

RESEARCH FOR POLICY INFLUENCE: A HISTORY OF IDRC INTENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IDRC was created to foster research that contributes to sustainable human development, especially in the South. Within this framework, the Centre has always been committed to ensuring the utilization of research results by policymakers and others involved in development.

This paper tells the story of how the Centre's *intent*, on linking research and policy processes, has evolved over the years. It is a small piece of a larger Evaluation Unit study that seeks to understand how IDRC and its partners have fared in practice, in different countries and on particular projects, and what lessons might help IDRC more effectively foster research leading to certain kinds of policy influence. As such this component of the larger study simply tries to capture what IDRC has been *trying to do* in this domain since 1970.-

The history of IDRC's intent can be viewed as a dialectical process, or for the more poetically inclined, as the story of a work in progress. The debates on the establishment of IDRC highlight the belief, by the Centre's architects, that IDRC should support applied as opposed to pure research. From the outset this included promoting the utilization of research results by policymakers in developing countries. In the 1970s this idea was put into practice through projects like the Science and Technology Policy Instruments. Yet the history of STPI highlights how there was a reluctance in parts of the Centre to support downstream linkages between research and policymaking, especially if this came at the expense of other Centre priorities such as responsive programming and respect for the norms of international sovereignty.

In the 1980s this thesis/antithesis dynamic persisted, with the emergence of a new senior management commitment to the utilization of research results, and new ideas for enhancing IDRC's capacity to promote policy changes. Some of these were put into practice, for instance through the Africa Economic Research Consortium. Yet at the same time certain Board members and staff continued to express reservations about investing too much in downstream activities, and interesting ideas for doing so were not always followed through.

Despite the difficulties created by the Federal Government's austerity measures, IDRC's interest in nurturing policy research endured in the early 1990s, and even flourished in cases like the South Africa Program Initiative. Yet partly because of the atmosphere of crisis at the time, it remained difficult to follow up on new ideas in this regard. In the late 1990s and first decade of this century this thread was picked up with renewed energy, codified in the current Corporate Strategic Program Framework and in the statement on Closing the Loop. New mechanisms have been put in place to enhance the Centre's capacity to program for policy influence. These range from the allocation of new budgetary resources for policy influencing efforts, to revised job descriptions for several categories of staff, and new initiatives by Communications Division as well as Programs & Partnership Branch. Still, some concerns and constraints inherited from earlier periods endure. The task of refining a corporate strategy to foster research for policy change, and especially of putting it into practice across the board, remains a work in progress.

INTRODUCTION

[The Centre] will be designed to facilitate the application of science and technology and the latest problem-solving techniques to fundamental socio-economic issues of the less developed regions of the world. A major part of its work will be directed to research of the kind which may be utilized by decision-makers in the formulation and implementation of policies.

Report of the IDRC Steering Committee, 1968¹

As IDRC embarks on its fourth decade, it is renewing its emphasis on research for policymaking ... IDRC will increasingly look for opportunities to link research results more closely to policy and policymaking.

IDRC at 30, 2000²

The conventional wisdom in IDRC today suggests that the Centre was most concerned with funding rigorous scientific development research in the 1970s, became more committed to ensuring the utilization of Centre-funded research in the 1980s but only became fully engaged in fostering research for policy change in the 1990s. Yet the quotes selected above suggest that IDRC has always been concerned with the practical application of the research it supports, including the utilization of research in policy making.³

Which version of history is more accurate? How did the Centre arrive at its current commitment to support research that influences public policymaking? How has IDRC addressed the questions raised about this goal along the way, at the conceptual and practical levels?

This paper demonstrates that there has indeed been a persistent concern with the *use* of research, albeit in different forms, over three decades of IDRC's history. In the early years there was great interest in the application of scientific and technological knowledge to development problems, but this included pockets of work at the policy level. In the 1980s interest in the utilization of research results in policy processes increased considerably and new tools were developed to facilitate this, yet parts of the Centre remained reluctant to invest in downstream activities. The late 1990s witnessed a renewed commitment by senior management to ensuring that IDRC-supported research had some influence on public policies, and the corresponding development of new mechanisms to foster such linkages. Yet many of the challenges entailed in fostering research for policy change, anticipated and intensely debated in earlier times, still endure.

¹ *Report of the Steering Committee*, 1968: 15.

² "IDRC at 30," *IDRC Annual Report 1999-2000*, 2000: 34.

³ For a discussion of key concepts such as research utilization and policy influence see Stephanie Neilson, *IDRC-Supported Research and its Influences on Public Policy Knowledge Utilization and Public Policy Processes: A Literature Review*, 2001.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the analysis of IDRC planning documents, reports, internal papers, evaluations and reviews, as well as selected Board minutes. External documents were consulted to understand the context in which IDRC debates took place at various points in time. Interviews with selected past and present Centre staff as well as senior managers provided valuable corroboration of the archival material examined. Interviews with Presidents and selected Governors were envisaged but could not be implemented due to unforeseen constraints.

