

# The Large Conference Re-Imagined: Strategies, Dynamics, and Systems to Strengthen IDRC's Convening Capacity

## Summary of Findings<sup>1</sup>

### Background

Vast amounts of funds, effort, time, and different types of resources and energies are invested in large conferences in the development sector. This does not only refer to the funders or organizers of conferences, but also to the participants who travel across the globe to take part in these events. Concerned about the investments going into these events and wanting to take full advantage of the opportunities they provide to support research for development, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) commissioned a team of researchers from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to study the nature of IDRC's engagement in large conferences, and the related opportunities and challenges.

The report draws on the experience of IDRC's involvement in 13 large conferences as co-convenor and/or initiator. It is intended to help stakeholder groups within IDRC who are planning to organize and/or participate in a conference learn from each other's experiences.

The evaluation began with a review of a report by Laura Haylock, which identified some key lessons and issues related to IDRC's involvement in large conferences. A further literature review was conducted to map out existing knowledge on conferences; examine how this fit into IDRC's understanding of social change, the policy process, and IDRC's approaches to learning and evaluation; and to frame the key issues for the ethnographic study. The literature review was followed by a review of IDRC's institutional memory (which included interviews with more than 30 key IDRC staff and a review of over 25 internal documents related to conference planning and participation), as well as an ethnographic study of the International EcoHealth Forum, held in Mexico in 2008. The practical suggestions and recommendations included in this report were developed from extended discussions with organizers, participants, team members within and external to IDRC, and the evaluation team. A workshop was held in 2009 to disseminate and support the uptake of findings amongst program staff.

### Key Findings

- 1. IDRC demonstrates a progressive approach to conference planning, delivery, and assessment, but lacks a strategic framework for decision-making, planning, and evaluation.**

---

<sup>1</sup> This report is a summary of findings from the strategic evaluation of IDRC's participation in large conferences, conducted by the Institute of Development Studies, UK in 2009. The full report is titled *The Large Conference Re-Imagined: Strategies, Dynamics, and Systems for IDRC's Convening Capacity* and can be found on the IDRC Evaluation Unit's website.

This lack of a strategic framework for engagement in large conferences has contributed to:

- uneven custom and practice in planning and assessing large conference participation;
- an inability to assess impact and outcomes based on established criteria; and
- a lack of data and documentation needed to monitor and assess the cost benefits of large conferences.

Table 1: IDRC's Strengths and Weaknesses in Engaging in Large Conferences	
Strengths	Weaknesses
A wealth of institutional knowledge about what works and the learnt capacity to innovate within the system.	A lack of articulated strategic direction, which would facilitate innovation, guide institutional collaboration, and rationalize efforts.
An awareness that large conferences generate significant moments for showcasing or mainstreaming innovative ideas and practices.	IDRC staff and managers do not use planning tools (such as the critical path) strategically, linking activities and events to the Centre's mission.
Flexible practices for engaging with conferences in funding, planning, facilitation, and reviewing. This supports opportunities for innovation, which are taken up sometimes by some organizers.	There are few standards across the Centre that would support or encourage innovation in areas critical to maximising the perceived success of conferences.
Awareness across the Centre and its partners of the potential for more systemic learning. This demand for reflexive practice is the first step in building capabilities to manage large conferences more effectively.	Evaluation frameworks still assess conferences as stand-alone events and do not track outcomes over time or in relation to a larger strategy. This is important if IDRC is to make a bolder assertion of the value of large conferences for its global mission.
A strong sense that conferences are not stand-alone events. This comes from a sophisticated understanding of influencing as non-linear and relationship driven.	There are no guidelines to monitor the costs of large conferences.
An awareness amongst a significant number of staff of the diversity of objectives that can come to bear on a single conference.	Staff are not sure how to support their insights about the complexity of conference dynamics and tend to revert to inadequate practice, such as over structuring and reducing the diversity of spaces.

While any conference can offer enough generic value to the Centre's mission to be worth supporting, there is some evidence to indicate that an explicit commitment to **policy entrepreneurship** would support a more purposeful and strategic involvement in large conferences and allow IDRC to address its weaknesses and leverage its strengths (as summarized in Table 1).

Kingdon's notion of the policy entrepreneur provides a useful way to describe how IDRC might engage with large conferences. Policy entrepreneurs are agents who occupy "in-between" spaces concerned with introducing, translating, and helping to implement new ideas into public practice (Corbett 2003). From a policy entrepreneur perspective, large conferences provide a number of strategic opportunities for IDRC to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of its investments as a funder, convener, or co-convener in large conferences. These include addressing:

- the opportunity costs;
- the adaptive learning opportunities;
- the opportunities for capacity building;
- the investment required to affect long-term change; and
- the carbon costs.

