

**IDRC-supported research in the public policy process:
A strategic evaluation of the influence of research on public policy**

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IDRC will foster and support the production, dissemination and application of research results leading to policies and technologies that enhance the lives of people in developing countries.

(IDRC program directions 2000-2005, p.16)

I. Introduction:

Influencing the policy process is increasingly important to the Centre in the research it supports as illustrated by the above quote from the Centre's strategic planning document. This working document outlines the design of a strategic evaluation of the influence of research on the public policy process. This central activity of the Evaluation Unit of the Centre in the period 2001-2003 is meant to develop as clear an understanding as possible not only of what we mean by the policy process but what we have accomplished thus far. This will inform thinking both at the project level – how to improve our project support to enhance policy influence opportunities and deepen our understanding of how ideas enter policy processes; and at the corporate level – what have we done as a corporation and what strategic adjustments do we need to make?

Work on the design of this study was initiated in January 2001. A series of staff interviews and preliminary searches of the literature were carried out in the first months of the year. This was followed by the development of several background research activities, all of which will be completed by October 2002. These include consultations with Centre staff and experts in the field, an in-depth literature review, use of external expertise, and research into the Centre's data.

Because of the varied nature of the Centre's work and the range of regions in which we work, the study will be comprised of a number of sub-studies which will be brought together to build a corporate picture of our work in this domain. A range of methodologies will necessarily be used. These are outlined following a discussion of the evaluation questions and the state of the art in this field as it relates to the Centre. A number of products will be produced in the course of this study. The data will be collected, discussed and analysed as far as possible in collaboration with the users; a number of methods will be used to ensure participation but to minimize impact on the burden of workload. Final products of the evaluation itself will start to appear in the Fall of 2002. A second stage of the study may be considered to look at issues in the influence of the implementation of public policy on development processes, as these influences will be somewhat different from influences around policy development, formulation and adoption.

II. Purpose & Focus:

Many IDRC project and program objectives reflect the expectation that the research supported will influence or have an impact on the policy process. Within projects and programs, Centre staff promote various means of linking research to policy, and research supported is often reported to have enhanced decision makers' awareness of policy options or to have been

otherwise taken into account in policy processes. If the Centre is going to maintain or increase its portfolio of projects with this mandate, there is a need to clarify and document what the Centre means by “policy influence”; to examine more systematically the extent to which and the ways in which the research it supports influences policy; and to examine the factors which affect the extent of policy influence resulting from its projects. Given the apparent “serendipity” described by many in cases where policy influence is claimed, a fruitful avenue of better understanding might be to understand how policymakers learn and how they absorb ideas into policy processes. This will serve two main purposes: first, it will provide learning at the program level which can enhance the design of projects and programs to address policy issues where that is a key objective; second, it will provide an opportunity for corporate level learning which will provide input to the strategic planning process, providing feedback on performance in the Centre’s corporate strategic planning process, and contribute to the design of the next corporate program framework (for example through presentations and discussions at Program Meetings). Taken together, these objectives are what distinguish this activity from Centre research: it is focussed on corporate performance, and it is intended to bring together disparate experiences in a range of domains and regions to inform learning across the organization.

Kingdon (1984) considers public policymaking as a “*set of processes, including at least (1) the setting of an agenda, (2) the specification of alternatives from which a choice is to be made, (3) an authoritative choice among those specified alternatives...and (4) the implementation of a decision*” (Kingdon, 1984, p.3). Succinctly stated, this definition includes the idea of policy as a set of processes, activities or actions resulting in a decision. IDRC recognizes that, “*decision making occurs at various levels and is carried out by a broad range of decision makers: from heads of families to program directors in other donor agencies, to government policymakers*” (Closing the Loop: Communication for Change at IDRC, 2001, p.1). While both “policy” and “policymakers/decision-makers” can be defined quite broadly, for the purpose of this study policy is defined as **public policy**. As such, the central focus of the study is on issues surrounding policy processes as they relate to municipal, regional and national levels of government. Although community and household level decision-makers will be taken into consideration as part of the process, they are not the central focus of this work.

It should be noted that not all Centre projects or programs have or are expected to have an influence on policy; nor do all programs focus on public policy, since some programs (e.g. ENRM) focus on local decision-making. While these are equally legitimate approaches, they fall outside the scope of this study. However, influence on public policy processes is an area of increasing importance to a wide range of activities across the Centre, both regionally and programmatically.

III. Users:

There are two primary users for this study as outlined below. Clearly the study will be of interest to a wider audience; however in view of the importance we are placing on use of the findings within the Centre, a clear focus on users is essential. More than two users would be extremely difficult to accommodate within the limits of the study.

The first user is **program staff** (whether Program Initiative, Secretariat, Corporate Project) who have a mandate to develop research activities (projects or programs) with a view to supporting “*the production, dissemination and application of research results leading to*

policies and technologies that enhance the lives of people in developing countries”. The study is intended to provide them with a rich review of Centre experience from which staff can draw out the most useful and relevant lessons for their purposes.