This is not an assessment of the Centre's historic performance with regards to linking research and public policy processes. That is one aim of the larger Evaluation Unit study of which this is but a component.⁴ Nor is this a general history of the Centre. A history of the IDRC would require a far more lengthy and detailed study, as well as a thorough analysis of the external intellectual and policy contexts in which IDRC has evolved. Those issues are beyond the scope of this paper, though important events in the wider history of the Centre are discussed in connection with the evolution of the Centre's intentions regarding policy research.

THE FIRST DECADE

Precursor debates

The Act of Parliament through which IDRC was created in May 1970 mandated the Centre to:

...initiate, encourage, support and conduct research into the problems of the developing regions of the world and into the means for applying and adapting scientific, technical and other knowledge to the economic and social advancement of those regions...

The idea of an international development research centre was conceived during a time of great hope in Canada. The spectacular growth of the economy in the 1960s, the popularity of Pearsonian internationalism, Expo 67, Trudeaumania, the creation of the Canadian International Development Agency and the widespread belief in the power of science and technology – all of those trends provided an enabling environment for the notion that Canada should host a world class institution dedicated to international development research.

Yet there was considerable debate among a small circle of influential officials, advisors and politicians about the shape that such a centre should take. Some thought that it should facilitate Canadian scientific research that would be shared with developing countries. Others argued that

⁴ Fred Carden, Stephanie Neilson et al, "IDRC-supported research in the public policy process: A strategic evaluation of the influence of research on public policy", IDRC Evaluation Unit, October 2001.

the centre should help build research capacity in developing countries. Most agreed that it should emphasize applied research rather than basic science.⁵

These debates were reflected in the seminal 1968 report by the Steering Committee which guided the creation of the centre. The report came down strongly in favour of the centre supporting “studies [that] would be ‘action-oriented’ rather than purely theoretical”.⁶ It recommended that the centre foster the application of science and technology to the fundamental challenges facing the less developed world, by building research capacity in those countries as well as by linking southern researchers to their Canadian and other northern counterparts. The Steering Committee also explicitly suggested that the centre support research that would be utilized by decision-makers in the formulation and implementation of policies, on the ground in the South.⁷

The Steering Committee report led to draft legislation which worked its way through Cabinet and Parliament. Bill C-12 passed in May 1970 with minimal opposition. There was debate over the balance of Canadian versus international governors on the Board, the degree of independence it should have from CIDA and the government of the day, as well as the extent to which the centre would also nurture the interests Canadian researchers and business enterprises.⁸ Parliamentarians understood that international development entailed more than a simple transfer of technology. Some were concerned about the implications that an emphasis on applied research, especially policy research, might have for the principle of not intervening in other countries’ internal affairs. In response to those concerns the Honourable Mitchell Sharpe, Secretary of State for External Affairs at the time, reassured parliamentarians that the centre

... does not assume or cannot assume that it has a mandate for social change anywhere. It is a provider of techniques, a centre for knowledge, a centre of resources, which developing countries will be able to draw on ... and adapt to their own processes of social change over which this institution will have no control.⁹

In sum, even before IDRC was established its architects envisaged an institution that would foster applied scientific research in developing countries, including research that would inform policymaking on the ground. Yet Canadian decision-makers were adamant that this should not shade into promoting particular strategies for social change: if the research supported by IDRC

⁵ Interview with Geoffrey Oldham, 23 July 2002.

⁶ *Report of the Steering Committee*, 1968: 5.

⁷ *Report of the Steering Committee*, 1968:15.

⁸ Peter Stockdale, *Pearsonian Internationalism in Practice*, 1995: 159.

⁹ The Honourable Mitchell Sharp, Secretary of State for External Affairs, House of Commons, Standing Committee of External Affairs and National Defence, “Minutes and Proceedings of Evidence”, No. 13, 11 February 1970, 87-88.

had an influence on public policies, this would occur at the initiative of decision-makers and others in those countries.

The Hopper years, 1970-77

Under David Hopper, the first President of IDRC, the initial challenge was to establish the infrastructure of a grant-making agency, nurture partnerships with promising research institutions in developing countries and position the Centre as an independent, global leader in the field of development research. The Centre grew rapidly as it took on these daunting tasks.

Fostering research that would be picked up by policymakers and other practitioners in developing countries was certainly one of the Centre's priorities in the early years. One former senior official noted that staff were directed to how they could maximize impact in developing countries: "The discussion was not on whether they should ensure use of research results, but how they should do so."¹⁰ Yet this commitment had to be balanced against other important objectives. In his key "Eleven Issues" speech of 1973, Hopper suggested that governing IDRC was a delicate act of balancing competing goals. This included maintaining a "balance between Centre support for problem-oriented or applied research, *and* assistance for phenomenon-oriented or basic research", and maintaining the right "balance between Centre assistance for analytical research, *and* support for direct, comprehensive action development projects".¹¹

IDRC balanced these objectives by supporting projects that led to tangible results in addition to basic scientific research.¹² For example in the early 1970s the Agricultural, Food and Nutritional Sciences Division supported research by the International Centre of Tropical Research in Colombia which led to the development of new varieties of cassava and the eventual quadrupling of average cassava yields in several countries.¹³ In the mid-1970s the Information Sciences Division supported research that led to the creation of MINISIS, a computer-based information management system that has been widely used in over 60 countries.¹⁴ Though some of these

¹⁰ Interview with Geoffrey Oldham, 23 July 2002.

