

# Distilling Key Learning across IDRC's Program-Led Evaluations

**Final report**

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# Executive summary: Distilling Key Learning across IDRC's Program-Led Evaluations

## Purpose and scope of this project

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) funds research aimed at reducing poverty and improving lives in developing nations. Committed to continuously learning from both the successes and challenges of its programming, IDRC commissions a wide variety of program-led evaluations from third-party firms. IDRC's Policy and Evaluation Division (POEV) commissioned Cathexis Consulting to conduct a **systematic meta-analysis of IDRC's program-led evaluations** in order to **capture and support learning about strengths and shortfalls** of IDRC's programming approach under the 2015-2020 strategic cycle. The analysis of recurring and strategically relevant lessons and findings across IDRC's program-led evaluations will also help guide strategic planning beyond 2020. The review included 23 significant evaluations commissioned by IDRC programs (including externally funded programs) and completed during the 2015-2020 strategic period; a complete list of evaluations reviewed is provided in Annex A.

This exercise has focused on **eight overarching areas of interest**, which are listed as the titles of the boxes on this and the following page. The areas of interest presented on this page are IDRC's 2015-2020 strategic objectives. The remaining five areas of interest, presented on the next page, are additional areas of interest to IDRC.

### 1. Achieving impact at scale

#### Key findings:

- Some IDRC projects are **deliberately built to facilitate scaling** of promising interventions.
- The private sector can be a valuable partner in scaling innovations in some cases, but **grantees often have limited capacity to engage with private sector actors**.
- Evaluating scalability (and KT more generally) within project-funding timelines usually requires **assessing likely future uptake**. There are promising methods of assessing this in the programs included in this study.

### 2. Building leaders

#### Key findings:

- **Deliberate mechanisms to build individual leaders and leading organizations** are integrated into all programs in scope.
- The **"greenhouse" approach** (holistic, wraparound, on-site support) to building emerging leaders may be particularly effective.
- **North-South research teams** benefit both sides. Equality is essential, and IDRC has found ways to ensure it.
- **Core funding** can provide the predictability and flexibility needed for leading organizations to build their own capacity
- Sustaining leadership beyond the grant period requires **increasing grantees' capacity to secure their own funding**, but the results of this effort have been uneven.

### 3. Being the partner of choice

#### Key findings:

- Being the partner of choice can mean being the **funder of choice** (from grantees' perspective) or the **co-funder of choice** (from other funders' perspective). Both are important, and mutually reinforce each other.
- IDRC's **flexibility (including funding flexibility)** can make it the funder of choice.
- IDRC's **Grants+ approach** (extensive supports to grantees) can make it the funder (and co-funder) of choice.
- **Co-funding and parallel funding** arrangements each have advantages and disadvantages. Further investigation in this area is needed.

#### 4. Integrating gender and equity considerations into programming

- Gender considerations, dimensions of equity beyond gender, and an intersectional approach to gender have often **not been systematically integrated into programs** and their evaluations, but there is evidence that **this is improving**.

#### 5. Designing programs for collaboration, learning, and synthesis

- Most IDRC programs in scope are **deliberately designed to support collaboration, learning, and synthesis**. IDRC has experimented with a variety of ways of supporting this.
- **Common research questions and timelines** (a “cohort” in the strong sense) may be particularly effective at leading to collaboration, learning, and synthesis.
- **Consortia** can foster collaboration across boundaries, create convening power and build individual leaders and leading organizations.
- **In-person meetings** between grantees are valuable for fostering cross-project and South-South learning.

#### 6. Building flexibility into IDRC programs through funding mechanisms

- **Opportunity funds and synergy funds** work well to keep programs nimble.
- In the programs reviewed, there are other **promising funding mechanisms** that facilitate flexibility.
- **Granter-grantee trust** makes flexible funding work. IDRC excels at this.

#### 7. Supporting knowledge translation and policy/practice influence

- IDRC works to **facilitate knowledge translation and policy/practice influence** in numerous ways.
- Influence on policy and practice is sometimes best pursued through **alternative policy spaces and nontraditional influencers**. Some grantees need support in accessing these spaces.
- Bringing the **intended users of the research into the research team** from the beginning may be the surest way to create research demand and maximize uptake.
- The **design of the Call for Proposals process** can impact research quality and uptake. A two-stage Call for Proposals process with financial support to shortlisted applicants is a promising approach.
- IDRC programs contribute to outcomes beyond policy influence. These include **field building, thought leadership, and awareness raising** of lesser-known topics.

#### 8. Knowledge management

- Some programs **lack clear, strategic knowledge management plans**. This is a key gap.
- A **useful resource hub** for development research is accessible, well organized, quality-assured, and includes both country-specific and non-country-specific resources.

#### Topics for future evaluation and learning

This exercise uncovered a number of areas where **learning was limited** due to a lack of in-depth examination by the evaluation reports, and/or use of inconsistent terminology. The following areas would **benefit from further investigation** (through evaluation or other means):

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| ▪ <b>Optimal scale and justification for scaling</b>                | ▪ <b>Equity</b> considerations beyond gender                               |
| ▪ Increasing <b>grantees’ capacity to secure their own funding</b>  | ▪ Ways of <b>designing programs for collaboration, learning, synthesis</b> |
| ▪ <b>Co-funding partnerships:</b> genesis, successes, challenges    | ▪ <b>Flexible funding mechanisms</b>                                       |
| ▪ <b>Co-funding vs. parallel funding:</b> advantages, disadvantages | ▪ Designing <b>Calls for Proposals</b>                                     |

About this project

# Purpose and methods of this project

## Purpose

IDRC employs a strategic and decentralized system of evaluations at the organizational, program, and project levels. Evaluations commissioned by IDRC programs normally target staff of the program in question and IDRC management as key users. However, looking across these evaluations, there are many examples of findings that could be strategically relevant across programs more broadly. While ad hoc efforts are in place to promote internal sharing of findings and key lessons, these findings and lessons present an opportunity for deeper systematic analyses or distillation

In June 2019, IDRC contracted Cathexis Consulting to complete this meta-analysis of program-led evaluations. The key findings that emerge will provide insights and guide future program decision making. Rather than a summary of all evaluation findings—which are far too numerous to include in a single, digestible document—the analysis was intended to identify the most significant and actionable findings that could inform future program design.

## Methods

This project followed a collaborative process, as follows:

- IDRC's Policy and Evaluation (POEV) division identified 23 evaluations (covering 20 different programs or projects) to be analyzed (see next page)
- The Cathexis team reviewed background and reference documents
- Cathexis and POEV collaboratively built a coding key to guide the analysis
- Cathexis used NVivo qualitative analysis software to analyze evaluation reports according to the coding key, adding additional codes as needed
- Cathexis identified key findings of cross-program relevance: those that appeared in many evaluations, or appeared in fewer but seemed highly significant
- Cathexis and POEV participated in a sensemaking session to co-interpret the findings
- Cathexis wrote a final report and presented the results to IDRC staff in October 2019.

## Overarching areas of interest

This project focused on eight overarching areas of interest. The first three are IDRC's 2015-2020 strategic objectives. The other five are additional areas of strategic interest to IDRC.

