The Intended Results of IDRC's Support of Networks: Extension, Excellence, Action, and Autonomy

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Report by Abra Adamo

"Network" is a term frequently met in the field of international development. Although people use the word to refer to many different types of shared activity—for example, partnerships, joint ventures, conferences, forms of international cooperation—most would agree that mobilizing a network is often an effective way to move an initiative forward.

IDRC has always recognized the importance of networks in supporting development research, but now it has begun to systematically consolidate its understanding of these structures. Because the Centre's inventory of knowledge on networks has been scattered and buried in reams of documentation and in the tacit knowledge of staff and partners, this learning has been difficult to muster and to apply.

Now, IDRC is determined to bring to light the collective knowledge that, in company with its partners, it has assembled and stored. The Centre aims to become more aware of the rich experience it has gained in working with networks during the past decade, and to share this experience more widely. A strategic evaluation will begin to unlock this information and so provide a resource that will nourish more profound discussions and effective networks in future.

For the purpose of its evaluation, IDRC defines a "network" as a social arrangement comprising either organizations or individuals that is based on building relationships, sharing tasks, and working on mutual or joint activities. A network, in other words, is a forum for human exchange. The term does *not* apply, in this case, to information, access, or data-swapping transactions (for example, LISTSERVs). Instead, the emphasis is on those links that enable people to work together to generate knowledge and to develop skills while maintaining their autonomy.

The first stage in IDRC's evaluation is a straightforward document review that pulls together a wide sample of the tacit knowledge about networks that is held within the Centre's literature. The study concentrates on three core issues: the **intended results** of IDRC-supported networks, the **sustainability** of these networks, and the **coordination and governance** of these networks.

This highlight summarizes the report "A Review of IDRC Documentation on the Intended Results of IDRC's Support of Networks (1995-2004)," which was prepared by Abra Adamo.

Networks as Agencies of Extension, Excellence, Action, and Autonomy

The Adamo report observes that IDRC's growing interest in networks is rooted in two shifts in thinking about development research. First, developing countries are burdened with large and complex problems that exceed the capacities of any single discipline to solve, and therefore the traditional monodisciplinary approach of science is insufficient to understand and solve these problems. Second, IDRC's own limited finances have forced the organization to husband its resources and to favour a more integrated strategy.

The report finds that IDRC has supported networks for four reasons, each of which reflects its preference for seeking out multidisciplinary solutions.

1. Networks improve the effectiveness and reach of IDRC and its partners

Networks are agencies of *extension*.

By engaging the cooperation of other bodies, networks enable IDRC to support larger and more important research and advocacy programs, and to do so with greater administrative efficiency. Networks attract multiple sources of funding and widen opportunities for publicizing and applying the results of research. They enhance the visibility, reach, and impact of all the Centre's work.

As Anne Bernard has explained: "Networks constitute prime vehicles for program delivery in times of decreasing development assistance resources precisely because they have the potential to improve coordination, enhance information exchange, support human resources development, and decentralize management."

The Centre's *Corporate Strategy and Program Framework, 2000-2005* explicitly recognizes this particular value of networks when it states that IDRC will seek to develop a variety of partnership arrangements with donors and research institutions, and pursue "regional and interregional networks of research institutions that are connected among themselves and with the broader Canadian and global knowledge communities." The Centre's 2005-2010 corporate strategy reconfirms this commitment to networks as a modality for development research.

2. Networks enhance the quality of research

Networks are agencies of *excellence*.

IDRC invests considerable time, energy, and resources in improving the rigour and comprehensiveness of the research it supports and the relevance of this research for its users. The Centre uses networks to boost research quality in several ways.

<u>Building capacity</u>
First, IDRC supports networks in order to *build capacity*, that is, to encourage long-term peer learning and lasting mutual support among researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders, and among institutions and sectors. To put it in a simpler way, IDRC aims to bring people together so that they might learn from one another.

Capacity-building strategies include supporting graduate programs, scholarships, small grants programs, and training courses, and connecting innovative researchers and practitioners. Often, networks are intended to develop not only practical skills, but also a sense of community and commitment among members, through joint training exercises, guided peer review, the monitoring of fieldwork, cross-sector or region exchange, and other opportunities for professional engagement.

Networks are mobilized specifically to unite people working on related projects. Often, this type of collaboration serves a catalytic, idea-building function. As IDRC's Director of Evaluation, Fred Carden, explains, in many developing countries "there are so few researchers in any one field that they need the interaction with colleagues with similar problems in order to generate the creative energy to come up with effective and relevant solutions."

Networks also serve a mentoring function. They encourage peer review, and they link junior with senior scholars and weak with strong institutions. Networks are a means of capitalizing on what people already know, building on it, and enlarging the pool of shared experience.

In addition, networks aim to join researchers from different disciplines and stakeholders from different institutions and sectors, including NGOs, governments, inter-governmental organizations, and the academic and research worlds. The purpose is to stimulate lateral thinking and the cross-fertilization of ideas on issues of common concern.

Collaboration and coordination
Second, IDRC supports networks in order to *promote collaboration and coordination* on the immediate research effort. The goal: to strengthen the comprehensiveness and coherence of IDRC-supported research.

