

**Using Their Own Evidence:
Building Policy Capacities in the South
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The IDRC Interest:

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC or the Centre) is a public corporation created to support researchers and research institutions in the South to find solutions to the social, economic and natural resource problems that they face. Currently, we use an interdisciplinary approach directed towards three broad programming areas: natural resource management, information and communication technologies, and social and economic equity issues – such as for example, trade, poverty monitoring and peacebuilding. Influencing the policy process is an important aspect of what IDRC supports, and is increasingly in its mandate that is captured by current policy:

IDRC will foster and support the production, dissemination and application of research results leading to policies and technologies that enhance the lives of people in developing countries (IDRC program directions, 2000-2005).

This paper presents how IDRC-supported research and its partners are contributing to the generation and production of research and research results that are being used as a basis for policy formulation and policy change.

The Key Questions:

Beginning in 2001, the Evaluation Unit carried out a strategic evaluation to examine whether and how the research it supports in Asia, Africa and Latin America influences public policy and decision-making. This evaluation sought to answer three fundamental questions:

- (1) What do we mean by policy influence?
- (2) Where has the research we supported influenced policy?
- (3) What factors contributed to and inhibited policy influence (or potential influence?)

The IDRC Study:

The study is primarily based on case studies but includes other elements as well: (1) several background reviews of existing Centre documentation¹; (2) a literature review² that revealed an extensive gap in the literature surrounding knowledge utilization and policy processes from a developing country perspective; (3) a conceptual framework developed by Dr. Evert Lindquist³ to

¹ Gillespie, Bryon. (2003) *Intent to Influence Policy in IDRC Programs and Projects*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa; Gonsalves, Tahira and Baranyi, Stephen. (2003) *A History of Intnet*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa; Adamo, Abra. (2003) *Influence of Public Policy through IDRC-Supported Research: Synthesis of Document Reviews*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa; Adamo, Abra. (2002) *Strategic Evaluation of Policy Influence: What Evaluation Reports Tell Us About Public Policy Influence by IDRC-Supported Research*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa; Edwards, Kimberley. (2001) *PCRs and Policy Influence: What Project Completion Reports Have to Say about Policy Influence by Centre-Supported Research*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa. These reviews are available at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation

² Neilson, Stephanie. (2001) *IDRC-Supported Research and Its Influence on Public Policy. Knowledge Utilization and Public Policy Processes: A Literature Review*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa. Available at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation

³ Lindquist, Evert. (2001) *Discerning Policy Influence: Framework for a Strategic Evaluation of IDRC-Supported Research*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa. Available at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation

help guide the strategic evaluation and; (4) 25 case studies covering more than 60 projects in over 20 countries⁴.

Methodology:

A case study approach gave us rich stories and narratives that are attentive to local conditions, circumstances and context. A key component for the analysis was the use of common interview questions and framework. This encouraged both depth and richness in each qualitative case, while still allowing for analysis across the cases. Regional workshops were held to discuss initial interpretations and analysis of the cases with Centre staff, some of our partners and the consultants who conducted the cases. As well, we continue working closely with Prof. Carol Weiss on the cross-case analysis. Although still in the preliminary stages, we are focusing on key questions, issues and topics raised at the regional workshops to interrogate the cases.

Types of Policy Influence:

The conceptual framework developed for this study by Lindquist was used in each of the cases and was designed to capture the various different “types” of policy influence. An important aspect of the Centre’s work is the recognition that research for development is located “upstream” from any kind of actual development “impact”. As a result of the upstream nature of our work, the Centre sought a framework that acknowledges the various points within the policy process that considers, or takes account of where we work.

The original framework used three “types”: expanding policy capacities, broadening policy horizons, and affecting policy regimes. A couple of the case studies in the ICT field also added a fourth element or dimension to the framework, which was developing new policy regimes.

Expanding policy capacities focuses on improving researcher capacities to conduct and create use for policy relevant research. This includes things like: supporting new research or the development of new fields of research, enhancing researchers’ capacities to work on problems or issues as being distinct from carrying out disciplinary work, as well as enhancing their capacities to communicate knowledge and ideas to diverse audiences.

Broadening policy horizons again, focuses on the researcher perspective. Generally it has to do with increasing both the availability of knowledge as well as the comprehensiveness of this knowledge. This involves the means and relationships that translate research into knowledge which policy makers can use to change policy, increasing the stock of policy relevant knowledge, introducing new ways of thinking, and making sure knowledge is available to policy makers in forms that make it possible for them to use it.