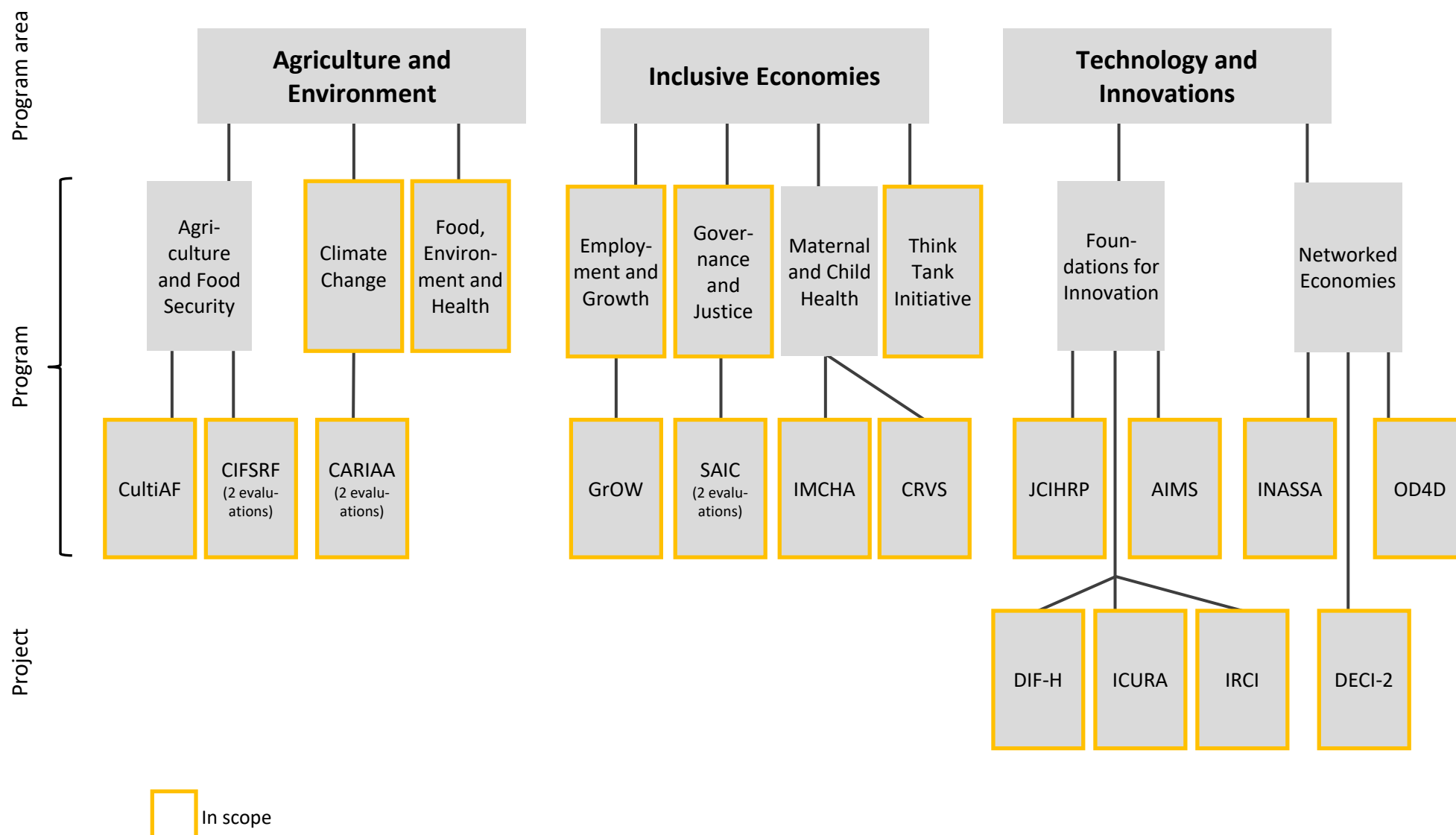
The areas of interest are as follows:

- |                                      |   |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| 2015-2020<br>strategic<br>objectives | { | 1. Achieving impact at scale  |
|                                      |   | 2. Building leaders   |
|                                      |   | 3. Being the partner of choice  |
| Additional<br>areas of<br>interest   | { | 4. Integrating gender and equity considerations into programming      |
|                                      |   | 5. Designing programs for collaboration, learning and synthesis       |
|                                      |   | 6. Building flexibility into IDRC programs through funding mechanisms |
|                                      |   | 7. Supporting knowledge translation and policy/practice influence     |
|                                      |   | 8. Knowledge management   |

# Evaluations in scope

The diagram below is an overview of the IDRC's Programs and Partnerships Branch. Programs/projects for which evaluations were analyzed as part of the present meta-analysis exercise are indicated with a gold outline. In total, 23 evaluations were reviewed.

For further details on the evaluations that were analyzed, including the meanings of each acronym, see Annexes A and B. For a list of background and reference documents consulted, see Annex C.



Key findings



# 1. Achieving impact at scale

**Key finding: Some IDRC projects are deliberately built to facilitate scaling of promising interventions.**

In the evaluations in scope, projects worked to achieve scale at multiple levels, including community, district, national, regional, and even global scale (e.g. some GJ projects, and elements of OD4D). What is scaled may be a policy, program, behavior/practice/skill, product/technology, research methodology, or combination of the above. Scaling often occurs by ground-truthing innovations and refining them through a **piloting process**, then assessing the extent to which they can be replicated in other places, contexts, and populations (DIF-H, CARIAA, CIFSRF).

A few examples of projects designed for scaling are given below:

- **Program/product/practice scaled to sub-national level:** CIFSRF included a project (Scaling Up the Production of More Nutritious Yellow Potatoes in Colombia) to introduce improved varieties of potatoes in rural communities in Colombia, while also encouraging sustainable agricultural practices. After this innovation was piloted in five communities, a provincial government in Colombia has committed to scaling it to a further 13 communities.
- **Technology scaled to a national level:** IRCI included a project (Breaking the Barriers to Internet Access) that developed data mining technology to make agricultural product prices more easily accessible to farmers. This led to the founding of an associated technology companies with offices in Canada and China, and the technology was adopted by the Chinese Weather Bureau and Ministry of Agriculture.

**Key finding:** The private sector can be a valuable partner in scaling innovations in some cases, but grantees often have limited capacity to engage with private sector actors.

Engaging the private sector as a partner in scaling innovations comes with risks, as benefits may accrue primarily to shareholders and products/innovations may be priced out of the reach of those with the lowest incomes. In other words, bringing in private actors can introduce conflicts of interest. Nonetheless, the evaluations suggest that the private sector can be usefully, and ethically, engaged in at least some circumstances.

ODI's CIFS RF evaluation argues that the private sector is an essential partner for scaling up an innovation when a) the innovation is relatively **simple to use**, and b) the innovation has **primarily private gains**. Private gains are those in which the end user of the innovation receives the full benefit of the innovation even if no one else adopts it (i.e. minimal positive externalities), and does not have to share the benefit with other non-buyers (i.e. excludable). An example given in this evaluation is a millet thresher. When these criteria are met, all that may be required for scaling is for private actors (individuals, households, farms, firms, etc.) to be aware of the innovation and its benefit, know how to use it, and have access to it, and it will likely be rapidly scaled.

A number of programs engaged the private sector in scaling efforts (CARIAA, CultiAF, CIFS RF, IRCI, AIMS, CC, FEH), and there were some noteworthy **examples of success**: for instance, insurance companies adopting tools to assess climate change risk and resilience (CC), and pharmaceutical companies assisting in the scaling of the Ebola vaccine (FEH).

Nonetheless, evaluations showed that there have been **severe challenges** when it comes to grantees engaging with private sector actors, and many **missed opportunities**:

- Grantees in the CC program usually had virtually **no knowledge and experience with the private sector** and gave it little or no thought; they did not engage even when there were apparently obvious opportunities for partnership. Grantees often harboured a **prejudice against the private sector** and viewed it as synonymous with large corporations. There was also a mismatch between the slower pace of academia and the quicker pace of business. As a result, while the CC program had some successes with the private sector (especially with the insurance and investment industries), there was much less success here than there was with the public sector.
- CARIAA and DIF-H grantees **lacked the business acumen and private sector connections** needed to attract interest from investors for their innovations.
- CIFS RF grantees had success with small-scale private actors (entrepreneurs, small businesses, farmers' associations, etc.), but only a moderate amount from national private actors, and very little from multinational private actors. This was in spite of significant outreach to the private actors through engaging them as partners, meeting with them, presenting findings, and developing research outputs intended for their consumption.

Some ways of overcoming these challenges were suggested by a few evaluations:

- **Build grantees' networks and capacity to engage with the private sector** (DIF-H, CC). This was successful in the CC program, where it led to grantees training Morgan Stanley employees in the use of climate change risk and resilience tools to inform their investment decisions. In particular, grantees need training in **packaging their results in a private-sector-friendly format** such as a business case; traditional research papers are difficult for private sector actors to engage with and to operationalize.
- **Private businesses should be sought as research partners rather than just funders**; approaching them only as potential funders only can alienate them, and means that the knowledge generated will be less well positioned for use (CC).
- **Businesses with strong social and environmental responsibility (e.g. certified B Corps) can be engaged** (CC), in order to allay grantees' understandable concerns about whether the partnership will be used for the public good. This approach was successful in the B Corporations in LAC Project within the CC program.
- **Require a business case as a deliverable**. This has been done in CIFS RF's 6th Call for Proposals, but it is too early to assess the success of this.

**Key finding: Evaluating scalability (and KT more generally) within project-funding timelines usually requires assessing likely future uptake. There are promising methods of assessing this in the programs included in this study.**

Most of the evaluations (e.g. CC, CultIAF, CIFSRF, CARIAA, GJ, ICURA, DIF-H) found that it was **too early** to fully assess the extent to which the research being conducted would or could be brought to scale. These evaluations had to instead assess **likely future scalability**. Note that this issue is cited frequently not just in formative evaluations, but in summative evaluations as well, so it is not simply an issue of an evaluation being conducted too early in the program lifecycle: **even the end of the program lifecycle is often too early**, as innovations may take a decade or more to scale.

Much the same was found regarding knowledge translation and policy influence more generally (e.g. in the TTI, IRCI, AIMS, and OD4D evaluations): evaluators needed to assess the likely future use of knowledge, how well positioned an individual leader or leading organization was to impact development in the future, and so forth.

None of this is surprising, as scaling, policy influence, building leaders, etc. takes time and the investments made are investments in the future. KT evaluation often uses measures of likely future influence, and IDRC's Research Quality Plus (RQ+) framework includes "Positioning for Use" (comprising "knowledge accessibility and sharing" as well as "timeliness and actionability") to assess the likely future influence of a piece of research.

