

Strategic Evaluation of IDRC's Contributions to Capacity-Building Design Document – Overview of Strategic Evaluation

IDRC Evaluation Unit¹

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 IDRC's Evaluation Unit is conducting a strategic evaluation to investigate the Centre's contributions to the development of capacities of those with whom the Centre works. This strategic evaluation focuses on the processes and results of IDRC support for the development of capacities² of its southern partners – what capacities have been enhanced, whose, how, and how effectively.
- 1.2 The strategic evaluation is intended primarily for **use** by:
 - a. **IDRC's senior managers**, in their monitoring of indigenous capacity-building as part of the Centre's Corporate Assessment Framework (CAF)³, and in supporting a corporate environment conducive to the Centre's capacity-building efforts;
 - b. **IDRC staff and managers**, in designing, supporting and monitoring projects and activities intended to develop capacities.
- 1.3 The Evaluation Unit has developed the evaluation focus, uses, questions, scope and design, in consultation with Centre senior management, Centre staff, an internal "reference group" of Centre staff and managers, and external experts. Similar consultations will continue throughout the project.

2 Capacity-Building at IDRC

- 2.1 The 1970 Act of Parliament establishing IDRC describes the Centre's mandate as being to *"...initiate, encourage, support and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions."* The Act states that one of the ways the Centre is to support this

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² The international development community tends to use the term "capacity development" rather than "capacity-building". The latter is often seen to mean that capacities are assumed to be absent, or that the process is one of moving from one level of capacity to the next, whereas "capacity development" acknowledges existing capacities, and the political dynamics of change. In this document, both terms are used somewhat interchangeably as "capacity-building" is the term most frequently used in Centre parlance.

³ The definition and characteristics of good performance in indigenous capacity-building from the CAF are attached as Annex A.

is “...to assist the developing regions to build up the research capabilities, the innovative skills and the institutions required to solve their problems.”

Capacity-building is therefore at the core of the Centre’s mandate, and is one of the two corporate strategic goals identified in the Centre’s CAF.

- 2.2 Capacity-building, for IDRC, has tended to focus on the development of capacities of individuals and of organizations (often referred to as “institutions” in IDRC parlance), and sometimes to other types of organized groupings, such as networks, communities, or sectors. Capacity in the context of IDRC work has tended to be considered to refer to research and related capacities,⁴ although there is some evidence that the range of capacities is quite wide, and possibly expanding in recent years. (This will be explored further in the evaluation.)

3 Evaluation focus and questions

- 3.1 The focus of the strategic evaluation is to find out **what results are being achieved through IDRC support to strengthening southern partners’ capacities, and what has led to those results**. This gives rise to the following interrelated questions:
- 3.1.1 **Who/what are the targets of IDRC’s capacity development efforts** (e.g. individual researchers, organisations, networks, emerging research areas, etc.), and **what capacities** has IDRC contributed to developing in, within and among such groups?
 - 3.1.2 What **strategies and methods** have been used in IDRC’s work to support capacity development of southern partners, and how **effective** have these strategies been?
 - 3.1.3 What **contexts and factors** (both outside and inside IDRC) inhibit or contribute to the ability of IDRC to bring about positive outcomes in the development of southern capacities?
 - 3.1.4 What are the **perspectives of IDRC’s southern partners** on their experiences and results in the context of Centre support?
- 3.2 Supplementary questions which the evaluation will seek to address are:
- 3.2.1 How do IDRC’s approaches to the development of capacities relate to those used by others?

⁴ The CAF specifies capacities to: identify and conceptualize research problems, establish priorities for action, and to design, implement, manage and evaluate research projects and programs that address these needs; to build relationships and linkages with other organizations in order to gain support in achieving their goals; and in communicating research results to promote evidence-based change.

- 3.2.2 What approaches and methods exist for assessing capacity development?
- 3.3 Given the evaluation uses, the evaluation will initially focus on results in the 2000-2005 Corporate Strategy and Program Framework (CSPF) period, albeit examined within a broader historical and programmatic context.
- 3.4 The evaluation will provide an opportunity to verify and inform the Centre's corporate knowledge (including the CAF definition) about the scope, characteristics and effectiveness of its support to capacity-building.

