Lessons from IDRC evaluations on Competitive Grants:

A review of 5 evaluations

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Please note: throughout this report, the author refers to "small grant programs" – in IDRC terminology, this should be understood as "competitive grant projects".

-IDRC Evaluation Unit

Background

Purpose

This document, prepared for the IDRC Evaluation Unit, is based on a review of five recent studies commissioned by IDRC on small grants programmes, the earliest of these completed April 2005 and the latest February 2006. Toward IDRC's consideration of future small grants programmes, the objectives of this present meta-review are:

- to consider the similarities, and any contradictions, in the findings from the five studies; and
- to suggest lessons that might be learned on the basis of these.

Nature of the Data

The five studies[1] reviewed were looking at quite different types of grants programmes, and for different purposes. They did not use a standard analytical approach, nor did they use a specific analytical framework. Thus, they did not all deal with the same issues, or address any one issue in the same way or with the same level/type of analysis.

While these factors limited somewhat the extent to which their findings could be compared, it was nonetheless instructive that – to a large extent -- their analyses and conclusions did in fact compare. Applying the same question to each study "what worked for whom and in what context?", in fact produced many of the same generic – and so reasonably generalizable -- answers. The main question for IDRC arising from this present review is, then, perhaps not what lessons are there to be learned, but why they are proving difficult to apply? An attempt is made to begin answering that question in the next section.

Organization of the Review

This review is divided into two main parts: (i) a discussion of the *key findings* that were common to all five of the grants programme studies and, therefore, can probably be assumed as the "lessons" of all such arrangements; and (ii) a more detailed presentation

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[1] A summary of the main design, results and analysis of "what worked, what did not and what are the lessons" for each of the five studies is attached as an annex.

of the *specific findings/lessons* identified under four core themes[2]: management, capacity development, policy and use, and networking.

(i) *Common Findings/Lessons*

The following points are based on data from the studies, though reflect wider experience of grants generally. They are also interactive, all related to two main characteristics of small grants arrangements: that they are essentially research and capacity *learning systems*; and they succeed to the extent that their *complexity and fragility as such are recognized and accounted for*. All of the grants programmes included in the five studies succeeded "to a degree"; they worked more or less well along the same dimensions.

a) Within the context of IDRC as a research for *development* agency, small grants programmes can, and will, never be the straightforward arrangements they are often expected to be. They are always going to be *labour-intensive to manage* whoever does it; *expensive to implement* in time, money and intellectual energy; and more *effective where they are grounded* in some wider institutional or programmatic framework. Because they are intended ultimately to generate capacities and knowledge that contribute both substantively and sustainably to the research, policy and/or development agenda of individuals, institutions, governance systems or development sectors – and typically to more than one of these -- they are never "simple".

→ Grants programmes need to recognize the scope and implications of these realities at the outset, and be reflected in decisions about their design, management, resources and linkages to policy/practice. Further, and critically, they need to be explicitly and directly set within the wider corporate and programmatic agenda of IDRC, as a main and legitimate "beneficiary". Without both of these criteria being met, grants programmes are inevitably limited in impact and eventually orphaned, conceptually if not practically. [3]

b) Contrary to how they are often treated, small grants programmes are not inherently self-sustaining. Grants programmes are not intended as the core of IDRC's normal activities, but rather to complement, extend or reinforce those activities. IDRC is neither

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[2] These themes are "core" both because they appeared as issues in all five studies and because they are of continuing concern to IDRC.

[3] Even for completely stand-alone contracted programmes, IDRC's reputation is a major in-kind contribution and should expect to advance, and be advanced by, the exercise.

a granting institution (a la SSHRC) nor a university. For this reason, grants programmes operated through or by the Centre are usually a series of fairly light-handed *individual learning events* strung together as *transitory and nonformal arrangements*. Their success, therefore, is dependent directly on those involved at each point in the decision-action chain: on their *level of commitment, interest and capacities (*as funders, managers, resources/advisers, awardees); and on the level of *responsibility each accepts to initiate, monitor and interact around activities.*

→ Grants programmes need to avoid falling foul of the unwarranted, though often unexpressed, expectation that once approved events will continue to unfold on their own and as planned. Unfortunately, not everyone will be equally motivated, able or have time to be proactive, to maintain regular communication, to offer mentoring. The "extra work" required is unlikely to be as "marginal" as initially assumed. A grants programme is effective to the extent it is not left to "happen", without specific systems and resources in place to push it along.

c) <u>Small grants programmes regularly struggle under the weight of too many and too substantial "intended outcomes" resting on a too fragile base</u>. More often perhaps a function of enthusiastic marketing rather than explicit design, grants programme descriptors suggest they "will do it all": generate new knowledge, confirm novel research themes, establish research-policy networks, consolidate institutions, create a sustainable research culture. However, grants programmes are what they are: loosely-coupled arrangements, providing relatively few material resources and fewer technical inputs, over a usually short time horizon, to a relatively few people unconnected to IDRC or to each other in any reinforcing way.

