

## CORPORATE PERFORMANCE

### Learning from Evaluation Reports

In IDRC's decentralized evaluation system, individual program units decide what activities are evaluated, when, and for what purposes. The strength of this system is that evaluations are tailored to the specific information needs of each unit. However, because the reports produced differ in focus, scope, and method, they require additional analysis to reveal generalizable information about corporate performance on issues of Centre-wide importance.

The Evaluation Unit analysed 52 evaluation reports received over the past two years, drawing out feedback on key issues raised in IDRC's second Corporate Program Framework (CPF II): **research outcomes, research linkages, interdisciplinarity, and gender**. We were looking for information on topics that the authors of the reports may not have been asked to address in their terms of reference, but on which it is reasonable to expect some coverage, given the centrality of these issues within IDRC and development circles more broadly. This analysis provides insights into the four issues, and shows how project and program evaluation information can be used to synthesize findings on topics of corporate interest.

#### The Sample

The 52 reports reviewed show that IDRC evaluation activity tends to be project-focussed; 58% of these evaluations focussed on one or multiple projects (see Table 1). Other types of evaluation are becoming more prevalent. Compared with the inventory of evaluations received since the inception of the Centre, there has been a significant increase in the number of evaluations of networks, from 8% overall to 21% in the last two years. The increase reflects a growing reliance on this mode of program delivery, and a desire to trace its effectiveness in different settings.

**Table 1. Types of Evaluations Received, 1995-97**

Type	Number	Percent
Single Project	17	33
Multiple Project/Program	13	25
Network	11	21
Institutional Assessment	5	10
Issue review	6	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100%</b>

The reports show that Centre staff use evaluations to gain feedback on specific issues within their projects; only 9 (17%) could be deemed compliance evaluations (in which the terms of reference simply ask the evaluator to verify that original objectives were met). The most common issues addressed were:

- the types and quality of the results of research projects (48% of the reports);
- critique of the design of the initiative (38%); of these, half relate to networks, particularly dealing with their structures and governance;
- the quality of the research, including methodology, approach, data samples, etc. (27%); and
- project or institutional management (17%).

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## Key Findings

Table 2 shows the incidence of comments related to research outcomes, research linkages, interdisciplinarity and gender in the 52 reports reviewed. The highlights of our findings on these four issues are described below, and discussed in further detail over the next four pages.

**Table 2. Sources of Information**  
n=52 reports

Issue	#	(%)
Research Outcomes	44	(85)
Research Linkages	37	(72)
Interdisciplinarity	21	(40)
Gender	17	(33)

### *Research Outcomes*

85% of the evaluation reports discussed research outcomes, indicating that IDRC is very concerned with results. The most frequently described outcome is capacity building among individuals and institutions, followed by application of research results and building effective linkages among researchers, institutions, and research users.

### *Research Linkages*

The reports show that a key advantage of research linkages relates to disseminating knowledge and projects still have difficulties sharing knowledge beyond research communities. Also, there is evidence that care should be taken so that new information technologies enhance, not replace, more traditional means of knowledge sharing.

### *Interdisciplinarity*

Despite interdisciplinarity being a key aspect of IDRC's approach to development research, the evaluation reports contained little substantive analysis on the subject. One of the key problems seems to be a lack of conceptual tools and methods to assess interdisciplinarity.

### *Gender*

Evaluation reports offer next to no corporate learning on gender issues. IDRC requested minimal feedback on how well projects succeed in incorporating gender issues into development research, or on what impact projects have on gender relations.

## Research Outcomes

**IDRC evaluations focus heavily on results.** Of the 52 evaluation reports analysed, 44 (85%) discuss the outcomes of IDRC-supported research (see Table 3). The most common type of outcome reported is capacity building among individuals and institutions (87%); 72% of the evaluations report on the application of research results to policy, as well as to improving standards of living, technical practice or research methodologies; finally, 68% of the reports record the establishment of effective networks or linkages among researchers, institutions, NGOs, and/or government agencies.

Drawing from both positive and negative examples, **the reports also provide insight into how to ensure that IDRC-supported research makes a difference for development:** (The percent of the reports commenting on the factors below is noted in brackets.)

