

Opening Remarks at a meeting of the  
Society for International Development (SID), Ottawa-Gatineau Chapter

“Democracy and Development:  
The Research Imperative”

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Maureen O’Neil  
President, International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

Colleagues and friends, good evening. It is a pleasure to be with you, and it is an honour to take part in your Annual General Meeting. For more than 30 years, the Ottawa-Gatineau Chapter of SID has served as a unique forum for addressing the great questions of development, governance, and globalization. And I am proud that IDRC has been a partner in your important work.

Your programming theme for 2006-07 has been “Governance for Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” I cannot imagine a more timely focus, or a more urgent priority, than the improvement of governance for sustainable and democratic development.

But tonight we might consider an imperative of good governance too often neglected—ignored both by the development community and by governments. This is the research imperative—the necessity of promoting and adopting research to advance democratic governance and fairly-shared development in the world’s poor countries.

To put it briefly: Research and innovation can powerfully accelerate development, in part by informing governance that is open, accountable, and participatory.

This is certainly the experience of IDRC, the International Development Research Centre. As many of you know, Parliament created IDRC in 1970 with a forthright and enduring mandate: to foster research *in* developing countries, by the people *of* developing countries—all, in the words of the IDRC Act, for “the economic and social advancement of those regions.” This is empowerment through knowledge, building the capabilities of people in their own countries to explore and understand their choices—and to improve their own futures.

Much of the research that IDRC has encouraged and financed has been in the physical sciences. Agronomy and soil geology. Engineering safe drinking water, or new devices for low-cost access to the Internet. Redefining the ecology of mangrove coastlines, or the toxicology of air pollution.

But what we have also learned, over these 37 years, is that a better knowledge of science and technology can take you only so far. Sooner or later (and sooner is better), converting knowledge into poverty reduction and development raises questions traditionally put to social scientists: questions of community action, political change, policy processes, and economics.

Here is where development actually happens: in the interaction of discovery, innovation, adaptation, and policy-making. The evidence is convincing and inescapable. Research and the ready adoption of research results are necessary for good governance and durable development.

So I am proposing a thesis in two parts. First, research constitutes an essential element of good governance and development. Second, research in the social sciences constitutes a particular and pressing priority for achieving good governance. I will return to this second point, about social science, in a moment.

But first, there is no avoiding the strong overall correlation of research with national economic and social success. Consider a few numbers.

The OECD countries, with about 21 per cent of the world's population, account for 58 per cent of global income—and 80 per cent of global spending on R & D.

Africans make up 13 per cent of the world's population—and 1.2 per cent of the world's researchers.

High-income countries spend an average of 1.5 per cent to 3.8 per cent of their national incomes on R & D. This compares to just 0.5 per cent in the developing countries.

Even among developing countries themselves, the inequalities of research investment are striking. Fully three-quarters of all the R & D done in Africa is done in South Africa. More than half of all the R & D conducted in Latin America is concentrated in Brazil.

The evidence is compelling. Research is not a luxury for the rich, an accessory of wealth. Research is a necessity for just and sustainable development. The history of development—and non-development—proves it.

The evidence is equally persuasive on a crucial qualifier. While research is necessary for successful development, it is not, by itself, sufficient. What matters more is how new knowledge is shared and applied in the households and businesses and public institutions of any country.

The hard fact is that the beneficial diffusion of knowledge through a society is not inevitable. Innovation does not automatically reduce poverty, or redress inequities, or diminish inequalities. Sometimes, innovation works instead to aggravate inequalities and deepen the disadvantages of poverty, gender, caste, or class.

If research is to serve development reliably, success requires the fluid and continuous integration of new knowledge through a country's economic and political life. Now we are talking about nourishing a culture of innovation—a culture of experiment and debate. We are also talking

about building the right institutions and procedures to identify, disseminate, and apply the knowledge that research produces.

Plainly, we have arrived in the land of the social sciences. This is the terrain explored by economists and sociologists, political scientists and anthropologists and psychologists, and all those other specialists in the riddles of human belief and behaviour.

It is the story experienced in poor countries as well as in rich countries: To understand development, we need to understand how societies and economies organize themselves to create, adapt, and make use of new knowledge for social and economic progress.

It follows necessarily that investing in social science research is nothing less than a prerequisite for true development.

But it is also worth reflecting on a separate and surprisingly under-examined characteristic of social science. I refer here to the strong and almost universal correspondence between a healthy social science activity in a country and the quality of that country's governance.

As a rule, where social science thrives, governance tends to be open, responsible, and reasonably effective. Where schools and institutes of social science are weak, so is governance. More often than not, good social science research is a marker of good governance.

In the Arab states of the Middle East, a survey of social science (supported by IDRC) recently confirmed the pernicious correlation between weak social science and deficient governance. I say pernicious because, of course, one of the long-term harms of inadequate social science research and learning is the inevitable shortage of relevant, evidence-based social science advice that could inform better governance.

In those Middle East countries, for example, it was observed that under-investment in social science research had resulted in what amounts to a generation of professors who are more pundits than scholars—academic office-holders who have done little actual research for decades, but who still wield the power of gatekeepers in the social science faculties.

The Arab countries might comprise an admittedly extreme case in point. But the findings of that survey are telling, and they give warning to us all. Where we find outdated social sciences, or ill-trained social science practitioners, it usually points to chronic under-investment in higher education and an absence of critical policy analysis. Worse, it very likely signifies the formal or informal suppression of any lively democratic discourse on important public issues.

Often, in fact, social scientists figure among the early victims of political repression and the abuse of human rights. That has been the past experience in settings as diverse as South Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America's Southern Cone. As governance improved in those areas, so did the conditions—and the contributions—of social science and social scientists.

Indeed, IDRC has been able to support social scientists in times when their livelihoods—and even their lives—were under threat from political repression. In countries of the Southern Cone,

we supported the work of social scientists removed by the old dictatorships from their university posts. Before the end of apartheid in South Africa, we helped finance policy research by scholars associated with the African National Congress—a program that helped prepare the ANC for the responsibilities of majority government.

But as I have said, an energetic and critical social science is more than an indicator of good governance. It is an essential contributor *to* good governance.

Social science makes some of its best contributions to development when it shows us how to engage people, in their families and communities, in the connections between research, policy, and action. After all, the best development research answers the needs and aspirations of people in their own homes and working lives. The best research networks involve these people directly, in framing the research questions and applying the answers that research generates.

But there is another point to be made about research networks, a point of principle. As a matter of principle, the people of any country have a right to take part in the decisions that govern their lives. That participation only has meaning if it is informed, if it is knowledgeable. People and communities need the facts that shape choices—choices about the goods they buy, or the jobs they take, or the governments they elect.

I would add, moreover, that people also need to know and to practise the procedures of good governance—procedures of deliberation, decision, and assessment that are transparent, participatory, and accountable.

By way of conclusion, I ought to make explicit a presumption that underlies everything I have said this evening: When it comes to sustainable development, good governance is—by definition—democratic governance. It is government not just with the consent of the governed, but with their active and informed participation.

Democratic governance requires informed consent. It perishes without informed dissent.

Research—the culture of it, and the practice of it—gives authentic expression to a vibrant democracy. Research supports the democratic procedures, and the democratic sensibilities, of open inquiry, tolerance, and critical debate. Research generates and integrates the information that enables citizens to hold their governments accountable. And research creates new choices and opportunities, new answers to problems of public policy and action.

In short, research belongs at the centre of any strategy of development, at the heart of any program of democratic governance.

Thank you.