Situating Capacity Development in IDRC : Some Policy Considerations

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I   Situating Capacity Development in Policy and Sector Context [1]

A) *Where capacity and capacity development "fit" within the wider policy context of the organization.*

In considering any capacity development initiative, whether as a part of a research project or as a stand-alone activity, an important first step is to understand it in policy context. In the case of IDRC, the answer to this remains somewhat uncertain. Capacity to do and use research is clearly a principal feature of its vision and mandate. However, while it is also clear that systematic support to the development of such capacity, and tracking its effectiveness and outcomes, are *encouraged and allowed*, that they are *guided or directed* is less so .

Why a CD Policy is Important   As a *development* agency, IDRC needs to be concerned about the manner and extent to which capacities for research and research utilization are being developed, and whether or not it will have an explicit role in, and policy for, contributing to the task. All capacity interventions, from informal seminar through to formal doctoral programme, are more effective as learning events when they are expressly planned as such. This is more likely to happen in IDRC where there is an institution-wide policy which provides adequate legitimacy, scope and resources to support capacity initiatives as integral parts of its research agenda.

The IDRC Act and CSPF-2000/05 recognize that *capacity for inquiry underlies all research and research utilization in the pursuit of sustainable social and economic development*. Both, therefore, imply the Centre's mandate to support the development of such capacity. If IDRC is to "initiate, encourage and support" as well as "conduct" such research on problems and "into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical and other knowledge" to resolve them, the ability actually to conceive, do and use research must be available in those countries. Capacity in this context includes:

> (a) Basic inclination toward, and skills in, data collection, analysis and summary, geared to the needs of maintaining and extending knowledge;

> (b) High-order abilities to conceptualize, generalize, interpret and innovate; and

> (c) The capability of articulating and negotiating results in ways which enable use.

A policy provides the frame of reference for determining an appropriate degree of capacity commitment for a research issue or goal. For example, support to high-end capacity of any kind -- graduate training, institutional development, substantive networks -- invariably presents a dilemma. While the immediate costs and risks are high, so, too,

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[1] References in this document are to the just-ending CSPF-2000/05 rather than the emerging CS + PF 2005/10. In part, this reflects the prevailing policy at the time of the data review. In part, it reflects the purpose of the EU for this document: to help "open up the corporate dialogue and give recognition to, and incentives for, deliberate CD (thinking)".

are the potential long-term benefits. But there are also dilemmas at the other extreme. While immediate costs and risks of lower-end capacity development activities are low, so too is the potential for long-term, high impact benefit.

The choice in any research context is *not necessarily* to support either end of the spectrum, but *neither is it necessarily* to deny the value of either approach. Given the wide range of capacities and levels of professional confidence which make up a full and effective research environment, all points along the continuum are valid as ways to build it. A well thought-out, guiding but flexible policy can help both POs and partners to work through the options for any particular circumstance.

The Act and CSPF-2000/05 make it clear that sustainable development is, by definition and necessity, a progressive and unending process. The CSPF notes further as a "milestone" in the Centre's own evolution the maintenance of a philosophy and structure which emphasize *scientific* research, networks of *scholars*, a focus on *knowledge and multi-disciplinarity*. Together, these imply a mandate to support the capacity to do development research which:
   - is of a fairly high degree of sophistication;
   - is long-term and incremental, building "selectively on past investments"; and
   - creates and strengthens individual and institutional capacities not simply for this year's research agenda, but for the generation of new research agendas as part of a sustained research-for-development enterprise.

Going further, the CSPF-2000/05 support of "an indigenous capability to generate and apply knowledge" suggests that capacity development should go beyond scholarship and extend to a broader community of ultimate users – and perhaps ultimately "research users as research originators".

Raising the question as to whether sufficient policy support is being given to CD as a legitimate professional field, however, is the fact that while the Act and CSPF-2000/05 acknowledge the Centre's capacity development mandate, neither articulates clear strategies or an operational framework for getting it done.

On one hand, there are *policies-in-use* – programmes and projects support activities addressing all ways of knowing (indigenous, scientific, cultural, informatics), multiple skill sets (policy-making and decision-taking, technical and social analysis, interpretation, negotiation and marketing) and a wide range of mechanisms. In small-p terms, the CD "policy" of the Centre appears to be one of non-interference: to consider legitimate any dimension of CD support deemed necessary for the research activity and which appears to work.

