RESEARCH AND INFORMATION SERVICES IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES;

ONE PERSPECTIVE FROM THE INTERNATIONAL

DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE, CANADA

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Is research by developing countries a luxury? Faced by so many pressing
development challenges, can developing countries afford to divert scare
human and financial resources to risky, long-term research efforts? Is
there enough time?

These are not simple rhetorical questions - some serious development
thinkers feel that substantive research on development problems is best done
by experienced scientists working in established facilities, and that LDC
resources should be directed towards implementation.

The view of IDRC, however, is that investments by LDCs in applied
development research can and do pay dividends. Research is a legitimate
component in a country's overall approach to controlling its own
development. The solution to local development problems will not come
readily from the distant industrialized North, however well-intentioned; the
best answers will come from local efforts by people who understand the local
needs and circumstances. This was the philosophy put forward in 1969 by a
World Bank Commission on International Development chaired by a former
Canadian Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson. The Commission reported that the

developing countries had "become increasingly dependent on a technology

conceived and produced outside their borders and without reference to their

special needs" and were suffering as a result. The Commission raised

awareness that there was an extremely low level of research activity in LDCs

(· estimates indicate only 3% to 6% of the total amount of research taking

place worldwide is located within the developing countries -) and that there

was an urgent need to build indigenous scientific competence to apply

science and technology to local development problems.

It was in response to this dual need to support the research efforts of

developing countries and to enhance their research capacity that the

Parliament of Canada, in 1970, created the International Development

Research Centre (IDRC). According to Parliament,

"The objects of the Centre are to initiate, encourage, support, and conduct

research into the problems of 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.

In actual practice, IDRC seldom chooses to undertake the research itself.

Rather, it encourages and assists scientists and policy-makers in the

developing regions to identify priority research needs and to pursue sound

methodologies themselves. IDRC monitors progress and promotes dissemination

of results, but the Centre-supported projects are designed, conducted, and

managed by developing country scientists. It is IDRC's aim not only that

the specific development problem be researched and solved, but that the

research experience acquired and the scientific competence gained, remain in

the developing country. This is why only under very exceptional

circumstances would one find a long term expatriate advisor within the more

than 3000 projects IDRC has supported in over a 100 countries.

The financial support offered by IDRC is in the form of "untied aid" research grants given to institutions (rather than to individuals) for specific research-related projects. The type of institution can vary – governmental, university, NGO, non-profit research centre, private company, etc. In current fiscal year 1988/89, IDRC will make available over $100 million for such projects. The money comes to IDRC in the form of an annual grant from the Parliament of Canada. Over the years, Parliament has steadily increased the grant to its present level of $114 million. Though substantial, this amount represents only 4% of overall Canadian overseas development assistance, the bulk of which is made available through our more familiar sister organisation, CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency. However, though somewhat complementary in their activities, CIDA and IDRC are different in their structure and operations.

CIDA is a government department and its employees are public servants. However, Parliamemt recognized that research was a potentially high-risk, long-term activity. It may involve sensitive issues, it needs specialized staff to monitor progress, and there has to be some flexibility to adjust to the changing research environment. Thus IDRC was established with a special status as a "Crown Corporation" that could operate at arm's length from the Government of Canada. IDRC employees are not public servants, and are drawn from nations around the world. There are about 400 staff based in Ottawa, and 200 located in six regional offices (Bogota, Dakar, Cairo, Nairobi. New Delhi, and Singapore). IDRC policies are established not by the government but by a 21-member international Board of Governors, many of whom are nationals of developing countries. IDRC is not subject tc Canadian rules

over Canadian content, priority countries, aid quotas, or other constraints.

Individual project proposals are reviewed on their merits by IDRC staff. To
qualify for IDRC support, projects must:

    i)   be of a research, or investigative, nature;

    ii)   be proposed by a developing country research institution;

    iii) be of practical or applied nature;

    iv) fall within the categories of essential development activity
         recognized by the Board;

    v)   address a problem recognized by the host government as
         bearing a developmental priority, and

    vi) focus primarily on the needs of the poorest.

The areas of direct research support concentrate on the agriculture, food
and nutrition sciences, the health sciences, the social sciences, and the
earth and engineering sciences. Areas of support to research infrastructure
include the information sciences, communications (means of disseminating and
implementing results from IDRC-supported research projects), and
fellowships.

Why does IDRC have an "Information Sciences" division? This is the legacy
of those who, when creating IDRC in 1970, recognized the value of
information as a reusable resource for development. There is an exponential
growth in the vast wealth of recorded knowledge, but can developing
countries gain access? In order to focus support for LDC efforts to
strengthen the management of scientific, technical, and other information as
part of the process of applying knowledge for development, IDRC's first

Board of Governors established the IS division as one of the Centre's
original program divisions. Thus, long before we entered the "information
decade" of the 1980's, IDRC had placed conspicuous emphasis on the potential
contribution of information science in the development process. During the
subsequent years, the division has grown to a staff of 80 people and an
annual budget of about $16 million CAD. During its 18 years of existence IS
division has funded over 400 information projects, costing in excess of $80
million CAD.

There are three objectives guiding the work of IS division. They reflect
the basic objectives of IDRC:

- Improving the management and utilization of infor-
  mation for development research and change.
- Building indigenous capacity to manage information
  and promote its use.
- Encourage cooperation and information-sharing.

We have adopted a broad interpretation of "Information Sciences" that allows
us to encompass the many different facets of information flow. We help fund
applied, problem-oriented information activities with clearly defined
objectives, users, beneficiaries, methodologies, and products. We are
particularly interested in projects directed towards benefitting the poorer
sectors of the community. The range of information problems and
organizations with which we work is rather varied. Activities financed by
IS division have included software development, creation of research
information services, design of national information systems, adaption of
modern information technologies, establishment of regional post-graduate IS

courses, and so on. These activities have taken place in fields of high priority to developing counties, such as debt management, agricultural research, community development, technology adoption in rural areas, land use, small-scale industries, water supply, sanitation. In addition to specific project activities in these sectors, IS division is also responsible for developing and maintaining the MINISIS software package, and for providing library services to IDRC staff and projects.

Why have representatives of IS division come to Sabah? To establish contact and to learn. What are the major development problems and priorities of Sabah? What research efforts are taking place into tackling these problems? How is the research agenda set? What human and financial resources are being made available for research? What research opportunities could be explored with IDRC's assistance? What are the information needs in support of research efforts or in support of implementing change? What information systems, services, and technologies are required to make development research and action in Sabah more effective?

Whether or not IDRC has a role to play will depend on the ability of Sabah to address these questions.

Annex I.   Examples of ISD-supported information projects in Asia.
Annex II   Examples of IDRC-supported research projects in Sabah.