A Review of the Use and Quality of IDRC's Rolling Project Completion Report Process

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Introduction

In 2005, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) adopted the Rolling Project Completion Report (rPCR) creating a cross-organization interactive process to elicit staff reflection, deepen learning about projects and to fulfill an accountability function for the organization.

A cross-organizational group led by the Evaluation Unit and Program and Partnership Branch Management designed this system after extensive study and consultation to address a series of concerns about an earlier reporting system. Several of the problems they hoped to address included a lack of report completion, limited use of reports that were actually finished, and more. As summed up by staff in the paper "Deepening a Culture of Reflection: IDRC's Rolling Project Completion Report Process:"

> "When staff realized that their project completion reports were unlikely ever to be read, they understandably became reluctant to put time and effort into preparing them. As a result, a large backlog of uncompleted reports arose and when these people left the program or the organization, IDRC suffered a "knowledge drain."

The paper goes on to describe how the new rPCR system addressed these issues by introducing a series of innovations to the reporting process, including:

- Being staged over time, thereby soliciting reflection on experience when it is still fresh in the minds of the responsible officers;
- Incorporating a series of interviews with the responsible program officer conducted by a range of organizational stakeholders (program management officers, program team leaders, and program or regional directors);
- Prompting reflection and thought through the addition of new questions beyond those focused on the achievement of objectives to capture program officer learning better.

After being fully in place now for over five years, IDRC evaluation staff commissioned this assessment of the rPCR process and its resulting reports as well as an analysis of how those in the organization use the system to inform learning throughout the organization. The primary purpose of the review is to identify ways for the Centre to improve the quality of the rPCR system including process, reports and their use.

Assessment Approach[1]

We largely base our review on two sources of information: an analysis of the rPCR reports and staff interviews.

We conducted an intensive document review[2] of 30 randomly selected projects with all three stages of the rPCR process completed. We also reviewed 50 randomly selected stage 3 only reports. We stratified our sample across program areas proportionate to the numbers of completed reports within each area.

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[1] A full description of our methodology is in Appendix 1.

[2] For 20 of these reports, we also read the corresponding PAD. In addition, we reviewed the guidelines for monitoring and trip reports.

Two members[3] of our team reviewed each report and rated them to assess the following: [4]

- Report completeness: Are all questions answered and phases complete?
- Quality of responses: Are they substantive, relevant, reflective, substantiated and indicate thoughtfulness and self-critique?
- Actionable/ useful for future: Are lessons identified with implications for the future clear?

We also looked for patterns in the types of information provided such as whether it was of a substantive nature related to the project and program or related to issues of process, etc.

We then interviewed 24 members of the staff including representatives from each level of responsibility in the rPCR process. The purpose of our interviews was to solicit user opinion on how they use and value the rPCR process and products. In our interviews, we explored staff perception of:

- How well the rPCR process met its goals
- Types of information captured in the report and how it complements or is duplicative of other sources of information within IDRC
- Value of the process and reports
- Use of the reports and how use might be improved
- Barriers and incentives for staff to invest the time in doing a good report
- Design characteristics of the process, questionnaire and the resulting reports

We interviewed staff members from a mix of program initiatives and regions with recent experience with the process of a rolling report (any of stage 1, 2 or 3). These included:

- Program management officers (4)
- Program officers/senior program specialists (7)
- Program managers/team leaders (4)
- Program and regional directors (8)
- Vice President of Programs (1)

Organization of the report

We have organized the report in the following manner:

1. Design and purpose of the rPCR system
2. How the system is currently implemented
3. Completeness and quality of the reports
4. How the reports are valued and used
5. Observations/ suggestions / recommendations

1. The Design and Purpose of the rPCR System

From the outset, the rPCR process was ambitious in its aims to make organizational learning a core part of the culture of IDRC. As conceived, the new system intended to influence interaction and sharing of knowledge across roles and levels in the organization and to apply incentives for strong quality and high levels of completion and use.

[3] When ratings differed between the two reviewers, they discussed differences in interpretation and either came to agreement or brought in a third reviewer to interpret and decide. This happened on four occasions at the beginning of the review. Thereafter ratings were consistent 90% of the time; where not consistent the reviewers followed the same process to reach agreement.

[4] The methodology section in Appendix 1 describes the criteria in detail.

Drawing heavily from the documentation of the process and staff reflection on it, we see the following as central tenets and elements of the system:

1. Its purpose is to stimulate and deepen individual learning by posing questions through an iterative interview process that could elicit not just facts about projects but also reflections about the experience.

2. The designers saw the interview process as central to the success of the system for several reasons including how it reflects the "oral culture" of the Centre and its perceived power to facilitate co-created learning. As originally designed, the report was to be a transcription of the interview.

3. The design incorporates incentives for quality input though a series of interviews of the responsible program officer sequentially over time, conducted by colleagues at different levels of the organization and in different roles, including:
    - The project management officer within 90 days of project approval
    - The program/ team leader mid-way through the project
    - The program or regional director within 90 days of the close of the project.

    This multi-level participation intends to motivate staff to invest the time and effort to complete quality reports by creating "the opportunity to exchange substantively with colleagues about issues they are working on and [providing] the demonstrated use of the knowledge obtained through the interviews." [5]

4. Another incentive for quality built into the process was the creation of the Annual Learning Forum (ALF), which draws attention to the reports by using knowledge surfaced from rPCRs completed throughout the organization.

5. Stages 1 and 2 were the principal vehicles in the system to foster learning as a response to a study suggesting that program officers learned the most early in a project's evolution. The stage 3 process directs attention to issues of accountability, as it elicits program officers' assessments of the achievement of objectives.

As designed, this system provides a thoughtful and strategic intervention into organizational culture. Gauging the actual value of the system requires more than what can be derived from an assessment of the content of the reports. A challenge for this assessment, therefore, is to avoid the pull to reduce our inquiry to the component parts of the system, i.e., the quality of the questionnaires/ interview schedules or the resulting reports. We, therefore, cast our assessment to examine the whole system; how it unfolds and the degree to which it still supports the central idea behind it, that is, to support robust organizational learning and project documentation for accountability.

2. Current System Implementation

As with all designs, actual practice varies from the plan. Our interviews reveal some important variation in how the rPCR system has been implemented throughout the Centre. The following

[5] From Deepening a Culture of Reflection: IDRC's Rolling Project Completion Report Process, November 2005.

details a number of these variations. Given the design of the study, we are unable to determine how prevalent these variations in process are, although we note whether we believe the practice to be widespread or of more limited nature.

- Stage 1 implementation aligns most with the original design: PMOs interview the program officer and prepare a report for the PO to review and approve.

  PMOs are highly motivated to continue their participation in the interview process and value the interaction with program officers as it reinforces and supports them in their capacity to carry out their role. For them, the interview sheds light on the proposal process and enhances their capacity to write reports with more insight into a project.

- Many of the stage 2 and stage 3 reports are not conducted through an interview between the program officer and the team leader or director. Instead, many staff report that they prepare a draft of the report and then discuss it with their manager.

  The predominant view offered by staff at all levels of the organization, with the exception of the PMOs, is a strong preference for the program officer to draft a report and then meet with their manager rather than conducting the process through an interview as originally designed. We heard from numerous staff that writing it first took less time and prepared them better for the later discussion with a team leader or director. Some of those functioning as interviewers raised the concern that conducting an interview, documenting it, and engaging meaningfully on the content, was difficult and distracting.

  > "I always write out comments… it helps me gather my thoughts makes for a better end product. Even for the (team leader or director), it makes it more efficient and they can focus on substance."

  > "For me it's hard to ask intelligent questions and write and be engaged at the same time. Also for the PO, writing ahead of time makes them think about it and they have to articulate their thinking--much more efficient."