Affecting policy regimes is the actual use of research in the development of new laws, regulations or structures; it is the least common type of influence following from research - but one, as this paper will show, that IDRC-supported research has been able to contribute to.

Developing new policy regimes is related to affecting policy regimes. It is about providing input in areas where there may be either limited or no current information available. This raises questions regarding policy content and processes in a particular domain. An example of this is found in the ICT field. For many developing countries, the ICT field is relatively new to policy formulation processes. Since there is a lack of existing information, there is more opportunity for research influence here because of the demand for it.

What We Found:

The data from our case studies indicates that in some instances, IDRC-supported research has indeed contributed to changes in both policy processes as well as policy content. A few cases reported the actual use of research in the development of new laws and regulations. More

⁴ Case studies are available at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation

frequently, however, data from our cases revealed that IDRC supports the building of policy capacities. Centre-supported research is an avenue towards improving the interest in and ability to use evidence as a basis for policy. We provide support that enhances the capacities of researchers to conduct and carry out policy relevant research, or to package results in ways that are more digestible for policy makers, or support research in new fields.

Using Their Own Evidence: Two Examples from the South

(1) Acacia-Mozambique case⁵

Demonstration projects were established and monitoring data was systematically collected for analysis to draw out lessons. The *Telecenters Project* is an example of one such demonstration project. At the project level, results from this research were posted on the Telecenter Project Website and disseminated through presentations at meetings in Mozambique and abroad. At the policy level, the study was also used to inform the ICT Policy development process. One of the key players, who is widely acknowledged as a visionary in ICTs and who has contributed to the development of this field in Mozambique, Eng. Venancio Massingue, confirmed that the ICT Policy Commission working groups and drafting team found the Telecenter project had a direct effect on the ICT policy. As one respondent suggested, “*the issues the studies raised were not new, but they had more powerful impact due to the fact that there was now documented evidence of the impact factors, such as the high cost of connectivity*” (Gaster, quoted in Ofir, 2003: 77). The working groups took note of the positive and negative lessons from this and other demonstration projects and found them to be good starting points for implementing ICTs in rural areas and in the field of education.

In particular, the demonstration projects provided the visual example and the monitoring information helped to validate the ideas and served as models around particular policy issues. As a result, the policy indicates the strong influence of the *Telecenters Project*, which is intended to expand into a national program. Several other ministries are also implementing systems based on policy recommendations.

Another important feature was Acacia’s influence on the policy process. The consultative process used for the ICT policy formulation caught the attention of the Minister of Higher Education, Science & Technology and who believes that it accelerated the reform process of the telecommunications sector.

Respondents in this case acknowledged that IDRC and its Acacia projects were not the only factors to influence these activities, but they now have a framework to guide them and the Acacia projects are attributed to this result.

(2) Copper mining and water resources in Southern Peru⁶

Since the 1950s, the Southern Peru Copper Corporation had been operating in Ilo, further exacerbating the water scarcity in the region through its mining activities. The mining company

⁵ Ofir, Zenda. (2003) *Information and Communication Technologies for Development (Acacia): The Case of Mozambique*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa. Available at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation

⁶ Loayza, Fernando. (2003) *Strategic Evaluation: Research Influence on Policy. The Cases of High Altitude and Mining (3-P-89-0247) and the Impact of Copper Mining on Water Resources in Southern Peru (3-P-91-0041)*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa. Available at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation

had, to date, neglected any prior commitments made to the national government regarding the environment or water resources. For economic reasons, the government was reluctant to address the company's shortcomings. As a result, LABOR, a local NGO, recognized that international pressure was needed to balance the power inequities between the local community and the mining company.

The Second International Water Tribunal presented an opportunity for the international pressure that LABOR was looking for. The NGO successfully persuaded local authorities to support the case and assisted LABOR to sue the mining company before the tribunal. IDRC supported the research that LABOR carried out to produce the needed evidence to make its case successful.

In February 1992, using the evidence it had gathered, LABOR successfully presented its case against the mining company when the Tribunal ruled in favour of the NGO:

.... The jury begs earnestly the accused to take into consideration the results and recommendations given here, and to guarantee that the company's future activities will comply with the relevant national and international laws and with the Amsterdam Declaration to protect the economic and environmental interests of the local population (Balvín et al., 1995: Annex 15, quoted in Loayza, 2003: 26).