¹¹ Hopper, "Research Policy: Eleven Issues," IDRC, 1973: 5-15. Emphasis in the original.

¹² Regarding the balance between such endeavours, in a 1979 Board meeting Geoffrey Oldham suggested that senior management aimed to allocate roughly 60% of IDRC's funds to "projects which have knowledge generation as their primary objective" and 40% to projects "which have the development of problem-solving capabilities as their prime objective." "IDRC Board of Governor Notes", March 1-3, 1979: 6.

¹³ "IDRC at 30", *IDRC Annual Report 1999-2000*: -28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 29.

initiatives led to policy changes, many were primarily directed at generating technologies that could lead to practical change without passing through complex public policy processes.¹⁵

The Social Sciences Division was perhaps most supportive of research directly linked to public policy processes. A high-profile initiative in this regard was the Science and Technology Policy Instruments project. STPI aimed to study and influence science and technology (S&T) policies in the South. During its first phase the project nurtured research and exchanges among developing country research teams working on S&T policy problems. The essential conclusions of STPI were that science and technology policy could be a valuable tool for national development, that policies should be adapted to the particular situation of each country, but that in all cases there should be an enabling macro-economic, fiscal, legal and institutional environment to facilitate the effective implementation of targeted S&T policies.¹⁶

Through their involvement in this research STPI staff became aware of different models purporting to explain the relationships between scientific research and policy processes.¹⁷ They applied these theoretical insights to the design of new activities and as a result Phase II focused on the dissemination of findings and the direct engagement of national policymakers.¹⁸ Briefing papers and monographs were published in different languages. Three major policy dialogue conferences were held in Africa and one in Asia. In some countries STPI projects showed early successes. For example, in Korea the head of the STPI team was a close friend of the Prime Minister's Chief Economic Advisor and the project was able to significantly influence Korean S&T policy. The STPI project also contributed to the agenda and discussions at the 1979 UN Conference on Science and Technology in Vienna. Two keys to this influence were the

¹⁵ This emphasis on the practical transfer of technologies is captured by Hopper's observation that IDRC's unique product was the "creation, adaptation, and implantation of technology to 'accelerate the blurring of the line between deep poverty and towering affluence that now separates the mass of mankind from the few'". See *With Our Own Hands*, 1987: 9.

¹⁶ Academy of Scientific Research and Technology, Egypt, "Science and Technology Policy Instruments STPI General Report," 1979: 1.

¹⁷ They were intrigued by three such models: 1) the limestone model, whereby some research results gradually seep into policy processes; 2) the gadfly model, whereby researchers achieve influence through public lectures, op ed articles and other ad hoc mechanisms; 3) the ant colony model, whereby researchers influence by entering public service or participating in state-led policy option explorations. STPI's approach attempted to synthesize and move beyond the best elements of these models. Interview with Geoffrey Oldham, 23 July 2002. It is interesting to compare these models to the contemporary explanatory frameworks discussed in Neilson, 2001.

¹⁸ IDRIS, project number 760004. It is difficult to do justice, in a few sentences, to a project that involved over 150 researchers in 10 countries and generated over 200 reports.

secondment of an STPI staff member to the UN conference planning secretariat, and the strategic use of STPI findings to lobby G-77 delegates in the lead-up to the UN conference.¹⁹

Yet STPI sparked intense debates over how much the Centre should fund such downstream activities. Some IDRC officials felt that investing too much in this kind of activity could jeopardize the Centre's capacity to respond to proposals for other worthy research projects. In the end STPI was not able to secure IDRC funding for a major dissemination event planned in Latin America.²⁰ Phase II was completed but no similar successor initiatives were put in place.

Prior to the 1979 UN Conference IDRC also published a compendium of articles on its achievements. Some southern contributions to this volume examined the difficulties of achieving policy influence through the kind of research typically supported by IDRC. Some authors suggested that much of the research being conducted with IDRC support was only of benefit to the researchers' own career advancement. They observed that some researchers were not particularly interested in following up on their research. Many of the researchers in the South, as they were educated in the North, conducted research that was highly specialized and somewhat disconnected from the needs of the people. The agencies that partnered with IDRC were not necessarily risk-takers. This made it difficult to organize interdisciplinary action research. Finally, most southern governments were concerned with crisis management and were not necessarily acting for the long-term. In such contexts the creation of indigenous research capacity did not automatically result in policy influence; nor did dissemination ensure utilization.²¹

It is also during this period that IDRC decided to support a cluster of projects that were *not* about achieving policy influence in the short run. In 1977 IDRC started providing institutional support for research centres in South American countries where military regimes had taken power, gravely violated human rights, closed down social science faculties and eliminated the channels of policy dialogue with all but their trusted allies.²² This decision was intensely debated by senior management and by the Board, not least because of the political risks involved. Indeed, these were circumstances under which IDRC had decided to take sides, against the *de facto* authorities, in the hope that its support would contribute to change or at least help researchers, their ideas and institutions survive in politically hostile environments.