- On the other side of this debate, some noted that program officers, after writing a report on a project, may be less open to alternative viewpoints. One director described the "tradeoff" well:

  > "[When coming in with a draft,] the PO will have done more background work and detailed thinking, rather than talking spur of the moment … and it takes less time and is perhaps more informed. The downside is that some things are pre-digested and you may not get as much brainstorming and questioning as in a two-way exchange. It is harder to change someone's mind when it's already in writing. There is a trade off because there's more detail when it's written. Do we want a reflective or an accurate document – these are incompatible."

- A more significant deviation from the designed process occurs when there is no interaction between staff once a draft report is completed. While *most staff* report that they meet with their team leader (during or after stage 2 reports) or their director (during or after stage 3 reports), we heard from several from different program areas, that these meetings do not always occur and that some officers do not receive any feedback on their reports.

- **Staff underscore the importance of the meeting between managers and program officers. It serves as an important incentive for taking the time to do the reports well and is pivotal in the learning process, professional development and management of staff.** We discuss this issue in more depth when we present our findings on the value and use of the process.

- In one variation in the process, interns and summer students in one program area conducted the interviews at each stage. We saw that these reports were brief, less complete and of lower quality than other reports reviewed.

- As many of the stage 2 and 3 reports are no longer transcripts written by the designated interviewer, several of those interviewed questioned who should be responsible to edit the draft report to reflect the conversation that follows. While most of the time program officers assume this responsibility, several people suggested sharing this task with the team leader or director as it would spread the burden of work and involve them more in the process.

- A similar question posed by a number of those interviewed is: who has ultimate responsibility and/or authority for the content in the reports and how much should program officer "opinion" be included. One critique calls for greater substantiation of opinion by facts:

> "Opinion should be supported by facts. One of the current flaws is that reports can be all opinion without facts. Some POs assume that you don't have to put in facts, because the facts are in the file."

Another critique relates to control over the content:

> "This is not an appropriate place for a PO to rant and rave or criticize the Centre and management. … I regularly need to correct some (reports), [as an example] 'this project doesn't fit with program, but we funded it anyway,' 'we are doing this project, but team doesn't have the capacity to do it.' There are situations where the PO feels a lot of risk and is using the report to protect themselves and shift responsibility to the Centre. This kind of an assessment needs to be done professionally and with an eye toward audience. If they say 'we shouldn't have done this project,' then I want discussion about why it was done in the first place. This is an accountability document and opinion is extremely valuable, but it needs to be supported [by the facts]."

3. Desk Review of the Completeness and Quality of the Reports

We reviewed final reports to assess whether they are complete, of good quality and show evidence of being thoughtful and self-critical. Working with Centre evaluation staff and based in part on directors' nominations of strong and weak rPCRs, we developed a set of criteria to reflect:

Completeness: Does the report provide enough narrative to follow what happened during the time period referenced? Is it understandable to an external reader who has the PAD? Is there sufficient detail about the project, its team, important events and/or accomplishments? Does the officer answer questions fully in the response? Would a new program officer understand the current state of affairs with the project?

Lessons provided and substantiated: Are the lessons, challenges and other content explained (such as conflict, differing interpretations, etc.) to make lessons understandable? Would the reader believe that the information presented and the conclusions drawn show evidence of thought? Is there sufficient reasoning to justify the conclusion or lesson? For stage 3: Does the report contain sufficient evidence to justify the ratings on achievement of objectives?

Actionable/useful for future: Does the report identify lessons or implications for working in the future on similar projects or with this grantee? Are the lessons explained in a way that they can be understood by others? Are future issues identified that should be tracked, for either learning or project success and are they explained in a way that they can be understood by others? Would an external reader be able to use this report and would a new PO be able to manage next steps and address issues?

Ratings:
The following table presents our ratings of each stage of each report reviewed. They were scored on a four point scale with (1) indicating a low rating and (4) high.[6]

	Completeness (1-4)	Lessons Substantiated (1-4)	Actionable/Useful (1-4)
Stage 1 (30 reports)	3.20	2.90	3.03
Stage 2 (30 reports)	2.93	2.82	2.93
Stage 3 (80 reports)	3.26	2.73	2.73

From a perspective informed by reading many reports prepared by staff at numerous U.S. foundations[7], we found the rPCR reports to be largely of solid quality. Most of the reports at each stage were complete and understandable. Program officers, for the most part, seemed to take this assignment seriously and gave it appropriate attention. The best of the reports expanded on questions asked and often discussed the implications for the future. The worst, and there were only a few, stood out as truncated, devoted only a few sentences to each question or answered them in

[6] We should note that we assessed information in the whole of a report and did not down grade a report if questions were addressed *somewhere* in the report but not necessarily corresponding directly to an individual question.
[7] The authors of the report are the directors of the Evaluation Roundtable, a community of practice of foundation evaluation directors and program leaders from 50 foundations in North America. It has been in existence for 13+ years with the goal of advancing how foundations learn about and improve their practice. In this role we have reviewed many (countless) reports prepared by foundation staff.

vague and ambiguous terms making it difficult to assign meaning or transfer the implied lesson elsewhere.

On completeness:

- Nearly 90% of stage 1 reports received ratings of either a 3 or 4.
- 80% of stage 2 reports received a rating of a 3 or 4. Five reports received 2, four from the same program area. Two others received a 1 because this stage was skipped entirely.
- 84% of stage 3 reports received a rating of a 3 or 4. Three reports received a 1: two were completely blank and the last one only had completed the rating of the project objectives.

Completeness tended to correlate with our measures of quality—that is, those that were more complete were also more likely to be actionable, supported by evidence and conversely those that were less complete were less clear about lessons, actions and follow up.

On the quality of content contained in the reports:
While eliciting slightly lower ratings than completeness, we believe that the content within the reports was of reasonable to strong quality. We tended to give higher ratings to reports that were more action oriented (for follow up for learning or decisions), considered other potential users and supported by information.

In terms of how well substantiated the reports were:

- In stage 1, 80% of the reports were rated as a 3 or 4.
- In stage 2, about 60% of the reports were rated as a 3 or 4.
- In stage 3, 58% of the reports (a larger sample) were rated as 3 or 4 and 36% were rated as a 2. A common problem we encountered was the lack of substantiation and at times contradictory information regarding staff ratings of how well objectives were met.

On how useful or actionable the information was:

- In stage 1, 74% received a 3 or 4.
- 68% of the reports received a 3 or 4 in both stage 2 and stage 3.

Variation:
We looked at possible explanations for variation in quality. A number of patterns surfaced:

- One program area received consistently lower ratings on all three criteria across all three stages. Summer students and interns in this group conducted most of these interviews.

- Reports completed by a single program officer "involved" from the start of the project were more likely to be complete and offer more "useful" lessons than those completed by staff who assumed responsibility for the project later in its evolution.

- Phase 1 and 2 reports on more costly projects tended to provide better quality information. Our interviews lead us to believe that risk management becomes more important as the size of the project increases. The size of the project did not affect quality in phase 3.

- Looking at whether the timeliness of report completion affected levels of quality we found:

    - For stage 1 reports, there was no difference in report quality for those written between 1-3 months after project start and those written 4 to 11 months after.

    - However, reports completed exceedingly late (more than a year after project approval) received significantly lower ratings on all three criteria.

    - We were unable to analyze the timeliness of stage 2 and 3 reports, because the project completion dates on these reports were not reliable because project timelines are often extended.

- We could not analyze differences in quality between those reports prepared through a formal interview and those prepared by a program officer by drafting the report first then editing it to reflect a subsequent conversation with the designated "interviewer." Only a small number of reports had "self" in the "interviewer" field. We know from our interviews, however, that the latter practice is widespread.

- However, Stage 1 reports received the highest ratings on all criteria—completeness, substantiation and for being actionable. PMOs completed these reports through interviews and produced relatively high quality reports.

- We found no differences in quality between stage 3 only reports and those stage 3 reports associated with projects that went through all three stages. Stage 3 only reports, however, received higher ratings on completeness (3.42) than those from the all stage process (3.0).

