

IDRC's Contributions to Building Emerging Research for Development Leaders

Summary Brief

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) commissioned the Institute of International Education (IIE) to carry out a comprehensive evaluation to inform its second strategic objective—*Building the Leaders for Today and Tomorrow*—and to evaluate IDRC's investments in strengthening the capacity of graduate students and early-career researchers to be leaders in their fields. This Summary Brief provides a high-level overview on the ways in which IDRC supports leadership, contributions to individual leadership development and project-level outcomes, and considerations for future programming.

Evaluation Overview

The purpose of the evaluation was threefold: (1) evaluate the strategies used in IDRC's programming and analyze how the interventions have contributed to the career pathways of awardees and grantees; (2) assess the effectiveness of IDRC's award programs and grants, including their considerations on gender and social equity; and (3) identify lessons learned regarding the success of leadership programs. For the purposes of the evaluation, IDRC defined categories for projects with strategies designed to build research for development (R4D) and leadership skills among emerging leaders:

- **Awards projects for individuals** offered fellowships, scholarships, or training opportunities to individual graduate students and early-career researchers, whether as part of a degree program or as a separate program of capacity-building.
- **Embedded projects** refer to research projects with embedded strategies demonstrating a clear intention to build research or leadership capacities of emerging research leaders.

IIE completed a cross-project evaluation, examining the capacity and leadership outcomes for individuals in terms of both technical and leadership skills. IIE reviewed 75 projects, received 934 survey responses (51% response rate from 1,825 alumni surveyed), and conducted interviews or focus groups with 38 IDRC staff, project alumni, representatives of collaborating organizations,¹ and external experts. Alumni respondents were from 102 countries (48% female, 51% male); 73% have remained in their region of origin since their IDRC-sponsored project.

Key Findings

Defining Good Leaders

Respondents shared common values and language for characteristics of being a good R4D leader, emphasizing the value of an inclusive, collaborative approach. Alumni respondents selected characteristics including decision-making capabilities (40%), accountability (28%), ability to empower

¹ Collaborating organizations are organizations that received grants from IDRC, in this case for capacity-building and leadership development of emerging-researcher projects.

others (28%), ability to inspire others (25%), and being inclusive and participatory (20%). When asked in the qualitative research, interviewees shared similar language; in addition to having expertise in their fields, a good leader should be “visionary,” an active listener, and a strong communicator; empower others; and work “collaboratively” and inclusively with a diverse team.

The qualitative research revealed alumni emphasized the value of an inclusive approach to effectively address complex, deeply rooted development issues and the importance of sharing leadership responsibilities according to each individual’s expertise and capacities. In the survey, almost 95% of alumni respondents considered building partnerships or networks to be important or critically important.

IDRC’s Contributions to Building Emerging Leaders

Corporate policies and initiatives. The objective *Building Leaders for Today and Tomorrow*, outlined in IDRC’s 2015-2020 Strategic Plan, put a spotlight on leadership development. Although projects may have incorporated some level of capacity-building and leadership development previously, this focus provided additional space to explore and expand the ways in which they were addressed. IDRC’s approach to building trusting, respectful relationships with collaborating organizations framed the way in which the projects were designed, encouraging a learning environment where ideas for projects emerged through meaningful, evidence-based dialogue.

Equitable practices and inclusion. IDRC has placed particular emphasis in recent years on equality, inclusion, and intersectionality. Alumni respondents were extremely positive about the stages of their IDRC-supported experience being fair and equitable (61% selected “yes, definitely”). However, in the 11 projects reviewed in qualitative analysis, the selection criteria for only one specified that a small subgroup come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Based on the qualitative research, some IDRC leadership development projects, such as the South Asian Water (SAWA) Leadership Program on Climate Change, were designed with a gender-transformative lens. More than 20% of alumni respondents participated in trainings and workshops focused on gender analysis.

IDRC-Supported Capacity-Building Activities

IDRC-supported projects were multifaceted, offering a range of academic and experiential activities that went beyond providing funding. The vast majority of survey respondents (97%) indicated participating in at least one activity as part of their IDRC-supported experience. On average, respondents reported participating in five to six activities and one-third (35%) participated in more than six activities. The majority of alumni respondents participated in or presented at a conference or participated in fieldwork or technical skills trainings.

Trainings. Survey respondents who indicated that they participated in a technical skills training or workshop (50%) said the focus was mostly on research methods (85%) and statistical analysis (57%). A smaller proportion of alumni respondents reported soft skills trainings (24%). Of these, two-thirds of respondents indicated having received training related to effective communications skills (68%), with smaller groups reporting working in teams (62%) and problem-solving (50%).