What is more interesting is *how* this early, prospective assessment can be made. Some of the evaluations showed some promising ways of determining the likelihood of future scaling:

- **Asking** the innovators, intended users of the innovation, or other knowledgeable stakeholders how likely they believe it is that the innovation can/will be brought to scale (or the research used, etc.). (Care needs to be taken here, however, as in some evaluations, such as ICURA, it seems that the evaluators asked these questions only of PIs and others who may have a vested interest in indicating likely future success. It is important to pose these questions to stakeholders with a more objective view – e.g. subject matter and regional experts, potential future users of the innovation or research who did not participate in its development, etc.)
- **Private vs. public gains.** This method is grounded in economic theory and was used by ODI's CIFSRF evaluation. It assesses the likely future scalability of an innovation based on the extent to which the gains from the innovation are private or public. Private gains have minimal positive externalities and are excludable (e.g. millet thresher); innovations with primarily private gains are easy to scale, as individuals can adopt the innovation and gain full benefit from it without collective action. Public gains have significant positive externalities and are non-excludable (e.g. livestock vaccination). Innovations with primarily public gains are unlikely to scale up without public action (e.g. a policy requiring the innovation to be adopted, or widescale purchasing of the innovation by a government body). (Public intervention may be required even when gains are primarily private, if the innovation is not well known or understood or its proper use is complex.)
- Assessing whether a **longstanding body** (government agency, well established private firm/NGO, etc.) has taken on the task of scaling the innovation or using the research. ODI's CIFSRF evaluation uses this technique.
- **Culture of research impact.** Assessing the likely future policy influence of an organization (e.g. a Think Tank) can be done by querying its "culture of research impact," as was done in the TTI evaluation. Think Tanks were assessed in terms of five signs of a "culture of research impact" which [derive from the DFID-ESRC Growth Research Programme](#); these signs include a focus on collaboration, co-creation, and an iterative approach; emphasizing local scholarship; networking activities; and quality of evidence.

## 2. Building leaders

**Key finding:** Deliberate mechanisms to build individual leaders and leading organizations are integrated into all programs in scope.

**Individual leaders** that IDRC programs support can include researchers (graduate students, postdocs, established researchers) as well as policymakers, community members, and others. The individuals invested in are mainly from the Global South, but some are Canadian or are from other Northern countries. They may be either promising junior researchers (emerging research leaders) or more established researchers (who may nonetheless benefit from additional capacity building to increase their influence and visibility in policy circles).

The basic way that IDRC programs build individual leaders is by engaging them in research projects – i.e. as grantees. This approach is implicit or explicit in every program that provides grants to research teams (e.g. CARIAA, SAIC, IMCHA, IRCI, JCIHRP). In many programs, a great number of emerging researchers are supported through post-graduate scholarships, and many of the research outputs that result from these programs are Master's and Doctoral theses. Engaging **early-career researchers as a project lead or co-lead** (e.g. CIFSRF, CARIAA, GrOW, EG, SAIC, DIF-H, IRCI) is a way to build leadership capacity by putting emerging leaders into positions of greater responsibility, visibility, and prestige. Allowing early-career researchers to have **first author credit** on publications (when warranted) can also be helpful in building their reputations (CARIAA, GrOW).

Programs also build leadership capacity through **training and education** (e.g. CultIAF, SAIC, GJ, AIMS, CC), **mentorship** arrangements (e.g. CultIAF, GrOW, SAIC, GJ, DECI-2, INASSA), **networking and peer learning** opportunities (e.g. CultIAF, SAIC, DIF-H, IRCI, JCIHRP, CC), **developing and enhancing postsecondary curriculum** (e.g. CARIAA, ICURA), and **creating new graduate programs** (CC).

**Leading organizations** that IDRC programs support can be think tanks (CARIAA, INASSA, TTI), universities (CultIAF, CIFSRF, INASSA), or civil society organizations (GJ), and may be either established, emerging, or start-up organizations.

Capacity building approaches for leading organizations include:

- Providing **core funding** (i.e. not earmarked for particular projects) for a set period of time (TTI) – see page 14
- Providing **project-specific funding** (many IDRC programs)
- Providing **flexible funding** (i.e. additional, ad hoc funding to help the organization seize opportunities to scale up research or achieve policy influence) (e.g. CIFSRF, INASSA) – see pages 22-23
- **Directly supporting organizational development** (e.g. supporting the organization's communications and evaluation capacity [DECI-2], funding workshops and retreats [TTI, OD4D])
- Helping organizations **network and collaborate** with each other (e.g. GJ, DECI-2, OD4D)

Through these measures, organizations expand their internal capacity as well as their networks, visibility, and reputation, all of which can lead to greater influence on policy and practice.

Building individual leaders and building leading organizations are intertwined and mutually reinforcing, due to “**reputational spillover**” of organizations to their constituent members and vice-versa (CC).

**Key finding:** The “greenhouse” approach (holistic, wraparound, on-site support) to building emerging leaders may be particularly effective.

The AIMS program trialed a unique model of capacity-building for emerging research leaders: a “greenhouse” approach in which promising students from African countries receive 24/7 holistic support while completing a Master’s degree at one of the AIMS campuses. There are two key aspects of this model:

- **Wraparound supports.** The students live on campus and have continuous tutoring supports, as well as ample opportunity to socialize and network with other students.
- **Holistic, applied approach.** Students attend a variety of courses beyond just pure mathematics and mathematical sciences. They learn applied mathematics, life skills, employment skills, job search skills, and business and entrepreneurship. Many of their theses pertain to topics with direct relevance to development, including climate, energy, environment, finance, and health. They are matched with co-op and internship opportunities that build their ability to influence Africa’s development trajectory.

Although undoubtedly expensive, this approach does seem to have borne fruit, in terms of developing the networks, qualifications, and skills (both hard and soft) of promising young Africans in applied mathematics. In the estimation of Cathexis, it may be worth exploring the possibility of replicating this model in other locations (outside Africa) and/or other subject matters (beyond mathematical sciences).

**Key finding:** North-South research teams benefit both sides. Equality is essential, and IDRC has found ways to ensure it.

A number of programs in scope (e.g. CIFSRR, GrOW, IMCHA, IRCI, ICURA, DIF-H, JCIHRP) deliberately built research teams comprised of researchers from both high-income countries (often Canada, but also the UK, Israel, and others) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). This model proved to be successful, with both sides benefitting: in particular, Northern researchers gained knowledge and appreciation of on-the-ground realities and development issues in LMICs, and Southern researchers gained in their reputation and visibility through their association with Northern researchers.

It is essential for this North-South partnership to be equal, **founded on mutual respect, and free from paternalistic assumptions** that the Northern researcher will teach the Southern researcher and not learn from him/her (CIFSRR, ICURA, IRCI). Indeed, it is important to note that the Northern researcher is not always more senior than the Southern researcher: either arrangement (emerging Northern researcher partnered with established Southern researcher, established Northern researcher partnered with emerging Southern researcher) can work well (IRCI).

The IRCI and ICURA projects (both under the Foundations for Innovations core program) took deliberate measures to ensure the equality of the partnerships: the Canadian co-PI and LMIC co-PI had **separate budgets** that they controlled and were accountable for. (This is enabled by the fact that IDRC, unlike some other grantmakers, is allowed to directly grant to Southern institutions rather than flowing the funds through Northern institutions.) This seems to have been successful at ensuring equality, though it did lead to an increased reporting and administrative burden.

Several evaluations (CIFSRR, GrOW, IRCI) found that North-South collaborations were most successful when there was a **clear complementarity of roles** between the two partners.

**Key finding: Core funding can provide the predictability and flexibility needed for leading organizations to build their own capacity**

TTI provided up to a decade of funding (\$500k to \$2.5m) for 43 think tanks in 20 countries. This was core funding, not earmarked for specific projects. That said, this was not an unconditional cash transfer: the organizations were monitored and provided with various capacity-building supports on research skills, policy engagement, and communications.

This model was **highly effective** at giving these organizations the opportunity to build their own capacity. Depending on the level of maturity of the organization and its context, this ranged from mere **institutional survival** (maintaining basic functioning through difficult political or financial circumstances) to **institutional transformation** (becoming recognized as a significant policy influencer or thought leader).

The main advantage of core funding that the TTI evaluation identified was its **flexibility**. Grantees were able to nimbly seize opportunities as they presented themselves, since their funding did not oblige them to pursue specific, predetermined activities. Core funding also lent much-needed **stability and predictability** to organizations so that they could focus their attention on building capacity, doing high-quality research, and influencing the development agenda, rather than on financial survival. Core funding also allowed the organizations to be (and to appear to be) more **independent and objective**. They no longer needed to rely so heavily on research commissions (i.e. consulting work) for clients that might have a vested interest in the results. This increased policymakers' trust in the think tanks and, thus, their ability to influence policy.

As the TTI evaluation explains, the risk with core funding (as with any cash transfer) is that organizations may become dependent and lose the skills needed to ensure continued funding past the period of the grant. This did not seem to occur in the TTI-supported institutions. This may owe to: the recipients being well selected; effective monitoring of the recipients; and/or effective additional supports for the organizations. As an additional accountability mechanism, recipients needed to submit a second application for their second five-year period of core funding: this resulted in a few organizations no longer receiving the funds.