Observations on Content and Quality
We have several observations about the rPCR questions and the patterns of response in the reports. We provide a detailed analysis of the questions in each stage in Appendix 3.

<u>Stage 1:</u>
- Much of the learning identified in stage 1 tends to focus on process rather than pertaining to the substance of the project. The questions in this stage probe on lessons regarding design and learning in general, but not on the learning related to the substantive issues of the project. As the phrasing of the questions and the prompts focus on issues of design and ask the officer to reflect on the "design phase," many of the lessons take the form of "importance of face-face meetings," "need to manage north/south relationships," etc.

- Two questions in stage 1 seek to elicit what the team intended to learn from the process: "why was this project chosen to go through all three phases" and "what issues should be followed up in the 2nd interview because they are likely to give valuable lessons." While about half of these projects represent learning opportunities, just as many are selected because the project is seen as needing intensive monitoring. In effect, some program officers use stage one reports to develop a de facto monitoring plan for the project to manage high risk or costly projects rather than focusing on learning. Program officers were quick to point to this function as being of great value to them. Where responses stayed close to the direction of the question, i.e., targeting likely lessons to discuss in the future, they tended toward the broad and the generic e.g., "follow-up on how the project is contributing to policy."

- Stage 1 reports received the highest ratings on quality. We hypothesize that this may be due to two reasons. First, as the questions target the project design phase POs have the information they need to answer the questions fully, simply and expeditiously. Second, we heard from PMOs that they enjoy this assignment, take it seriously and therefore likely devote the time and attention to ensure higher quality reports.

Stage 2

- Much of the content in stage 2 reports provides a status update of the project outlining successes and challenges.

- Program officers and team leaders see the stage 2 process as allowing program officers to get advice on how to handle challenging issues. However, we saw little of this type of advice in the reports themselves. This may be due in part to the questions in the report, which do not ask staff directly about this issue.

- Stage 2 has two "learning questions" about the project. The first question asks program officers to reflect back in time, asking: "Thinking about what has happened in the project so far, to what extent are your lessons from the 1st interview still valid?" Because many of the lessons identified in stage 1 were about project design, many of the responses were short and mechanical responses such as "lessons still valid."

- The second question asks staff to look forward, "What other issues should be followed up in the 3rd interview because they are likely to give valuable lessons." No question in the stage 2 interview prompts the program officer to address what they have learned since the design phase and that might be pertinent to this mid stage point of reflection.

Stage 3

- We saw numerous instances of reports presenting significant learning related to the content of the project. As a group, this stage has more substantive lessons and content than that provided through the first two stages. The best of these reports present evidence of reflection on three years of work and shed light on how issues evolved and resolved. Strong reports tend to delve more deeply into the substance of work and provide observations on implications for the role IDRC has played or could play in the future. These reports, at their best, speak to implications about the substantive area or about purpose and achievement. Weaker reports provide shorter responses, focus on general process and provide little evidence to support the observations offered.

- Although this stage was the most substantive of the three, its overall ratings were lower on how well the reports use strong information/ substantiation to back up observations. Two key factors contribute to this:
    - In rating stage 3 reports, we took into account how well the author provides back up to their rating of achievement of objectives. Many of the objectives were broad and extremely ambitious, yet still received exceptionally high scores. Consider the following: The average rating given to achievement of objectives was 4.12, on a scale of 1 to 5, where one was "not met" and 5 was "fully met."

      Interestingly, when we compared how the original program officer rated achievement of objectives to that of a subsequent officer who assumes responsibility for a project later we see a significant difference. The mean rating assigned by original program officers is 4.3; that of subsequent program officers drops to 3.8. Neither distribution appears to be anything close to what would be expected in light of the ambitiousness of most of the objectives.

- We found stage 3 reports to be less "useful" or actionable for the future than what we saw in the reports from the first two stages. While it is difficult to know with any certainty, we speculate, that since staff see the reports mostly in terms of individual projects, that as a project ends, staff are less inclined to contemplate how this one project should inform the whole initiative or other projects similar in some way. This is certainly up for debate.

4. Value and Use of the Process and Reports

The following summarizes what we learned about how staff value and use the rPCR system and its elements. We base these observations on interviews with 24 members of the staff across the organization—all with some experience in preparing, interviewing or reviewing a reasonable number of rPCRs. We also provide our observations from the desk review of the reports.

- **The *process* itself (with few exceptions) is highly valued *throughout* the organization.**
  - **PMOs** value the chance to interact with program officers and to learn about project development. The information that they glean from the process helps them understand the work overall and projects more specifically. PMOs say that the process allows them to do their job more efficiently because they can gather information more easily as they use the information from the process when organizing and writing documents about the overall program area.

  - **For most program officers** the rPCRs' great value is in making them stop to reflect on the nature of their work and what they learned from it. As one said "it gives us a chance to breathe, to get new ideas and see different parts of the system." Staff, whose managers use the report as an opportunity to talk to them about the content, come away from the experience with the feeling that the interaction with their manager was the most valuable part of the process. Only one program officer, who never met with his/her team leader or director to discuss the reports, believed that the process did not add significant value.

  - **Directors and team leaders** tend to value the structured opportunity to: 1) learn about the projects, 2) manage staff and 3) offer them advice. The process provides them insight into the capabilities of staff. As one manager said, it gives him/ her a perspective that s/he does not get elsewhere, on how officers think. Another believes that it provides important incentives to officers to "show their accomplishments; it's the one opportunity they have to document their investment in shaping and bringing a project along." Another believes that "(The process) tends to add weight to what we know about the issues. (It) adds to the volume of knowledge."

    Team leaders, by standard protocol, do not participate in or receive stage 3 reports. We heard, however, of a number of team leaders who have created a variety of ways to review or access the information either before or after director input. Some request to see them before they go to the director or the program officer asks them for their input before sending the report to the director. Others review a copy of the report when filed. We heard of a few team leaders sitting in on the meeting between the program officer and directors. Others feel more reticent about "intruding" into the dynamics between the program officer and the director, but ask the program officer to update them on the discussion.

- **The view on the utility of the *written* reports varies by role in the organization.** Directors, for the most part, appear to be the biggest "users" of the reports themselves, which serve as:
  - "data" for their own reports to the board or management
  - part of the information sent to external reviewers
  - documentation behind decisions to change course in a program initiative

  One highly engaged director has met with initiative teams to discuss how s/he used the reports and the type of information s/he wants to find in them. This kind of interaction gives a clear signal to those responsible for completing the reports about the importance of the reports and their intended use—both important to producing good quality.

- **Some program officers do not know how the reports are used or even if they are read by anyone.** The directors we spoke with reported that they meet with their staff to discuss the reports.

- **Although there are examples of those who share all rPCRs within their teams, it is unclear how many staff read reports done by others (unless they are part of the interview or writing process).** Some teams share the rPCR reports with all the team members as a matter of course, and we heard of a few teams that even make the rPCR reports as an agenda item at periodic team meetings. However, several program officers acknowledge that they do not read all of the reports shared with them, due to time constraints, interest or perceived applicability of the project lessons to their work.

- **Staff have mixed views on the utility of the reports themselves and question how much value the "mining" of the reports could yield (if efforts were made to search them for cross-cutting insights into a particular issue.)** Staff provided several examples of teams that attempted to mine the reports to learn about an issue, yet staff assess these experiments as being of limited success. In part this was attributed to how the studies were constructed (e.g., one area examined all the reports completed in one year and had difficulty drawing inferences from the sample) and the effort it took to do so. There were several requests by staff for coding of reports to enable easier search capacity.

  Others believe that mining reports would be of little value because the real value is in the process. As one team leader said, the information from the reports are "kept in your heart and in brain; you don't have to mine them."

  Several staff took the middle ground and suggested that mining should occur, but it should be at a Centre-wide level on issues of Centre wide concern.