→ The problem is less that these programmes rarely realize these goals, than that they can dissipate focus in aiming vaguely at too many targets without sufficient attention to any one. By setting the bar too high, these over-expectations tend often to produce either overly negative reports of "missed" results; or overly positive ones full of unsubstantiated "satisfaction" statements. Neither situation assesses the programme fairly on the basis of what it could and did do.

d) <u>Small grants programmes fall short or collapse as development interventions because they are too 'light-handed' in conforming to "best practice" development and management standards, and learning principles</u>. In IDRC, where they are second-tier

tasks, grants programmes tend not to get the same level of relevant professional attention that goes into research projects. Criteria often not comprehensively or rigorously addressed includes: *relevance* to development, research and capacity priorities of all stakeholders; *appropriateness* to policy, programme and institutional goals; *clarity and agreement* on goals, roles and resource commitments; *congruence, coherence and consistency* of design, methods, resources and their link to expected outcomes.

→ Like any "system" of interacting inputs, actions, actors and outcomes, it is important to get the logic right; to answer the critical questions of any development intervention:

- What exactly is it really going to achieve?
- Is this what all of those involved and responsible want?
- Is everyone prepared to make the necessary contributions (invariably more than what is expected or resourced)?
- Do all the elements hang together – is there appropriate and adequate input to match every expected output?
- On what basis will it be declared "finished"?

This last one is an especially tricky question given all those "weighty expectations".

b) Thematic Findings/Lessons

The following synthesis of findings comes directly out of the five studies, though not all dealt with all of them, analyzed them in detail or presented definitive "lessons learned" conclusions.

1. Management of Grants Programmes

The management of small grants programmes are invariably complicated by the facts of multiple actors, only occasionally in direct contact, with often unclear or competing agendas; a multi-faceted task environment of funds administration, awardee selection, maintenance and programme support, resource person mobilization etc; and, for various reasons, a typically tenuous human and financial resource base.

Management arrangements that appear to work:

- Clarifying and establishing agreement with all management/funding collaborators with respect to the rationale, priorities and "bottom-line" expectations of the

programme; confirming that these are consistent with their respective organizational goals and mandates; identifying the systems and processes in each agency that will ground the programme in their policy, programming and budgets with respect to grant oversight, adaptation and termination. Overarching all of this, determining if collaborators are "partners" or "contractors" and the implications for management relations of either.

- Basing the programme in an established institution with proven record as manager of multi-dimensional, loosely-coupled outreach programmes; flexible, responsive and transparent administrative systems; and competent staff with dedicated time for the programme, not expected to "fold it into" other work.

- Enabling IDRC to provide this kind of base itself, bringing to bear the critical "value-added" dimensions of professional reputation, technical input to the selection processes, links to its networks and mentored monitoring oversight, **IF** senior management explicitly articulates an institutionally relevant rationale for housing the programme; supports the design and administration of the arrangement through dedicated grants management expertise and pre-arranged, acknowledged time-allocations of research officers.

- Promoting ownership of, and expectations of benefit from, the grants programme in Centre-administered arrangements by engaging all key management and professional officers in ways which encourage and reward linking it as complement to other aspects of their work, open communication about problems and successes, risk-taking and innovative thinking.

- Ensuring a selection and review process that is professionally credible, technically competent, contextually relevant and transparent - through the use of recognised international experts for selection and review processes, whether the programme is internally or externally managed and whether it is competitive or invitational.

- Finding a "just right" balance in terms of meeting the objectives of the programme in bringing in the appropriate candidates and adding value to the exercise by serving as an exposure-cum-learning exercise (e.g. project development workshops), while not

overweighting the front-end in terms of time, money and good will of resource persons.

▪ Designing the programme around and in the context of available and tested institutions, systems and resources (financial, technical, partnerships); in ways that build on and reinforce proven practice and piggy-back services/networks already available through, for example, IDRC regional offices; and in regions rather than countries or globally toward balancing potentials for reach, diversity, complementarity and exchange.

▪ Acknowledging, respecting and accommodating the value-added and in-kind costs of the external "experts" contributing to the grants programme, by limiting the size and scope of tasks to fit actual needs and promote double-tasking, keeping review and application processes user-friendly, providing clear and reasonable terms of reference, welcoming feedback.