4 Background work

- 4.1 The design phase of the strategic evaluation has included background work to help the Unit:
 - 4.1.1 understand the field of "capacity development" and how capacity development can be assessed;
 - 4.1.2 identify who is doing what in the field of capacity development; and
 - 4.1.3 understand, in a preliminary way, the scope and nature of IDRC's own capacity-building work (what capacities do we contribute to building, whose capacities, where, how, how assessed etc.).
- 4.2 Activities in the design phase include:
 - 4.2.1 talking to managers and staff about the strategic evaluation and capacity-building;
 - 4.2.2 reviewing the literature on capacity development and the work of other organizations, and making contacts with others;
 - 4.2.3 consultancies to review Centre documents and project files related to capacity development, and to interview staff about their capacity-building work. Specific consultancies include:
 - 4.2.3.1 an analysis of a sample of 40 projects (1985-present) from a « learning » perspective; how does what we do relate to learning theory? What can we draw from this for planning and evaluating our capacity-building work?
 - 4.2.3.2 interviews with a small sample of staff and review of selected documents, to identify some "theories of change" at IDRC about how capacities develop, and how these relate to outside perspectives;

- 4.2.3.3 a scan of recent evaluation reports, to identify what capacities and whose capacities were supported, and how.

5 Considerations for evaluating capacity development that affect the evaluation design

- 5.1 A number of considerations for evaluating capacity development emerge from the literature on capacity development and related fields, and from the background work to this strategic evaluation. Among those considerations with particular pertinence for the conceptual and methodological design of the strategic evaluation are the following:
- 5.1.1 A typical definition of capacity centres on the ability of a collective or individual to achieve its goals, which makes the use of the concept for analysis or practical application a challenge. Many have commented that “capacity” is a **complex** and elusive concept (ECDPM 2003; Boesen 2004).
- 5.1.2 Given the elusive nature of “capacity”, it is a matter of interpretation **whether capacity-building underlies most if not all** of the Centre’s work, or if it entails explicit and targeted aims and interventions that are common to **only a subset** of the Centre’s work (e.g. activities designed to address identified capacity “gaps”). Bernard (2004b) suggests, “capacity development is intrinsic to all IDRC projects insofar as they are expected to contribute to the *sustainably enhanced* development status of the people and societies [concerned]....Enhancing development implies enabling change; doing so sustainably, implies learning.” If so, then distinguishing “capacity-building” from “development” or “empowerment” poses a significant challenge, particularly if “capacity-building” is articulated or understood at a fairly general level, as is often the case.
- 5.1.3 “Capacity” is used in reference to individuals and to groups of various types (e.g., organizations, networks, communities, institutions, sectors, societies). It also refers to the ability of these entities to do many different kinds of things. Capacity in the international development literature is closely related to governance and the ability of governments to manage their affairs and foster development. IDRC’s use of the term is somewhat more specific to its mandate, but still encompasses a wide range of abilities.
- 5.1.4 Reflected in the burgeoning literature on capacity development is the notion that capacities of individuals or groups must be understood in relation to the **systems** in which they are embedded (ECDPM 2003; Lavergne 2004; Lusthaus et al. 1999; Morgan 1998, 1999, 2003; UNDP 1998; etc.) Individuals apply and develop their capacities as part of organizations, institutions, societies, networks, and many other “webs” of relationships, all

inter-related; and efforts to facilitate capacity development at one level or one part of the system will have implications for the others. The strategic evaluation will therefore need to reflect an understanding of the nature and notion of systems and systemic change that are relevant to the Centre's work.

- 5.1.5 Human and organizational capacity development are also increasingly understood as embedded in **processes of change** that have short- and long-term dimensions. The background work and evaluation studies are seeking to make more explicit the understandings of multiple change processes that both IDRC staff and partners have as they work towards the enhancement of partners' capacities.
- 5.1.6 Increasingly, capacity development is understood as an **endogenous** process – or set of processes -- which, while subject to external influences, are change processes which are determined by those going through the change (ECDPM 2003; Morgan 2003; Lavergne 2004). Effective capacity development is therefore dependent on ownership of the development process and agenda by those whose capacities are being strengthened (Lavergne 2004). In this light it is therefore somewhat problematic to talk about "IDRC's results" in developing capacities. The evaluation will need to seek, rather, to identify the Centre's contributions to supporting the efforts of individuals and groups to enhance their capacities in ways that these individuals and groups determine.
- 5.1.7 Capacity development and support for it are increasingly understood as being **context-specific** and **adaptive** (Lavergne 2004). Moreover, preliminary findings from an ECDPM study of capacity development (under the Govnet of OECD-DAC) suggest that there is no single "best" way to support capacity development, and that **multiple perspectives** and approaches on the part of those attempting to support capacity development are important (Baser 2004). Therefore, evaluation is not a matter of coming up with "best practices", nor is it about assessing relative effectiveness of different types of approaches used by the Centre, but rather shedding light on the factors and conditions which influence capacity outcomes.
- 5.1.8 Capacity development involves individual and collective or organizational **learning** (Baser 2004, Bernard 2004a, b). Bernard (2004b) makes a distinction between capacity development and learning⁵, but proposes that "learning underlies capacity":