- **We heard mixed reviews on how well the reports helped external reviewers, however, we were unable to ascertain from those staff interviewed what the specific issues were.** If the Centre decides that informing external reviewers is an important function for the rPCRs, we suggest that staff interview a number of the external reviewers to understand how they used the reports and ways that the reports might better serve this function.

- **Many staff saw two major gaps in terms of the type of information that the reports capture.** Nowhere in any stage is an officer asked to consider how the individual project contributes to the overall aims of the program initiative, Centre-wide aims (e.g., gender issues), or regional issues. Team leaders, in particular, seek more information about how individual projects contribute to overall program area objectives. As one put it, s/he wanted the program officer to answer the "so what" question. As one said, "If they're serious about mainstreaming certain issues, then we should be capturing them here."

  The second area many staff identify as needing more attention in the reports is on the substance of the research or project itself. One person offered that s/he wants "to know what the PO thinks about how this research will be used by whom and why it is important." Another said: "What debate are those findings relevant to?" Several point out that while questions in the reports provoke thought about how the work was done, they inquire less into the findings themselves. "I typically pose other questions—what did this matter in terms of specific policy issue at hand, why and how?"

- **Many of those interviewed would like to see an improved report format that allows for easier reading.** Specifically many would like to see the "preamble" and other guiding questions moved to the end or attached so that the reports could be easier to read.

- **Several staff mentioned that the process does not work well for larger projects with multiple sub-components.** They identified difficulties addressing different components within the confines of the current instrument. One interviewee noted that a program area addressed this issue by doing separate rPCR reports for each research project within the larger overall initiative. This was the only type of project identified by staff where the rPCR instruments were difficult to apply.

- **Comments specific to stage 1 and 2:**

  - **Many of those interviewed suggest that these reports need "tombstone information"—that is basic descriptive information pertaining to the project and its intent.** This is of particular concern to interviewers and users who need to understand staff reflections more meaningfully**.** IDRC evaluation staff note that the reports were never meant to serve as stand-alone documents. However, the absence of this contextual information hampers the readers' full understanding of the reflections provided. As outside reviewers, we also found this to be true.

  - **With the exception of PMOs there is a great deal of ambivalence and some dissatisfaction with stage 1 reports; we heard several requests to eliminate this stage.** Most directors, team leaders and some POs believed that the PADs are superior to stage 1 reports and that these reports offer little value. Many in this group believe that the PAD provides more context for the project and is better at identifying risks. As one interviewee put it: "PADs are stage 1 plus."

    A much smaller number of staff (mainly program officers but not entirely) felt that although there was some duplication with the PAD, stage 1 reports were still worthwhile because they encouraged program officer reflection, did a better job than the PADs at capturing the "backstory" of the program design, and were helpful if a project was handed over.

Although stage 1 reports were intended to capture lessons from the design stage, only a few interviewees spoke about stage 1 reports as eliciting much insight in this regard. Program officers find the greatest value of the stage 1 report to be how it facilitates thinking about project risks what to track going forward.

Our review reveals that the PADs contain more contextual information about the project, why it was funded and the risks and issues to consider as the project unfolds. We reviewed 20 of the PADs corresponding to the rPCRs in our sample to explore the extent of duplication and to see if the PAD contained new or additional information. Stage 1 reports include more information on issues surrounding project design and navigating projects through IDRC. At times, stage 1 reports also provide more detail and tactical information on issues of project monitoring (e.g., it will be important to attend a specific meeting, next steps, etc). This is not surprising given the questions asked in each document.

As an external reader unfamiliar with the specifics of the project, we were better able to understand the PAD documents, in part because they provide context and specific project aims, which allowed us to make better sense of the information provided.

- **There was widespread, consistent positive reaction to stage 2 reports.** Program officers and team leaders emphasized the value of taking time to step back and reflect on project progress. Program officers value getting advice from team leaders particularly at the mid-point of a project when they can make necessary changes to improve a project. Interestingly, we did not see this type of advice reflected in most of the written reports we reviewed.

  Several staff saw some overlap and duplication of information in stage 2 reports with the Centre's new monitoring system and trip reports. We heard little sentiment to stop stage 2 reports because of the value that staff see in the process and the interaction that it engenders. A few staff, however, strongly advocate for Centre management to think about the various sources of project information and how it is gathered, and more importantly, stored and accessed.

- **Many staff would like to see stage 2 questions reordered.** Along with wanting to start with descriptive information about the report, staff also would like to start with a question that asks directly for an update on progress (the first substantive question now asks about what has worked well).

5. Observations/ Suggestions

The rPCR system is an ambitious experiment into building organizational learning. It is a success on many levels. Nearly all of those interviewed endorse the system's capacity to engender good solid and substantive engagement and learning. Moreover, it is one of the few vehicles we have seen in philanthropy that supports active supervision and development of staff capacity.

A number of the core design elements of the approach work well and contribute toward the intended goal of promoting learning. The iterative process supports relationships and roles in the organization and shows attention to how they should contribute to knowledge about a project. It uses important incentives that help build demand and foster quality. Most importantly, the system facilitates face-to-face interaction, professional development and, we suspect, thoughtful engagement about project-related issues. The attention paid to these issues during the design of the system has paid off.

As noted in the report, over time, exact adherence to the system has altered but mostly in line with the original intent. Some of the variations in implementation, however, deviate importantly from the spirit of the system, particularly in instances where summer students and interns supplant the designated interviewers or when reports are prepared and the authors get no discussion, response or feedback in any way. It is unclear from our study how pervasive this issue is, but it likely can be addressed fairly easily with more attention at the director level.

Several organizational shifts appear to be increasing demand for information, perhaps even beyond what the original redesign intended. These include:

- Introduction of final prospectus reports in the external review process where program teams outline their accomplishments
- Increased focus on how the projects in an initiative add up to further the program goals and objectives
- The use of the reports in external evaluations and considerations of how they might be of more value in this regard
- Strong use and promotion of reports by senior management

At the same time, other changes within the organization such as the new grants monitoring system and the PADs may put elements of the rPCR system into question.

None of this is surprising as change is inevitable. The challenge for a learning system to work well over time, is to stay attuned to changes in the organization, the broader environment, new demands on the organization, and new information systems. It needs to address and respond to feedback from its users (in various forms). It is no different here.

Our intent in the following discussion is to raise a number of the larger issues that surfaced in this study that will need internal discussion and debate. Consideration of these issues will enable the Centre to refine the rPCRs appropriately. Detailed feedback on the instruments and questions is in the attached appendices.

Principal Observations

1. Our central observation is that there is a lack of definition about the focus and purpose of learning. We come back to a basic question: Who needs to learn what? From what we understand, this was never explicitly defined and de facto it ends up being defined by each program officer.

   We heard what may be a growing demand for more systematic learning on issues of specific relevance to IDRC's organizational and programmatic agenda. Thus, a consistent call surfaced for more and better reflection on the substantive issues that shape the Centre's work. Staff want more substantive learning of a more challenging nature. They want to learn how projects contribute to the larger program initiative and how they reflect an approach toward impact in an area of interest.

2. The rPCR process facilitates individual program officer learning and provides a forum for some degree of knowledge sharing. A principal challenge, however, is expanding this learning beyond the individuals involved toward wider organizational learning. At its core, organizational learning requires reflection that goes beyond that of any single instance or individual and discernment of patterns of experience and of perspective. This can emerge either from aggregating multiple cases representing the work of the Centre or reflections from multiple vantage points on a more limited number of cases or both. By many accounts, the ALF process has contributed to this type of learning but it is relatively infrequent.

   More direction and clearer purpose about *what needs to be learned, and why* can advance this agenda considerably. We know that there is a strong call for a more specific and focused approach to learning about Centre-wide cross-cutting issues such as gender as well as a demand for more focused attention to team learning needs. So too directors have specific questions that the rPCR could address if they were specifically built into the questionnaire.[8]

   However, identifying patterns in IDRC work will require better and easier search capacity if these documents are to be a centerpiece of such learning. If the reports are to serve as a data source to mine, aggregate and use, the Centre needs to find a way to code reports based on key categories of learning and develop way(s) to access them with some ease.