Management arrangements that are problematic:

▪ Not being explicit, honest and modest about the place of the grants programme in the wider life of the collaborating donor/management organizations, especially for IDRC, as it balances its corporate stability (e.g. good policy/public relations in Canada) and research for development agenda (e.g. responsibility and commitment to Southern researchers) → and, in consequence, taking on too much, with overly vague conditions, and failing to put the appropriate safeguards and resources in place.

▪ Underestimating the labour intensive, professionally demanding and typically uncertain nature of grants programmes that invariably must juggle and hold together a complex mix of development agenda, institutional priorities, personal attributes and professional capacities → and, in consequence, failing to put the support systems, resources and skills sets in place to facilitate, sustain and reward competent, consistent management action.

- Outsourcing management responsibility to untested, marginally capable organizations, without sufficient institutional assessment to ensure appropriateness of prevailing policies and capacities; shared understanding of the task and strategies; and fiscal, technical and administrative probity → and, in consequence, requiring as much labour-intensive management and policy work by IDRC staff as for Centre-managed programmes, but without direct control over the quality or results of programme delivery.

- Allowing ambiguous designation of grant purpose, scope, level of commitment to roles and resources in co-developed and managed programmes; and failing to put in place clearly agreed and resourced systems for goal clarification, negotiation and arbitration → and, in consequence, laying the foundation for management and political dysfunction and potential agreement breakdown.

- Failing to ensure a coherent and comprehensive "logical model" that connects the dots of inputs, material resources and expected outcomes → and, in consequence, under-resourcing in human, financial and infrastructure terms the core elements of the grants programme e.g. cost-effective, technically oriented selection processes, timely and relevant advisory support, opportunities for peer interaction, mentored and systematic monitoring.

- Failing to match the grants mechanism to the situation and/or needs of the research/capacity task, the prospective awardees, and the wider beneficiary/user community → and, in consequence, creating a management-heavy, cost-ineffective arrangement, overweighting resources on procedures and control systems at the expense of content quality, usable outcomes and forward looking adaptation.

2. Capacity development

That small grants programmes will develop the capacity of awardees in some way is a "given", in theory. Even grants for senior researchers, where the objectives focus on knowledge generation, network building or policy impact, enhanced capacity for doing such things is implied. Grants programmes are typically "most beneficial" where they "helped me learn". Unfortunately, capacity development is also a "given" in practice,

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expected to happen without necessarily bringing together the elements necessary to enable it.

Capacity building arrangements that appear to work:

- Conceiving the overall design of the grants programme and all of the elements within it in terms of their implications for facilitating or impeding learning, including:
  - being precise as to what the learning outcomes are expected to be and for whom;
  - as much as possible, designing all major grants stages as interactive and facilitated learning events e.g. introductory orientation or project development seminars enabling applicants/awardees to understand, exchange or confirm expectations, new concepts, ways to improve research methodologies etc, deal with data design; stock-taking workshops among awardees, with advisors and/or the referent community (e.g. policy-makers expected to use the results).
  - asking of each expected capacity outcome:
    - Who will have to learn what?
    - Through what means?
    - How will that learning be consolidated?
    - What will indicate it's happening?
    - Are the resources in place for facilitating it appropriate i.e. not just knowledge content expertise, but also knowledge of how people learn and skills in mentoring?

- Focusing on people/awardees already in a *learning mode* e.g. graduate students, young research associated with a new IDRC project/programme, senior researchers struggling to shift their analyses to a next level (of policy, intervention practice, multidisciplinary design). Readiness is a key factor in learning; a grants programme is more cost-effective and internally sustained by engaging motivated people with clear learning goals and negotiating its priorities in terms of theirs.

- Recognizing that people do not learn what they do not have the opportunity to engage with, and ensuring those opportunities are in place:

- the simple chance to do field research and reflect with others on the experience was perhaps the major contributor to individual capacity development for young researchers; to have a system of regular exchange to test ideas for more senior ones.

- individual grants, implemented in isolation, do not develop institutions or produce networks; if these are the goals, there needs to be sufficient and relevant means for getting there - of extending the learning, integrating it into policies and practices, experiencing the processes and learning the skills of negotiating, communicating and aligning agendas.

Capacity building arrangements that are problematic:

▪ Not linking the grant conceptually or practically into IDRC's wider agenda, either as project, programme of institution development (to use an old, but still valid, capacity framework) → and, in consequence, limiting the likelihood of a sufficiently holistic frame of reference to warrant sufficiently extensive time and resources to, for example:

- differentiate researcher learning needs (experienced versus novice, research skills versus knowledge generation) and tailor programmes in design (e.g. including pre-selection mentoring or concept formulation workshops), content, duration and resource inputs to these

- include time and resources for pre- and post-project planning and follow-up

- generate comprehensive results dissemination strategies,

- build opportunities for value-added links back into IDRC for researchers themselves, their knowledge products, their continued professional development e.g. associating them with other Centre activities, networks.