In this sense of policy, the breadth of what is subsumed is large and diverse, visible in the emphasis on support to all points along the "expertise continuum":
    * at one end, projects are concerned with engaging and mobilizing the most sophisticated communities of policy and scientific expertise (e.g. gene-pool research);

  * at the other, projects are engaging local communities of practice-based, non-academic and indigenous knowledge (e.g. farmers cross-fertilizing crops by hand); and
  * in the middle, are those relatively well-educated, largely discipline-based academic and government research officers, NGO researchers-cum-educators or technical institutions receiving lightly-managed opportunities for technical, outreach and application training to shift their perspectives or raise their impact.

All of this makes serious, systematic and comprehensive capacity development *policy thinking* important. Policies provide guidance, legitimize resources and make certain demands on staff (e.g. for monitoring). In their development, application and revision, policies clarify, and make more certain, the "acceptable" ways and means of providing an intervention action e.g. options for capacity strategies, venues, facilitators and even participants. The CSPF-2000/05 only implies these.

The case becomes even more critical with the CSPF-2000/05 decision to allocate programme support such that "the most assistance (is given) to the poorest countries with the weakest research systems", with 44% going to Sub-Saharan Africa. Compared to other regions, the Centre has had a much more difficult time realizing success in its research capacity goals in and for weak research systems here[2]. The need for long-term, iterative "from the ground-up" capacity development will be especially strong for those local researchers and policy-makers expected to be involved in the sophisticated, cutting edge issues of "big policy concern", as well as for those community-based practitioners expected to become participant analysts.

<u>Characteristics of an Effective Capacity Development Policy</u> An effective capacity development policy is one which provides a helpful intellectual and resource "space" for thinking about, planning and assessing capacity activities.

- It justifies the often high up-front costs in money and time, intellectual energy and personal commitment that go into determining and designing appropriate capacity development action. It makes little sense to make such investments, and support and monitor the activities, unless they are framed in and for a long-term perspective, and are well integrated within a wider research and capacity agenda.

- It allows the lead time needed to plan activities professionally and comprehensively in each of the three dimensions of a learning event: *front end* - planning, design and selection; *implementation* - delivery; and *consolidation* – supporting the learner in applying the new knowledge and skills, and reporting effectively and clearly on results.

- It enables, and encourages, the finding of ways to blend a number of modalities, mechanisms and methods into a coherent whole, to suit the range of capacity types, levels and timing required of most IDRC projects and programmes.

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[2] This based on the author's own IDRC experience and as inferred from many of the project documents.

- It allows for iteration in capacity activities, to better co-ordinate across IDRC research initiatives, for example, in the development of new research methodologies like participatory research, and for fostering linkage opportunities with other agency initiatives.

- It enables, and encourages, the redesign of capacity activities in conjunction with changing emphases and dynamics in the research, tailoring them to suit the different types of research categories as gaps and opportunities are identified.

- It encourages researchers and research managers to take the time to monitor capacity development actions, in terms both of their own progress and of how they are interacting with, and contributing to, the wider research agenda.

In other words, ***having a policy means having a long-term perspective***, and thus allowing for realization of ***the critical condition of <u>good</u> capacity development***: ***the incremental facilitation of change***. Combining research goals with those of individual and institutional capacity development objectives requires a continual balancing and prioritizing of the natural shifts in a project – in its timing, focus and tasks. It allows recipient researchers, project managers and IDRC, together with their respective institutions, to reach general consensus as to what capacities need to be developed; and to continue to negotiate these as actions evolve.