**Key finding: Sustaining leadership beyond the grant period requires increasing grantees' capacity to secure their own funding, but the results of this effort have been uneven**

Many programs (e.g. CIFSRF, GJ, IMCHA, TTI, IRCI, AIMS) aim to increase grantees' capacity to secure their own funding from other sources, or to find permanent employment. This is essential if leadership is to be sustained beyond the period of the IDRC grant.

The results of these efforts have been mixed. In GJ, less than half of a sample of projects are making promising progress in securing additional funding. TTI did not result in dependency (as was feared might happen), but neither did it lead to much progress towards sustainability beyond the IDRC funding: many of the think tanks will need to downsize or rely on commissioned work that could threaten their flexibility, stability, and independence.

The evaluations do not give much insight into how this situation could be rectified, beyond pointing out that sustainability and resource mobilization plans should be given more attention and be more integrated into IDRC programs and grant applications from the outset. ICURA and IRCI seem to have been more successful in this area, but it is not clear how they achieved this. This is an area that IDRC should continue to explore through its evaluations.

*Also see key finding re: the consortium model (page 22) – a promising way of increasing the international visibility of organizations and building their experience and networks.*

### 3. Being the partner of choice

**Key finding: Being the partner of choice can mean being the funder of choice (from grantees' perspective) or the co-funder of choice (from other funders' perspective). Both are important, and mutually reinforce each other.**

In the evaluations in scope, it was observed that being the partner of choice can be interpreted in two different ways:

1. The funder of choice: From grantees' perspective, IDRC being the partner of choice means that it is a **uniquely appealing donor to be funded and supported by.**
2. The co-funder of choice: From the perspective of funders other than IDRC, IDRC being the partner of choice means that it is a **uniquely appealing donor with whom to co-initiate, co-design, and co-fund a program, or to whom to give day-to-day administrative responsibilities for the program.**

Being the funder of choice and being the co-funder of choice are interrelated, as being the funder of choice increases the quality of applicants, results in higher-quality research, and therefore ultimately leads to IDRC being seen as the co-funder of choice.

This section will use the terminology above to make clear which type of partnership is being referred. (Note that this understanding of the concept of “being the partner of choice” was developed by the Cathexis team based on a consideration of multiple evaluations in scope; it did not come directly from any specific evaluation.)

**Key finding: IDRC's flexibility (including funding flexibility) can make it the funder of choice.**

IDRC's **flexibility in budgeting, timelines, deliverables, and research foci** is greatly valued by grantees (GJ, JCIHRP, CC, FEH). This flexibility allows research themes and knowledge translation (KT) strategies to arise organically (CARIAA, GJ, CC) and allows grantees to seize opportunities as they arise (CIFSRF, INASSA, TTI, FEH). Grantees appreciate that IDRC, unlike many of its peers, allows funding to be put towards visas, travel expenses, and tuition (JCIHRP). This can make IDRC an attractive organization to be funded by.

Some evaluations also pointed to IDRC's **flexible funding mechanisms** as making it a *uniquely* attractive organization to be funded by. The INASSA evaluation noted that *"Grantees referred to IDRC as the only funder providing the flexibility to seize policy windows through a Rapid Response Program"* (i.e. opportunity funds) (INASSA, pg. 30).

This flexibility is made possible by the **unusually high degree of trust** that exists between IDRC and its grantees (CIFSRF, TTI, INASSA) – see page 24 for a further consideration of this important strength.

**Key finding: IDRC's Grants+ approach (extensive supports to grantees) can make it the funder (and co-funder) of choice.**

The Grants+ approach refers to the fact that IDRC provides **more than just funding** to its grantees: it works closely and collaboratively with its grantees to help shape the research projects, build research capacity, provide technical support, connect grantees to each other and to important third parties, assist in policy influence and uptake, synthesize results across projects, and many other supports.

These supports are largely provided by IDRC's Program Officers (POs) (GJ, CultAf, EG, SAIC, TTI, DECI, CIFSRF, IMCHA). Research Support Projects are another mechanism to support grantees, especially with policy influence (GJ, CC, IMCHA, DECI-2).

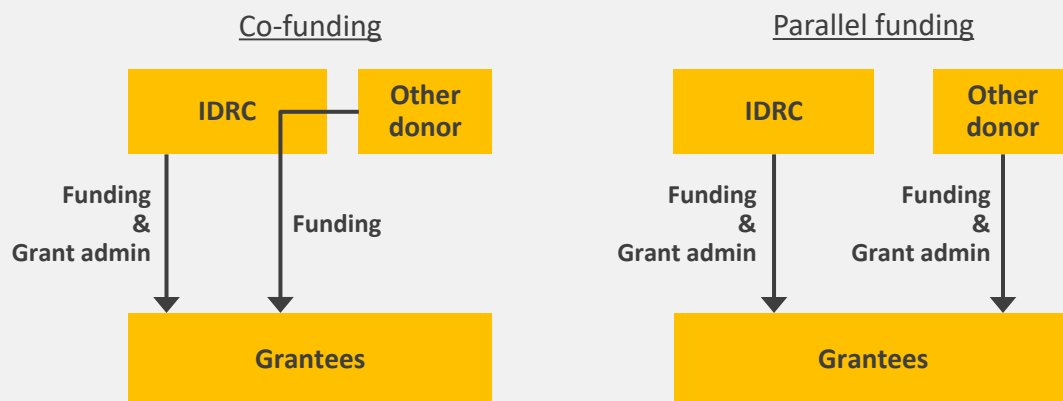
These supports are frequently cited in evaluations (and by grantees themselves) as a **key enabler of success** (CC, GJ, CultAf, EG, SAIC, TTI, DECI, CIFSRF, IMCHA, DECI-2, FEH). The TTI evaluation noted, *"It cannot be emphasized enough that, without the continuous contact between grantees and [POs], the overall TTI approach would not have been viable."* (TTI, pg. 27) As an approach that is **unique to IDRC**, Grants+ makes the organization **both a funder and co-funder of choice** (CultAF, CIFSRF).

The Grants+ approach is made possible by the fact that IDRC POs have **deep knowledge of research and development**, and are not simply grant administrators (FEH). It is also made possible by the **amount of time that POs are able to devote to each grantee**, which is rare among development donors (CIFSRF). It will be necessary to maintain these practices if the dividends of the Grants+ approach are to continue paying out.



**Key finding: Co-funding and parallel funding arrangements each have advantages and disadvantages. Further investigation in this area is needed.**

IDRC's donor partnerships come in two types: co-funding and parallel funding. Cathexis' understanding of the distinction is shown in the diagram below:



In other words, in co-funding relationships, funding for the program is provided by IDRC and another donor and the program is administered and implemented by IDRC; the grantees are accountable to IDRC. In parallel funding relationships, the funding is provided by IDRC and another donor, but each is separately administering the grants; the grantees are accountable to both donors.

Despite all efforts, it was difficult for the Cathexis team to learn a great deal about the relative merits of these two funding schemes. This was because evaluations often did not identify lessons learned about donor partnerships. When they did identify lessons, these lessons sometimes conflated co-funding and parallel funding mechanisms. Moreover, definitions of co- and parallel funding were used inconsistently in evaluations.

Some isolated findings that the Cathexis team did uncover related to the relative advantages and disadvantages of co-funding vs. parallel funding are summarized below:

- Co-funding represents a more intimate relationship between IDRC and the other donor, so it can help to **forge and consolidate broad strategic partnerships** (GJ).
- Parallel funding does not require such a close relationship, so it can open the door to a **more diverse set of partner organizations** (GJ). In FEH, a transnational consortium of donors tackling antimicrobial resistance allowed IDRC to understand how these donors were approach other issues, such as non-communicable diseases.
- Co-funding relationships can introduce **restrictions on IDRC's usual flexibility** with the terms of its grants, due to policies of the co-funder. In CC, this did not turn out to be a major problem, but grantees did express frustration about restrictions on travel (the evaluation does not make it clear whether it was IDRC or another donor that imposed these restrictions).
- Parallel funding relationships can lead to **double reporting requirements**, which is onerous to grantees.

## 4. Integrating gender and equity considerations into programming

**Key finding:** Gender considerations, dimensions of equity beyond gender, and an intersectional approach to gender have often not been systematically integrated into programs and their evaluations, but there is evidence that this is improving.

Many IDRC programs and their evaluations have attempted to integrate gender, but often not in a deep or systematic way (CIFSRF, GJ, TTI, IRCI, OD4D, INASSA). For example, research within a project may focus on increasing access to economic opportunities for women, but this same project could be found to have a highly imbalanced gender composition in its research team or have few resources allocated to gender expertise within the team (CIFSRF). Other projects (and their evaluations) appear to have focused almost entirely on gender parity in research teams, a shallower approach that lends itself to mere inclusion as opposed to equity (JCIHRP). Evaluation reports often appeared to be using different definitions or have different understandings of what level of gender integration was appropriate: some evaluations focused on inclusion, while others held equity as the standard.