   The bottom line is that there is strong demand for learning at IDRC, but one that focuses and links to a larger organizational learning agenda.

3. In addition to the learning goals of the system, it also serves an accountability function, which is also under-defined. We came away from our interviews with leadership and staff at the Centre unclear about what is meant by "accountability." Is it about how the Centre uses its funds or how grantees use the Centre's funds? Or is it about what grantees produce (outputs)? Or how well each project advances against their (usually) very broad objectives? Or is it for the completion of the reports? And who is being held accountable for what? More clarity on this issue can free up thinking about where and how to advance learning or accountability.

   One specific tension between accountability and learning appears in the discussion about how much program officer opinion should be in these reports. Facts play an important part of any accountability system, as does judgment. For learning to flourish, however, facts may need to take a subordinate role as the Centre gives more freedom to staff to speculate about why something happened as it did. The system distinguishes itself when officer opinion is articulated and substantiated well. Opinion is there certainly, but at its best, staff provide evidence and a rationale for the speculation provided.

[8] Beyond the core set of rPCR questions, the Centre and its directors might specify a select number of questions to be addressed in every report where applicable. Questions beyond the core set could change periodically to reflect interests at the Centre.

Concerns arise at the Centre, however, when officer opinion is less substantiated or perhaps "wrong" from a manager's point of view. Here accountability can run afoul of the goals of the system to enhance learning. On the other hand, the accountability aspects of the system may create incentives for completing the reports. Ultimately, however, we believe that *management attention is the key factor in differentiating strong from weak reports.*

4. The Centre would be well served to look at all sources of project and program information to see how they align; where they are duplicative and the kinds of information they need to address their most important questions. A basic architecture for information and its retrieval is sorely needed. There clearly is significant overlap between stage 1 reports and the PADs as well as the potential overlap between stage 2 and the new monitoring system. Some of our observations about the mixed uses of the rPCR system include:

    - Stage 1 currently serves a mix of purposes, perhaps at the expense of doing any one well, including serving as a monitoring plan, way of improving project design and articulating a team learning agenda. We imagine that projects for learning differ from (but not fully) high-risk projects that require intensive monitoring and that the questions for each purpose would be different as well.

    - Stage 2, while facilitating discussion and potentially mid-course changes, does not capture these changes in writing. The mid implementation point in a project should provide enormous fodder for serious reflection and learning, yet it is not recorded, thereby limiting how much of this learning is available to others.

5. We believe that no one system or device can meet all of the needs identified in this report and address all audiences at the Centre. Staff need to identify priorities for the system. In particular, staff need to consider the tensions and tradeoffs among the following:
    a. Learning versus accountability emphasis
    b. Focus on the individual project versus contribution to overall program
    c. Emphasis on individual and team learning that can be accomplished through meetings and discussions among team members versus broader organizational learning that may be achieved through better and more systematic mining of the written reports
    d. Monitoring and risk management emphasis (for stages one and two) versus a broader learning agenda
    e. Internal learning versus data for external reviewers

6. We do not see refining the instrument as being major issue (Appendix 3 details critique of specific questions guiding the three-stage rPCR process). It is also important to note that it is not possible to develop the "perfect" questionnaire. More importantly, the directors and team leaders need to be proactive with staff to identify needs and desires for learning in their programs. Increasing program officers' understanding of how directors and others use the reports and what information their teams want to learn will contribute significantly to the quality of the reports.

7. Finally, leadership matters. It is the attention of management and the involvement of directors in the redesigned process that has likely contributed to the increased attention given to the reports. If directors and team leaders work with staff to understand learning opportunities and co-develop a learning agenda, the result will be more targeted and better information. The

more staff observe leadership using the reports, the more attention and effort will be given to them.

Appendix 1: Methodology

Between January and June 2011 Patrizi Associates undertook an assessment of the use and quality of IDRC's rPCR process and reports. The study had two key components: a desk review of a sample of rPCR reports and interviews with staff.

Desk Review of the rPCR Reports

The purpose of the desk review was to assess the completeness and quality of the reports from each stage of the rPCR process.

A search in EPIK was done to identify all rPCRs that were started and completed between January 1, 2006 and December 31, 2010. A total of 596 rPCRs were identified and broken down by rPCR type (all stages or stage 3 only) and program area. [1]

A random sample of **30 all stage rPCR reports** was selected proportionate to the number of reports completed by each program area and included the following number of reports:

- 9 ICT4D
- 7 SEP
- 5 ENRM
- 5 IPS
- 2 SID
- 1 RHE
- 1 CSRM

A random sample of **50 Stage 3 only report**s was also selected proportionate number of reports completed by each program area and included:

- 18 ENRM
- 11 SEP
- 10 ICT4D
- 4 SID
- 3 PPB
- 2 RHE
- 1 IPS
- 1 REG-RAF

The evaluators divided the reports for review, and periodically jointly reviewed reports and ratings to ensure use of standard criteria and data collection procedures. When ratings differed between the two reviewers, they discussed differences in interpretation and either came to

[1] In identifying this sample, there was an indication of possible compliance issues that either teams are not fully following through with the all stage interview process or the EPIK project field indicating which projects are meant to have all 3 stages completed is not being used properly or consistently (IDRC staff looked at 29 of the all stages rPCRs and found 9 that were flagged in EPIK as 'all stages required' but only had the stage 3 completed.)

agreement or brought in a third reviewer to interpret and decide. This happened on four occasions at the beginning of the review. Thereafter ratings were consistent 90% of the time; where not consistent the reviewers followed the same process to reach agreement.

Three evaluators created and contributed to a database to capture information and responses contained in the sample of 80 reports. The database included:

- Information on the cover page of each report, such as interviewee, interviewer, dates, program and funding areas, and grant amount
- Program officer's role in the project
- A summary of the program officer's response to each question (for the 30 all stage reports)
- Evaluator comments on each response assessing the quality, clarity and any other impressions with the response
- The objectives and objective ratings in Stage 3
- Follow-up actions, such as sharing the report with others or requesting input from others

The evaluators rated each report on criteria developed after a review of a sub-sample of the reports and in consultation with IDRC's evaluation staff (see Table 1 on the next page for criteria).

Criteria

We identified the criteria for this review (building off questions in the RFP developed by the evaluation staff at IDRC) by requesting Directors to nominate rPCRs that they considered to be good and weak and to provide us with their corresponding rationale for selecting them as such. We then reviewed each of these reports to understand the rationale as presented to us.

We drafted a set of criteria incorporating director's impressions and those of the evaluation staff. Evaluation staff reviewed and critiqued these for our revisions, which we did. The final criteria are described in detail below.

Staff Interviews

After completing our desk review, we interviewed 24 members of the staff including representatives from each level of responsibility in the rPCR process. Our interviews included staff from the following positions:

- 4 program management officers
- 7 program officers
- 4 program managers or team leaders
- 8 program area/ regional directors
- 1 vice-president of programs

The purpose of our interviews was to solicit user opinion on how they use and value the rPCR and PCR process and products. In our interviews, we explored staff's perception on:

- How well the rPCR process met its goals

- Types of information captured in the report and how it complements or is duplicative of other sources of information within IDRC
- Value of the process and reports
- Use of the reports and how use might be improved
- Barriers and incentives for staff to invest the time in doing a good report
- Design characteristics of the process, questionnaire and the resulting reports

The confidentiality of the interviews was explained to each interviewee, and they were assured that their responses would not be identifiable in the final report to IDRC, nor would a list of interviewees be provided. Notes from the interviews were typed up after the interview and culled for information to inform the rPCR assessment.

