

Findings Brief

External Review of the Canadian Partnerships Program

This findings brief is based on the report “Canadian Partnerships (CP) Program External Review” by Dal Brodhead and Wendy Quarry with the assistance of Bill Found. The full report is available from IDRC’s Evaluation Unit.

The objectives of the External Review of the Canadian Partnership Program were to assess the extent to which the Program is meeting its aims and objectives and identifying and managing its risks, as well as to note any evolution in its objectives. It also aimed at documenting the results of the Program and making recommendations. This is the first external evaluation of the Canadian Partnerships Program.

1. Program Aims

The Canadian Partnerships Program seeks to ensure IDRC’s active presence in the Canadian development research community. In keeping with the Centre’s mandate of empowerment through knowledge, it supports the contribution of research and knowledge to Canada’s involvement in the global search for ways to build healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous societies.

Its specific objectives are to:

1. Build and maintain the Centre’s long-term relationships with those key Canadian institutions that are most closely related to the Centre’s overall mandate and mission through program support and collaboration;
2. Strengthen the capacity and engagement of Canadian universities, research institutions and civil society organizations to address international development questions through research, knowledge sharing and networking;
3. Facilitate and strengthen mutually beneficial Canada-Global South connections through collaborative research, knowledge sharing and networking;
4. Increase the number of Canadians learning about and engaging with international development issues through their participation in knowledge production and sharing activities;
5. Explore and document innovative partnership mechanisms.

The CP Program funded 402 projects totalling \$14.1 million, during the period 2005 to April of 2009. It has a permanent full-time staff of 4 with an annual budget between 3% - 4% of the overall IDRC program allocation.

2. Methodology

The Review Team undertook a ‘multiple sources of evidence’ approach to data collection. This involved: a document review; interviews with CP Program staff and other IDRC staff and management, as well as other key stakeholders including contacts with all CP Core Partners. The team also interviewed a sample of stakeholders in 57 selected projects across the country either through site visits or via telephone.

Altogether a total of 72 interviews were held. In addition, survey monkey was used to reach 235 of a total of 315 CP grantees during the Review period (2005 – 2009). A total of 76 people completed the on-line questionnaire and of those, 55 added additional comments.

There were specific challenges and certain weaknesses which emerged during the course of the exercise. As a responsive program, CP spans a wide range of projects with diverse objectives from traditional research to action research orientations, funded at very different levels of activity, across the breadth of Canada and linking with partnerships in the global South. The unclear link between the Program objectives and its outcomes (and the absence of indicators) made it difficult to identify results. A further key challenge was that the CP Program itself, as well as a majority of the long and short term projects and partnerships it supports lack evaluations with the exception of the Core Partners. The Review Team did, however, have access to Project Completion Reports which are considered to be a form of self-evaluation.

3. Review Findings

The overall assessment of the review team is that CP has been successful in meeting its objectives and that the program has accomplished a great deal. It is a Program which to date, has focused more on the building of good relationships than on reaching specific program level outcomes. The report does, however, offer evidence of the achievement of program outcomes. The Review Team also noted the uniqueness of the role that the Canadian Partnerships Program plays within IDRC and its clear value to the Centre, as well as to its key audience – the Canadian international research and development community. It is distinct from other IDRC Program Initiatives (PI) which focus on sectoral issues with recipients in the global South; its main objective is to build and maintain relationships in Canada with the international research and development community. The review also found that there continues to be a need within IDRC for a unit that is not programmatic - a place that can respond with flexibility and where experimentation and innovation are encouraged. Its unique open-ended approach also provides an entry point for potential future Canadian partners.

The Review determined that the wide range of relationships established by CP across the country has increased awareness of the mandate of IDRC and helps keep the Centre grounded within Canada's contribution to international development. The Team was able to find sufficient evidence to show that CP has also substantially met its four program outcomes:

- CP has built and maintained long term relationships with Canadian institutions and has strengthened their capacity and engagement in international development research;
- CP has encouraged the inclusion of research focussed on international development issues with a range of key partners within universities and NGOs allowing both types of institutions to improve their research and dissemination capabilities while increasing the benefits to the global South;
- CP's use of small grants, in particular, has allowed it to facilitate North-South institutional connections and networking;
- and CP support has opened the way for the development of innovative partnership mechanisms between institutions in Canada and with their southern partners while enabling them to take on challenging opportunities with manageable risks.

It is also evident that the Program is at a change point as the external context has evolved since its inception. It now needs to consider emerging international development priorities and the changing dynamics within Canada such as increased immigration, changing perspectives on security in the post 9/11 era, and the growing internationalism of Canadian universities.

The Review Team found that CP's global objectives remain appropriate and valuable, but that the Program needs to reach further afield in Canada to locate potentially interested players from a diversity of backgrounds and geographic locations.

