

Funding modalities for organizational strengthening in research for development

Purpose of this brief

This brief shares lessons from the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) experience providing organizational strengthening through different funding modalities: core support, flexible funding and organizational development support.

Who this is for

This content will be of interest to those who are designing and providing research for development (R4D) support and are interested in incorporating organizational strengthening. While based on IDRC experience, this document will likely be widely relevant to other funders undertaking similar work.

About the evaluations

This brief shares findings from two IDRC evaluations:

- [The Evaluation of IDRC's Contribution to Building Leading Organisations](#) examined the strategies and results of incorporating organizational development into research programs. It looked at how investing in organizations and networks can help them become more sustainable, effective and influential, using a subset of 52 IDRC grantee organizations.
- [The final evaluation of the Think Tank Initiative](#) reviewed the Centre's flagship 10-year program that provided core funding and supplemental capacity strengthening to 43 independent policy research think tanks in 20 countries.

Why provide support for organizational strengthening?

Multifaceted funding can be a key factor in strengthening organizations' institutional structures, and their ability to undertake quality research and pursue internal learning processes — all while taking ownership of their trajectories. Funding modalities that enable

organizational strengthening typically include core funding, flexible research grants and strategic organizational development (OD) support programs. These modalities have demonstrated contributions to higher-quality research, better positioning for use, networking and partnerships, while facilitating internal learning processes.

As outlined in [Brief 2 in this series](#) funders can make essential contributions to organizational strengthening throughout the life of a program or project. Grantees that

contributed to the IDRC evaluations widely expressed a desire for more explicit and higher levels of support for organizational structures and processes, with many expressing a preference for core support. Where core support is not possible, alternative funding modalities should respond to the need for predictable support that enables organizations to make their own decisions about how to position themselves and invest in human resources.

With the aim of informing conversations about how to fund organizational strengthening, this brief outlines three modalities that funders can use (core support, flexible grants and OD-specific support programs) before sharing lessons from IDRC's experience providing this type of support within the organization.

The Think Tank Initiative (TTI)

IDRC's flagship 10-year program, TTI, was an ambitious, large and long-term effort that ran from 2009 to 2019. It provided core funding and supplemental capacity strengthening to 43 independent policy research think tanks in 20 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and had a total budget of more than CA\$200 million. The overall goal was to strengthen independent policy research institutions in developing countries "to ensure that research results inform and influence national and regional policy debates" and support consisted of core, non-earmarked funding to all 43 organizations.

Making the case for core funding, a key recommendation from the final evaluation of the TTI was: "Enhancing the effectiveness of think tanks should be supported through core funding. If this is not possible, alternative approaches should be designed that explicitly focus on predictably supporting think tanks to make their own decisions about how to position themselves in the policy debate and for investing in their own human resources over time."

How to fund for organizational strengthening

Donors can use three primary funding modalities for organizational strengthening:

- 1. Core support** — Core funding grants have the explicit and primary objective of performing organizational strengthening activities, with little or no research outputs required specifically from the grant. These include the types of support highlighted in [Brief 2](#), such as staff recruitment, IT infrastructural development, conference attendance and communications. The evaluation found that core support provided foundational funding as new organizations were formed and during transitional periods (e.g. network restructuring), and fostered the growth and expansion of organizations. In some cases, it also enabled organizations to pursue a broad program of research.
- 2. Flexible grants** — These grants allow for the provision of organizational strengthening support through research grants that typically do not include a stated objective or anticipated outcome related to organizational strengthening. These grants are provided for specific research support but are flexible enough to be used for organizational strengthening activities such as network development, payment of staff salaries or investment in technological infrastructure.
- 3. OD-specific support programs** — Through strategic, OD-specific support programs, organizations receive a specific type of organizational strengthening support — for example, for capacity strengthening in areas such as evaluation or resource mobilization.

IDRC's experience with multifaceted funding

IDRC's R4D funding to organizations is often multifaceted, which sets IDRC apart from many other donors. Multifaceted support can include financial support, institutional support, research and technical support, as well as networking and reputation building. Such multifaceted support — where research and

organizational strengthening are viewed as intertwined and complementary — has been critical to relevant organizational strengthening efforts. On the premise that impactful R4D **is enabled by a strong organizational underpinning**, one in which the organizations themselves identify and assess their own needs and priorities, organizational strengthening can complement a strong research agenda. In addition, weak, fragile or stressed grantee organizations can be a significant risk factor for achieving expected program results.

While the amount of funding provided is undoubtedly important, evaluation respondents claimed that the fact of having received multifaceted funding (through flexible research funding and/or core funding) was particularly empowering. Grantees described it as having allowed them to look **“at the bigger picture”** beyond specific research activities. This was particularly valued by established R4D organizations — typically, those with a strong track record of obtaining targeted research funding, as it allowed them to re-examine their strategic directions, and plan and build accordingly.

Organizations shared that this support helped them strengthen their governance and management practices, including human resources, as well as their ability to raise funds and/or promote organizational sustainability. Even less conventionally, program officers cultivated a closer presence within some of the organizations they supported, providing institutional guidance and strengthening — for example, sitting on the Board of Governors of some organizations receiving support, participating in organizational activities and maintaining relationships with organizations’ other donors. The **tailored support** from program officers emerged as a more important factor for effectiveness than the provision of support for any specific length of time.

Grantees generally expressed a preference for core support. There is widespread belief among grantees that this **enables more effective research, positioning for use, networking and partnership development**. As one respondent notes, “IDRC can have a much bigger

influence by providing grants at an institutional level, rather than individual research grants, because in the former type of grant, the grantee can more easily shift the resources to benefit the institution and is therefore better able to achieve its vision or fund activities of a more strategic nature.”

“The funds from IDRC are very important because, while [our organization] benefits from funding from nine other donors, these donors fund specific research... but IDRC is the only donor to fund the organization at an institutional level.”

-Evaluation respondent

Key takeaways

- Organizational support can lead to higher-quality research, better positioning for use, networking and partnerships, while facilitating internal learning processes.
- Grantees express a desire for more explicit and higher levels of support for organizational strengthening, with a preference for core support.
- The tailoring of support (via the program officer role) is a more important factor for effectiveness than the provision of support for any specific length of time.

This brief was prepared by Shannon Sutton (independent consultant), with inputs from Amy Etherington and Hayley Price-Kelly (IDRC). The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of IDRC or its Board of Governors. The brief is based on findings of the following evaluations:

- Abitbol, Eric; Rastogi, Archi; Arsenault, Mariane; Rouleau, Esther; Pembleton, Corey; Amery, Hussein. (2018) Evaluation of IDRC's contribution to building leading organisations
- Christoplos, Ian; Pain, Adam; Kluyskens, Jups; Fruhling, Pierre. (2019) External evaluation of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) phase two, 2014-2019

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