▪ Providing insufficient resources of money, time and compensatory professional benefit for those who hold the learning substance and processes of the grant together - reviewers, advisors, IDRC officers → and, in consequence, limiting their ability and, perhaps, motivation to provide mentoring commentary on proposals, facilitative evaluation feedback to applicants/awardees, ideas and support for integrating or extending the experience.

- Over-estimating the speed, linearity and uni-dimensionality of organizational learning, institution building or policy systems change and the extent to which these complex goals can be realized through the typically light-handed mechanism of a grants programme → and, in consequence, not building in the necessary connectors between the individual and the organization/system; making grants too short in duration; not providing opportunities for second-round application or planning for multiple phases.

3. Policy Influence and Utilisation

Influence and utilization issues are problematic in small grants arrangements for several reasons: because they plan for/claim to do more than is reasonable for what they are; because even the reasonably expected outcomes are rarely defined in outcomes terms at the level of the programme (individual awardees no doubt know what s/e expects to learn from and do with the experience); and because they are not expressly planned to ensure that utilization ends are matched with the means of achieving them.

Policy and utilization arrangements that seem to work:

- Clarity within IDRC as to why and how it's engaging in a small grants programme mechanism will enable moving forward its corporate mandate and programming goals, on both general and specific terms, and whether as manager or overseer; and thereby being able to frame design and resource decisions *in expressly policy and utilization terms*: to seek and agree on collaborations that are use-oriented, map progress outcomes in terms of policy/use "expect to see"; adapt, reconfigure and add phases that allow for progressive policy and utilization-focused action. Noting, for example, that
    - targeted themes selected by IDRC to match changing regional policy priorities appear to have a better chance of leading to some policy infuence;
    - targeted commissioned *studies* appear to have more chance of policy influence than projects selected through competition.
    - planning for use through association with/integration into on-going IDRC programmes and networks facilitates application of new skills and knowledge in reasonably cost-effective ways benefiting both awardee and the Centre

Policy and utilization arrangements that are problematic:

- Thinking in the short-term and expecting links into policy and practice to happen → and, in consequence,
  - devising research competition themes without sufficient reference to "why and where next", the step-wise progression of research application and policy change processes and thus the limited utility of shifting focal areas too quickly (e.g. in less than 2-3 years)
  - providing insufficient time or resources for post-project dissemination of results through conferences, publication, or contact with community stakeholders,
  - not including development of skills and knowledge expressly geared to implementation or application of results
  - failing to provide support for laboratories, databases, libraries and other support services, including technical troubleshooting, to encourage dissemination and utilization.

4. Networks

Across the five studies, creating networks was not a well-realized outcome of the small grants programmes reviewed. The problem with the concept of a network is that its meaning, structures and functions, and expected impacts are typically too vague: grants programmes refer to "networking" as the both the process and mechanism for implementation, and as an outcome of that implementation - awardees will network to learn and become a network in consequence. While both of these expectations might be accurate and effective, the five studies suggest they are neither.

Networking arrangements that seem to work:

- Proactively bringing awardees together in a facilitated, purposive activity that will establish linkages on the basis of professional exchange, value-added for one's own work and, importantly, recognizing IDRC's commitment to the grant as a learning and research "whole" that is greater than the individual parts -- while not ensuring a network *relationship* evolves, will provide the space for that potential.

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- Designing and managing collaborative multi-donor grant programmes that, from the outset, promote, enable and build networking as the modus operandi of the programme – with clearly agreed roles, mandates, resources and responsibilities for implementation, monitoring and progressive adaptation.

- Providing awardees the "hooks" on which to evolve a network relationship
  - regular opportunities for dialogue;
  - core materials available on an interactive website;
  - helping identify or create common activity threads among awardees (testing novel research methods or analytical frameworks, encouraging development of data collection or analysis tools);
  - encouraging and facilitating (through financing) meetings outside the programme.
  - facilitating links with existing research centres, training institutions, networks to which awardees separately or jointly can affiliate.
  - locating the competition or coordination in some permanent structure (such as a regional association or regional institution) to encourage post-project networking.
  - building in mechanisms within IDRC to maintain contact with new organizations introduced to the Centre through the grants competition, even when they do not receive immediate support.