Follow-up Activities. A constant challenge for leadership development programs is providing continued connection and support to alumni. In the case of these 75 IDRC-supported projects, the majority (61%) of respondents participated in some form of follow-up activities, highlighting the sustained commitment of IDRC, collaborating partners, and alumni. Follow-up participation has increased in recent years.

Professional Development and Skills Acquisition

A vast majority of alumni respondents (91%) agreed that IDRC had made a positive contribution to their careers. Nine out of ten alumni (89%) indicated that their IDRC opportunity allowed them to network, particularly at conferences and through their technical trainings. Respondents reflected more specifically on their IDRC-supported experience contributing to their awareness of research- and policy-related knowledge that was critical for their work and study. One of the most unique findings was that engaging with research users led to positive effects in research and policy awareness.

Commitment and capacity for social change. Arising from the qualitative research, the evaluation found that many alumni emerged from their IDRC-supported experience with a stronger commitment to affect social change. Many also felt participating in the IDRC-supported experience increased their level of prestige and the outputs they produced increased their confidence and provided evidence of their capabilities. Some mentioned the importance of working with a diverse or multisectoral team. Others mentioned the uniqueness for them in participating in a project spanning a number of countries.

Research Quality Plus (RQ+) skills. RQ+ frames what IDRC most values in high-quality research: research integrity, research importance, research legitimacy, and positioning research for use. Most alumni respondents indicated acquiring skills across all four RQ+ dimensions, with the most related to research integrity and research importance. There were no differences by gender. Again, when alumni worked directly with research users, they indicated higher rates of acquiring RQ+ skills in all dimensions. Likewise, alumni in focus groups often cited their IDRC-supported experience as a significant influence on their perspectives related to positioning research for use, saying that their approach to research shifted or expanded to think about the purpose of the research and in turn how research was designed and conducted.

Leadership skills. IDRC-supported activities were critical to leadership skills acquisition. All four categories of leadership skills²—thinking strategically, communicating effectively, driving results, and motivating others—were strongly linked to activities offered by IDRC projects. Engaging with research users continued to show a significant increase across all four categories. Those respondents who participated in fieldwork were more likely to indicate leadership acquisition in strategic thinking and effective communication than others. Respondents who participated in technical skills trainings or workshops also indicated higher leadership skills acquisition.

Networks and personal connections. Alumni, IDRC staff, collaborating organizations, and external experts all agreed that building individual leaders is critical, and not enough on its own. Alumni in focus groups stressed the importance of the personal connections they made during their IDRC-supported experience and how these connections influenced their abilities to be leaders in their fields. The projects were often designed to ensure regular in-person connections among individuals who are already leaders in a range of fields and peers in their cohorts who are from similar and different backgrounds. All alumni interviewed had worked with mentors and most felt deeply connected to them, although a few were disappointed that their mentors were not able to be more available. Many have stayed in contact with peers and mentors; a few mentioning they feel less alone when facing challenging issues with the support of their network. Similar to the survey

² IIE developed its Leadership Matrix in 2015 to measure leadership change and attributes among participants in programs with a leadership component or focus. The Matrix consists of four major categories and sixteen items; in a self-assessment, alumni respondents rated their own competencies related to these skills.

responses, many alumni interviewed felt their IDRC-supported experience provided opportunities to enhance and expand their professional and peer networks.

Professional Trajectories and Leadership

IDRC-supported projects, for most respondents, positively contributed to obtaining work in their field of expertise (87%) and completing their studies (87%). An overwhelming 97% of alumni respondents agreed that their IDRC opportunity enhanced their resume. In the qualitative research, some alumni emphasized the importance of the practical experience and knowledge products for building concrete evidence of their capacities in helping them to attain employment and legitimacy.

When looking at types of leadership positions, half of all alumni respondents (50%) indicated that they have a leadership or senior management position in their work, advising on policy, conducting targeted research on pressing development issues, and teaching in universities, among other roles. Since professional advancement takes time and this study focused on graduate students and early-career researchers, it is not surprising that there was a significant difference by cohort end year, indicating that alumni respondents from earlier cohorts were more likely to be in leadership positions than more recent recipients.

Many survey respondents shared their specific positions, mostly in policy and academia, with some working with the government to help shape policy. Others influence policy by heading an organization, heading a department, leading a research team that is conducting advocacy, or working in communications and journalism. Others work as managers of organizations or departments. A few mentioned leading particular efforts within their workplace, such as a departmental strategy and training efforts. In their current work, alumni capitalized on their skills honed during their IDRC-supported experience. More than half of the respondents indicated that they engaged in activities such as drafting research findings, data collection, quantitative analysis, and qualitative analysis.