The evidence collected to inform the Tribunal, the national government, the local communities and the mining company provided an opportunity for a local NGO to contribute to changes at the local level as well as contribute to global environmental strategies and regulatory frameworks regarding natural resource management. As an example, the reviewer for this case found that evidence from this research was used in support of constitutional and institutional legal changes required for environmental protection.

There are several factors in this case that appear to have contributed to the success of the research influencing policy. The first is the development of a strategy to disseminate the results among key national and international stakeholders. LABOR carefully planned the research project and process with this in mind. The second factor was that LABOR also spent time cultivating local community and stakeholder support around the issue, which was important to realizing the potential of the findings to influence policy. Third, the presentation to the Tribunal gave the case more credibility and political relevance. This was further supported by other factors like careful planning and analysis, institutional arrangements, and lobbying to build support. As well, LABOR had the capacity to supply the necessary strong leadership and policy entrepreneurship. Finally, the political context was favourable to environmental policy reforms.

Building Policy Capacities: Two Examples From the South

(1) Asian Fisheries Social Science Research Network⁷

At the time the network was initiated, concerns in the region about environmental degradation and overexploitation of the fisheries were treated as biological problems; however, beginning in the early 1980s, it was being recognized that the problems were more socioeconomic, institutional and political in nature. The primary objective of the network was to build national research capacity that enabled researchers to address important social science issues in the development and management of fishery resources in the region.

In the early stages, there was a clear focus on building research capacities and a clear understanding that until there was a stronger research and professional base it would not be possible to conduct policy relevant research that would have legitimacy. But as the network strengthened its capacities, it started to develop linkages and relationships with non-member

⁷ Pomeroy, Robert. (2002) *A Case Study Analysis of the Asian Fisheries Social Science Research Network*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa. Available at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation

institutions. As a result, the network was able to develop and consolidate its identity and began to see itself as a force in the domain of fisheries and resource management policies.

It was not until the 4th phase of IDRC support that the network developed explicit activities around policy relevant research. By this time, many of its members were seen as highly qualified and their views began to be sought by their governments. Their research and ideas contributed to expanding the range of issues taken into consideration in the formulation of fisheries policies. Researchers also became more adept at identifying issues of importance to policy makers:

With this skill base in social sciences, maturity in conducting research, career advancement, confidence in themselves as researchers, more acceptance of social science research by policymakers, Network members became more knowledgeable and experienced in how to conduct policy analysis and began to influence policy... (Pomeroy, 2002: 39).

By first attending to the issue of building research capacity, the IDRC-supported network was able to strengthen the skills of researchers and the quality of the research produced. As policy makers recognized the quality of the research they became more accepting of the findings – and some could see how to use the information for developing new policies. One respondent in Vietnam reported that an article helped him to better understand fisheries management issues in neighbouring South East Asian countries and that this could assist in developing new policies in the Fisheries Sector Plan in Vietnam. This also illustrates the use of research and research results produced in the South being used by policy and decision makers in the South to help them better understand the issues and how to address them from a regional perspective.

(2) Latin American Trade Network⁸

The Latin American Trade Network was initiated in March 1998 and was formed in response to the increasing complexity of the international trade agenda. Building the capacities of researchers and negotiators was a primary goal of the network:

In the face of [some] challenges, the larger countries have some capacity of their own to undertake research and analysis as a prelude to adopting positions. On the other hand, the smaller and medium sized countries that have no such capacity could benefit from a regional mechanism that would provide them with an ordered set of ideas on the main issues of the multilateral agenda (Macadar, 2003: 15).

From the beginning, it was insisted that the results of the research should be addressed to policy makers and negotiators. Initially, working papers were commissioned with a 3-year horizon and these were to be followed by books. But it was soon discovered that three years was far too long to wait for results. The negotiators needed information in real-time. As such, LATN started to focus more on the briefings, which were seen as being very timely and their user-friendly format meant that they could reach the negotiators more directly and more effectively.

This case found that the uptake of research and results are promising. Early indications of this include: evidence that various Latin American governments, for example Argentina, Paraguay, Peru and several Central American governments, and organizations in the region have approached LATN for assistance on trade negotiations. The World Bank has worked with LATN to customize its policy training courses for the region, and UNCTAD and WTO representatives see LATN as a vehicle for organizational collaboration.