Networking arrangements that are problematic:

- Not being clear about the "why and how" of the networking idea → and, in consequence,
  - failing to ensure that it is more than simply a rhetorical substitute for the programme itself putting all the pieces in place in terms of grant implementation and results utilization e.g. 'let the network do it" ;
  - selecting designs or methods likely to impede networking from occurring e.g. competitive selection scattered over wide geographic, topic or capacity ranges that provide no common platform for interaction;
  - under-resourcing the minimal conditions of a network – funding and infrastructure for regular and face-to-face communication, joint action, explicit financial support for coordination;

- failing to follow-up activities of the grant programme in ways that promote informal sharing and collaboration as the seed of future networks and options for post-project interaction that foster ownership of network building process

ANNEX: Summary of the five studies in terms of specific findings and lessons

Study: Advanced Education and Training Options Available to IDRC
               Prepared for Special Initiatives Division, IDRC

Author: George Tillman Consulting
Date: April 16, 2005
Pages: 56

1. Context:

This study is a review of training programmes operated by a large number of donors, and of lessons from these programmes which might be applicable to IDRC. It also traces the evolution of training within IDRC over the last 25 years.

The bulk of the material for the study came from written documents, supplemented by ten interviews.

What worked:

This study provides analysis of the effectiveness of only a few of the individual programmes it lists, but the following are interesting:

   ▪   A CIDA-funded project: Early Childhood Development Virtual University Masters
       degree programme, liked the University of Victoria with a number of Sub-Saharan
       Africa organizations [p. 51-56] and appeared to have both career and policy
       impacts.

               Lessons:

               o   Use of flexible *curricula permitting incorporation of local knowledge
                   and practice,* can help produce sustainable training results.
               o   Internal country networks appear to have been more successful than
                   international networks.
               o   Long-term support is viewed as necessary, but is not currently
                   available.
               o   Orientation seminars are useful before training.
               o   *Transparent selection processes* are important for credibility.
               o   *Expert advisory committees* are useful.
               o   *Future programmes should build on the base of trained cohorts.*
               o   *More dissemination of participants' products* would be useful.

   ▪ The UK Wellcome Trust Population Studies Programme includes both a training
     course and support for a research project in the home country. The course was
     rated higher than the research, because of *a lack of field support during research.*
     [p. 15]

- The Ford Foundation International Fellowship Programme focuses masters and doctoral training support on women, and ethnic racial or religious groups that have been marginalised or which are in conflict or post-conflict situations.

    o The programme includes *preparatory training in language, computer skills and research methods*.

    o The programme specifically is not targeted at institutional development, but *at helping innovative individuals such as community activists in civil society.* [p. 16]

- The John D. Rockefeller 3rd Scholars Program focuses on Asian capacity for regional collaboration in policy-oriented research.

    o Significantly, the programme appears to focus on field support, providing *an "eminent mentor" for research teams*, and money for research assistants.

- A 2003 evaluation of the UNDP/UNFPA/WHO/World Bank Special Programme of Research Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction said that the programme created research capacity *but criticised monitoring of research institution capacity and performance.*

- Commonwealth Scholarship Commission in the United Kingdom's *distance learning scholarships* for post-graduate courses with partnerships between UK and overseas providers – permit people to maintain employment while being trained. [p. 10]

- SIDA programmes "aim to *help universities gain credibility for managing governmental funds* for basic research facilities, and become *able to extract external funding* from the private sector, from foreign donors and from foundations." [p. 11] No details provided.

- The French "Bourses d'Insertion de Jeunes chercheurs and Bourses post-doctorales, aim *to integrate younger researchers into research teams*" already supported by other French sources. [p. 14]

- A 1997 report on networks in sub-Saharan Africa cited the importance of *knowledge networks, rather than information networks, and particularly the importance of providing "a critical mass of peer review* not available at the national level" to sustain learning. [p. 21]

- University Science, Humanities and Engineering Partnerships in Africa encountered a number of *problems related to division of labour* among joint supervisors, inadequate salaries and other support issues. [p. 21-22]

General lessons:

- Managing advanced education and training is very *labour intensive*.

- *Donor interpretation of their own mandates may differ and this can cause problems for recipient institutions.*

    o "This causes confusion and administrative burdens for the recipient institutions. Organizations need to examine how their support to training relates to and affects not only the recipients but also the activities of other donors." [p. 31]

    o IDRC should therefore consider how to coordinate support with other donors. [p. 41]

- Funding for laboratories, databases, libraries and other support services including technical troubleshooting, should be included in support for research capacity development.

- Support for training should be based in a clear understanding of an organization's core mandate.

    o *IDRC's support for training grew iteratively*, not from specific policy guidelines "or a clear articulation of the Centre's principles and objectives concerning training". [p. 34, 38]

        - Several examples of successful training in Programme Initiatives projects focused on work with stakeholders at the community level or on people who did not intend to become professional researchers [p. 37-39]

    o Some other donors have rooted their training programmes in reviews of previous experience, and outline how they see training contributing to capacity development.

    o *Clarification of training goals and objectives facilitates monitoring and evaluation.*

    o IDRC should clarify its training policy.