**Right Stakeholders** . Impact is greatly enhanced when the right stakeholders are involved in the project; evaluations call for the use of more participatory techniques, or for greater coordination and networking with key research users and collaborators during the design and implementation of the research. (25%)

**Dissemination** . Projects need, yet often lack, a coherent, appropriate and aggressive strategy to disseminate research findings to users. (23%)

**Persistence** . The Centre should be persistent on two fronts: in supporting research into its utilization phase (10%); and in sticking with institutions or networks until research capacity is firmly established (10%).

**Individuals** . Particular individuals may be influential in ensuring or hindering the impact of a research project. Some evaluators praise dedicated and skilled staff, others point to key research personnel championing the research after they assume a position in another organization, while another discusses problems caused by high staff turn-over. One report mentioned that a lack of contact with IDRC personnel hindered the project's success. (15%)

**Contextual Factors** . Contextual factors must be taken into account, for they can significantly inhibit or facilitate impact. Evaluations described technologies that were irrelevant to the surrounding market because they were too costly or redundant, or research topics that were rendered unimportant by changes in national policy. (13%)

### **IDRC's corporate objectives for 1997 to 2000**

- *To foster and support the production and application of research results leading to policies and technologies that enhance the lives of people in the developing regions;*
- *To mobilize and strengthen the indigenous research capacity in the countries of those regions, particularly capacity for policies and technologies for more healthy and prosperous societies, food security, biodiversity, and access to information.* (CPF II)

<b>Table 3. Research Outcomes</b>		
<b>Type of Outcome</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>%</b>
Capacity building:	38	87
<i>individual</i>	21	48
<i>institutional</i>	17	39
Application of research results:	32	72
<i>to policy</i>	12	27
<i>other</i>	20	45
Effective network / linkages	30	68

## Research Linkages

Three out of four of the reports (72%) deal with either formal networks or looser arrangements among researchers, institutions, knowledge users, etc. The issues they raise are mainly in the areas of knowledge dissemination and how to make networks effective.

**Knowledge Dissemination** . The reports raise two key issues regarding knowledge dissemination, one of the primary benefits of research linkages:

1. *Finding the appropriate mode of dissemination is essential and generally different modes are required to reach the various parties concerned.* For example, the evaluation of a cattle project in Mexico and Central America found that information sharing occurred only at a scientific level through publications, seminars and symposiums; little was returned to the local producers. Extending access to research results beyond the research community is an essential, but difficult, process.
2. *In some contexts, traditional means of knowledge diffusion should not be replaced with new information and communication technologies (ICTs).* An institutional assessment of CODESRIA, a pan-African institute devoted to developing African social science, found that its traditional role as publisher and documentation centre remains vital to researchers because of a dearth of private publishers and limited access to electronic information resources. In this context, ICTs might be less appropriate, given the audience's limited ability to receive information through these new technologies.

**Networks** . The evaluations provide some guidance on how to build effective networks. The evaluations confirm a recent study's conclusions regarding the key factors that affect the success or failure of a network; these include: flexible and internally-driven management, diversity of membership, clear and focussed goals, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances (*Networks: An Ethnographic Study*, Anne Bernard, 1996). Evaluators emphasize that networks need to be structured and actively promoted, they require long-term program support, a committed coordinator, and they demand an appropriate and reliable communication system.

### Program Strategy

*We are establishing the program initiatives as working networks, focussed on particular knowledge gaps and linking participating institutions with other relevant knowledge communities.*  
(CPF II)

### EVIS data on Research Linkages

Evaluation Information System (EVIS) data also reveal positive assessments of IDRC's record in promoting research linkages. Of the 194 reports and sub-reports on EVIS, 127 answered the question, "*Were linkages among national, regional, and/or international researchers enhanced?*" Their conclusions were:

Yes:	67 reports (53%)
No:	23 reports (18%)
Yes/No:	37 reports (29%)*

Only 69 reports addressed the question "*Were linkages between researchers and facilitating or intermediary organizations adequate?*" 70% of the responses were positive:

Yes:	47 (70%)
No:	12 (17%)
Yes/No:	10 (14%)*

\* Yes/No denotes that the report cites examples where some linkages were enhanced (or adequate) and others were not.

