IDRC ✳ CRDI

Executive Summary
Capacity Development for Research: Strategic Evaluation

Cross-Case Study Analysis

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Background

IDRC is mandated to "to initiate, encourage, support and conduct research into the problems of developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions" (*IDRC Act* 1970). As part of this mandate, IDRC seeks "to assist the developing regions to build up the research capabilities, the innovative skills and the institutions required to solve problems" (ibid).

Since capacity development constitutes a fundamental aspect of all IDRC work, IDRC's Evaluation Unit is conducting a strategic evaluation to investigate the Centre's contributions to the development of capacities of partners with whom the Centre works. The evaluation aims to provide IDRC's own staff and managers with an intellectual framework and common language to help harness the concept and document the experiences and results that the Centre has accumulated in this domain. Specifically, the strategic evaluation focuses on the intentions, processes and results of IDRC support for the development of

capacities of its southern partners – what capacities have been enhanced, whose, how, and how effectively.

Phase 4 or the strategic evaluation focuses on the elaboration of six organizational case studies undertaken with partner institutions. The six case studies selected by IDRC's Evaluation Unit include:

- The Association for Progressive Communications (global)

- Cheikh Anta Diop University, Senegal

- The Consortium for Economic and Social Research, Peru

- International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), (global)

- Makerere University, Uganda

- Ministry of Environment, Cambodia

The case studies have been chosen as a purposeful sample using maximum variation in order to capture how IDRC's sustained support contributes to capacity development at the individual/group, organizational and network levels in the field. The studies examine different types of organizations

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in different geographic regions and with diverse sectoral concentration, which have received significant IDRC support over the last ten years.

The purpose of this analysis is to review the studies and some of the key outputs produced to date to identify patterns or trends between the documents, with a particular emphasis on the six organizational case studies. The learning that is derived from these studies of IDRC's support for capacity development in practice is also intended to support the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of IDRC's future capacity development projects and activities.

Major Conclusions and Recommendations Derived from the Case Studies

Although the case studies do not, nor were they intended to, capture and convey the full spectrum of IDRC's efforts and experiences in supporting capacity development among its Southern partners, there are a number of possible conclusions and recommendations that can be drawn from a comparative analysis of these studies:

Capacity development is fundamental to all IDRC work but is often not made explicit. Whereas formal capacity development activities, such as training, awards programs, seminars and conferences constitute the more visible, tangible and explicit side of IDRC' s support of capacity development, much of IDRC's

capacity development remains largely implicit in the sense that it has not been captured in IDRC documentation. The findings suggest a number of reasons for this:

1. IDRC staff have an often-limited understanding of what constitutes capacity development and how to operationalize it, particularly at the organizational level;

2. IDRC's institutional structure and program orientation along thematic research lines means that the explicit emphasis of most projects is more on the research problem than on capacity development;

3. IDRC's approach to capacity development is often informal, characterized by on-going peer exchange and mentorship between IDRC program staff and researchers that is not easily documented, or otherwise captured in project documentation; and,

4. IDRC program staff are aware of the sensitive nature of capacity development work and the kind of top-down, hierarchical relationship often implied by the language of "capacity development" and as such are often careful to avoid this language.

While partners praise IDRC's less formal, hands-on approach to capacity development, there is some agreement that the Centre ought to be more explicit and transparent about its capacity development intentions

and expectations both to ensure that IDRC and its partners have a shared vision when it comes to capacity development and that all capacity development retains a measure of local ownership.

While IDRC's support for capacity development targets the full spectrum of research capacity, it focuses more on "research supply" than "research demand". Given IDRC's historical emphasis on developing capacities that target "research supply", findings from the case studies reveal that IDRC has paid closer attention to strengthening the capacities of organizations to conduct and manage research, with comparatively fewer results in strengthening partners' capacities to use research results and to create or mobilize research links to systemic policy formation or change. While it is clear that IDRC is increasingly committed to ensuring that IDRC-supported research influences policy, the case studies suggest that IDRC is still in the process of defining and working through these aspects of capacity development. As such, the Centre`s support of partners along these lines has not progressed as far as it has in other capacity areas. Evidence across the cases suggests that there is a strong demand by partners for IDRC to invest more intensively and systematically support capacity development in these areas to ensure that research becomes more relevant, appropriate and accessible to a diversity of potential research users (including policymakers, the private sector, civil society, local communities etc).

In practice, IDRC's capacity development support focuses more on individuals than organizations or institutions. Although IDRC has sometimes explicitly targeted its support for capacity development at the organizational or institutional level, the case studies suggest that IDRC, first and foremost, seeks to develop the capacities of individual researchers and their research teams. There is also considerable agreement among the case studies that IDRC's approach to capacity development – working along problem or thematic lines, at the level of individual research projects, with individual researchers and their research teams – is what IDRC does best, and is what distinguishes the Centre from other donors. IDRC has a long established history of nurturing close working relationships with individual researchers and/or research teams with the intent of building research capacities as a means to strengthen the quality, relevance and use of research to solve local and regional development problems.

IDRC's informal approach to capacity development is the Centre's "niche". While "hard" technical capacities are perhaps more commonly addressed through concrete investments in specific capacity development interventions, IDRC support for capacity development is defined by developing and nurturing professional peer relationships between IDRC and its partners that are of a more informal, implicit nature. Both IDRC staff and IDRC partners share the perspective that IDRC's greatest strength, and what sets it apart from other

international development donors, is its commitment to establishing and maintaining professional peer relationships with partners. Through peer-to-peer exchange and mentoring, Centre staff and managers are able to share a program initiative's range of experience and expertise with individual researchers and research teams in a context of "mutual learning." This compliments, but also far exceeds, the benefits of isolated, "one-off training sessions". Throughout the project cycle, IDRC program officers (POs) function as "advisors" or "mentors" during the conceptual and methodological development of project concept papers and proposals, during project implementation (including data analysis and interpretation), and/or in the writing and dissemination of research results.