Similarly, **dimensions of equity beyond gender** (which may include age, (dis)ability, income/class/caste, nationality, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and vulnerability e.g. to climate change) **were generally not deeply addressed** in programs or their evaluations. An intersectional lens was usually not employed: where gender was included, it was sometimes understood to mean women as a homogenous group rather than e.g. rural women, low-income women, elderly women, etc. (CARIAA). Age (generational equity) is one of the few non-gender dimensions of equity considered in multiple evaluations, but this is generally understood in the narrow sense of including youth (CultiAf, EG, GJ, AIMS). The AIMS evaluation was unique in specifically assessing the degree of equity in terms of disability, nationality, ethnicity, language, income, age, and religious affiliation, in addition to gender.

Note that in many cases it was difficult to assess whether the program did not fully integrate equity issues, or whether the evaluation did not, or both. There is probably room to encourage a **broadened equity lens both in evaluations and in the programs that are evaluated.**

Several recent evaluations, however, highlight the **trend toward a more thorough integration of equity considerations in IDRC programming and evaluation:**

- The CC program (evaluation completed in 2019) included a Gender Call for Proposals, and the CC portfolio includes some projects which are exemplary in their systematic integration of a gender-transformative approach into the research project.
- The FEH evaluation (2019) included examples of women being recruited both as research subjects and as members of research teams, integrating gender into methodology (e.g. population surveys), and including a gender specialist on research teams.
- The CRVS program (evaluation completed in 2019) began with little consideration of gender, and then dramatically turned around issue in 2017, becoming an exemplar of gender sensitivity (e.g. organizing a Global Conference on Gender and CRVS).
- The IMCHA program (evaluation completed in October 2018) required gender integration from the Call for Proposals process onwards.

These evaluations may be a sign that the federal government's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), launched in June 2017, is now bearing fruit.

The FEH and CC evaluations also included **some consideration of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and general vulnerability**, though gender was the dimension of equity that received the most extensive investigation. CIFSRF is another relatively recent evaluation (2018) that paid attention to equity considerations, specifically income/socioeconomic status, as it attempted to target low-income individuals and small-scale farmers.

## Ways to more thoroughly integrate gender and equity into programs and evaluations

There are a number of ways that equity gaps found in some earlier programs, projects, and evaluations could be addressed, including:

- Providing researchers **more guidance on incorporating gender** into research design (GJ, INASSA) (including clarifying the difference between inclusion and equity). IDRC-facilitated workshops were found to be an effective tool for training grantees in gender integration in the FEH evaluation, and for allowing them to learn from each other.
- **Emphasizing gender and equity in Calls for Proposals (CC)**, which may mean that **gender experts are engaged early in research design** (GJ, CARIAA).
- Including gender and equity as specific **evaluation questions**.

The evaluation of the GrOW program showcases a number of gender-inclusive methods used in its constituent projects, e.g.: a participatory approach that allowed storytelling from participants; respect for the safety and timing/location of meetings for all participants; and gender paired data collection and analysis.

## 5. Designing programs for collaboration, learning and synthesis

**Key finding: Most IDRC programs in scope are deliberately designed to support collaboration, learning, and synthesis. IDRC has experimented with a variety of ways of supporting this.**

IDRC does not simply fund a disparate collection of research projects, but deliberately works to set up structures that allow the research teams to learn from each other and synthesize their results into broader knowledge and insights. IDRC has experimented with many mechanisms to support this, with complex but **generally positive results**. Some of the notable models are as follows (note that the terms below are not always used consistently):

- **Cohort in the stronger sense** (GJ). Research projects share common research questions and proceed on the same (or similar) timelines, with formal touchpoints throughout.
- **Cohort in the weaker sense** (referred to as “clusters” in the GJ evaluation) (e.g. CultiAF, EG, SAIC, IMCHA, JCIHRP). Research projects share common themes, but not common research questions or timelines.
- **Hotspot approach** (CARIAA). Multiple research projects share a common geographical region of focus, chosen for being particularly vulnerable to a specific threat (in CARIAA’s case, climate change).
- **Consortium** (CARIAA). A group of institutions partner in order to collaborate on research, with a single PI at the lead institution, and co-PIs at a small number of key partner institutions. In CARIAA, there were multiple consortia that also learned from each other, creating a consortium-of-consortia model.
- **Centre of Excellence** (CRVS, OD4D). A regional or global hub tasked with promoting and supporting research on a particular issue, facilitating its translation into policy, and making available the evidence that results.
- **Networks**. Deliberate, but less formalized connections between research teams, researchers, and research institutions. They may be built through meeting other researchers at conferences [TTI, ICURA, OD4D] or IDRC-hosted inception meetings [e.g. IRCI, ICURA]. When they are more formal (e.g. with a coordinating institution as in INASSA) they become consortia. Others could be termed Communities of Practice (CC).
- **North-South research teams** (e.g. CIFSRF, IRCI, ICURA, IMCHA, DIF-H, JCIHRP). Research teams are composed of researchers from high-income countries (e.g. Canada) as well as researchers from LMICs. A research project may have two co-PIs, one from a high-income country and one from a LMIC. (See page 13 for a consideration of this model.)
- **Researcher-practitioner research teams** (e.g. ICURA, IMCHA, GJ). All projects work to bridge the gap between research and action, but some do so from the outset of the research by bringing a practitioner (e.g. policymaker, civil society leader) as a research partner. (See page 26 for a consideration of this model.)

**Key finding: Common research questions and timelines (a “cohort” in the strong sense) may be particularly effective at leading to collaboration, learning, and synthesis.**

The GJ program is designed around cohorts (e.g. Youth Violence; Land; Early Childhood Forced Marriage) with the following characteristics:

- The cohorts are composed of multiple projects conducted by separate research teams (up to 13). These may be multiple research teams that responded to a Call for Proposals, or may be brought together by POs at IDRC.
- The research projects **share the same research questions**; these are determined collaboratively, with the leadership of IDRC POs. (For instance, the Youth Africa 2016 cohort’s common question was “How can formal and informal responses to conflict, violence, and injustice create the potential for or obstruct the development of safer spaces for youth?”) They may be organized around a single region of interest, or may cross regions.
- The research projects also share a **common approach to knowledge synthesis, communication, and translation into action**.
- The research projects **share timelines** to the extent possible (this is not always possible).
- The research teams **work collaboratively** with each and **meet in person** at key touchpoints (joint workshops at beginning, middle, and end)
- The cohort is supported by POs at IDRC, as well as (often, but not always) a **coordinator and synthesis lead**, which may be one of the grantee organizations or an external body chosen specifically for this purpose.

This approach was **highly successful** in the GJ program. It resulted in:

- **Increased research quality** due to sharing of know-how between research teams;
- **Increased South-South learning** more generally;
- The accumulation of **larger, triangulated bodies of evidence** with **greater ability to convince policymakers** and impact the development agenda;
- The creation of unified bodies of knowledge that could have **influence and scale beyond national levels** to the regional, cross-continental, or even global level. (Actual impact is yet to come, but the signs are promising.)
- A **cost-effective vehicle for capacity building** (at least compared to other models), as all of the research teams in the cohort attend workshops at the same time.

Cohorts in this sense do have drawbacks and challenges. They require a great deal of coordination, which is **time-consuming for POs**. Meetings between the research teams may not be as frequent as desired, and collaboration may be stymied by language barriers. Finally, financial barriers may make it **difficult for the research projects to start and finish on the same schedule**. Still, given the significant benefits outlined above, most stakeholders in the GJ evaluation felt that the **benefits outweighed the costs**.

The CC program provides an interesting counterpoint. Unlike GJ, the CC program developed organically and ad hoc out of past programs, with projects beginning at different times. This resulted in a program described as a “bricolage.” While there were successful examples of cross-project learning and collaboration, these happened at a smaller scale. It seems there is a **trade-off between flexibility** (necessary to seize emerging opportunities) **and rigidity** (necessary to create more unified bodies of knowledge).

**Key finding: Consortia can foster collaboration across boundaries, create convening power and build individual leaders and leading organizations.**

CARIAA employed a consortium model, with the following characteristics:

- Institutions partner together as a **community of practice**, to collaborate on research. These institutions span multiple countries (up to six), usually multiple regions, multiple types of institutions (universities, civil society, think tanks, both Northern and Southern organizations), and researchers from multiple disciplines.
- Although dozens of institutions can be part of a consortium, **one institution is the lead** (with the PI) and several others are considered key partners (each with a co-PI).
- The consortium is **organized around a common name and brand, common development issue** (e.g. climate change-induced displacement in river deltas), and **common geographical area(s)** (e.g. river deltas in South Asia and West Africa).
- There were multiple consortia, and these consortia were themselves linked to each other, creating a **consortium of consortia**.