¹⁹ Interview with Geoffrey Oldham. On the impact of the 1979 UN Conference, see also Geoffrey Oldham, "Time is Important," *Mazingira: The World Forum for Environment and Development*, 8:65 (1979): 59-65. The STPI staffer in question was Francisco Sagasti. As an IDRC governor decades later, Dr. Sagasti apparently played a key role in nurturing senior management's commitment to fostering synergies between research and policy processes.

²⁰ Interview with Geoffrey Oldham. This was also discussed by the Board, albeit indirectly. See Board of Governors notes, "Draft notes of proceedings," March, 1979: 3, 5.

²¹ *With Our Own Hands*, 1979.

²² Fox, "Support for Social Sciences Research in the Southern Cone" Vol. I, 1980: 4.

Interestingly this support for Southern Cone researchers eventually became one of IDRC's success stories, since the Centre could claim partial credit for sustaining the critical intellectual tradition in countries such as Argentina and Chile during their darkest years. Though little of this research probably had direct policy influence at the time, IDRC reaped the benefits of its long association with key researchers when many of these moved into positions of influence under the democratic governments that came to office in the 1980s.²³

THE SECOND DECADE

The Head years, 1978-1991

IDRC remained officially committed to the utilization of research in the 1980s, but the debate on how much IDRC should foster this goal continued. The first Program and Policy Review presented to the Board in 1980 highlighted the technical difficulties involved:

It is recognized that in some programs it is possible to identify the end-user, whilst in others the establishment of a direct link with the end-user will not always be possible and the policy linkage may not, in fact, take place until several years after project completion. The Board may wish to address the issue of whether a policy link is in fact a necessary objective of Centre supported programs or whether the enhancement of research capability by itself would be adequate.²⁴

The possible implications of intervening in other countries' political affairs also remained a concern, though some believed that IDRC staff and their contacts were well-positioned to achieve influence without engaging in politics. As one Governor stated:

... no IDRC or other outside agency can go into another political jurisdiction and dictate what is to be done. This is one of the reasons why emphasis has been placed, quite frankly, on the professional capabilities of the IDRC rather than the political. The respect that the IDRC professionals have gained has given them access to the sort of people in different parts of the developing world who will ensure that the projects benefit the large mass of people."²⁵

To ground this debate in evidence, in 1981 senior management recommended that the Office of Planning and Evaluation (OPE) carry out project case studies "to try to identify why the results

²³ For a broader study of the long term impacts of IDRC support to key researchers, see Stephen Salewicz and Archana Dwivedi, *Project Leader Tracer Study*, 1996.

²⁴ PPR I, 1980: 67.

²⁵ The Honorable Rex Nettleford, Governor from Jamaica, quoted in "Special Report: Ten Years for tomorrow", no date: 3.

were utilized in some cases and not in others.”²⁶ The idea of case studies was not followed up until later but the OPE carried out a preliminary study on the matter. The resulting paper noted the existence of multiple views within the Centre: some saw utilization as a linear process while others viewed it as a more iterative process of generating, receiving, absorbing and generating new knowledge. The study noted observed that it was not easy to distinguish between research that promoted knowledge and that which promoted its use. It confirmed a shared concern that moving more decisively towards utilization could curtail the Centre’s responsiveness.²⁷ Yet it also intimated that, at the end of the day, IDRC would be “assessed by its association with research work that has contributed in some way to social and economic advance.”²⁸

In the end the OPE study suggested that there could be more emphasis on consolidating existing projects instead of taking on new ones, yet it also suggested that IDRC should continue to support projects that resulted from southern demands. It recommended that the Centre and its partners clarify at the outset how beneficiaries would be involved in projects. The study also suggested that pilot projects be undertaken to apply the results of research, and that there should be more “research on research” to track the results of IDRC supported research.

The extent to which these recommendations were translated into practice is not clear, yet the debate on policy influence continued.²⁹ In 1984 a Board Committee which reviewed the Social Sciences Division noted that there was “good research being produced, but links to policy process are weak, hence IDRC goals should be organizational and provide small financial contributions to help bridge the research-to-policy formulation gap.”³⁰ There was persistent trepidation, though, about IDRC’s involvement in the political imbroglios of other countries. In terms of the criteria for selection of projects, it was found that:

²⁶ PPR III, 1981: 17.

²⁷ “When considering policy alternatives, the “steady as you go” option deserves as much objective consideration as any other. It always has appeal, but is particularly attractive for IDRC which already has a good international reputation that could be put at risk by a deeper involvement with development, as opposed to research.” See John Hardie, “Using Knowledge for Development”, IDRC, 1982: 8.

²⁸ Ibid.: 2.