Interestingly, peer exchange between IDRC program staff and partners is not only "one way" but, rather, is characterized by mutual learning in the sense that the capacities of IDRC programs are also strengthened through its work with partners. Understanding that programs do not always have sufficient time and human resources to address the capacity needs of partners, IDRC POs also function as "facilitators", encouraging peer-to-peer networking between researchers/teams working in similar thematic areas and/or experimenting with common research approaches (such as participatory research).

The strategic value of regional offices and staff is high. Given IDRC's preferred approach to capacity development, the regional specificity of development problems and the external environment in which partner organizations must conduct research, the case studies highlight the critical importance and value of IDRC regional offices and staff for capacity development. IDRC's regional approach enables POs to develop a more extensive and immediate working knowledge of development challenges and of the environment in which partner organizations are situated. This often facilitates stronger and more productive peer relationships between POs and researchers than is possible through electronic communication and field visits from POs based in Ottawa. The findings also suggest that there may be aspects of capacity development for which regional offices and program staff are particularly well suited. For example, given the local knowledge of regional POs, particularly with respect to locally defined policy engagement processes, they may be ideally placed to scope out options and solutions for closing the gap between research supply and research demand.

IDRC's support for organizational capacity development has been strategic and selective. Findings from the case studies suggest that IDRC does not support organizational capacity development equally with all partners. Since organizational capacity development involves the development and implementation of new systems and procedures, and usually

requires the dedication of considerable human and financial resources to be successful, it is understandable that the Centre's support for organizational capacity development is strategic and selective.

From the case studies, it appears that whether, and the extent to which IDRC supports organizational development depends considerably on the institutional structure of partner organizations and partner's organizational capacity needs. Where institutions are "loosely coupled" (as with universities composed of different departments working in very different research areas), IDRC targets its support at the level of individual research teams (and their departments) since support for capacity development at the institutional level would not likely produce outcomes that would "trickle-down" to individual departments and/or research teams. However, IDRC does support organizational level capacity development in networks that, while "loosely coupled" in some respects, share a thematic research focus and are often characterized by joint, coordinated projects.

In the case of networks, IDRC targets its support to strengthening the administrative and coordinating functions of networks as a means to improve overall effectiveness and the quality of the research being produced. At the same time, it appears that IDRC strategically invests in organizational capacity development with newly emerging institutions (where the Centre is in a position to influence the direction and mandate of the organization), or with organizations that may be well-positioned to influence policy

through research, but whose capacities to conduct research require strengthening.

To ensure that IDRC's limited resources are optimized, as well as to ensure transparency and fairness, it is important that IDRC make explicit (and perhaps formalize) the criteria, factors and considerations that drive its decision-making to support organizational capacity development with particular partner organizations (and not others).

Capacity development—particularly at the organizational level—requires a more explicit, clearly-defined capacity development framework or set of policies. While an implicit approach to capacity development may be well suited to particular partners and the development of particular capacities, organizational capacity development requires a coherent and explicit capacity development framework. The case study findings support early evidence in the strategic evaluation that suggested a need for a set of institution-wide frameworks or set of policies to guide the Centre's approach to, and investments in, capacity development. Such frameworks or set of policies would provide a useful starting point for enhancing the capacity of Centre staff to understand the needs of individual partner organizations. Moreover, a set of institution-wide capacity development policies would help to ensure that there is consistency, across programs, in support for capacity development and help PI`s structure their efforts to monitor and evaluate capacity development progress and outcomes. Importantly, this need not function as a straightjacket, but rather as

a comprehensive framework building on the "IDRC's Good Practices for Capacity Development" and the Research-into Use framework (Bernard, 2005), which serve to guide and inspire, rather than dictate.

Organizational capacity development requires rigorous organizational assessment. As part of a more explicit organizational capacity development strategy, the case study findings suggest that the Centre requires a more formal and systematic approach to organizational assessment. Tools for organizational assessment enable IDRC program staff, in collaboration with partners, to identify (and perhaps prioritize) capacity needs and wants during the planning stages of a project. Organizational capacity assessment makes it possible to more effectively target capacity development support and to monitor and assess an organization's performance. This kind of assessment would not be a one-time, stand-alone exercise but rather an iterative and on-going process with partners.

IDRC can't do it all. Whether IDRC wishes to concentrate its capacity development efforts to research capacity building at the level of individual researchers and project teams (which is considered by most consulted in the strategic evaluation to be IDRC's niche and comparative advantage) or to develop a more explicit (and perhaps expanded) organizational capacity development framework and strategy with partners, no donor can address all the capacity development needs of an organization. Given that IDRC has a history and reputation for working well, in collaboration with other donors, IDRC might consider coordinating more intensively with other donors in ways that support the development of "complete capacity" of individual organizations. One study suggested the potential benefit of a "forum of donors" to encourage the kinds of collaboration, harmonization and synergy that come with a more coordinated approach to organizational capacity development (UCAD Study 2008). Such an approach would not only improve the outcomes of capacity development interventions, but would do so in a way that complements and furthers IDRC's capacity development goals beyond what the Centre could achieve on its own.

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