This model proved to be **very successful**. Organizations within consortia learned to collaborate with each other **across cultural, linguistic, and organizational lines**; shared research methodologies that they had previously kept secret due to competition for funding and publication; **increased their networks, reputation, and international visibility**; and **elevated the quality of their research** to a global standard. The consortia allowed research to be conducted **across disciplinary lines**, and between countries that share climate change vulnerabilities but are in conflict with each other (e.g. India and Pakistan). All of this created **“convening power”** and positioned the organizations for greater influence. The quality of research output was rated as “very good” according to the RQ+ framework, and several examples of specific policy influence were found. In the estimation of the Baastel team (the authors of the evaluation report), these linkages and partnerships will likely continue even when CARIAA funding ends.

As in any ambitiously collaborative endeavor, there were challenges in managing such large and complex research teams and in working across disciplinary boundaries. The demands on consortium leaders (PIs) are heavy, amounting to 3-4 days per month in management and coordination, over and above conducting research.

### The hotspot approach

Another way to understand the collaboration model of CARIAA (see key finding to the left) is as a **hotspot approach**. CARIAA built consortia around not just research themes (particular vulnerabilities to climate change) but around specific geographical areas and types of landscapes (e.g. specific river deltas in South Asia and West Africa, glacier- and snowpack-dependent regions of the Himalayas, semi-arid regions of Asia and Africa). This was seen as a **key enabler** of the success of this program, and helped otherwise disparate groups of partners (spanning disciplines, countries, continents, institution types) to collaborate around a common focus. This was especially impressive when the countries involved are in conflict with each other: for example, India and Pakistan can find common ground in their shared vulnerability to climate change in the Himalayas and associated watersheds.

Obviously, the issue of climate change lends itself well to a hotspot approach, in a way that not all other development issues would. But it is worth considering whether the hotspot approach could be a useful organizing principle in other, non-climate-change-related programs. For instance, consortia (or other types of collaborations) could be built around geographical hotspots for diseases or natural disasters.

**Key finding: In-person meetings between grantees are valuable for fostering cross-project and South-South learning.**

Cross-project learning and South-South learning have often been less strong than North-South learning (CIFSRF, GrOW, INASSA, IRCI). In-person meetings between grantees can help overcome this challenge (FEH, CARIAA, IRCI, ICURA). These may be Annual Learning Reviews (CARIAA), inception meetings (e.g. IRCI, ICURA), or workshops at project beginning, middle, and end (GJ cohorts). In all cases, these were seen as very valuable. Often, stakeholders wished for more such opportunities (IRCI, INASSA).

## 6. Building flexibility into IDRC programs through funding mechanisms

**Key finding: Opportunity funds and synergy funds work well to keep programs nimble.**

“Opportunity” and “synergy” funds refer to additional grants given to grantees to extend or expand their work, or to take advantage of emerging opportunities (e.g. GJ, CIFSRF, TTI, INASSA). (Note that the “opportunity” and “synergy” terms are not consistently used across programs/evaluations; we use the terms here for convenience.) For instance:

- In CIFSRF, innovations that showed promise were supported with scale-up funding.
- In TTI, grants (beyond core funding) were provided to think tanks on a flexible basis to support emerging needs such as networking, joint research projects, and capacity building for engagement with government (“do-tank” activities).
- In INASSA, a “Rapid Response Program” provided additional funds to grantees to allow them to respond to unexpected requests from policymakers for technical assistance.
- In IMCHA, “Synergy Grants” were provided to high-performing grantees to research additional innovations or to explore the possibility of scaling up innovations they had already developed. Synergy Grants also helped IMCHA research teams to more fully integrate gender into their work to accommodate with the increased emphasis on gender when the Trudeau government came into power.

In each case, these flexible funds appear to have been **successful at supporting knowledge translation and mobilization**. It will be important to continue offering such grants in the future.

**Key finding: In the programs reviewed, there are other promising funding mechanisms that facilitate flexibility.**

Beyond opportunity and synergy funds, programs have experimented with a variety of other flexible funding mechanisms that have shown promise:

- **Core (non-earmarked) funding for organizations.** This was a key enabler in the TTI program. Although the amount of funding itself is not flexible, the uses to which the funding is put are flexible. See page 14 for more information.
- **Midterm reapplication for funding.** TTI and CIFSRF were designed as two-phase projects in which only a subset of grantees in the first phase would continue to receive grants in the second phase. This gave IDRC the flexibility to continue funding the more promising projects, while discontinuing funding for less promising projects.
- **Moving items across budget lines.** The GJ and JCIHRP evaluations identified the PO's willingness and authorization to redistribute grant funds across line items as a key enabler of program nimbleness. This allowed grantees to respond to emerging stakeholder priorities and ensure that a wide variety of stakeholders' priorities could be addressed.
- **Redirection of funds within a portfolio.** One notable example is the quick redirection of funds within the FEH portfolio to address the Ebola crisis.
- **Increasing the size of the investment based on quantity of high-quality proposals received.** In SAIC's Call for Proposals process, a larger-than-expected number of high-quality proposals were received. This led IDRC to double and DFID to triple their investments, allowing for many more projects to be supported originally anticipated.
- **Small grants.** AIMS offers small grants to its students, for example for research and travel.
- **Mobility Grants.** These are not offered by IDRC but by the UK's Newton Fund; they were described in the IRCI and ICRUA evaluations. Mobility Grants are relatively small grants that fund visits between potential research collaborators so that they can explore the possibility of future collaboration. Some evaluations pointed to the importance of selecting research teams/collaborators who having already worked with each other in the past (SAIC, IMCHA), but requiring applicants to have already worked together might be overly restrictive. Mobility Grants could be a good compromise, allowing potential collaborators to test the waters before they submit a full application for funding.

**Key finding: Granter-grantee trust makes flexible funding work. IDRC excels at this.**

The high level of trust that exists between IDRC and its grantees is identified in several evaluations as an essential enabler of success (CIFSRF, TTI, INASSA). The more flexibility IDRC allows—especially flexibility around funding—the more trust is required between IDRC POs and grantees, so that IDRC and grantees can have open conversations about what is working, what is not, and what implications this has for budgeting.

IDRC excels in this area (CIFSRF, TTI, INASSA). In the words of the authors of the INASSA evaluation, *“There is an unavoidable power dynamic between those who are providing resources and influencing the direction of the work with those who are receiving the money and required to respond to the funder’s requirements, if they are to receive the funds. IDRC does an excellent job of building a safe, open relationship with their partners so that this dynamic does not play a strong role.”* (INASSA, pg. 40)



## 7. Supporting knowledge translation and policy/practice influence

**Key finding:** IDRC works to facilitate knowledge translation and policy/practice influence in numerous ways.

IDRC research is meant to be used: “positioning for use” is a key part of IDRC’s RQ+ framework. Research and researchers funded by IDRC can influence policy and practice in a number of ways:

- **Increasing the capacity of policymakers to make evidence-based decisions.** For instance, CARIAA consortia developed climate change vulnerability and adaptation training courses for government officials.
- **Providing evidence to inform policy dialogues and decision-making processes.** For instance, as part of the OD4D program, an Open Data Barometer, Index, and Impact Map were developed, which can be used by policymakers to benchmark their country’s readiness for and adoption of Open Data for Development policies.
- **Directly influencing policies and decisions.** For instance, INASSA-funded research was explicitly cited by policymakers as the reason for an information and communications technology policy being formulated, altered, or rejected in a LMIC.
- **Influencing the activities of private individuals, households, and firms.** For instance, some CultiAF projects led to local businesses changing their produce storage facilities to reduce contamination, and a fish processing center adopting practices that reduce post-harvest loss.

Across the evaluations, four ways that IDRC facilitates knowledge translation and policy/practice influence emerged – these are summarized in the boxes to the right.

**Select grantees based on their pre-existing capacity to influence policy.** Evaluations point to the importance of grantees’ pre-existing policy capacity (CARIAA, CIFSRF, CC, GJ). For instance: in CARIAA, the pre-existing reputation and networks of the research institutions involved was key; in CIFSRF previous experience engaging with rural populations in the LMIC in question was essential; in CARIAA, CC, and GJ, an important enabler of policy influence was researchers’ pre-existing personal contacts with policymakers.

**Build grantees’ capacity to influence policy.** This is essential when grantees are academics unaccustomed to conducting applied research, have yet to internalize the concept of research use (INASSA, CARIAA), or have limited experience engaging with policymakers (IRCI). For instance, chairholders in the IRCI program often had never worked with policymakers before, but through the IRCI program gained significant skills in this area. Capacity to influence policy can be built through any of the mechanisms listed on page 12. In building new relationships with policymakers, it is essential to have repeated, ideally face-to-face contact over the long-term (CIFSRF, GrOW, IMCHA, TTI, INASSA, EG).

**Include a policymaker on the research team from the outset.** This technique is especially promising, so it is discussed in more detail on the next page.

**Support broad and diverse dissemination.** Dissemination is not synonymous with influence and may not bear fruit, but by getting the research out to a wide variety of audiences in a wide variety of formats, the chance of the information getting in the right hands and having an influence is increased. Dissemination requires tailoring communication to the intended audience (CARIAA, FEH). Vehicles for dissemination include academic articles, theses, websites, blogs, social media, conference presentations, videos, theater, and business cases, and can be targeted at policymakers, community members, journalists, investors, firms, and donor organizations, in both the North and South.