Alumni have also been recognized as leaders through awards. Of 934 survey respondents, 112 reported winning awards. These included scholarships, fellowships, research grants, travel grants, best publications, best researcher awards, sustainability awards, leadership awards, awards for best paper and presentation or poster at a conference, and other prizes in various fields from prestigious national and international organizations.

Knowledge Products and Sharing

Alumni respondents have generated high-quality research and shared that knowledge to inform decision-making. Since their IDRC-supported experience, the majority of alumni have had the opportunity to share their research and expertise by speaking at conferences (67%), publishing in academic journals (60%), or organizing research workshops or seminars (50%). Many alumni are also committed to “paying it forward” by sharing their expertise with today’s emerging leaders.

Knowledge footprint. Alumni respondents shared their knowledge through production of a total of 15,135 products. These products included conference presentations (27%), peer-reviewed journal articles (20%), and workshops or seminars (19%). Respondents participated in 2,044 new research projects and led 1,169 of them. Since their IDRC-supported project, alumni respondents garnered CAD 94,694,363 in additional research funding.

Teaching and mentoring. Sharing their knowledge and encouraging the next generation of potential emerging leaders was a clear value for many alumni respondents. More than half of alumni respondents (55%) indicated that they had been involved in teaching or advising, working with a total of 53,349 students since their IDRC-supported experience. According to the qualitative

research, the IDRC-supported experience inspired alumni to share their knowledge with others in their field, putting into practice the characteristic of inspiration they identified for a good leader.

Drafting and advocating for policies. IDRC highly values bringing research to use as part of high-quality R4D, of which one aspect is influencing policy change. According to the survey, approximately 112 (12%) respondents reported having influenced approximately 250 policies at the local, national, and international levels. Some indicated drafting policies for their governments on local or national issues. Others participated in policy-drafting processes for their organizations, including agencies within the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations. As expected, time was a significant factor, with respondents from earlier cohorts reporting more policy influence than their more recent counterparts.

Conclusions and Considerations

How did IDRC design activities and strategies to support leadership development among its awardees and grantees?

This project was an evaluation of IDRC's efforts to build emerging leaders as a contribution to achieving its strategic objective of *Building Leaders for Today and Tomorrow*. Although a few projects annually reviewed their objectives and designs after 2015 as part of their renewal process, most projects in the study were designed prior to the articulation of this objective. This was purposefully determined so that alumni would have had at least two years since completing their IDRC-supported experience to provide a more accurate picture of the influences and contributions of these projects on their work moving forward. It is a testament to IDRC staff's ability to keep the organization's core values at the center of its programming that the results of this study are aligned with the strategic objective and are similar across program types and cultural contexts. Similarly, the organization's definition of thought leaders and evaluation participant's definition of a good leader include similar concepts, such as being an expert in their field and one who empowers and inspires others. Evaluation participants went further to say that a good leader is someone who is visionary, collaborative, inclusive, participatory, and works well with a diverse team.

IDRC's emergent and responsive approach facilitated building respectful, trusting relationships with collaborating organizations. The corporate strategic objective provided space for exploration and innovation to address leadership building within evolving development issues.

IDRC also supported leadership development by employing fair and equitable practices throughout the project cycle. Most projects studied in the qualitative research employed a gender lens, which encourage and supported women who are often underrepresented in scientific fields. Although a quarter of the alumni respondents identified as being part of at least one marginalized group, the 11 projects studied in the qualitative research revealed minimal intentional and targeted inclusion and support for researchers from marginalized or disadvantaged groups. This finding is both contrary to IDRC's value of equity, inclusion, and intersectionality and lacking support for potential emerging leaders who could contribute a perspective to their field that is grounded in their life experiences.

How effective have IDRC programs been in contributing to building leadership among their awardees and grantees?

IDRC-supported experiences have been effective in contributing to building leadership among participants from around the globe and across research fields. IDRC provided a unique opportunity for alumni by offering critical technical and leadership skills through academic and practical learning activities. Half of alumni respondents acquired technical skills that helped them hone their expertise

in their fields, particularly skills related to research methods, statistical analysis, and the RQ+ dimensions of research integrity and research importance. A quarter of respondents acquired soft skills, most frequently communications skills, working in teams and problem-solving. Interestingly, working directly with research users was an effective design component that significantly increased the number of alumni who acquired skills.