**2. IDRC's purposes and related objectives for engaging in large conferences—policy influence, knowledge sharing and uptake, and networking—are fairly consistent, but not always clearly articulated and communicated across teams and different levels of the organization.**

The evaluation found that a clearly articulated central goal or purpose gives staff a framework to guide decision-making and innovation, whereas a poorly articulated or unclear purpose (or set of purposes) creates stress and confusion. A clearly articulated central goal also allows organizers to manage the diversity of related objectives and events that characterize IDRC's involvement in large conferences. These include:

**2.1 Influencing Policy: *Policy influencing emerges as the overarching goal for all of the large conferences studied.***

Other objectives, such as knowledge sharing, showcasing research results, and networking, were seen by many respondents as ways of further influencing policy. While IDRC staff correctly understand that there is no direct causal link between conferences and policy change, they do see conferences as one element of a larger strategy for influencing change. This offers further support for IDRC to embrace a policy entrepreneurship role in its support of large conferences.

Even when programs recognize IDRC-supported conferences as being part of a larger strategy, the evaluations commissioned by IDRC rarely address this aspect and continue to treat them as one-off events. It would be useful for IDRC to be more explicit in linking conference objectives and activities to the broader context and strategy when planning, resourcing, evaluating, and framing messages for participants and stakeholders. This would allow it to better assess whether large conferences do, in fact, further the development goals of the programs.

**2.2 Showcasing and Mainstreaming Research Findings: *Conferences can be excellent venues for showcasing research results and mainstreaming new approaches among researchers and practitioners.***

In this vein, IDRC approaches conferences as offering settings where interpretations are negotiated, agendas set, and appropriate methodologies defined. As temporary knowledge communities, conferences necessarily include heterogeneous groups of participants with different backgrounds, academic hierarchies, and motivations for attending the conference. However, this multi-dimensionality is rarely addressed by IDRC in how it organizes conference activities and venues.

IDRC has demonstrated some innovative and non-conventional approaches to knowledge sharing at conferences, such as a networking platform to showcase best practice cases, which are highly appreciated by participants. However, the evaluation found that these approaches were not always facilitated very effectively and there are no institutional guidelines for identifying, managing, and/or scaling out these activities.

### **2.3 Networking: *IDRC recognizes that large conferences offer unparalleled opportunities for networking and the Centre identifies this as an important objective.***

During the fieldwork, ethnography, and interviews for this study, networking was often presented as the most important reason for people to travel, even when their expectations of the policy-influencing or knowledge-building agendas were ambivalent.

IDRC has provided innovative ways for participants to network—such as the Partnership Paradise at the EcoHealth Forum, the Global Village booth at the XVI International Aids Conference, and the Sandbox at the World Summit on the Information Society. However, IDRC has sometimes failed to facilitate networking opportunities by over-scheduling conference events and/or marginalizing related networking opportunities (by, for example, failing to promote venues for informal networking). The attempt to standardize all engagement at conferences does not leave room for different participants to engage amongst themselves in a format they deem most appropriate. While many organizers expressed frustration with the number of “fringe” events participants might want to organize (such as post-event meetings, time for more in-depth discussions, or opportunities for participants to evolve their own agenda around the workshops), participants themselves appreciated and wanted more spaces and opportunities to engage with each other.

### **3. Conference dynamics, such as the quality of discussions and the interactions amongst participants, affect its perceived success. The agenda has a significant influence on conference dynamics.**

The evaluation found that conference participants’ subjective assessment of the quality of relationships at a conference was a common marker of success. Contentious issues of complaint were usually associated with the agenda, the delays, the facilitation, and a lack of room for discussion.

***Managing Dynamics:*** It is important for organizers to think of conferences as emergent processes dependent on the interactions of all the different actors with each other and in response to the structure of the conference. The evaluation showed that anticipating and encouraging innovations that address conference dynamics—such as choosing a working language that would include all participants or allowing for alternate presentation formats that would encourage and foster participants’ agency—contribute to success. Therefore, planning opportunities to respond to strategic objectives is more valuable than the detailed planning of each available conference minute.

### **Moving Forward**

The final section of the report presents specific suggestions for how the findings and a policy entrepreneurship framework might be applied by IDRC senior management, programs, communications, and evaluators to IDRC’s engagement with large conferences. It identifies the need for more conscious planning across the Centre in the early stages of engagement to maximize efficiencies and to make it easier for the Centre to monitor the real costs and associated outcomes of large conferences.