This should have as an objective to correct the current imbalance which favours central Canada. Some ideas that emerge from the Review include engaging Community Colleges across Canada and increasing contacts with the multi-cultural and diaspora communities. The Review Team also found that in the context of networking with CP support, Canadian universities have managed to partner with a number of interesting NGOs in the South, but they have largely ignored interesting, innovative activities undertaken by Canadian NGOs.

The Team concludes that CP's accumulated experience since its inception should allow the program to become more specific about what results it hopes to achieve through its relationships. Using this experience, CP should strive to better articulate clear strategies and identify indicators in order to move towards delineating a theory of change which would underpin its resource allocations.

3.1 Canadian Partnership program niche, role and value-added

The CP program is at the very centre of IDRC's relationships with Canadian partners. As such, it occupies a unique niche and 'grounds' the Centre within Canada. While it is not the only program through which IDRC connects with other Canadian research institutions, as IDRC's responsive mechanism, it is frequently the place where Canadians interested in working with and through the Centre are referred. Over the years, the CP team has interacted with and learned a great deal about the Canadian research and development community; it is a repository of knowledge about who is doing what and where. CP's sense of the importance of networks has helped the Program use this knowledge wisely, making concerted efforts to link groups who share common interests. The Program has also been a calculated risk taker and has understood the possibilities of starting small and supporting an initiative that might on the surface have appeared to have low potential. Examples include CP encouragement for joint collaboration between universities and NGOs to form networks governed by similar procedures where both groups saw considerable risk in this idea (e.g., Support to work on Social Analysis System-SAS and on the Genuine Progress Index – GPI).

An important aspect of the CP Program is its willingness to respond to Canadian international development organizations and universities seeking to explore innovative and potentially politically sensitive initiatives with developing country partners. Examples would include CUSO's work in Latin America and Partnership Africa Canada's work with the diamond mining issue. At the university level, another illustrative example can be found in the role IDRC played in ensuring the smooth transfer of the MiniAtlas Human Security project from the University of British Columbia to Simon Fraser University. The challenge in such cases is to carefully manage the risks which can accompany innovation without stifling the initiatives.

3.2 Achievement of Results

Relationship building

Building and maintaining IDRC's long term relationships with key Canadian institutions has been a key CP objective. Nurturing partnerships is a hallmark of the CP approach and this process was most evident to the Review Team in its examination of the Core Partnership arrangements (AUCC, CASID, CCIC, IISD and NSI). These organizations receive sizeable multi-year funding which includes support for staff salaries, and some overhead costs. CP staff meets with them on a regular basis and attends some of their workshops and Board meetings. Given the level of commitment by CP, they are expected to report at least annually to IDRC. All Core partners have been evaluated (some by IDRC and others through CIDA).

Overall, the Review Team found that most respondents interviewed (core and others, big and small), commented positively on the nature of this relationship. It was reported as constant, personal, continuous, extremely supportive, and based on trust that grew over time. This practice of having key partnerships does raise the question as to what makes one organization eligible to be a core Partner while another is not and the Review Team found some ambiguity in the selection of core Partners.

The CP Strategy (2005-2010) states that it will be responsive to Canadian partners' proposals and that CP will emphasize "partners" working with Southern colleagues, rather than doing research on, or even on behalf of, the South." Interviews indicated that CP staff made consistent efforts to encourage Canadian partners to include Southern partners in the conceptualization of projects. For example, CP encouraged the University of Ottawa to hold a workshop involving potential partners from Central America in the design process for a project. Fifty per cent of the respondents to the on-line survey indicated that the CP Program had "greatly" supported effective partnerships between Canadians and researchers in the Global South through the projects funded and another 21% replied that CP had "moderately" supported them.

Strengthening capacity

The Review found that small grants played a particularly important role in strengthening the capacity and engagement of universities, research institutions and civil society organizations to address international development questions. Small grants have sometimes been the entry point, the mechanism through which new organizations have gained access to the IDRC network. They have also been the indispensable tool through which CP has tested potential relationships. This is an important aspect of CP's approach to risk mitigation. Small grants have been used to fund innovative ideas and they have also supported networking and the development of new research ideas. While small grants have come at a high administrative cost, CP has evolved methods to make this load more manageable. Small grants have also led to larger grants in some cases where a partner organization demonstrates an ability to produce quality results and/or leverage funding from other sources. Some CP recipients have grown a small grant into a much larger, complex research grant and into a continuing relationship over several years, (e.g., Inter Pares).

Facilitating Equitable North-South Connections and Innovative Partnerships

The Review Team was frequently informed of the value of CP funding to both Northern and Southern partners. Projects have demonstrated innovation, a measured degree of risk taking and great flexibility and responsiveness. The notion of innovation in partnership arrangements can take a variety of forms and the Review Team found a number of notable examples in CP supported projects. One activity connected the university and NGO communities to southern action research efforts around the productive use of marginal farm land. This was innovative partnering at its best. It is clear that CP values joint efforts of this type. The achievement of these sorts of partnerships is a complex undertaking and will remain a challenge in the future.