Table 1: Desk Review Criteria

Criterion	**Traits/Looking for….**	**High (4) /Low (1) ratings**
Completeness	Does the report provide enough narrative to follow what happened during the time period? Is it understandable to an external reader who has the PAD? Are there sufficient details about the project, its team, important events and/or accomplishments? Are the questions fully answered in the response? Would a new program officer understand the current state of affairs with the project?	**Low**: Responses do not answer the majority of questions. Language and explanations are sparse, hard to follow, unclear and/or incomprehensible. **High**: Questions are answered in majority of questions, understandable and comprehensible to external readers; with enough detail about important events and challenges. New officer can understand project status enough to take it over.
Lessons/ objectives substantiated	Are the lessons and challenges explained (such as conflict, differing interpretations, etc.) to make them understandable? Would the reader believe that the evidence presented justifies the conclusion or lesson? For stage 3: Does the report contain sufficient evidence to justify the ratings? Would the reader believe that the evidence presented justifies the ratings?	**Low**: Insufficient evidence: Report does not contain enough information, descriptions or details to support the ratings. Reader does not see a clear link between the responses and the ratings; justification for a rating is weak. **High**: Very sufficient and strong justification: Report contains plenty of detail and description of the project to support the lessons or ratings. Reader would rate the objectives in a similar way given the responses in the report.
Actionable/ useful for future	For stages 1 and 2: Are future issues identified that should be tracked, for either learning or project success? Are they explained in a way that they can be understood by others? Does the writer discuss new, emerging or unexpected trends that will require new actions of IDRC or the officer? Would an external reader or new PO be able to easily take over this project and manage next steps and issues? For stage 3: Does the report identify lessons or implications for working in the future on similar projects or with this grantee? Are they explained in a way that they can be understood by others?	**Low:** PO does not consider implications or actions that could be taken for future grants or IDRC processes based on this project. It is not clear how lessons of this project can be applied to other projects or which projects. **High:** PO details recommendations for other and future projects based on this project or implications for IDRC. Lessons and/or recommendations are clear for others with related grants or those working at IDRC with similar situations.

Additional Forms and Reports

A number of additional documents were reviewed as part of the evaluation aside from the rPCR reports.

- The new project monitoring and standard trip report templates were compared to the Stage 2 rPCR template for duplication and level of detail
- Twenty PADs that corresponded to the all stage rPCRs were compared to the questions and responses in the rolling Stage 1 reports, assessing duplication and unique information in each.
- Internal documents, such as those describing the rPCR process, ALF reports, and past evaluations.

Appendix 2: Findings from the Desk Review of the rPCR Reports

Introduction

Between January and June 2011 Patrizi Associates undertook an evaluation of IDRC's rPCR process, assessing the quality of the system's reports and their use. The review had two main components: a desk review of 80 rPCR reports and interviews with IDRC staff. This report presents the findings from the desk review of the reports resulting from the rPCR process.

The purpose of the desk review was to assess the completeness and quality of the reports from each stage of the rPCR process. With IDRC staff, we developed the criteria to explore dimensions of completeness and quality (see table on the following page).

IDRC staff conducted a search in EPIK to identify all rPCRs that were started and completed between January 1, 2006 and December 31, 2010. A total of 596 rPCRs were identified and broken down by rPCR type (all stages or stage 3 only) and program area. [1]

The study drew a random sample of **30 all stage rPCR reports** proportionate to the number of reports completed by each program area and included the following number of reports:

- 9 ICT4D
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50 Stage 3 only reports were also randomly selected proportionate number of reports completed by each program area and included:

- 18 ENRM
- 11 SEP
- 10 ICT4D
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- 1 IPS
- 1 REG-RAF

[1] In identifying this sample, there was an indication of possible compliance issues. Teams may not be following through with the all stage interview process or the EPIK project field indicating which projects are meant to have all 3 stages completed is not being used properly or consistently. IDRC staff looked at 29 of the all stages rPCRs and found 9 that were flagged in EPIK as 'all stages required' but only had the stage 3 completed.

We developed a database of information from our review which included:

- Information on the cover page of each report, such as interviewee, interviewer, dates, program and funding areas, and grant amount
- Program officer's role in the project
- A summary of the program officer's response to each question (for the 30 all stage reports)
- Evaluator comments on each response assessing the quality, clarity and any other impressions with the response
- The objectives and objective ratings in Stage 3
- Follow-up actions, such as sharing the report with others or requesting input from others

The evaluators rated each report on criteria developed after a review of a sub-sample of the reports and in consultation with IDCR's evaluation staff (see Table 1 on the next page for criteria).

Table 1: Desk Review Criteria

Criterion	Traits/Looking for….	High (4) /Low (1) ratings
Completeness	Does the report provide enough narrative to follow what happened during the time period? Is it understandable to an external reader who has the PAD? Are there sufficient details about the project, its team, important events and/or accomplishments? Are the questions fully answered in the response? Would a new program officer understand the current state of affairs with the project?	**Low**: Responses do not answer the majority of questions. Language and explanations are sparse, hard to follow, unclear and/or incomprehensible. **High**: Questions are answered in majority of questions, understandable and comprehensible to external readers; has enough detail about important events and challenges. New officer can understand project status enough to take it over.
Lessons/ objectives substantiated	Are the lessons and challenges explained (such as conflict, differing interpretations, etc.) to make them understandable? Is there evidence of careful thought? Would the reader believe that the evidence presented justifies the conclusion or lesson? For stage 3: Does the report contain sufficient information to justify the ratings? Would the reader believe that the information presented justifies the ratings?	**Low**: Insufficient evidence: Report does not contain enough information, description or detail to support the ratings. Reader does not see a clear link between the responses and the ratings; justification for a rating is weak. **High**: Very sufficient and strong justification: Report contains detail and description of the project to support the lessons or ratings. A reader would rate the objectives in a similar way given the responses in the report.
Actionable/ useful for future	For stages 1 and 2: Are future issues identified that should be tracked, for either learning or project success? Are they explained in a way that they can be understood by others? Does the writer discuss new, emerging or unexpected trends that will require new actions of IDRC or the officer? Would an external reader or new PO be able to easily take over this project and manage next steps and issues? For stage 3: Does the report identify lessons or implications for working in the future on similar projects or with this grantee? Are they explained in a way that they can be understood by others?	**Low:** PO does not consider implications or actions that could be taken for future grants or IDRC processes based on this project. It is not clear how lessons of this project can be applied to other projects or which projects. **High:** PO details recommendations for other and future projects based on this project or implications for IDRC. Lessons and/or recommendations are clear for others with related grants or those working at IDRC with similar situations.

Key Findings

1. On the whole, rPCR reports were of acceptable to high levels of completeness and quality.

	Completeness Average (1-4)	Lessons Substantiated (1-4)	Actionable/Useful (1-4)
Stage 1 (30 reports)	3.20	2.90	3.03
Stage 2 (30 reports)	2.93	2.82	2.93
Stage 3 (80 reports)	3.26	2.73	2.73

- Nearly 90% of stage 1 reports received a rating of either a 3 or 4. All stage 1 reports were completed.
- 80% of stage 2 reports received a rating of a 3 or 4. Two stage 2 reports were blank.
- 84% of stage 3 reports received a rating of a 3 or 4. Two stage 3 reports were completely blank; one only scored the project on its objectives.

1. Reports that received a higher completeness rating also received higher ratings on other criteria.

	Stage 1 (30 reports)				**Stage 2 (30 reports)**				**Stage 3 (80 reports)**			
Completeness Score	1 (N=1)	2 (N=2)	3 (N=17)	4 (N=10)	1 (N=2)	2 (N=6)	3 (N=14)	4 (N=8)	1 (N=3)	2 (N=10)	3 (N=30)	4 (N=37)
Average Lessons Substantiated Rating	1.0	1.5	2.9	3.4	n/a	1.5	3	3.5	1	2	2.8	3
Average Actionable/ Useful Rating	1.0	1.5	3.0	3.6	n/a	2	3.1	3.3	1	1.6	2.8	3

- Two stage two reports were completely blank and were not rated on criteria other than completeness.