In many developing countries, the isolation in which researchers and their institutions typically work is often due to their limited means, but sometimes it may be rooted in an institutional culture sharply divided along disciplinary lines. The result: either a lower level of research is being carried out, or else research is being duplicated unnecessarily.

IDRC supports networks because they encourage people to pool scarce financial, material, and intellectual resources and to work toward common research goals. Better coordination increases the likelihood that the work will have a positive influence on human development.

In particular, because many development problems affect more than one country, IDRC is eager to support networks that have a regional perspective and where resources can be pooled toward a collective search for solutions. Regional networks also function as a vehicle for "scaling up," that is, for applying research already completed in one country to other countries with similar concerns, thereby extending the impact of the original work.

Involving stakeholders
Finally, IDRC supports networks in order to *involve key stakeholders* in Centre-supported research.

Once upon a time, IDRC felt that its main partner in its development efforts was the "small band of trained scientists" dedicated to solving the problems of poor countries. Nowadays, however, IDRC's partners include these scientists and researchers as well as a wide body of local communities, indigenous groups, NGOs and other civil society actors, the private business sector, and government policymakers.

As we have noted already, one good reason for involving such a network of stakeholders is to improve the quality and relevance of the research. Another important reason is to "democratize" research and make it more open, inclusive, and participatory. "Networks have the power to change existing power relations by enabling a greater diversity of voices to be heard, especially the historically marginalized, poor and powerless," says sociologist Peter Park.

3. Networks advance the use of research in policymaking

Networks are agencies of *action*.

IDRC uses networks to help ensure that the research it supports is eventually put to good use, particularly in policy-making by governments. The Centre takes four approaches toward this goal.

IDRC uses networks to *expand policy capacities*, that is, to improve the institutional framework surrounding policy-making. Networks support the development of innovative ideas and the skills to communicate them, and develop new talent for doing issues-based research and for analyzing practical problems.

As Adamo concludes, "...coordination of research agendas and efforts has the potential to ensure better coverage of the full range of researchable policy issues, to improve inter-institutional debate, exchange and cooperation and greater professional consensus on leading policy issues."

It should be added that, often, the visibility, credibility, and reputation of the network itself, and of its members, convinces a government to accept the network's research and use it in forging new policies or in revising existing ones.

IDRC uses networks to *broaden policy horizons*, that is, to improve the intellectual framework surrounding policy-making. Networks help increase both the stock of policy-relevant knowledge and its comprehensiveness. They introduce new ideas to the policy agenda, check that knowledge is provided to decision-makers in a form they can use, and nourish dialogues among researchers and decision-makers.

Southern Africa's regional Equity in Health Research Network (EQUINET), for example, broadened policy horizons by spreading the new concept of "equity in health"—a significant paradigm shift in the field. Equity in health implies recognizing the power relations that are involved in the provision of health care, and addressing differences in health status that are unnecessary, avoidable, and unfair.

Networks also help alleviate deficiencies in the research process, such as when research fails to address pressing issues, or when its results arrive too late to be useful. They advocate dialogue between researchers and policymakers at the outset of projects to ensure that the work will be relevant and timely.

IDRC uses networks to *disseminate information*. Networks often possess the combined resources needed to publish or broadcast research results to a wide audience, including to policymakers.

Electronic and Web-based media further extend this reach. For example, the Resource Center on Urban Agriculture and Forestry (RUAF) has benefited hugely from the use of electronic conferencing to disseminate data and experiences on urban agriculture. It runs electronic conferences in English, French, and Spanish that have included discussions on research methods, policy agendas, and urban wastewater.

Finally, IDRC and its research partners uses networks to *advocate policy*.

Sometimes this advocacy is direct and overt, such as efforts to promote changes in traditional concepts and attitudes held by policymakers in developing regions, or efforts to promote changes in the priorities and spending of Northern research institutions.

Sometimes, however, a network will lobby indirectly, by devolving this advocacy function to local organizations. Not only are established NGOs often better equipped for such a task, but the risk that the IDRC-supported research network will be suspected of adopting a political or partisan line will be minimized.

4. Networks strengthen the local ownership of research

Networks are agencies of *autonomy*.

IDRC's support for research networks in developing regions is a reaction, in part, against the old paradigm under which development agendas were written by foreign donors rather than by the people directly affected by these agendas. The Centre challenges that patronizing view. Instead, it sustains networks in order to help redefine power relations between North and South, and thereby to give a stronger voice to local partners in setting the research programs and agendas.

In practical terms, "local ownership" means that research is demand-driven. In the past, donor-driven research agendas have not always addressed the most pressing needs of local stakeholders. The result has sometimes been the underutilization of research results and limited impact on development. Networks help to counter this risk. Being forums for the broad-based sharing of information, they increase the likelihood that local needs will be heard—and met.

Devolving the coordination of research networks to regional partners ensures not only that the dependence on IDRC's limited resources is reduced, but also that established and well-informed people will manage and sustain these networks. As the 2003 external review of the Micro-economic Impacts of Macro-economic and Adjustment Policies Program Initiative notes, local institutions "are likely to be more familiar with the academic research communities in the developing countries. This puts them in a better position to identify all appropriate research partners ..."

As we have seen, IDRC encourages networks in order to enhance the reach, the quality, and the usefulness of the research it supports. A broader intention is to foster the creation of effective, long-term research relationships within developing countries.

Highlight prepared by Patrick Kavanagh, March 2005.