**Key finding:** Influence on policy and practice is sometimes best pursued through alternative policy spaces and nontraditional influencers. Some grantees need support in accessing these spaces.

Policymakers in the usual sense—i.e. politicians and public servants—have political agendas and are constrained in many ways; they cannot always be counted upon to base their decisions on research (CARIAA, TTI). When they are unreceptive to evidence, it is essential to engage with “alternative niches of the policy sphere” (TTI) and “nontraditional influencers” (SAIC) beyond the government. For instance, grantees have:

- Engaged with city police (SAIC)
- Influenced the practices of private firms (CARIAA, CIFSRI, CC). For instance, insurance companies and investment firms adopted climate change risk assessment tools (CC).
- Influenced household-level practices and decisions (GJ, IMCHA). This can be achieved by employing a participatory research approach (GJ, IMCHA) and/or by disseminating research results in non-traditional formats such as art and theatre (CARIAA, INASSA).
- Helped to shape public debate on an issue, ultimately creating a broader demand for a policy change that government was then obliged to respond to (TTI). This was the approach taken by FUSADES in El Salvador, a think tank funded under TTI. The organization’s earlier collaboration with the private sector made a new leftist government resistant to accepting any direct influence from the organization, so it worked instead to stoke public interest in pension reform through social media and multimedia communication with the public at large. This was successful and ultimately led to national legislative change.

The SAIC evaluation found that while some grantees had a broad and sophisticated understanding of policy influence (including alternate policy spaces like private firms, communities, etc.), others narrowly understood it as being synonymous with influencing government. Grantees with a narrower understanding may need support from IDRC to access less-obvious avenues of policy and practice influence (SAIC).

**Key finding:** Bringing the intended users of the research into the research team from the beginning may be the surest way to create research demand and maximize uptake.

It is essential to have **sustained relationships with research users along the journey of the research**, not just to communicate results to them at the end (CARIAA, OD4D, INASSA). Given this, a promising technique to ensure use is to **involve research users as members of the research team** from the beginning (CARIAA, GrOW, EG, IMCHA, ICURA). Two programs/projects took this approach deliberately and systematically:

- In IMCHA, each of the 19 research teams included a co-PI who was a decisionmaker at the local, district, or national level in the country where the PI was located. The inclusion of these decisionmaker co-PIs was not a token gesture; they were indeed engaged as research partners, and seem to have been genuinely invested in the outcome of the research. This approach seems to be bearing fruit, with several concrete, if preliminary, examples of policy influence. The decisionmakers co-PIs add value by bringing knowledge of the local context and of government priorities. Although the approach was promising, there were challenges with turnover (turnover in government positions leading to turnover in co-PIs) and shifting government priorities. The arrangements worked best when there was frequent contact between the PI and co-PI.
- In ICURA, universities (researchers) were paired with civil society organizations (research users). This succeeded in broadening the scope of the research, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, generating innovative research, and influencing policy.

**Key finding:** The design of the Call for Proposals process can impact research quality and uptake. A two-stage Call for Proposals process with financial support to shortlisted applicants is a promising approach.

Several evaluations showed that an effective Call for Proposal process is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for policy and practice influence down the line. This makes it **imperative for this process to be adequately resourced:** when CIFSRF staff restructured the calls process to fund Technical Reviews, the breadth and quality of proposals increased.

The two basic types of calls—open and closed calls—each have advantages and disadvantages:

- Open calls lead to a **wider variety of applicants**, and open the door to **unexpected applicants** and **novel research topics** that IDRC may not have been aware of (IRCI, CultiAF, CIFSRF). They have the disadvantage of being very **resource intensive**, as many hundreds of proposals may need to be evaluated (GJ).
- Closed calls are **less resource intensive**, as fewer proposals need to be evaluated (GJ). They are also useful for **targeting the most suitable researchers** (GJ), which reduces wasted time and effort for other applicants. Their disadvantage is that they foreclose the possibility of unexpected applicants and novel research topics (IRCI, CultiAF, CIFSRF).

The key, it appears, is to **tailor the type of Call for Proposals to the type of impact that the program intends to achieve**. If the program intends to build the capacity of emerging leaders, it may be best to hold an open call to identify promising new applicants. If program is aimed at field-building, it may be best to hold an open call to discover unknown researchers in a novel area of inquiry. If the primary goal is to support high-quality research in a defined and established area, it may be best to limit the proposals to researchers and organizations that are known quantities.

A good compromise between an open and closed Call for Proposals is a **two-stage application process** (ICURA, CultiAF). In the examples that the Cathexis team found, this was accompanied by **small grants for shortlisted organizations to help them prepare their full application**. For example:

- In ICURA, applicants first provided letters of intent. One in ten of these applicants was shortlisted and the organization invited to prepare a full application, with \$30,000 given to support this effort.
- In CultiAF, a “Call for Concept Notes” generated 171 applications, which was narrowed down to 11 promising applications. \$5000 was paid to each shortlisted organization to travel to develop the proposal. Ultimately, just 5 were awarded the grant.

These schemes may help emerging researchers, and less well-resourced individuals and organizations, compete effectively with more established applicants.

**Key finding: IDRC programs contribute to outcomes beyond policy influence. These include field building, thought leadership, and awareness raising of lesser-known topics.**

Programs in scope achieved a number of impacts which are less concrete than policy influence, but highly significant:

- **Field-building, and putting topics on national, regional, and global agendas** (CARIAA, CIFSRR, GJ, OD4D, CC, FEH). For instance, OD4D has helped to clarify the very concept of Open Data for Development and put it on the agenda in multiple countries. Similarly, CC helped to define the emerging concept of “energy justice.”
- **Thought leadership** (CIFSRR, GJ, CRVS, FEH). For instance, CRVS has established itself as a thought leader on the issue of civil registration and vital statistics, and the Rapid Research Fund for the Ebola Virus Diseases Outbreaks (part of FEH) led to significant thought leadership on issues of conflicts of interest in partnering with private corporations for development assistance.
- **Awareness raising of lesser-known topics** (CARIAA, CIFSRR, IRCI, ICURA, AIMS, OD4D, FEH). Awareness can be raised in both the North and the South, and among the general public as well as among specialized audiences such as Global Affairs Canada. For instance, CARIAA brought the links between climate change and migration to the attention of global organizations like the World Bank and the International Organization for Migration; AIMS has helped to generate greater interest in mathematical sciences as a career path and a contributor to development, among members of the public in the countries where AIMS has campuses.
- **Contributing to the broader evidence base** (e.g. CARIAA, GrOW, OD4D, CC). This is inherent in most of IDRC’s programs, in that they result in a great volume of peer-reviewed academic literature. In certain programs, especially ones focused on new fields of research (e.g. OD4D for Open Data for Development) or on very specific sub-fields (e.g. GrOW for Women’s Economic Empowerment), IDRC can make a large, even transformative, impact on the overall body of evidence.

## 8. Knowledge management

**Key finding:** Some programs lack clear, strategic knowledge management plans. This is a key gap.

The evaluations in scope suggest that many programs have not taken a systematic and strategic approach to knowledge management. For example, CARIAA, CRVS, and INASSA lack overarching knowledge management strategies, which **limits dissemination of research results** and their accessibility. Similarly, OD4D could make its research outputs more accessible to the public. This is a particularly unfortunate omission for programs that are themselves thematically related to transparency and accessibility of information (e.g. CRVS establishes a resource hub, OD4D promotes the cause of Open Data).

The INASSA evaluation authors suggest that IDRC fund a **Research Support Project (in the vein of DECI-2) that works to build grantees' capacity in the area of knowledge management**. The INASSA evaluation also suggests **mainstreaming knowledge management** into IDRC programs through inclusion in Terms of Reference and Monitoring & Evaluation plans.

**Key finding:** A useful resource hub for development research is accessible, well organized, quality-assured, and includes both country-specific and non-country-specific resources

The CRVS and OD4D evaluations put forth several best practices for creating a truly useful resource hub of development research:

- The resources must be **easily accessible**, for free or for a minimal cost
- Users of the resources should be granted **reuse and redistribution rights**
- The resources must be **quality-assured**, including being **user-friendly**
- The resources need to be **well organized** and **properly categorized**
- The resources need to include both **country-specific case studies** and **operational (non-country-specific) research**.
- A **directory of experts** on the issue at hand can be a valuable addition to the resource hub.

Topics for future evaluation and learning

# Topics for future evaluation and learning

This exercise highlighted several topics that could be fruitfully explored in future evaluations and other learning mechanisms; these topics are listed in the **table on the following page**.

Often, these were topics that few evaluations broached to any significant extent; in these cases, IDRC could consider including these topics as evaluation questions, to ensure they are explored. In other cases, systematic learning was limited by inconsistent terminology across evaluations; in these cases, IDRC could consider defining terms more clearly, or systematically clarifying the key dimensions on which the thing in question (e.g. flexible funding mechanism) can vary.