2. The majority of reports received a rating of 3 or 4 on lessons substantiated by evidence and usefulness.

	Stage 1 (30 reports)				Stage 2 (30 reports)				Stage 3 (80 reports)			
Lessons Substantiated Score	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Percent of Reports (number)	10% (N=3)	10% (N=3)	60% (N=18)	20% (N=6)	11% (N=3)	29% (N=8)	29% (N=8)	32% (N=9)	5% (N=4)	37% (N=29)	36% (N=28)	22% (N=17)

	Stage 1 (30 reports)				Stage 2 (30 reports)				Stage 3 (80 reports)			
Usefulness Score	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Percent of Reports (number)	7% (N=2)	20% (N=6)	37% (N=11)	37% (N=11)	7% (N=2)	25% (N=7)	36% (N=10)	32% (N=9)	12% (N=9)	21% (N=16)	51% (N=40)	17% (N=13)

3. We explored whether there were differences among the program areas that had at least five reports in the all three stages sample. One program area, IPS, received lower ratings than the others.

Stage	Program Area	Completeness Average	Substantiated Average	Useful/ Actionable Average
Stage 1	ERNM (N=5)	3.20	2.80	3.20
	ICT (N=9)	3.22	3.22	3.11
	IPS (N=5)	2.80	2.60	2.00
	SEP (N=7)	3.71	3.29	3.71
Stage 2	ERNM (N=5)	3.40	2.80	3.20
	ICT (N=9)	3.11	3.11	3.11
	IPS (N=5)	2.20	1.80	2.20
	SEP (N=7)	3.14	3.50	3.50
Stage 3	ERNM (N=23)	3.52	2.78	2.78
	ICT (N=19)	3.05	2.76	2.76
	IPS (N=6)	2.17	2.33	1.83
	SEP (N=18)	3.33	2.44	2.67

4. We explored whether the timing of report completion affected ratings. For Stage 1 reports, we found no significant difference in report completeness or quality if the report was completed “on

time" (i.e., within 3 months of project approval) and those completed within one year. Reports that were exceedingly late however, that is over a year, received significantly lower ratings.

Number of months between project start and Stage 1 report	Average Completeness Rating	Average Lessons/Objectives Supported Rating	Average Actionable/ Future Rating
0-3 months (N=13)	3.38	3.08	3.15
4-11 months (N=9)	3.22	3.11	3.33
12+ months (N=4)	2.25	2.25	1.75

- Of the four reports completed after one year, one was written by a program management officer, one appeared to have been written after the close of the project, and two were very brief and skipped several questions.
- We were unable to determine the time of completion of four reports due to incomplete information.

We were able to complete this analysis only for phase 1 reports, because the project completion field does not appear to indicate whether the project was extended.

5. The size of a project appears to affect completeness and quality during stages 1 and 2. Reports tied to larger grants tended to receive higher ratings on the criteria in these stages. Size does not appear to affect the quality of stage 3 reports.

	Stage 1 (30 reports)		Stage 2 (30 reports)		Stage 3 (80 reports)	
	<$500 (N=17	>$500 (N = 12)	<$500 (N=17	>$500 (N = 12)	<$500 (N=50)	>$500 (N=26)
Completeness	3.06	3.33	2.71	3.17	3.28	3.23
Substantiated	2.76	3.08	2.40	3.25	2.75	2.69
Useful/ Actionable	2.88	3.17	2.67	3.17	2.73	2.73

- The grant amount is unknown for 5 projects.

6. Stage 3 reports written by a program officer involved since the project's inception were significantly more complete than those written by project officers inheriting a project (3.39 compared to 3.04). We did not find notable differences on the other criteria.

7. When asked to assess the extent to which the project achieved its objectives, originating program officers gave their projects higher achievement ratings (4.28 compared to 3.82 on a scale of 1 to 5).

8. Stage 1: summary of key content areas
   - The most common lessons from the stage 1 reports dealt with:
     - Value of IDRC engagement with potential grantees
     - PO role in identifying managing/developing grantee capacity
     - Connection to stakeholders/policy advocacy
     - Internal IDRC management/navigation of projects through the approval process

   - The most frequently cited themes regarding follow-up actions were:
     - Methodology/ethical issues
     - Partner/team building
     - Organizational capacity/sustainability
     - Work with grantee to address specific task
     - Research demand/policy impact

9. Stage 2: summary of key content areas

   - Stage 2 content tends to provide a status update on project activities and assessment of challenges and accomplishments rather than focusing on lessons. The most frequent topics raised pertain to:
     - Capacity of the research/organizations
     - Relationships among or between stakeholders, project team
     - Sustainability of the organization or project

10. Stage 3: summary of key content areas

   - Stage 3 content largely pertains to substantive issues, varying widely.

Stage 1 rPCR Questions and Analysis

Appendix 3: Analysis of rPCR Questions

Question Number	Question	Issue	Example	Recommendation
1	What role have you played in the project to date?	Several POs gave very long answers that went well beyond this narrow question on role. We found that several POs marked both the box for "involved in the design of the project" and "handed over from another PO," which made analysis less clear.	Weak: "How this project has actually been developed is important. It builds on past IDRC-supported work in a number of ways….."	Eliminate the long "answer" field and replace it with a shorter field next to the check box "other." If IDRC wants to do more analysis of the rPCRs, consider have clearer check box options to clarify role and timing
2	What's your perspective on why our team selected this project for a rPCR?	Works in many cases; needs tune up as there are too many vague responses	**Strong**: "to learn how to set up regional hubs for innovation." **Weak**: "It is unique." "It's a large grant."	Make the "learner" the team rather than the individual respondent--will trigger more thought. Consider: "Why did your team select this project: what do they want to learn?"
3a	How long did the planning/design phase of this project last?	Pretty interesting question as it turns out; lots of variation on time it takes to make the award. 3 a and 3 b tend to get merged		Worth analyzing why there is so much variation.

Stage 1 rPCR Questions and Analysis

3b	Still thinking about the design/ planning phase, how did it differ from what you expected to happen?	Sets up reflection on the design phase which then is carried out through the next few questions and then into the next stage of the rPCRs. Lots of information (sometimes defending time it took to make the grant; but also identifies substantial issues). Tends to read like "notes to self." Not clear how this could be accessed well for more use.	**Strong:** (paraphrase)Challenge to make project leader and potential collaborators understand IDRC's meaning of "networks" and scale. Open (conference) attracted more people and allowed them to establish more networks. Other IDRC health partners felt threatened by XYZ . PO discusses how this was resolved and collaboration in another project. **Weak:** "Project suffers from internal and external issues and few have good understanding of debate."	Very interesting instances reflected in examples of design and start up issue that could be identified through a review of this material; the strongest of the comments are about challenges faced. Perhaps be more direct in asking for reflections on challenges.
3c	What did you learn from the design/planning phase that you want to remember or that you want other IDRC staff to learn from?	Lessons tend to be simplistic as worded. Attempts at generalizing the experience into a lesson, tend to produce overly simplistic statements. Only a few good examples in the set.	**Strong:** (paraphrase) RO describes how the State Secretary never met with her when she was in town. Reflects on whether she should have been more direct with project leader or if it would have insulted him and/or put him in jeopardy. Need to be on the ground to understand interplay and relationships among stakeholders. **Weak**: (paraphrase)Manage partner expectations or need for face-to-face meetings.	The phrase, "What did you learn" tends to evoke high levels of generality. Consider changing the question to one that evokes critical incidents in the evolution of the grant.
4	What issues should be followed up in the 2nd interview because they are likely to give valuable lessons?	This turns out largely to be a monitoring plan rather than identifying areas of expected learning. When learning areas are identified, they tend to be broad.	**Broad**: Policy impact.	The PO s tend to value the chance to develop a monitoring plan. Perhaps this is what is needed.
5	Final comments	None		None