⁵ Bernard (2004b, p. 1) describes capacity development as "an *instrumental concept*, capacities tending to be 'for' something", and capacity development as implying "someone deciding on his/her own, or for someone else, that a particular knowledge or skill is needed, and intervening in some way to enable its acquisition." She states that "Learning, on the other hand, is something intrinsic, a *natural, internally driven and personal process* of coming to understand, and to better manage, oneself in the social and physical environment....Learning happens as an individual confronts, consciously or not, challenges to

[Learning] is the process through which a sought-after body of knowledge or set of skills is acquired. It is this fact that makes capacity development such a tricky issue for an intervening agent. Capacity objectives can be set and opportunities for learning provided, but what is learned, to what level of competency and how sustained it is are ultimately in the control of no one but the learner – and not even totally then. Capacities, then, cannot be ‘developed’ as such; they can be encouraged, guided and facilitated, and, where care is taken to meet certain best-practice conditions, may very effectively develop from within (p. 2).

Bernard also notes that “intervening with people’s ways of knowing and acting is inherently intrusive” (2004, 25).

6 Strategic evaluation design

6.1 The strategic evaluation is designed to be modular, consisting of a number of discrete studies focused on specific questions or dimensions, that will provide findings through 2005-2006. The following sets of studies have been envisioned, although are dependent on human and financial resources available:

6.1.1 Studies in the 2004/05 fiscal year, oriented towards reporting to the Centre’s Board of Governors in June 2005 and beyond, as part of CAF reporting. These will include:

- collection of descriptive data on individuals and institutions that the Centre has worked with, and on Centre **intentions** to support the building of capacities through projects in the CSPF 2000-2005 period (“Module 1”);
- analysis of capacity-building **approaches** and **results**, drawing on a sample of projects, including examination of the perspectives and experiences of Centre partners (“Module 2”).

6.1.2 Depending on resources (and interest), studies in 2005/06 which could be oriented towards a deeper examination of issues raised in the initial set of studies and by the strategic evaluation users. This set of studies might include:

- a tracer study and/or set of case studies of capacity-building results in IDRC-supported work;

his/her beliefs, practices and ways of knowing (knowledge system). It involves bringing together the various, often disparate, bits of information from the environment and interpreting them into increasingly meaningful and stable patterns, the explanatory concepts or ‘hooks’ used to guide behaviour.”

- longitudinal studies that monitor Centre support to individuals and institutions and the development of their capacities, over time; and/or
- studies of particular modalities or approaches to capacity development (e.g. training, “learning by doing”, organisational support, etc.) and their effectiveness, especially those of particular strategic importance for the Centre (e.g. towards more “complete” capacity-building).

6.1.3 Studies in collaboration with specific programs and/or responsibility centres -- i.e., evaluations that programs / responsibility centres are planning which have a capacity-building focus.

6.2 The evaluation will entail engagement with and support to Centre staff, both to ensure that the evaluation responds to needs and opportunities that are relevant to management, staff and partners, and to share with staff findings about capacity-building that can assist them in their work. Options for engaging with staff include:

- Periodic consultations with staff on various dimensions of the evaluation;
- Discussions / dissemination around preliminary evaluation findings (e.g. lunchtime seminars, “Work in Progress” briefs, and/or use of the intranet);
- Collaboration with programs on monitoring and evaluation of capacity-building work, as requested and as feasible.

Care will be taken to ensure that staff participation is primarily voluntary and does not adversely affect workloads. Centre (Programs) Management has requested periodic updates on this aspect of the strategic evaluation implementation.

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Annex A

Corporate Assessment Framework (CAF)

Definition and Characteristics of Good Performance in Indigenous Capacity-Building

Definition

In the projects and programs it supports, IDRC aims to strengthen the abilities of Southern researchers, research institutions and networks to identify and conceptualise research problems, establish priorities for action, and to design, implement, manage and evaluate research projects and programs that address these needs. This process can include devolving activities or functions to existing or newly-created entities in the South. The Centre also devotes time and resources to strengthening the capacity of these individuals, institutions and networks to build relationships and linkages with other organizations in order to gain support in achieving their goals and in communicating research results to promote evidence-based change.

Characteristics

1. IDRC supports Southern researchers, institutions and networks by strengthening their ability to identify and conceptualise research problems and to establish priorities for action.
2. IDRC supports recipient organisations in the building of technical, administrative and management capacities.
3. IDRC supports a process whereby activities and/or functions can be, when and where appropriate, devolved to existing or newly created entities in the South. In programs which have been devolved, IDRC continues to participate in the sustainability of the program as a donor ensuring that the assets and responsibilities of the program are legally transferred to the new host.
4. The Centre devotes time and resources to strengthening the capacity of Southern recipient partner organisations and networks in building relationships and linkages with other organisations that help the Southern partner organisation achieve its goals.
5. The Centre devotes time and resources to strengthening the capacity of recipient partner organisations, individuals, institutions and networks to communicate their research results to promote evidence-based change.