

# **Strategic Evaluation of IDRC's Participation in Large Conferences**

## **Phase One Background Paper - How and Why IDRC Participates**

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### **Executive Summary**

Over the past few years, IDRC has been involved in an increasing number of large conferences. The nature of the Centre's involvement has ranged from being the donor, advisor, organizer, initiator, participant, observer or a combination of these roles. In response to requests from Communications Division and Program and Partnership Branch this report provides the first phase of a strategic evaluation of IDRC's participation in Large Conferences, focusing on how and why the Centre participates. Subsequently, Phase Two will incorporate and build upon these findings and provide an analysis of the results of the Centre's participation.

This strategic evaluation will be used to inform programming decisions on large conferences and inform actions about "how to" organize and participate in conferences. The primary intended users of this evaluation are Communications Division and Program and Partnership Branch senior management. Additionally, this report will be used to assist IDRC staff in planning for future events.

The following evaluation questions will be addressed in this report:

- What influenced the decision to participate in the conference? What were IDRC's intentions in participation in conferences? What was the nature of that participation?
- What lessons can Programs and Partnerships Branch and Communications Division draw from the: a) planning; b) implementation; and c) wrap-up phases of participation in large conferences?

A literature review and an evaluability assessment was conducted and, based on the input from Communications Division, eight conferences in which IDRC had participated were selected for an in-depth document review. Two of the eight conferences were also selected as case studies: *International Forum on Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health* and the *Third Global Knowledge Conference (GK3)*. For each of these cases a series of key informant interviews, focus groups and surveys were carried out.

The document review suggested that IDRC's communications objectives for participating in large conferences focus on promoting and communicating IDRC's work whereas program objectives focus on dissemination and use of research. The review also found that IDRC engages in different "types" of large conferences.

The lessons that emerged from this study were broken down into three different conference phases (preparatory phase, conference implementation phase and follow-up phase). The report provides a number of recommendations for the *preparatory phase* including the need to set a critical path and to be realistic about workload considerations. The report emphasizes the value added by including representatives from various divisions of the Centre in the planning process. It is recommended that Centre staff identify synergies with other key Canadian actors and strategic opportunities to work with like-minded civil society actors. During the preparatory phase it is also recommended that capacity building opportunities for IDRC staff and research partners be considered as well as environmental considerations.

Lessons from the conference *implementation phase* include the importance of an IDRC welcome sessions to allow staff and partners a chance to initially connect and create the foundation for networking and designing the conference agenda in a way that fosters both formal and informal interaction among participants. When the conference is being held across regions and time zones it is noted that a local consultant can provide valuable onsite support. At least one IDRC staff member should arrive on-site a few days before the conference in order to respond to changes and challenges on the ground before other participants arrive. While most conferences offer opportunities to hold workshops or meetings around the main event, the report cautions that too many events in a row can be overwhelming and exhausting. Finally, throughout IDRC's participation at the conference every attempt should be made to be as environmentally friendly as possible.

Lessons from the *follow-up phase* include the need to plan for post-conference follow up including After-Action Reviews and Evaluations. Post event communication with Centre staff is recommended in order to keep others informed and to maximize learning from these types of events. Additionally, research partner participants should be given an opportunity to express whether expectations were met, and any outcomes and successes achieved as well as challenges faced in the conference. Follow up with in-country hosts is also noted as important yet often overlooked. Finally, because participation in large conferences can be end-heavy, staff and partners are often exhausted after the conference. For this reason a realistic follow-up plan should be clearly articulated in the planning phase instead of an after-thought to the conference.