Overarching area of interest	Topic for further exploration	Learning was hampered by:		Notes
		Few evaluations explored this topic in depth	Inconsistent terminology across evaluations	
1. Achieving impact at scale	Optimal scale and justification for scaling	✓		Optimal scale and justification are two of IDRC's core principles of scaling, but evaluations in scope barely spoke to these considerations. (There is a brief reference in the IMCHA evaluation.)
2. Building leaders	Increasing grantees' capacity to secure their own funding beyond the period of the IDRC grant	✓		This topic was addressed in a number of evaluations, but these evaluations provided little indication of how to make efforts to increase grantees' capacity in this area more successful.
3. Being the partner of choice	Co-funding partnerships: how they came to be, successes, challenges, enablers, barriers, lessons learned	✓		Limited information was found in the evaluations. The CC evaluation also pointed to the lack of a learning system at IDRC related to developing and managing partnerships. Evaluation may not be the most appropriate vehicle for this learning, as the findings can be sensitive and high-stakes.
	Co-funding vs. parallel funding arrangements: relative advantages and disadvantages	✓	✓	Evaluations often did not investigate how the funding arrangement impacted programs. Lessons learned sometimes conflated co-funding and parallel funding mechanisms, or used inconsistent definitions, making it difficult to learn about the relative advantages of each.
4. Integrating gender and equity considerations into programming	Equity considerations beyond gender (and a broader, intersectional gender lens)	✓		These may include age, (dis)ability, income/class/caste/socioeconomic status, nationality, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and vulnerability.
5. Designing programs for collaboration, learning and synthesis	Ways of designing programs for collaboration, learning, and synthesis		✓	Terms like "cohort" and "network" are used in different ways across evaluations and are not always clearly defined.
6. Building flexibility into IDRC programs through funding mechanisms	Flexible funding mechanisms		✓	The terms "opportunity funds" and "synergy funds" are not used consistently across programs/evaluations.
7. Supporting KT and policy/ practice influence	Designing Calls for Proposals: approaches, successes, challenges, enablers, barriers, lessons learned	✓		A handful of evaluations discussed this in depth, but others mentioned it only in passing or not at all. Many evaluations did not provide basic information about Calls (e.g. whether they were open or closed).



Annexes

# Annex A: Evaluations in scope

Abbrev	Report title	Author	Type of eval.	Year of report	Program area/program	Program or project	Co-funders	Region(s) of focus (if <3)
CultiAF	Evaluation of Cultivate Africa's Future Fund (CultiAF)	Universalialia	Summative	2016	Agriculture & Environment - Agriculture and Food Security	Program	Australian Centre for Int'l Agric. Research (ACIAR)	Sub-Saharan Africa
CIFSRF	Evaluation of the Canadian International Food Security Research Fund (CIFSRF)	Universalialia	Formative	2016		Program	Global Affairs Canada (GAC)	N/A
	Understanding the CIFSRF Phase Two portfolio's overall contribution to food security	Overseas Development Institute (ODI)	Summative	2018		Program	GAC	N/A
CC	Climate Change Program External Evaluation - Final Report	baastel	Summative	2019	Agriculture & Environment - Climate Change	Program	Various	N/A
CARIAA	Mid-term evaluation of gender and social inclusion in the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA) consortia	Noémi Gonda	Formative	2017		Program	UK Dept. for International Development (DFID)	Sub-Saharan Africa; Asia
	Collaborative adaptation research initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA): summative evaluation	baastel	Summative	2018		Program	DFID	Sub-Saharan Africa; Asia
FEH	External Review of IDRC's Food, Environment, and Health (FEH) Program 2015-2020 – Final Report	University of Toronto	Summative	2019	Agriculture & Environment - Food, Environ. & Health	Program	Various	N/A
GrOW	GrOW Formative Evaluation for Mid-Term Review	Universalialia	Formative	2017	Inclusive Economies - Employment and Growth	Program	DFID	Sub-Saharan Africa; Asia
EG	Employment and Growth Learning Evaluation	Sisters Ink	Formative	2019		Program	None	N/A
SAIC	Safe and Inclusive Cities Program: formative mid-term evaluation report	Sustainable Livelihoods Foundation	Formative	2015	Inclusive Economies - Governance and Justice	Program	DFID	N/A
	Safe and Inclusive Cities Final Evaluation	Universalialia	Summative	2017		Program	DFID	N/A
GJ	Governance and Justice Program Evaluation	Universalialia	Formative	2019		Program	None	N/A
IMCHA	Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa: A Mid-Term Formative Evaluation	Small Globe, Inc.	Formative	2019	Inclusive Economies - Maternal and Child Health	Program	Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR); GAC	Sub-Saharan Africa
CRVS	Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Systems Mid-term Evaluation	Raj Gautam Mitra	Formative	2019		Program	GAC	N/A
TTI	External Evaluation of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) Phase Two, 2014-2019	NIRAS	Summative	2019	Inclusive Economies - Think Tank Initiative	Program	Gates Foundation; Hewlett Foundation; UK Aid; Norad	N/A
DIF-H	Development Innovation Fund – Health: Summative Evaluation Report	Oxford Policy Management	Summative	2015	Technology & Innovations - Foundations for Innovation	Project	None	N/A
IRCI	Summative evaluation: IRCI; a review of the International Research Chairs Initiative (IRCI)	Small Globe, Inc.	Summative	2015		Project	None	N/A
ICURA	Summative evaluation: ICURA; a review of the International Community-University Research Alliance	Small Globe, Inc.	Summative	2015		Project	None	N/A
AIMS	African Institute for Mathematical Sciences Next Einstein Initiative final evaluation	MDF Training & Consultancy	Summative	2017		Program	DFID	Sub-Saharan Africa
JCIHRP	Program Evaluation of the Joint Canada-Israel Health Research Program (JCIHRP)	Technopolis Group	Formative	2019		Program	Azrieli Foundation; CIHR; Israel Science Foundation	N/A
DECI-2	Evaluation of DECI-2 (Developing Evaluation and Communication Capacity in Information Society Research project)	S Hearn & S Batchelor	Summative	2017	Technology & Innovations - Networked Economies	Project	None	N/A
OD4D	Evaluation of the Open Data for Development Program: final report	OD4D Network	Summative	2017		Program	The World Bank; GAC; DFID	N/A
INASSA	Evaluation of the Information and Networks in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (INASSA) Program	Kallick Russell Consulting	Formative	2018		Program	DFID	Sub-Saharan Africa; Asia

# Annex B: Evaluations in scope – by key attributes

## By type of program

### Core programs

- EG
- GJ
- CC
- FEH

### Externally funded programs

- IMCHA
- CRVS
- TTI
- JCIHRP
- CIFSRF (x2)
- CARIAA (x2)
- INASSA
- GrOW
- SAIC (x2)
- AIMS
- OD4D
- CultiAF

### Projects

- DECI-2
- DIF-H
- IRCI
- ICURA

## By year of evaluation report

### 2019

- EG
- GJ
- IMCHA
- CRVS
- TTI
- JCIHRP
- CC
- FEH

### 2018

- CIFSRF (summative)
- CARIAA (summative)
- INASSA

### 2017

- CARIAA (formative)
- GrOW
- SAIC (summative)
- AIMS
- DECI-2
- OD4D

### 2016

- CultiAF
- CIFSRF (formative)

### 2015

- SAIC (formative)
- DIF-H
- IRCI
- ICURA

## By type of evaluation

### Formative/midterm

- CARIAA
- CIFSRF
- SAIC
- GrOW
- EG
- GJ
- IMCHA
- CRVS
- JCIHRP
- INASSA

### Summative/final

- CARIAA
- CIFSRF
- SAIC
- CultiAF
- CC
- FEH
- TTI
- DIF-H
- IRCI
- ICURA
- AIMS
- DECI-2
- OD4D
- CC
- FEH

# Annex C: Background and reference documents consulted

## IDRC documents

- Investing in Solutions: Strategic Plan 2015-2020
- Research Quality Plus: A Holistic Approach to Evaluating Research (2016)
- Evaluation at IDRC (2017)
- Knowledge to Policy: Making the Most of Development Research (2009)
- Standardized Indicators for Strategic Objective 1: Invest in Knowledge and Innovation for Large-Scale Positive Change
- Standardized Indicators for Strategic Objective 2: Build the leaders for today and tomorrow
- Mapping IDRC's Efforts to Build Emerging Research Leaders (DRAFT) (2018)
- Investing in solutions: Partnership Implementation Plan 2015-2020
- Strategic approaches to engage the private sector: Report to the Board of Governors (2017)
- Exploration Report: IDRC's position as a leader: driving knowledge translation and synthesis to champion Southern contributions in sustainable development (2019)
- Scaling Science at IDRC: Internal Findings Brief (2018)

## Other documents

- Gargani, J. and R. McLean 2017. Scaling Science. Stanford Social Innovation Review Fall 2017.
- Universalia 2018. Evaluation of IDRC's Contribution to Building Leading Organisations: Final Report.
- Sisters Ink 2018. Gender-Transformative Research: Lessons from the International Development Research Centre (DRAFT).