

In Conversation: Richard Fuchs

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Richard Fuchs joined IDRC in January 2001 as Director of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for Development Program Area. He came to the Centre with broad experience in academia, the public service, and the private sector. Dr Fuchs served as the Executive Director, and later as a Commissioner, for the Newfoundland Economic Recovery Commission. He was also the founder and CEO of the Enterprise Network Inc., a Crown corporation that established Canada's first rural online and telecentre services. In 1996, Mr Fuchs set up Futureworks, a firm specializing in the development of distance technology systems and services. It won the Newfoundland and Labrador EXPORT award earlier this year. While at Futureworks, Dr Fuchs worked with IDRC on several projects, including the study "Little Engines That Did:" Case Histories From The Global Telecentre Movement.

Over its 30-year history, IDRC has prided itself on the emphasis it has placed on the role of information in development. Today, with information and communication technologies (ICTs) changing so quickly, is it more difficult to be at the leading edge?

One of the lessons I have learned, largely the hard way, is that words are really important. "Leader" connotes "follower" and most folks would rather be leaders than followers. The word I use is "innovator." We need to understand our niche within the context of international development rather than patting ourselves on the back for always being the leader. IDRC is a relatively small organization with knowledgeable staff and a long history in information science — and now ICTs — for development. Our role has been *to be an innovator* and we need to continue that.

In what areas is there scope for innovation?

The information economy is very new and there are lots of places we can go where no one else has gone. One area that strikes me as very important is women's participation in the information economy. The post-industrial economy in the North has been principally characterized by rapid increases in women's participation in the workforce; in science and technology; and in business. For a host of reasons, women have much higher success rates than men in start-ups. So if there is a role in the information economy for the developing world — and we most certainly feel there is — how do we learn about women's optimal participation?

A second area — and this is a very Newfoundland-Canadian perspective — is to look at how the regions of Canada have transformed, in less than a generation, from resource- to knowledge-based economies. How do we take what's been learned there and contribute that knowledge to developing-country institutions? How can we help communities in the developing world understand the institutional training and business opportunities that have come about so they too can take advantage of them? We can help them learn where the information economy is heading, not where it's been. That means moving toward technology choices and research and development choices that are based on the future, not the past.

In what other directions do you see IDRC's program heading?

I see the program area as building on the strengths of some of our accomplishments. I sit on the steering committee of Bellanet [a multi-donor initiative working with the development community to increase collaboration], and we are interested in its growth and the services it can provide to IDRC. There have been a lot of good things within [the Centre's] Acacia and PAN [program initiatives] and we want to learn from those and continue them. But the world has changed since these initiatives began and we need to reflect those changes in our programming.

When Acacia and PAN started, in 1996 and 1994 respectively, there were still several countries in the developing world where connectivity had not happened. Now, I think it would be hard to find a country where there is no connectivity — it might just be one Internet service provider in the capital city, but the whole issue of whether connectivity is going to happen has more or less been resolved. So this is one area where the target has moved, partly because IDRC has had some success in helping it move.

The second change is that increasing numbers of agencies have internalized ICTs as part of their development programs. So the niche IDRC has had in this area for a very long time has again partly succeeded: more agencies now see ICTs as an important development issue.

In what other areas has IDRC programing in ICTs for development had an impact?

I think the way in which policy formation and adoption has occurred in the four Acacia target countries — Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda — has been quite remarkable. Acacia is in some cases principally, and in other cases partly responsible for helping that happen. That's a remarkable accomplishment in such a short time.

Influencing policy development is important but difficult. What is the best way to achieve this influence?

There is no real answer to that. Since I come from Newfoundland, we use what I call the "surround them" strategy, which means having an informed citizenry and civil society that know what's important to them; sooner or later the political processes will respect that. Now, we can also invest in the political processes in our partner countries to help them become informed adopters of policies. I think we need to do both — bottom up and top down.

In Uganda, policy development is principally a networking outcome from people who are learning to use ICTs. They are getting together and influencing the political process and demonstrating that this is possible. It's a sign to me of how these networks actually happen.

Does the fast pace of change in the ICT sector pose a particular challenge?

Absolutely, especially for a research organization like IDRC. We talk at the Centre about "closing the loop" by placing greater emphasis on the utilization of research results. Well, in this sector, you have to close it pretty fast because if you don't, you miss the opportunity. We have a special responsibility to tighten the relationship between the research we do, the things our partners and we learn, and the ways in which we communicate that.

I believe Bellanet has a very important role here, with its emphasis on using ICTs to improve collaboration in the development community. This is a networked economy: networks represent wealth, and networks that work well represent advantage. So within IDRC and between IDRC and our partner organizations, we need to build networks and link people together. That is how you

close the loop. We also need to think of ways to communicate what we learn from our research to our clients and practitioners. Communications add value to information.

How do you deal with questions about why resources should be directed toward ICTs when there are so many unmet basic needs in the developing world?

I deal with it the same way I dealt with it in rural Newfoundland in 1988 when people thought we were crazy: What's the alternative? The information economy is the most dynamic and highly profitable sector of the world economy. The industrial revolution largely bypassed the developing world and the rural regions of the developed world. How do we keep the information economy from bypassing those same places? It has to be a development priority. There are now beginning to be enough examples of things that work and don't work to contribute to decision-making about how to do this best.

ICTs make the world a smaller place. While there are differences regionally, nationally, ethnically, and linguistically, we are all one species, one people, and we have a lot to share in terms of making progress. And ICTs help make that happen. If we are not finding useful ways to introduce these technologies with partners in the developing world, we are cutting off our nose to spite our face because, while they have things to learn, they also have so much to teach us.