²⁹ Some of these ideas were put into practice in the 1980s, for example through the introduction of questions on beneficiary involvement in project appraisal and project completion report templates. Other ideas were not taken up until much later: for example it took two decades for the idea of conducting systematic research on the results of IDRC-supported research to be put into practice through the Evaluation Unit’s major policy influence study in 2001-2003.

³⁰ “Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Board of Governors of the International Development Research Centre to review the Social Sciences Division,” 1984: 18 (Annex G - attachment).

In many nations, the priority of different policy questions is viewed differently depending who one speaks to. The Division seeks not to become identified with any particular ideological or partisan view on policy issues, but to support research which will illuminate the issues for all involved.³¹

Despite these debates there seems to have been frustration among certain senior managers with the difficulties of moving the research utilization agenda forward in practice. At President Head's initiative senior management held a 10 week seminar in 1985 to reflect on strategic challenges facing the Centre. According to one participant the main driver behind the meeting was the feeling that IDRC had too little to show for its efforts over the past 15 years. In addition, many Centre staff didn't seem to understand or share the commitment to support initiatives that linked research directly to policy processes. The limestone model of high quality research permeating into policy processes still seemed to dominate staff thinking. As such the seminar attempted to generate senior management commitment to support more inter-disciplinary research, and to more actively foster the utilization of research in practical and policy processes.³²

The evolution of IDRC's involvement in African economic research networks during the 1980s illustrates how this renewed senior management interest in policy processes led to changes in practice. In 1984 IDRC made its first grant to the Eastern and Southern Africa Macroeconomic Analysis Program. The primary aim of the program was to build the policy research capacity of economists in Sub-Saharan Africa. As such the emerging network engaged university-based economists as well as analysts working inside African government agencies. By the late 1980s, on the basis of solid research, publications and conferences, IDRC and its African partners managed to transform the network into the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) and get a number of larger donors to contribute to its core operations. One of its key aims since has been to "improve relationships between researchers and policymakers" through research activities, conferences as well as workshops aimed specifically at public decision-makers.³³

Notwithstanding such advances, some IDRC managers wanted the Centre to move even more decisively towards linking research and policy influence. In 1988 the Social Sciences Division tabled a Strategic Plan with commitments to "emphasize persistence in capacity building and increasing the utilization of research results" and "put more resources into the downstream end of its projects".³⁴ The document outlined plans to work with other Divisions, especially Communications, to ensure that other researchers as well as policymakers and the public were

³¹ Ibid.: 25.

³² Interview with James Mullin, 29 July 2002.

³³ IDRIS description for project 870112. See also IDRIS descriptions for projects 830099, 850055, 850057, 860292, 910035 and 000882. Mullin also cited AERC as an example of what IDRC could do when it dedicated its resources to fostering research-policy linkages.

³⁴ "Strategic Plan of the Social Sciences Division, 1988-1992": iv.

aware of research supported by IDRC. It also sketched plans to create an experimental subprogram on Public Policy and Participation.

That same year the new Vice-President of Programs Branch, James Mullin, presented a Program and Policy Review that concentrated on the issue of utilization. PPR X distinguished between utilization, dissemination and impact. It further distinguished between different types of research and context-sensitive approaches to promoting its utilization.³⁵ In the end it did not recommend major structural changes or the generation of new demands on staff to transform their programming methods; instead it recommended that training be provided and experiments conducted to ease into this new approach. The Review also indicated that the Communications Division would look at new ways to focus on dissemination and utilization of research outputs.³⁶

A study was commissioned to consult a sample of South Asian researchers on this issue. According to the study researchers felt that IDRC interests were still confined to research and that utilization, beyond limited dissemination, was outside the scope of most projects. Researchers' interest in utilization was generally in terms of exchange between other researchers and/or institutions. Moreover, the standard three to five year period was seen to be too short to undertake any major utilization activity. If utilization was stressed, it would require longer term support and structural changes to projects. There would also need to be more formal linkage mechanisms between research centres and policymaking institutions.³⁷

Similarly a review of the Science and Technology Policy of the Social Sciences Division observed that while it was important to support activities concentrating on S&T policy, the linkages between these activities remained weak and ad hoc. Without recommending specific institutional changes, it recommended that "any new structure must be designed to improve the total impact of the Centre in generating policy-relevant knowledge and its utilization both in the developing countries and by IDRC itself."³⁸

Despite these shifts in the views of certain senior managers and southern partners, there were

³⁵ While dissemination was the process of making the results of research accessible, utilization involved the application of these outputs in areas which could effect various changes in society. See PPR X, 1988: 7. See also "A Utilization Framework for IDRC Projects" (1989), in which André Potworowski outlined an eight-point framework for thinking about utilization in IDRC-supported research projects. Among other things, he noted that there was no silver bullet for identifying which research could be utilized. In many cases in the South, resources for dissemination simply did not exist, and the burden of application rested on the shoulders of the innovator. In these situations, he argued, IDRC should be discerning about project selection.

³⁶ PPR X, 1988: 2-3.

³⁷ PPR X, 1988: 10-11.

