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Support to Southern Scientists: Achievements and Lessons Learned

by Terry Smutylo and Philip Ward

In large part, the accomplishments of IDRC over the past quarter century may be said to rest squarely on the shoulders of hundreds of innovative and tireless researchers throughout the developing world. Therefore, IDRC's 25th anniversary offers an excellent occasion to celebrate the achievements of the many researchers the Centre has helped support, and to draw lessons from its experience in supporting research for development.

For 25 years, strengthening indigenous research capacity in response to needs determined by the people in developing regions has been an enduring element of IDRC's strategy. Some idea of the success of this approach is provided in a 1993 analysis of IDRC's experience in strengthening research capacity¹. According to the author of the analysis, Tim Dottridge, strengthening the capacity of individual researchers in the South is implicit rather than explicit in the IDRC approach. Centre programs support institutions working on research that addresses development problems, with capacity-building usually as a secondary objective. Although both formal and informal training provisions are often built in, they usually have been geared directly to the technical needs of a specific project. In addressing development problems this way, IDRC pioneered support to empower Southern scientists to define development problems and to conduct relevant research.

Based on the conviction that one of the best ways to build capacity is through actual research activity, the primary target of IDRC support has been research designed and undertaken by developing country researchers working in institutions in the South, often in linkage with others working on related problems elsewhere in the world. While most projects funded are in established institutions with an experienced research team and focused on problem-solving research rather than on capacity-building, a smaller number of the Centre's projects are essentially capacity-building exercises to augment hands-on research experience .

Over 20,000 developing country scientists are estimated to have worked on projects supported by IDRC. About two-thirds were senior researchers, usually graduates; the remaining third were more junior. IDRC evaluations suggest that on-the-job research training in the developing country context is effective in strengthening indigenous capacity not only to focus research on topics related to national priorities, but also to utilize and contribute to local and international publications and meetings; to test results in field conditions, utilizing local industrial and agricultural extension agencies; to attract funds from other sources; and to develop practical skills in research management.

Both formal and informal training have been used to complement the practical experience gained through IDRC-funded projects. In the 1983-89 period, training absorbed approximately 13% of total program funding, and a third of projects had a training component. Roughly two-thirds of this funding went toward

informal training such as short courses, seminars, workshops, and group and network-based training, with formal, degree-related training accounting for the remaining third. Of the degree-related training, 52% was for Master's degrees and 32% was for PhDs.

Capacity-building is also a function of collaborative projects linking Southern scientists with Canadian scientists in similar fields to work on related research problems. Developing-country researchers, through cooperation with Canadian researchers have access to new people, techniques and information. And Canadian researchers have an opportunity to look at their work in different, broader contexts and to adapt their approaches to conditions in other countries. The Centre is currently evaluating collaborative activities to determine the strengths and weaknesses of this mechanism.

The arrival of the information revolution validates and gives urgency to the long-held goal of IDRC's Information Sciences and Systems Programs to make Southern information professionals and practitioners recognized as key players in empowering developing country societies to apply knowledge for their own benefit. Efforts in this field have included short-term courses to meet immediate requirements for up-grading practical skills in specific fields, as well as improving opportunities for postgraduate education to strengthen professional capacity for addressing long-term needs in identifying, processing, retrieving, repackaging and disseminating information for development. Examples include a regional consortium of information science graduate schools in Africa, and strengthening training capacity in information handling in Asian and South Pacific countries.

THE RECOGNITION FACTOR

Another, much more subtle way in which IDRC has bolstered the ability of individuals to contribute to development has been to raise the profile of researchers individually and in groups, thereby increasing their recognition and influence. One way this is done is through links with other researchers in their fields. Domestic recognition is often the result of recognition at international workshops, symposia, networks and other linking mechanisms that are basic to IDRC's approach. It can also stem from press coverage of such events or from a significant research breakthrough. By recognizing the quality and potential of a particular line of investigation and by providing researchers with the resources to make a significant contribution, nationally or internationally, IDRC has seen the stature of many grant recipients increase dramatically, along with their capacity to contribute to development.

During the early 1980s, in response to hostile environments for social science research within countries under military rule in the southern cone of Latin America, IDRC offered special institutional support to social science research institutions in these countries to cover both research and overhead costs. Other donors cooperated in this effort and, as a result, nine social science research institutions in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay had sufficient financial security to maintain a productive core of research staff during a difficult and uncertain period. Then, during the post-military period in these countries, the institutions and social scientists began to receive financial support from their own governments. Now many of these researchers have made significant contributions to economic and social policy in their own countries. Some now hold positions of power and leadership in civilian, democratic governments.

While it is difficult to assess the total impact of IDRC support on Southern scientists, information drawn from EVIS, the Centre's evaluation database, provides some lessons concerning the effects on Southern researchers involved with IDRC-supported projects. Beyond the strengthening of technical skills and experience, researchers report being motivated by having had the opportunity to use their skills and having been able to gain credibility and confidence. Also of great importance has been IDRC's support in helping researchers in the South overcome isolation through information systems, conferences, collaborative projects and other mechanisms that provide links with other researchers around the world.

OVERCOMING ISOLATION

A 1991 global tracer survey of IDRC award recipients noted that over 80% were very satisfied with the theoretical and substantive knowledge gained; and that the training was very helpful in advancing their

overall careers. The major problem facing trainees when they return home is a chronic lack of research funds and an abrupt end to ongoing contact with other trainees and the research community at large. Training without subsequent support is a problem increasingly noted in evaluations. The provision of continuing support and the development of networks linking past trainees working on topics of mutual interest has been suggested as one method of surmounting this isolation.

A portion of IDRC program funds has also gone toward small grants to improve individual researcher skills. These grants have had a great impact by fostering networking within countries, allowing exchanges of information, breaking academic isolation and promoting the emergence of a scholarly community. To strengthen the competence of individual researchers, monitoring and technical supervision of grantees and the critical review of research reports are essential.

In an effort to evaluate yet another component of IDRC's support and capacity-building role in the work and achievements of Southern scientists, the Centre is presently conducting a strategic evaluation tracer study of former IDRC-supported project leaders. While there have been tracer studies of former IDRC training and fellowship awardees, there has been no aggregate assessment of where IDRC-supported project leaders come from, where they go after IDRC support, and how their relationship with IDRC affected their professional development. This tracer study will attempt to fill this gap (and will be featured in a future issue of IDRC Reports).

Initial findings from the project leader tracer study, and other Centre evaluations, have revealed that many IDRC-supported researchers have gone on to make significant contributions to sustainable development. This issue of IDRC Reports is dedicated to profiling individual researchers and to celebrating their accomplishments. Along with many others like them around the world, these researchers give us cause for celebration this anniversary year. It is their commitment and dedication to their work, often under severe and challenging circumstances, that provides inspiration in the quest to answer the pressing problems of our times.

- Terry Smutylo is Director, Evaluation Unit and Philip Ward is Researcher, Evaluation Unit, Corporate Affairs and Initiatives Division, IDRC, Ottawa.

¹ Tim Dottridge, Strengthening research capacity: the experience of the International Development Research Centre, in Development and strengthening of research capacity in developing countries. RAWOO: Advisory Council for Scientific Research in Development Problems, The Hague, Netherlands, 1993.

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