    - Situating the wide range of IDRC training initiatives within a network context would be useful.

    - IDRC should continue to expand CT-supported learning programmes *including research on the effectiveness of this approach for post-graduate training.*

Study: Evaluation of "Central America in the World Economy of the 21st Century", Phase 1 and Phase 2 (103276)
Prepared for the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

Authors: Fernando Loayza Careaga, Romulo Caballeros Otero
Date: August, 2005
Pages: 50

1. Context:

The Association for Research and Social Studies of Guatemala, was supported by IDRC to strengthen research and policy dialogue on economic integration.

Four research competitions, over four years (Phase 1: February 2001-January 2003; Phase 2: October 2003-September 2005 – ongoing at time of the study).

2. Basic objectives:

a)   Improved *quality of research*
b)   More *policy debate* on international economic issues
c)   *Capacity development* for researchers, policy makers, civil society on international trade issues.

▪   **Type of research capacity:**

   • Conducting research
   • Conceiving, generating and sustaining research on international economic issues.
   • Using research in policy and practice.

3. Management:

▪   **External:** The project was run, and funds managed by the Association for Research and Social Studies in Guatemala.

▪   International advisory group.

▪   Control of grants: Selection committee appointed by the Association.

4. What worked:

a)   *Management:*

▪   *Using an established institution to manage the project* facilitated management of the project.

  ▪ *Using recognized experts* as referees for selection gave credibility to the grant selection process.

b)   *Quality of research/debate*

- *Mixing commissioned research studies* by well-recognized specialists with competitions, improved the quality of the research and influence on policy.

- *Timing:* The project was funded at a time when research was likely to have an impact on ongoing debates.

c) Capacity development

- *Training for researchers on the substance* of economic issues was well received by researchers from countries with "less developed" research capacity.

- *Workshops two months after commencement* of research in round 2, improved quality of the studies by clarifying expectations, and making adjustments to projects.

5. What did not:

a)   *Management*

- *Insufficient funds for the advisory group* limited its ability to meet and have an impact.

- *Unclear TORs for the advisory group* limited their impact on the project.

- *Competition between subregional research centres* for grants, reduced networking between them.

- *Depending on other donors to deliver financial support* for some components reduced continuity, when the support did not materialize.

b) Quality of research

- *Positive discrimination* to assist less developed institutions participate resulted in *lower quality research*.

  - *Lesson:* To redress imbalances in competitions provide training and technical assistance (mentoring) complementary to the research topics [p. 26]. "One can say that this type of support helps to avoid the false dilemma between building research capacities and promoting high-quality research." [p. 16]

c) Capacity development

- *No budget for reviewers* limited their ability to provide capacity-development commentary on proposals.

- Successful round 1 applicants were *restricted from applying in round two,* and this reduced sustained network and research capacity development.

- Training: Researchers from more developed regional countries wanted more training on practical issues of research methods.

- *Training by other donors* focused on substance, but *did not contribute to research capacity development.*

- *Small research grants and limited time available* reduced the project's capacity development results.

    - *Lesson:* Limit objectives to assured resources, and concentrate them on fewer grants over a longer period.

    - *Lesson:* Integrate training with research.

d) Impact on policy/networking

- *Lack of a permanent structure* limited sustainability of a network.

- *Insufficient or inappropriate (electronic) diffusion* of research (both commissioned and competitive) reduced the impact on policy debates, reduced ownership by stakeholders in the project, and limited the creation of an effective research network.

- Lesson: Provide opportunities for researchers to participate in international presentations of findings.

- Lesson: Research competitions are not suitable for influencing public debate.

Study: Ecohealth Research Awards Program Tracer Study

Author: Jessica White
Date: January 2006
Pages: 79

1. Context:

The Ecohealth Research and Training Awards Programme supported 48 graduate student researchers in Canada and other countries, to do research on an Ecosystem Approach to Human Health between 1997 and the time of this study in 2005. The programme provided a week of training at IDRC, up to $15,000 for research and in the last two years, up to $4,000 to present findings at an international conference.

2. Objectives

The programme aimed to:

- Build capacity among graduate students to use this approach in their research

    o Type of capacity: Capacity to conduct research

- Encourage institutional collaboration to use the research.

3. Management

It is unclear from both the study and the IDRC web site, how this was managed. It appears, from references to the time-consuming nature of followup, however that this was internally managed, with grants controlled by IDRC, but no further data is available.

4. What worked:

Capacity development/networking

- *Initial training on the subject at IDRC* worked for 100% of the awardees. This specifically helped them:

    o refine the research proposal
    o understand research methods
    o meet and form networks with other young researchers, IDRC staff

- *Readings, website* and other materials helped some awardees.