³⁸ Rath, "Science and Technology Policy Review," 1988: 4.

persistent concerns about increased spending that could result from greater emphasis on utilization. PPR X did not elicit universal approval among governors, management and staff. For example, in 1988 the Board's In-Depth Review of the Social Sciences Division concluded: "We are somewhat reassured by the concomitant statement, with which we agree, that 'the Division should not direct large amounts of funding to the support of downstream activities'."³⁹

In sum, during the 1980s lively debate continued on how and how much IDRC should support activities linking research to policy. A more sophisticated view of research utilization challenges was emerging on the basis of the Centre's own experience and its engagement in international discussions. Numerous studies, reviews and plans were tabled to address these challenges. New initiatives like the Africa Economic Research Consortium were launched to put the Centre's thinking into practice. Yet some debates and recommendations were becoming repetitive. Programming innovations such as the initiative on public policy and participation were not sustained. The Centre also seemed to have difficulties moving beyond old dichotomies such as consolidation versus responsiveness, or scientific rigour versus political intervention.

To put this in context, it is worth remembering that despite these iterative internal debates, in 1988 IDRC received commendation from the Auditor General of Canada. IDRC was identified as one of eight "well performing government organizations". The section on IDRC concluded:

We have looked at IDRC from the point of view of its internationally recognized high performance in delivering research assistance to developing nations. IDRC is considered worldwide to be one of the best organizations of its kind. Its high performance is based on a number of elements: people who are competent, committed and value-driven; continuity of leadership; a clear and strong sense of mission and purpose; a strong client focus; autonomy and flexibility at all levels; risk-taking and innovation; freedom from political and central agency interference; tailor-made internal regulations and reporting requirements; and continual self-scrutiny of strategies and activities.⁴⁰

³⁹ "Report of the In-Depth Divisional Review Panel, Social Sciences Division," 1988: 79. One senior manager who has been involved in these debates for over twenty years suggested that the resistance to Mullin's thinking in PPR X undermined its impact on IDRC. Interview with John Hardie, 5 June 2002.

⁴⁰ Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 1988: 4.31.

THE 1990s AND BEYOND

The Bezanson years: 1991-1997

Despite its achievements during the first decades of its existence, IDRC was vulnerable when pressures to dramatically cut federal expenditures intensified in the early 1990s. In 1991 the Centre faced the possibility of being closed down, along with several other crown corporations and federal bodies. In 1992 the government considered making IDRC a departmental corporation of CIDA. The Centre experienced large cuts in its parliamentary allocation: from \$120 million in 1992 to \$86 million by 1998. Responding to these external challenges absorbed the Centre's energies under the Presidency of Keith Bezanson.⁴¹

Bridging the gap between the research it supported and its utilization in policy processes was a small but crucial element in IDRC's response to these challenges. In 1991 the Centre unveiled a new strategy titled *Empowerment Through Knowledge* which reiterated IDRC's commitment to "consolidate ... itself as a results-oriented, 'research-for-development' organization".⁴² The strategy also outlined plans to foster "research on effective research systems", a notion that echoed the idea of 'research on research' mooted back in 1982:

The Centre will intensify its efforts to assess "what works" in development research. Little information exists on how research for development is best organized or how to ensure that the products of useful research can be more speedily and widely applied. A new program will be developed to support research on such topics. It will draw on the accumulated experience of the Centre's own evaluation program. The new program will pay particular attention to the important question of how to improve policy research – the formulation, packaging, and application of knowledge for policymaking.⁴³

Related commitments to a "finer focus on policy research" were made in other documents⁴⁴ yet the pressure of fiscal cutbacks made it difficult to follow these up in practice.

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development presented the Centre a timely opportunity to demonstrate its usefulness and thereby manage these fiscal pressures. At the Rio Earth Summit the international community committed itself to 'Agenda 21', an ambitious program of measures to reverse environmental degradation and promote sustainable development. Canada was deeply engaged in shaping the Rio Agenda. During this period IDRC

⁴¹ Pierre Beemans, "Re-inventing IDRC in the 1990s," speech given at St-Mary's University, 12 March 1999.

⁴² *Empowerment Through Knowledge: The Strategy of the International Development Research Centre*, 1991: 7-8.

⁴³ *Empowerment Through Knowledge*, 1991: 23.

⁴⁴ See also "Transition Budget: IDRC, 1992-93": 48.

officials and allies persuaded Canadian decision-makers that the Centre could play a key role in fostering the multi-disciplinary, collaborative research needed to implement Agenda 21. As a result soon after the Rio Summit Prime Minister Mulroney declared IDRC an Agenda 21 organization, thereby confirming the Centre's survival as an independent crown corporation.