The kind of policy-enabled co-ordinated approach to capacity development is also important in making best use of the flexibility inherent in IDRC funding and the readiness of POs to be responsive to needs and opportunities as they come up. While it is true that the effectiveness of any learning event, planned or spontaneous, is ultimately a function of the idiosyncrasies of the learner, it is equally true that other factors intervene to enhance or diminish the arbitrariness that this implies – factors which can be planned for, managed and adapted to counter problems and build on strengths. This is more likely to happen where the perspective is sufficiently long, comprehensive and professionally informed. *In other words, where capacity development is treated as a serious professional process, worthy of sustained attention.*

<u>What a Capacity Development Policy Requires</u>   As with any policy, creating one for capacity development will require making a number of decisions based on a consideration of goals, priorities and resources. Two sets of decisions are key among these. First,

1. *Whether to direct the purposive building* of a comprehensive capacity development policy and programme for the Centre, parallel to and interactive with the research; or

2. *To allow the iterative evolution* of a capacity development support function, actions attached to research activities as/when appropriate and under PO initiative.

Second,

3. *Whether to support* a smaller number of high-end and sustained *educational* capacity initiatives -- graduate degrees, institutional development, training-of-trainer programmes, substantive networks; or

4. *To encourage* a larger number of small-scale *training and awareness* capacity activities – short course training, study and exchange visits, workshops and seminars, loosely-structured networks.

Options 1 and 3 are related, as are options 2 and 4, but they are not mutually exclusive. A broadly framed, well-developed capacity development policy might well be one which emphasizes small-scale iterative training, though it is more likely to be prepared to support a longer-term strategic approach of both higher and lower-end activities within a sector or PI area.

It is less likely that the essentially no-policy option 2 will produce a pattern of graduate degrees and long-term institutional development. It may, however, lead to a series of small-scale, fairly low-risk capacity initiatives which eventually add up to something greater if the research agenda driving them is coherent enough to sustain continuity and cumulative building (as the CBNRM-biodiversity linkages seem to be doing).

None of the options is inherently wrong in terms of being able to produce capacity. The strengths and challenges of each are different, however:

► The strengths of 1 and 3:

  ▪ high potential benefits in the quality, depth and durability of capacities created;
  ▪ capacity activities can become more light-handed and locally managed as the base becomes stronger;
  ▪ strengthened readiness to respond to opportunities and innovations in research and sectors as these emerge.

► The challenges of 1 and 3:

  ▪ high human resource, funding and opportunity costs;
  ▪ long-term commitments and uncertain trajectories;
  ▪ risks which are difficult to assess or mitigate.

► The strengths of 2 and 4:

  ▪ relatively low up-front costs;
  ▪ considerable flexibility in responding to short-term needs and opportunities;

- allow for timely value-added, especially to the already capable researcher or manager;
- good reach and catalyzing potential;
- can create communities of aware, engaged peers.

► The challenges of 2 and 4:

- limited cumulative impact or collateral benefit;
- unlikely to produce depth of capacity or to sustain collaborative initiatives.

Creating a capacity development policy also requires other negotiations.

1. What will be the balance between knowledge generation and capacity building priorities with respect to allocating resources?

2. How will regional differences be reflected in IDRC/capacity development criteria and resources?

3. How much attention will be accorded or legitimized for assessing the research capacity environment of a country, region or sector e.g. undertaking situation analyses/environment scans? Such assessments can be extensive and expensive, involving consideration of:

   a) what research expertise is available and what is needed in the five categories;
   b) what the comparative advantages, costs, risks and benefits are of beginning capacity development action in the different categories;
   c) what the needs, options and risks are for trying to institutionalize research capacity;
   d) what the options and risks of different methods/activities are in each or any category (e.g. post-graduate may be needed in a research area in Africa, but are the institutional base, time-line and local resources there to make it a viable choice?);
   e) how difficult it will be to integrate the research into the real world of researchers, practitioner/policy users -- for the kind of learning required, the difficulties of facilitating it, the kinds of training/advisory supports which might be feasible; and
   f) what research-related initiatives other agencies are supporting which imply challenges, openings for collaboration or complementarity, or additional funding possibilities.