- *The money* provided was sufficient for most awardees.

- Funding for *participation in conferences* helped some awardees in later phases of the programme.

- Overall, the _opportunity to do field work_ on the topic appeared to have substantial career benefits for awardees.

Utilization

- Most awardees _apply Ecohealth in their career work_ and the awards have positively affected careers.

5. What did not:

Capacity:

- _There was some confusion about the basic concepts_ among awardees, supervisors and stakeholders. Nevertheless, "increased knowledge and awareness of the ecohealth approach" and of research methods is cited as an important result.

- _Lack of field support_ and contact with IDRC staff.

  - _Lesson: More mentoring by IDRC staff_
  - _Such work is labour intensive and this give support to the idea of devolved management of the programme._

- There was mixed feedback on the electronic web site: For some people _internet access was expensive_ or rare, and this diminished utility of the web site, but for others it appeared useful.

- _Limited dissemination of research_ on a broad scale and to participating communities appeared to reduce capacity results.

Networking

- _There was a lack of followup on networking_, to support researchers in the field. "The conference was great, but it was a one-time thing….There needs to be something that ties us together beyond the occasional conference" [p. 22].

  - Nevertheless, this is contrasted with the finding that 92% of awardees maintained post-award contact with people they met during the programme.

  - _Lesson: Provide followup training, conferences_ during the awards.

Utilization:

- _There was no influence on policy,_ but the study provides no analysis of why.

- _Limited application to theses and dissertations._

  - _Lesson: There should be more followup by IDRC staff to ensure delivery of specified outputs._

Study: RoKS Competitive Grants Program: Review and Recommendations

Author: Michael Graham
Date: January 2006
Pages: 66

1. Context:

The Research on Knowledge Systems Competitive Grants programme approved by the Board in 2001, was part of an effort to promote analysis and debate on how knowledge is produced and applied to development problems. Other elements of this approach included supporting networks on knowledge systems, supporting capacity development and support for longer-term research based on themes identified in the competitive grants.

Grants had a maximum value of $80,000 and duration was 12-18 months.

This study, completed in 2006, is based on interviews with six IDRC programme staff and four grant administration staff, questionnaires completed by nine awardees and a review of documents. The study intended to determine how effective the grants component was in reaching its objectives, and to review a number of questions related to how the programme was managed.

2. Objectives

This study identifies four underlying purposes for the grants programme: [p. 4, 11, 39]

- Identify promising researchers
- Increase visibility for IDRC and its partners
- Identify priorities for longer-term research and action.
- Capacity development (unspecified level)

The grants programme's stated objectives were:

- improving understanding of public-private patterns of support for research and
- affecting policy on research.

3. Management

The programme was internally managed by IDRC, and grants were approved and disbursed by IDRC.

4. What worked

Management

- Peer review workshops provided transparency in selection and gave technical credibility to the selection process.

Capacity

- Individual researchers and administrators improved research methods capacity [p. 34]

Networking

- New organizations were attracted to and became familiar with IDRC through the competition (but most were unsuccessful in the competition. [p. 42]

  - *Lesson: A separate component for junior researchers may give them more opportunity.*

- Electronic announcements were effective in reaching prospective applicants. [p. 29]

- *Focused yearly themes* for competitions matched individual organizational needs. [p. 31-32]

Policy

- Because yearly competitions were *focused on specific themes of importance,* some, but not all, of the research had an impact on research policy. [p.34-35]

5. What did not

Management

- The peer review process was too wide (up to ten people) and took too much time.

  - Applicants, however, wanted more detailed evaluation feedback on their proposals.

    - *Lesson: Fewer people should review proposals, but give more in-depth feedback* to applicants on technical issues in their proposals.

- The original application form was too complicated [p. 9], originally 22 pages [p. 20]. This was changed to an 8-page concept note followed by a more detailed application and full proposal for shortlisted candidates in round 2. Even the short concept note was too demanding, and technically difficult to use according to the study [p. 30].

- The simultaneous review and approval of all awards (6-9) makes obtaining financial clearances difficult. [p. 44-45] Delays for one or two projects can cause down-stream delays in coordinating networking and reporting for projects. More attention needs to be paid to financial elements during the peer review workshops as part of the selection process. This will reduce problems with financial administration later. Second and third round approvals were faster because of this involvement.

  - *Lesson: Involve Grants and Administration staff from the beginning of a competition,* to make clear to programme staff and applicants, what the approval process entails.

- Ambiguous definitions of responsibility within IDRC for technical and financial monitoring caused confusion for awardees.