IDRC launched extensive internal and external consultations to update the 1991 strategy based on this new focus. In 1993 it decided that all programming would be dedicated to sustainable development and half of the Centre's funds would go to six themes linking environmental and natural resource management to the broader development agenda.⁴⁵ In an interview for a DFAIT publication President Bezanson explained this revised strategy and highlighted how the principles of Agenda 21 were a good match for the Centre:

It was clear that the strategy provided a strong comparative advantage in responding to Rio, including a focus on capacity-building; insistence on multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral approaches; priority to the generation, adaptation and dissemination of essential knowledge on the full participation of policy-users and policy-makers; and focus on research utilization.⁴⁶

This interview was part of the outreach that IDRC officials intensified to build support among decision-makers in the Prime Minister's Office, the departments of Finance and Foreign Affairs, CIDA as well as the broader Canadian development community. The Centre's commitment to applied research and engagement with policymakers was a crucial part of President Bezanson's case for granting IDRC resources to foster research for the implementation of Agenda 21.

During the following years the Centre was absorbed with the task of re-engineering itself to deliver this strategy. To nurture more multi-disciplinary research on sustainable development the divisional structure was replaced by clusters and finally by program initiatives. The number of staff was reduced by almost 50%. This limited resources available to enhance research-policy links. Yet interesting initiatives emerged. For instance, in South Africa from 1991 onward IDRC supported research by the democratic movement and the African National Congress, on a range of industrial, environmental and social policy issues. This assistance is credited with having a significant influence on the public policies of the first ANC government in a number of sectors.⁴⁷

⁴⁵“ Meeting the Global Challenge: Themes and Programs of the International Development Research Centre,” 1993: 8. *IDRC Corporate Program Framework, 1993-1996*: 3.

⁴⁶ Bezanson, “Research for Development” in *Diplomat and International Canada*, 1993: 10-13. This was also the period in which David Glover wrote his seminal paper titled “Policy researchers and policy makers: Never the twain shall meet?” December 1993.

⁴⁷ Interviews with John Hardie, 5 June 2002 and Jim Mullin, 29 July 2002. African Community Access to the Communications and Information Age (ACACIA) is another example of IDRC programming for policy and practical change during this period. See Beemans, 1999, for a brief explanation of ACACIA and other such initiatives in the mid-1990s.

The O'Neil years, 1997-

From the outset of her tenure President Maureen O'Neil signaled her keen interest in enhancing the linkages between IDRC-supported research and public policy processes. A discussion emerged between the new President, certain governors, senior managers and staff on how the Centre could move decisively forward on this score. The Evaluation Unit's work on "outcome mapping" and Policy Planning Group's initial thinking on "building a knowledge pyramid" exemplify the interest that was percolating below the surface. Yet during this period IDRC was largely dedicated to ensuring the delivery of the 1997-2000 Corporate Program Framework and fine-tuning changes introduced under President Bezanson.⁴⁸

It is during the formulation and implementation of the 2000-2005 Corporate Strategic Programming Framework (CSPF III) that major changes were introduced to advance the policy influence agenda. A renewed intent to foster "research for policymaking" was unequivocally stated in CSPF III and in the Centre's 1999-2000 *Annual Report*.⁴⁹ Over the ensuing years this was refined into a policy statement on what became known as "Closing the loop" (CTL):

Closing the loop is an approach to programming and projects that seeks to ensure the awareness, understanding, and ownership of research outputs by decision-makers at all levels. Its goals are to increase the relevance and utilization of research outputs, thereby enhancing the influence of the researchers, institutions and work we support.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Interviews with Brent Herbet-Copley and Paul Dufour, 14 May 2002, and John Hardie, June 2002. For fragmentary evidence on the gradual re-emergence of this priority, see *IDRC Corporate Program Framework To the year 2000*, March 1997; Maureen O'Neil, "IDRC at the dawn of its 30 years," speech to the Conseil des relations internationales de Montréal, 21 November 1997; and John Hardie, "Building a better base for the pyramid," December 1999 Policy Planning Group memo. Certain individuals seem to have played key roles in helping the President make this a priority. These include Fransisco Sagasti and John Hardie: the former is currently a governor but was a regional coordinator for the STPI project in the 1970s; the latter is the Director of the Policy and Planning Group but was the author of the 1982 paper looking at IDRC staff views regarding the links between research and its utilization.

⁴⁹ See *IDRC in a Changing World: Program Directions 2000-2005*, 2000, especially pages 12, 10 and 16, as well as *IDRC Annual Report 1999-2000*, especially the quotation cited on page 1 of the present paper.

⁵⁰ "Closing the Loop: Communications for change at IDRC," January 2002: 1.

The January 2002 CTL statement outlines the factors that shape prospects for research-based policy influence. These include project-level factors such as the involvement of potential users in the design and conduct of the research, as well as adequate financial resources for high-quality research and the strategic dissemination of its results. It also includes contextual factors such as the existence of a favourable policy environment, users' interest in the research and the existence of credible champions. Based on this analysis the statement highlights steps that should be taken by IDRC and its partners to align enabling factors at the project and contextual levels. It emphasizes that closing the loop needs to be mainstreamed at all stages in the design, funding, research, dissemination, monitoring and evaluation of projects as well as programs. As such the statement aims to send "a clear message that IDRC wants to be seen as strongly pro-active in its commitment to research for development" including achieving an "increase [in] the reach of outputs ... to policymakers, donors, development institutions and other stakeholders ..."