How a Capacity Development Policy will be Implemented   The more a capacity development policy is well-expressed, the more the rationale -- and need -- for its implementation and development to be assigned to some form of defined responsibility centre. As a base of professional expertise for undertaking analyses of, and guiding

comprehensive action on, issues of capacity, the tasks of such a focal point would include, for example:

* ensuring that capacity dimensions/implications were reflected in other corporate policy and strategic development efforts;
* enabling consistent monitoring and evaluation of, and development of a knowledge base for, best capacity practice and best practitioners;
* developing procedures and capacities for capacity scans -- situation analyses at the front-end of new research themes/PIs to map the strength, scope and types of available and needed capacity and the expertise to generate it;
* facilitating evaluations at the end of projects, especially those being considered for further phases, in order to determine any next steps required with respect to filling the five capacity levels, and best options for institutionalizing the capacities established;
* co-ordinating with the Evaluation Unit on strategies and procedures for capacity-related *outcome mapping* at regular points during the life-cycle of PIs or projects, to verify assumptions and assess progress toward objectives; and
* supporting/working with PIs, programmes and projects on all of these.

Neither the Act (understandably) nor the CSPF-2000/05 (less so)[3] says very much about the actual strategies and methods through which the Centre's capacity development goals will be realized. Instead, capacities are expected to be realized in three general ways, only the last of which concerns active capacity building:

* *allowing people to learn*, through *affiliation* with existing expertise, "enlisting the talents of natural and social scientists and technologists in Canada and other countries"; by providing opportunities for them to participate in the meetings, access the information and join the networks where ideas and examples are available to acquire and exchange;

* *enabling people to learn*, through *exchanges* which encourage "generally the coordination of international development research (and to) foster cooperation in research on development problems…"; by supporting and providing advisor expertise to research projects through which they can learn-by-doing; and

* *facilitating people's learning*, through *generation* of new local capacity, assisting "the developing regions to build up the research capabilities, the innovative skills and the institutions required to solve their problems"; by creating for them, or supporting their participation in, formal education and training programmes and providing on-site mentoring arrangements.

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[3] As noted in the Evaluation Framework, there may well be more specific policy-type references to capacity development in broader programme and PI documents or prospectuses and these warrant both assessing and strengthening as formative Centre policy statements.

B) *Where capacity and capacity development "fit" within the operating environment of the project or programme*

A second essential task in situating capacity development within a project/programme is literally that: to undertake some level of *capacity-focused environmental scan or situation analysis* to determine five core conditions:

- What research and research-related capacities are needed, and by whom, to get the research done and its outcomes applied?
  - This is an issue both of relevance and appropriateness: *relevance* because the expectations and priorities as to what needs to be learned among all of those involved in the development, implementation and application of the research project and expected to change in or from the process will need to be taken into account; and *appropriateness* because some capacities will be more likely to enable and sustain the research activity than others and it is important to get the match between what is learned and the application of that learning as close as possible.

- What capacities are already available and need strengthening, and among which people/institutions; what capacities are not available and need to be generated, among whom?
  - This is an issue related to *all aspects of the research initiative* - conceptualization and design, implementation, dissemination and application, and sustainability, and will necessarily evolve as the research process does – invariably adding more "learners" and learning tasks along the way.
  - For this reason, it is also an issue related to *progress mapping/monitoring*. Capacity outcomes, indicators and measures need to be confirmed as early, as often, and with as wide a participation as possible.

- What research and research-related capacities are needed to allow the research enterprise as such to be sustained in policy, institutional or disciplinary terms?
  - This is an issue of *sustainability* -- of the research results themselves, of the capacity to do research, and of the capacity to generate research capacity.

- What human and infrastructure resources are available for designing, delivering and monitoring the capacity dimensions of the project and their impacts, inside IDRC, in the region or globally?
  - This is an issue of *cost-effectiveness* insofar as it may not be possible to select the most relevant capacity type or level of competency, or the most appropriate mechanism. It will often be a matter of finding

the *most reasonable balance* among factors such as sector content and learning process expertise, cultural fit, cost, availability, continuity and timing of resources.

- What corporate policies, experience or lessons learned are there in IDRC which might be used to guide thinking and decisions on any/all of these issues and any others relevant to the long- and short-term CD concerns of the programme, project and region?
  - This refers to capacity-specific, but also to capacity-related, policies and experience. Examples of this last would be networks, some of the heavily learning-oriented participatory research designs and use of small grants mechanisms. Few of these are expressly labelled or thought of as instances of "CD", but most of them are used as *mechanisms* or methods for supporting informal and nonformal learning.