Several partners emphasized the uniqueness of CP with its practical, non-bureaucratic processes, its respectful relationship building and its genuine interest in cultivating equitable partnerships. The value-added of CP staff whose encouragement enabled Northern and Southern partners to initiate new contacts and build and support networking, was frequently stressed by those interviewed or surveyed during the Review. Many partners commented on CP efforts to put one group in touch with another, thus stimulating the generation of new ideas and modalities of cooperation. Seventy-five percent of respondents to the on-line survey indicated that they had been introduced to new networks of researchers through their work on CP projects.

Increased learning and engagement on international development research

The Review Team was informed that CP support has kept Canadian universities engagement with international development issues and southern partners firmly on the map. Many universities now make “internationalization” a key component of their strategic plans, and several have opened special offices to assist students and faculty members in their international endeavours. Almost all interviewees commented on the excellent support provided by CP to access networks and researchers, as well as their guidance in research and information sharing services.

4. Issues for Consideration

The projects that CP funded tell the story of CP past and present. They are the vehicles through which CP expresses its mandate and its unique relationship with its partners and the international development constituency in Canada. As a responsive mechanism on the frontline of this constituency, CP has some particular challenges that should be addressed.

4.1 Diversity

In reviewing the presence of CP across Canada, the Review Team found that an unanticipated result of current practice was an evident concentration of funding in a few provinces. A future challenge for CP will be to extend beyond the current partners to involve other potentially interested universities and NGOs, as well as to reach out to new communities across Canada.

4.2 Selection

In the absence of clear indicators for the CP outcomes and in the absence of explicit criteria, project selection is particularly difficult to understand. While there are identified selection criteria for the small grants posted on the IDRC website, specific criteria for the larger grants are not evident and remain in the main implicit rather than explicit. Also, it is not evident what factors have governed decisions regarding the size, duration and nature of the grants awarded or those not approved. Nevertheless, it is important to underline a number of grant recipients interviewed perceived that the selection process has been rigorous and in many cases, recipients felt that the iterative process of proposal development led to strengthened project proposals and better definition of results.

4.3 Eligibility for continued funding

It was also apparent to the Review Team that there is a lack of clarity as to what the criteria are for eligibility for continuity of funding, other than for those organizations falling into the core or institutional partners categories. While CP did appear to have an implicit set of criteria to guide its actions, more explicit and public documentation should be made available to avoid any further confusion amongst current or future grant applicants or recipients.

5. Recommendations

To further strengthen the CP Program, the Review Team makes the following recommendations:

5.1 Invest in the Future of the Canadian Partnership Approach

The Review Team strongly supports the rationale for the CP Program and its role within the Centre. It is particularly impressed with the utility and effectiveness of the Program’s numerous small investments in Canadian NGO’s and universities.

5.2 Designate Project Priority Theme Areas

The present loosely defined project categories should be replaced with theme areas that relate more closely to those that have emerged from the CP Program, such as climate change, food security, youth and the diaspora. Targeted strategies need to be launched to realize specified priority themes.

5.3 Develop “New” Canadian Partnership Strategies

CP should work on a two track strategy, focused on both strengthening its long standing relationships, as well as actively developing designated theme areas. The CP Program should consider renewing its efforts to reach out to groups and institutions outside of central Canada.

5.4 Improve Transparency in Selection

Specific selection criteria for each project priority area should be defined to support greater transparency and for the sake of clarifying the confusion currently evident around the project eligibility and intake process. The selection criteria and expectations for Core partners should be redefined to open the possibility for additional institutional participation.

5.5 Stress Innovation & Flexibility

CP should maintain the current diversity of projects while recognizing the role of small grants as a key part of the flexibility of the CP Program. Small grants encourage experimentation and risk-taking which is usually less feasible in large projects. They also greatly increase the constituency and numbers of CP partners served, in addition to the potential for enabling multi-sector collaboration and innovation while effectively managing risk.

5.6 Implement Project Self-Evaluation

All grant recipients should be asked to provide a self-evaluation of their work in relation to the relevant CP objectives. The length and depth of these evaluations should be reasonable and commensurate with the size of the allocation.

5.7 Encourage Joint University – NGO Projects

The CP Program should consider renewing its efforts to strengthen collaboration between universities and Canadian NGOs by ear-marking funding to encourage the development of joint projects, including ones which create opportunities for student training.

5.8 Initiate a CP Communication Strategy

A communication strategy for CP should be created which disseminates the message internally and externally about the nature of CP, especially its uniqueness. A reshaped project information management system which is more user-friendly is needed. Additionally, the nature of CP should be more clearly articulated and evident on the IDRC web site.