In 2000 the Centre began introducing a number of new mechanisms to operationalise this enhanced commitment to policy research. The Communications Division was reorganised and allocated more resources to strengthen its capacity to synthesize the results of IDRC-supported research and translate them into policy briefs, presentations to parliamentary committees, media coverage and enhanced website. It intensified its collaboration with the President's Office to convey timely messages to Canadian decision-makers through strategic interpersonal communications. These efforts have already generated new grants from the Canadian government for the establishment, by IDRC, of connectivity institutes in the Americas and in Africa.⁵¹ Communications and Programs & Partnership Branch were jointly allocated an extra \$500,000 to deliver a series of policy workshops in which IDRC-supported research was presented to Canadian policymakers. When staff job descriptions were updated in 2001 regional directors, program area directors and program officers were given greater responsibility for tracking policy debates and facilitating influence by IDRC-supported researchers.

Finally, two major initiatives were launched to translate the idea of 'research on research' into reality. The first is the Research on Knowledge Systems (RoKS) exploration, an initiative to explore "the ways in which knowledge is produced, communicated and applied to development problems, and the policy and institutional frameworks which govern this process".⁵² The second is the corporate strategic evaluation of how IDRC-supported research has, over time, influenced public policy processes. This large study includes a foundational literature review and concept papers, analyses of key IDRC documents such as project completion reports from a policy influence angle, and over 25 case studies of IDRC-supported projects from the same standpoint.⁵³

⁵¹ Conversation with Jean-Marc Fleury, 23 July 2002. See also Communications Division, "2001-2002 Retrospective".

⁵² RoKS, "Programming Strategy," June 2001: 1.

⁵³ Carden and Neilson, "IDRC-supported research in the public policy process," 2001.

CONCLUSIONS

In recent years IDRC has made much progress in its efforts to foster research that influences policy processes. These advances build on earlier intentions, debates and initiatives. The renewed commitment to research for change – enshrined in the current Corporate Strategic Program Framework – builds on longstanding institutional intentions. Indeed, this intent to foster applied research and its utilization in public policy processes can be traced back to debates on the establishment of IDRC in the late 1960s. The strategy codified in the Closing the Loop statement also reflects an accumulation of knowledge about how research and policy processes are linked in different contexts, and how IDRC can nurture such linkages in practical ways. Many of the innovations introduced in recent years were also mooted or even tried in earlier eras: this is the case with efforts to strengthen Communications Division, allocate more resources to downstream products, and foster “research on research” through the RoKs exploration. What is new is the depth and breadth of commitment among senior managers, the sophistication of the current strategy and especially the concerted effort to put renewed intent into practice. What is new this time is that the tension between research for influence and other agendas has been resolved in favour of the former. Indeed it is interesting to observe how old constraints – such as the priority given to remaining responsive to recipients’ agendas, or the concern about intervening in other countries’ politics – have largely been transcended in the new outlook.

The vision and persistence of President O’Neil, and the support of key staff as well as governors, have been essential to translating this old idea into a coherent strategy. The confluence of factors outside IDRC – including the renewed interest in policy dialogue and influence in international development circles, the pressure to demonstrate results on the ground and gain profile in Canada, and the slow but steady increase in governmental funding for IDRC – have also provided favourable conditions for these champions’ efforts. As such the Centre’s own experience over the past decades illustrates the slow, difficult and multi-causal nature of processes whereby ideas lead to change in policy and practice. Borrowing the metaphors used by the Science & Technology Policy Instruments project in the mid-1970s, one could say that it has taken gadflies, ants and a favourable climate for the limestone of research for policy influence to seep into ground and flower into the coherent strategy for Closing the Loop that exists today.

Yet history also suggests that the challenge of putting this intent into practice will endure. The Centre will continue to grapple with the difficulty of allocating sufficient funds for policy influencing efforts over the longer term, particularly if the fiscal situation becomes less favourable in the future. It may have to address possible trade-offs between seeking influence in Canada, in tandem with resource expansion efforts, and supporting partners’ efforts to influence public policymaking on the ground in developing countries. The Centre may need to revisit its staffing strategy to ensure that it recruits sufficient personnel with deep experience at the interface of research and policymaking, and it may need to provide more time and training to enable staff to nurture research-policy synergies systematically. The dialectic will continue, the gadflies and the ants will be busy. For the task of refining the Centre’s intent on policy influence, and translating it into practice, will remain a work in progress for some time to come.

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ANNEX: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Brent Herbert-Copley and Paul Dufour (RoKS). In-person interview, May 14, 2002.

Anne Bernard. Phone interview, May 16, 2002.

John Hardie. In-person interview, June 5, 2002.

Geoffrey Oldham. Phone interview, July 23, 2002.

Jim Mullin, phone interview, 29 July 2002.

(I also had conversations with Chris Smart, Leanne Burton and Jean-Marc Fleury).

Plus list of all those who attended focus group session on 9 April 2002.