Stage 1 rPCR Questions and Analysis

6	Is there anyone else who should have the opportunity to add to this interview because they have valuable lessons to share about this project? What areas can they expand on?	Tends not to be completed. Is the question meant to get to someone else to "add to the interview" or to identify others who should read the interview.		Formalize link to the Project Team Leader. Clarify for review or addition and why.
7	As this is a new process, do you have any comments on the interview itself?	Process is no longer new.		Remove this question.
8	What action should be taken as a result of this interview?	As structured replicates or is interpreted as replicating question 6.		Format and combine with 6
Other		Allow space for additional comments from other staff or team leaders to provide alternative viewpoints.		Add a section for manager or other staff comments (for each phase)
Other	Format	Too many instructions on the page; makes the process look more onerous.		Include instructions in a separate companion document

Stage 2 rPCR Questions and Analysis

Question Number	Question	Issue	Example	Recommendations
1	What role have you played in the project to date?	See Phase 1 comments.		See Phase 1.
2	Thinking about this project/ RSP activity and what you expected to happen, what do you think has worked well?	Seen as out of order in that it asks what "worked well" before it asks "what have they done." Respondents tend to start with a description of the project and offer a range of observations.		If tombstone were included then the first question would be: "What is the current status of the project." (and think about how to specify status.)
3	Thinking about this project/ RSP/ activity and what you expected to happen, what challenges have been faced?	What time frame is triggered by this question—previous expectations or the nature of challenges faced?		Revise as it ends up being a bit double barreled.
4	How would you assess the project team and its accomplishment so far?	Is the question about the team/ people or project accomplishments? Combining them often throws off the question. Many of the respondents limit responses to the team and not its accomplishments.		Drop the team focus as a specific call out or separate it in a different question.
5	How would you assess IDRC's involvement with the project/ RSP/ activity up to this point?	This question is not well understood. Most respondents discuss their own involvement rather than IDRC. Also it is too broad--could include things such as policies, strategy, regions, approach as well as operations.	• "IDRC plays a key role." • "Capacity building is demanding" • "IDRC staff has regular interaction with the project; has been very involved and am cc'd on all important communication."	With rewording, this could be a reasonably good question *if* there is an audience for the responses.

Stage 2 rPCR Questions and Analysis

6	What's needed going forward?	Question elicits a range of thoughts regarding issues to address in one way or another.		No changes in the question but it does raise for us the question of how changes in workplan get recorded and formalized.
7	Thinking about what has happened in the project so far, to what extent are your lessons from the 1st interview still valid?	This retrospective question harkens the PO back to lessons about the project design process, yet many of these issues are no longer relevant ongoing issues, because they dealt with the design phase. Several POs referred back instead to question 4 in stage 1, "What issues should be followed up in the 2nd interview because they are likely to give valuable lessons?" Others reflect on issues in phase 1, but rather raise new ones, which seems to be more relevant for an interview at this point.	**Weak:** "All of these lessons are still valid and remain at the forefront of the future steps of this initiative." The lessons are (paraphrase) the: 1) importance of face to face interaction; 2) need to strengthen institutional capacity; 3) need to closely monitor research findings.	Is there a question to ask relevant to the "present" of the stage 2 interview? What about capturing all the great mid course discussions that the Pos and team leaders talk about. As it is, the question elicits a set of relatively weak responses
8	What other issues should be followed up in the 3rd interview because they are likely to give valuable lessons?	Responses tend not to be about lessons but focus instead on issues for future monitoring.		There is a need for a straight monitoring question and more clarity and one that elicits reflection on the issues that made this project a learning project in the first place.
9	Thinking about what you've experienced and learned from this project / RSP/ activity, what might you do differently in your role now or in the future?	Responses are not particularly insightful or interesting. Perhaps the PO does not want to put it on the record.		Not clear why this question did not draw out more
10	Final Comments	None.		

Stage 2 rPCR Questions and Analysis

11, 12, 13	Same questions as 6, 7, 8 in stage 1			See stage 1
Other		Although we heard of good discussions between PO and team leader they are not included here. We think in part it is because the instrument is forward and backward looking but not focused on the present. Nor does it ask for a summary of the discussion or for reflections on how the project offers lessons on the program initiative		Need a question on potential mid course corrections/refocusing and one to elicit reflections contemporaneous to the 2nd stage.

Stage 3 rPCR Questions and Analysis

Question Number	Question	Issue	Example	Recommendation
1	What role have you played in the project /RSP /activity to date?	See phase 1 comments.		See phase 1.
2	On a scale of 1-5, please rate the achievement of each project objective.	Many objectives are overly broad or unrealistic. PO ratings are overly positive. The reader encounters the objectives and PO ratings without knowing anything about the project.		Define more appropriate project objectives at project approval stage. Consider asking staff to "justify" their ratings rather than just comment on them. Include a project description before this question.
3	Is a list of outputs available in the project file?	None; straight forward.		None.
4	If appropriate, highlight any unique or innovative outputs.	This question seeks to document "particularly impressive and useful" outputs. Unique and innovative may limit responses.		Consider broadening the language in the question to particularly impressive and useful, and perhaps focus it by adding "toward the program initiatives or organizational goals."
5	If appropriate, explain why outputs were not completed or were of poor quality.	About one quarter of the reports in our sample addressed this question and discussed issues of quality.		None

Stage 3 rPCR Questions and Analysis

6	What did this project set out to achieve?	Responses to this question tended to fall into four categories: 1. a reiteration of the project objectives; 2. a general description of the project's broad aims; 3. a rationale for how the project fits within IDRC's program; and/or 4. an assessment of project accomplishments (which was at times repetitive with question 7).		Consider moving this question before rating the project on the achievement of objectives to elicit a broader description of the project and help orient the reader before going into the specific objectives. Ask specifically about how it contributes to program initiative/organizational goals. Consider adding a question on how this project advanced program initiative and/or organizational goals.
7	What actually happened?	Elicited several interesting and insightful responses. At times answers were repetitive with question 6 or referenced comments made in response to question 6.		See above to lessen potential repetitiveness.
8	If appropriate, explain how the project contributed to the field of study / research area.	POs seemed to interpret this question either narrowly on the direct accomplishments of the project; others answered more broadly on the potential future implications (e.g., likely influence on policy change). There was a surprising number of not applicable or very brief responses.	Narrow interpretation: "Published [a number] of international publications." Broader interpretation: (paraphrase) PO discusses funding and partnerships that have emerged. "This project has established health informatics as a field in the 3 sites. A model for building local capacity and results."	Separate this question into two: one on the POs assessment of overall achievements of the project and a second on its potential implications.

Stage 3 rPCR Questions and Analysis

9	Why did it happen that way?	Responses were at times short and of limited insights; other POs provided more thought and/or summed up earlier themes. This may be an issue of officers not knowing why the project unfolded as it did or being uncomfortable in speculating on causes.		If IDRC is seeking the officer's viewpoint, clearly state that by starting the question with "In your informed opinion."
10	What would you do differently if you were doing this project over?	This question elicited some interesting and tangible actions that officers would do differently. Examining patterns across projects of a similar nature would likely yield data for a rich discussion among staff.	(Paraphrase) • Spend more time in pre-project phase. • "Have less involvement of foreign institutions". • "Methodological refinements were necessary to ensure rigor. This would be better done by splitting project into 2 phases."	None
11	Based on your experiences with this project, what have you learned about the role of the responsible officer?	Like question 10, this question elicited interesting points that would be useful to examine patterns.	• "Need subject matter experience." • "Stay engaged with team during implementation." • "Difficulty balancing roles as officer and leader."	None
12	What are the implications of this learning for IDRC programming?	Responses tended to be project specific or have implications for IDRC and/or PO's general approach to project management. There was less discussion on the implications for future program initiative investments and/or goals and objectives.	• "Involvement of PO is crucial." • "Ensure knowledge is transferred when consultants do much of the work.?	Ask specifically about implications for or lessons on program initiative grantmaking.
13	Any final comments?	None		
14	What actions should be taken as a result of this interview?	See phase 1 comments		

Stage 3 rPCR Questions and Analysis