⁸ Macadar, Luis. (2003) *The Influence of Research on Public Policy: The Latin American Trade Network*, Evaluation Unit, IDRC: Ottawa. Available at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation

Several factors appear to have supported these early indications. The first is intent. Both IDRC and the researchers set out with the deliberate intention of funding research that would be of interest to policy makers. They purposely sought ways to identify issues of importance, consulted with policy and decision-makers throughout the project and tried to seize policy windows and opportunities as they emerged.

The second is that the network and its coordinators understood the policy context and knew who to target – the middle ranks, or the bureaucracy. A unique feature of policy processes in Latin America is that individuals occupy various roles, as researchers, negotiators, government advisors, either simultaneously, or rotationally over time. As a result, LATN's target audience constantly changed. To address this, LATN's Coordination Unit chose to target middle management because these individuals tend to remain the same, even as governments come and go. The middle ranks also control the data and process information that gives them an important power. By targeting the middle ranks, the network's Coordination Unit was able to have access to those who have power to influence, even during times of instability and changes in government.

A third key factor is the LATN approach or its trademark of independence. The regional approach to these issues addressed by the network's researchers and Coordination Unit transcends governments, international agencies and national interests and this has helped to give it legitimacy and credibility to the research users.

Concluding Remarks:

Research Skills:

Capacity building is not just about building the capacity of researchers to do research. It is also about building researcher capacity to carry out policy relevant research and communicate the findings effectively to policy and decision makers. Building research capacities in each of these cases strengthened the skills of the researchers and the quality of the research produced. And when policy makers began to recognize the quality of the research they become more accepting of the research.

Local Ownership:

The notion of local ownership is very closely linked to capacity building. Both the Asian Fisheries Network and the Latin American Trade Network are examples that highlight how building the capacities of researchers provides new opportunities for policy and decision-makers, and other practitioners and research users, to use the research and research results produced from within their own countries or regions – that is to say, to use their own evidence for policy making. This uptake of research from within encourages an increase in demand from within, as well as encouraging the influence of policy from within.

Communication and Dissemination:

Findings from our case studies are consistent with the well-documented difficulties researchers face in their ability to communicate their findings in formats that enable policy makers to easily understand and absorb the information. Packaging, marketing and communicating solutions to complex problems and issues appears to be a skill that many researchers and development donors have overlooked. Yet researchers are expected to do more than just research: they are expected to be able to communicate and disseminate their findings to policy and decision-makers. LABOR, the local NGO in the mining case, seemed to have an understanding of this, and this case, as with some of the others, demonstrates how building the communication and dissemination strategies during the design phase can increase the effectiveness of these activities. But for most of our partners, as well as for our staff, this shift needs to be accompanied by a new thrust in capacity building. This posits the question: are donors willing and ready to fund and support these kinds of activities?

Persistence:

Some of these projects, and in particular the Asian Fisheries Network case, were long-term commitments by the Centre. IDRC supported this particular project for 14 years. The notion of persistence is strong within the Centre: building capacity to do research takes a long time and that it's not a single project effort. Short term, rapid results are seldom seen. As the Asian Fisheries case illustrated, persistent support over the years provided network members the experience, expertise and confidence to conduct policy analysis research. It also implies that support needs to go beyond "the project trap", when donor agencies regard aid and support as individual projects. In terms of programming, donors might consider persistence in terms of strategic funding – looking for projects that collectively build upon each other and which aim at particular policies but from different angles, or sectors.

Systems of Support:

What this review has also revealed is the non-linear nature of the influence of most research on public policy. Yet many donors, including IDRC, are plagued by the legacy of linear support – when a project is granted support, there is a tendency to wait and see if the research is going to be of sufficient quality and then find the funds needed for communication and dissemination activities. But this means that dissemination is often too late for any policy influence. There is a disconnect between the way we think about policy influence, and the way we design and fund projects. Developing appropriate support systems and project management systems that ensure accountability but that are also agile in their ability to seize opportunities as they emerge is not an easy undertaking.

This is particularly true in the context of a capacity building organization: the primary focus of the Centre is in improving the interest in and ability to use evidence as a basis for policy and we are particularly interested in the researcher side of that equation, not the policy maker side. This means that much of what we support is very long term; however, by the time the interest emerges we may have moved to new areas of funding. This in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, since some of the projects find ways to ensure their own survival. But it is a challenge: if we frame our mandate in terms of improving the ability of using evidence then what is the obligation of the Centre to provide that support and over what frame of time does that obligation hold? These are just some of the questions and issues we will be investigating further in our cross-case analysis.