What contribution did the programs' leadership-building components have on awardees and grantees in their careers?

Alumni have translated their IDRC-supported experiences into significant catalysts for directing and boosting their careers. In fact, 87% said their IDRC-supported experience contributed to their obtaining work in their field. The IDRC-supported experience contributed to alumni shifting or solidifying their focus from themselves to the greater good, demonstrated through incorporating into their work research for purpose, inclusion of diverse and community inputs, and mentoring. They are using an evidence-based approach learned through their IDRC-experience to tackle development issues across sectors and fields. And alumni attributed to their IDRC-experience a strengthening of their commitment to addressing development challenges.

Building on what they gained from their IDRC-supported experience, alumni demonstrated concrete success. The majority of alumni were employed; most in the public sector, which includes universities. Half of all alumni said they were currently in leadership or senior management positions. Of those not employed, most were pursuing further education. In addition, alumni were able to generate and share a vast number of outputs since completing their IDRC-supported experience. They have generated 15,135 knowledge products, led 1,169 new research projects with CAD 94,694,363 in funding, taught 53,349 students, and influenced about 250 local, national, and international policies. While working with research users was quite indicative of higher rates of skills acquisition, time rather than specific activities most significantly affected higher output rates.

What can we learn from IDRC's award programs and grants?

- Strength of common understanding and core values led to consistent corporate outcomes
- Respectful, trusting, collaborative long-lasting personal connections are critical for personal and professional support, counteracting isolation and encouraging motivation in intense contexts
- The combination of practical and academic activities was unique to IDRC and critical for high-quality learning
- Working with research users significantly increased the number of alumni acquiring technical and leadership skills
- Inclusion and intersectionality are articulated values that, according to the qualitative research, were minimally integrated into project designs when related to marginalized or disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds
- Gender issues were somewhat integrated into the project designs of the qualitative research projects, although there were further areas for improvement
- Time was the most significant factor in alumni advancing to leadership positions and generating knowledge products, indicating that the individualized project designs were relevant for each context and that those selected to participate were well prepared to become R4D leaders given sufficient time to develop their careers, conduct research and knowledge products

Considerations for Future Actions

The evaluation team developed areas for consideration as IDRC advances its strategic goal of *Building Leaders for Today and Tomorrow* and designs future programming.

Strategic Alignment and Organizational Learning

- IDRC should consider building on current momentum by continuing corporate objectives or policies that support space for staff and collaborating organizations to develop intentional programming to build R4D leaders from a range of backgrounds and fields.
- Program reflection and project design processes should identify implicit and explicit roles and their impacts on inclusive leadership development within IDRC, among collaborating organizations, and across project participants.

Defining and Identifying Leaders

- IDRC should facilitate ongoing dialogue on R4D leadership among stakeholders and IDRC staff to continue to deepen and specify characteristics of a good leader and encourage the evolution and reinforcement of understanding across staff and stakeholders.
- The question of who is participating and in what ways is critical to consider throughout all aspects of the project. Beyond a focus on selecting participants from marginalized communities or disadvantaged backgrounds, facilitating environments and opportunities particularly designed to encourage and empower these participants requires identifying implicit and explicit challenges and developing a range of spaces for people from different backgrounds to thrive.

Technical and Leadership Skills

- IDRC should consider how project design can more systematically incorporate participants working with research users to increase skills acquisition.
- IDRC should consider incorporating complementary practical and academic learning opportunities throughout their programming, including fieldwork, conferences, and publications.

Awards and Embedded Programs

- Whether as part of IDRC support or as a contribution by collaborating partners, IDRC should ensure a capacity-building component across all awards programs that includes practical learning opportunities.
- Program and project teams should consider nuanced, adaptive programming for the smaller more flexible embedded projects, particularly addressing the range of ways skills can be developed through mentoring, practical experience, trainings, and workshops.

Relationship-Building

- Program and project teams should consider creative designs that incorporate the advantages of technology and in-person activities to encourage meaningful connections.
- For projects with cohorts, program and project teams should consider an emphasis on designing projects that will develop strong, continued connections among cohorts and within networks and that will address power dynamics within the group.
- Projects should be designed to include professional networking opportunities through conferences, meetings, and other activities to provide a space for emerging leaders to practice their newly acquired leadership skills, such as communicating effectively.

External Environment for Leaders to Thrive

- IDRC should consider promoting institutional understanding and receptivity to high-quality R4D and leadership with the collaborating organizations, particularly where the IDRC collaborating organization is a smaller part of a larger institution.