## Interdisciplinarity

**The evaluation reports reviewed provide little input for corporate learning on multi- or interdisciplinarity.** The innovative nature of this type of research and high corporate commitment to its promotion suggest a need for corporate monitoring and learning (see CPF quote and *Across Disciplines*, Kapila and Moher, 1995). While Program Officers express satisfaction with the interdisciplinary experience in their activities (see PCR box), the 52 evaluation reports reviewed showed a lack of data and analysis on this subject.

Fewer than half (40%) of the reports reviewed include some mention of interdisciplinarity. Most of the comments are cursory. Many of the evaluations state that they did not have the means to evaluate interdisciplinarity, indicating a need to make available frameworks and methods to better assess the cost and contribution of the approach. The issues that emerge in the reports suggest a need for exploring some of the assumptions and experience to date:

**Improved outcomes** . The evaluations contend that a multi- or interdisciplinary approach generally provides better analysis, greater acceptance of research results, and more sustainable impact. They cite a lack of multi- or interdisciplinarity as a factor limiting the impact of the project or inhibiting the achievement of goals.

**Cost-benefit** . Authors mention that multi- or interdisciplinarity tends to be more costly and that the time frame for yielding results is longer than single disciplinary research. It is generally assumed that the improved research outcomes warrant these additional costs.

**Organizational structure and leadership** . Organizational structure and leadership appear to be an important determinant of the success of multi- or interdisciplinarity. Although no one model is endorsed, the evaluations converge on the importance of having structures which cut across sectoral lines and inspired leadership which is able to deal with the challenge of bridging gaps between many points of view.

*Complex problems must be addressed in a multidisciplinary manner. ... The Centre has incorporated a multidisciplinary approach to research support and management in order to reinforce its commitment to environmental sustainability and social equity. (CPF II)*

### Project Completion Report (PCR) Data on Interdisciplinarity

Program Officers rated 202 projects (from a total of 401 closed PCRs) to be "genuinely inter-disciplinary". Of these, the interdisciplinary experience was assessed as:

Satisfactory in 147 reports  
(73%)

Unsatisfactory in 15 reports  
(7%)

No judgement in 40 reports  
(20%).

IDRC staff seem to be satisfied with the degree of inter-disciplinarity of their projects. However, the PCRs lack critical commentary; most simply note which disciplines were involved.

## Gender

**IDRC is not requesting information on how well projects succeed in incorporating gender in development research, or on what impact the project has had on gender relations.** Except for one report by the Gender and Sustainable Development Unit, the evaluation reports of the last two years lack substantive discussions of gender issues.

It has been over ten years since the establishment of IDRC's Women in Development Unit, and even longer since women's and gender issues have been explicitly incorporated into Centre priorities. However, only one-third of the reports (33%) say anything related to gender at all, or disaggregate data by sex. Only 7 reports (13%) make any recommendations or give an evaluative comment with respect to gender. (See Table 4)

*There may be awareness of gender equity concerns on a structural level (as seen in attention to hiring practices), but gender issues were rarely evaluated on the level of individual research projects.* Eleven of the 17 reports that mention gender or contain sex-disaggregated data are network or institutional assessments. Half of these simply comment on the number of male versus female personnel. Of the project-level evaluations, four on farming systems research note the importance of incorporating gender issues in this type of research, given the gendered division of labour in farming; and two evaluations on information technologies highlight women's difficulties in gaining access to ICTs.

One evaluation from the Gender and Sustainable Development (GSD) Unit assesses the degree to which gender issues are integrated in project design. It concludes that in the abstracts of 70 projects funded by IDRC in 1995-96, only 8 clearly addressed gender relations in the design, methodology, implementation, analysis and evaluation stages of the research.

*All Centre staff share responsibility to ensure that IDRC-supported research takes into account the differential impact that change will have on the lives of men and women... Efforts will continue to ensure that adequate numbers of women scientists, and scientists sensitive to gender issues, participate in all Centre-supported research and that the impacts of the research on both women and men are fully explored. (CPF II)*

**Table 4. Comments on Gender in 52 Reports**

Type*	#
No mention	30
Project focussed on women or had a strong gender component, but this wasn't an evaluation issue	3
Counted number of women researchers or trainees	5
Evaluation methodology was sensitive to gender differences in respondents	2
Gender was one in a list of demographic issues	2
Report made recommendations about gender	5
Report made evaluative comment on gender	2

\* Two reports fit in two categories, thus the number of citations rises to 19.