  - *Lesson: Make explicit the role of financial and administrative staff for monitoring.*

Networks

- Networks were not successful. Awardees could not identify common interests because of diverse geographic and substantive differences in their work although they thought this was their fault, not IDRC's. [p. 34, 37, 43]

  - *Lesson: Increase regionalisation of the competitions* to provide some basis of common interest for networking. [p. 31, 39]

  - *Lesson: Link grantees to existing networks* rather than starting new ones.

  - *Lesson: Encourage joint projects between several country teams.*

  - *Lesson: Provide support for necessary coordination of networks.* [p.35]

- Most "new" organizations introduced to IDRC through the competition were not successful, and no contact was maintained with them subsequently (because of limited availability of IDRC staff for this task). [p. 42]

Capacity

- Short duration of the awards did not facilitate any capacity development beyond the individual, to the institution. This seems similar to conclusions of two 1985 studies on IDRC small grants. [p. 16, 41]

  - *Lesson: Longer duration awards.*

Policy

- *Themes changed too quickly.*

  - *Lesson: More time should be allocated to a theme (two years) to get maximum impact*. [p. 35, 38]

- Insufficient attention to dissemination and post-project followup of results.

  - *Lesson: Ensure diffusion of research results.*

General Lessons:

- While time-consuming, *direct administration of the grants is preferable* to devolution. IDRC maintains its profile, and gets access to new institutions through direct administration.

- *Grant programmes which have a firm institutional "home" within IDRC are more likely to generate internal IDRC support than those that are cross-cutting.* [p. 44]

Study: Review of the Role of IDRC in the Scholarship Fund for Palestinian
                 Refugee Women in Lebanon

Author: Gail Larose Consulting
Date: February 2006
Pages: 43

1. Context:

IDRC manages the Scholarship Fund for Palestinian Refugee Women. A total of $3.3
million was raised from multiple donors by 2005 (roughly $1 million from Canada).
IDRC's contribution totalling $300,000 was salary, travel and waiver of an administrative
fee.

This administrative review assessed whether IDRC should continue to manage the Fund
on behalf of a group of donors after 2010. It does not evaluate basic objectives of the
Fund.

2. Objectives

- Clear: capacity development – but not research capacity. The primary focus was
  on basic education capacity.

- Reviewer's suggested additional objectives: administrative capacity development in
  the local administering agency (UNRWA) [p. 20, 22], and improving the influence
  of women in community development.

3. Management

- IDRC manages the scholarship fund – specifically coordinating receipt of donor
  contributions, overseeing the selection and work of the administering agency
  (UNRWA) in Lebanon, disbursing funds to that agency.

- An advisory committee of Palestinian experts and UNRWA staff monitors decisions.

- A Board of Governors, made up of donors, provides general oversight.

- IDRC maintains an internal role on policy, selection criteria, receipt, placement and
  disbursement of funds from donors and reporting.

- Control of grants: A selection committee supervised by a Board and by IDRC staff,
  and monitored by an advisory committee, administers grants.

4. What worked?

Management

- *IDRC's role in defining clear, transparent selection processes* has given credibility
  to the Fund, among donors and recipients. [Similar to the Central America
  economics Fund's utilization of respected experts as referees].

Capacity development

- *Utilization of an IDRC model* for selection, reporting and decision-making has led to changes in *organizational capacity* within UNRWA, the local administering agency.

5. What did not:

Organizational relationships/management

- *Ad-hoc receipt of funds* from other donors has made administration and continuity difficult.

- *Relying on the administering agency for reports* has not worked. Reports are late and not in donor-friendly formats. This leads to funding delays, and time for IDRC staff to rewrite them.

  - o IDRC has had to advance funds to cover short-falls from other donors and some awardees take loans to cover the shortfalls.

- *Ambiguity about political and development results* undermines sustainability of the Fund.

  - o The basic objectives of the Fund have not been explained in terms compatible with either CIDA's or IDRC's mandates or priorities.

  - o There is confusion about the primary objectives of the Fund –is it basic education capacity development, or an undergraduate scholarship fund?

- *Lack of clarity about roles and changing mandates of Canadian partners* and disagreements with CIDA on overhead charges have hampered coordination and possible continuation of the IDRC role.

  - o Initial ambiguities about the nature of the organizational relationships within Canada, and different interpretations of the programme in each organization have led to strained relations between the three Canadian organizations.

  - o Foreign Affairs and IDRC see a partnership, but CIDA appears to see a contractual relationship to administer funds.

- *Lack of personnel continuity among Canadian partners* (Foreign Affairs, CIDA, IDRC) have led to problems of continuity in management and organizational understanding of the rationale for the project.

- *Publicity has not been effective* in explaining IDRC's or Canada's role in the project.