be more aware of potential underfunding of project management costs in budgets, where lack of such funds has the potential to adversely affect capacity to deliver on projects.

Looking ahead

One key challenge for this case study was As IDRC decides how to take organizational capacity building forward, it may wish to consider doing the following:

1. **Expand the IDRC Good Practices framework to incorporate more elements of the Girgis framework.**
2. **Provide opportunities within IDRC to reflect on organizational relationships and relationship management.**
3. **Ensure that IDRC staff working on capacity building of an organization have the seniority to work with the senior levels of the partner organization.**
4. **Undertake the mapping and network analysis of organizations active in a research field** in order to select keystone organizations important to the advancement of a field; and to understand how IDRC's support for other organizations may impact on key partners.
5. **Build the capacity of IDRC staff to understand and apply appropriate organizational capacity frameworks according to the needs of the partner organization.**
6. **Improve IDRC's understanding of research capacity to include the full "Mapping Research Capacity" framework**, which identifies abilities to conduct research; to manage research activities; to conceive,

generate and sustain research in a sector; to use research outcomes in policy or practice; and to mobilize research-related policy and program “systems” thinking. The study reveals that the last two areas are frequently overlooked by IDRC staff, although they are central to the discussion of APC’s capacity for research dissemination and systemic change through policy advocacy.

7. **Improve IDRC’s own organizational memory and transparency** in order to understand how IDRC’s own corporate

culture and organizational history can impact its relationship with partners and to share its strategic plans with partners to ensure that they understand how these may impact the relationship in the future.

8. **Continue to promote the fundamental values underlying positive relationship work** – Sensitivity, creativity, shared understanding and commitment.

Methodology

This report, written by Terri Willard of the International Institute for Sustainable Development, explores IDRC support for the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) between 1996 and 2006. The study is based on a review of documentation and key informant interviews, with significant consultation with both IDRC and APC staff on the draft findings. Externalities during the review period that impacted the relationships are also explored, in particular rapid changes in the field of information and communications technology for development (ICT4D), and significant structural and leadership changes at both organizations. Three analytical frameworks have been used in the study: the Girgis framework for assessing individual relationship work as the basis for capacity building; the McKinsey “Capacity Assessment Framework” for assessing the institutional structure and skills of non-profit organizations; and the “Mapping Research Capacity” framework developed by Anne Bernard. Two major areas of strengthening are reviewed: APC’s institutional capacity to achieve its mission; and APC’s capacity to contribute research into the field of ICT4D.

One limitation is that the study did not take into consideration the impact of core funding sourced by APC from other donors that may have created an enabling environment for the relationship work between IDRC and APC, or the types of capacity building that may have occurred through relationships with other donors and organizations. The study therefore cannot be construed as a review of what has been most or least effective overall in building APC’s capacity.