The second primary user is the corporation as a whole, through its **program management** group. The evaluation will address two corporate needs: first, it will provide a picture of how we are doing now including generating data and information for the Corporate Assessment Framework (CAF) by: (a) providing evidence of policy influence; (b) providing a more sophisticated understanding of what we mean by policy influence and how IDRC plays a role; and (c) offering a framework for planning and assessing policy influence; second, it will provide input to the development of the next strategic program framework (and potentially modifications to the corporate program framework for 2000-2005).

Members of both these groups have been involved in the identification of issues as well as preliminary identification of cases. They have indicated an interest in ongoing involvement and in some cases an interest in participation in fieldwork. Ongoing user involvement in design and in analysis will be crucial and the methodology will reflect that priority. The range and level of interest to date demonstrates the clear relevance of the issues within the Centre.

IV. Questions:

The design of this strategic evaluation was discussed a variety of Centre staff, including the President, Vice-President of Programs and Partnership Branch (PPB), Directors of Programming Areas, Regional Offices, Team Leaders, the Policy and Planning Group, Director, Special Initiatives Division and the Communications Division. These initial discussions with Centre staff and preliminary reviews of the literature as well as of Centre documents, point to three main questions that the strategic evaluation will fruitfully address:

1. What constitutes public policy influence in IDRC’s experience?

This question will help answer what we mean by research and its use. Among the issues to be considered:

What is the relationship between policy influence and capacity building – is it a trade off? Does investing in one support the other?

What is the range and type of policy influence achieved through IDRC-supported research (e.g., influence on policymaker thinking, agendas, declarations, laws, implementation)?

What is the role and definition of partnerships as part of policy influence?

Is it about: building capacities of researchers to conduct policy inquiry and to influence policymakers? building the capacity of policy makers to use research in the policy process? the relationships between researchers and policymakers? the enlightenment function?

To what extent is advocacy important?

To what extent are changes in legislation important?

How do ideas enter the policy arena?

How do policymakers learn?

2. To what degrees and in what ways has IDRC supported research influenced public policy?

How does policy influence happen? With whom are we working and what are the relationships between researchers and policymakers in policy inquiry processes?

What are the range of decision makers which IDRC-supported research seeks to influence and how (e.g., national government policy makers through to local government policymakers, to communities and households)?

What are, and what are the roles of, dissemination strategies?

3. What factors and conditions have facilitated or inhibited the public policy influence potential of IDRC-supported research projects?

What has been IDRC's experience in influencing new policy areas?

What has been IDRC's experience in working collaboratively to influence policy? Collaborating with other donors? With communities?

What is the link between research quality and policy influence?

What are the contextual factors at play?

What are the ranges of processes used?

V. Research and policy – Summary of the literature review

A considerable literature exists detailing the nature of policy processes, and on whether and how research does or does not inform public policy. There are numerous frameworks and/or models found within the literature to help explain or represent knowledge utilization in decision making, as well as frameworks explaining how policy change occurs. A detailed literature review was prepared as part of the study design; its key points are outlined below. A copy of this review is available at: http://www.idrc.ca/evaluation/litreview_e.html

The first section of the literature review presents an overview of the knowledge utilization literature including its views on the use of knowledge and research in decision-making. The two most enduring findings from this literature are discussed: (1) the cultural differences between researchers and policymakers; and (2) the “enlightenment” function of research in policymaking. Caplan (1979) explains the use, or non-use, of research as a symptom of the cultural gap between researchers and policymakers. For him, the limited use of research by policymakers was, in part, due to the fact that researchers and policymakers have different worldviews. Later explanations, based on the writings of Weiss, Sabatier, and others, include the idea that the research-policy link is not a direct one particularly in relation to data and information sources. These writings support the claim that research is only one of many sources of information for policymakers, and that it is not a simple dichotomy between “use” and “non-use” but rather that knowledge/research utilization is built on a gradual shift in conceptual thinking over time.

The second section provides a synopsis of the various policymaking frameworks. These include: (1) linear; (2) incrementalism; (3) interactive; (4) agenda-setting; (5) policy networks; (6) policy narratives; and (7) policy transfer. Although many of the earlier frameworks have been heavily criticized for their rational and/or unrealistic portrayal of the policymaking process, they have each made an important contribution in terms of helping to explain some of the factors which either facilitate or constrain the use of research in the policymaking process.

Each of these conceptualizations therefore, has different implications for the extent to which research is able to influence policy, and for how research could be designed to influence policy. Moreover, each has different implications for who are considered to be the main decision makers in society, and/or to whom research should be addressed. Further, while much of this literature reflects Northern or developed country settings, some acknowledges the diversity of policy contexts throughout the world.

Preliminary interviews with staff, along with a preliminary review of specific IDRC documents, reveal that there are several ways in which research is considered to link to policy. The nature of “policy influence” as experienced by IDRC program staff include:

- Dissemination of research results to policymakers, in appropriate formats;
- The interaction between researchers and policymakers during the design of the research, dissemination, and/or the research process itself;
- The building of relationships between researchers and decision makers that last beyond the research project;
- Public dissemination and debate of the research results;
- Use of the research results by groups in society to encourage or advocate for change;
- Strengthening organizations in terms of their capacity to carry out policy inquiry; and
- Strengthening key individuals within a generation of researchers who will in the future be in a position to implement or encourage policy change.

Some of these links are also mentioned in the literature as factors or mechanisms that help facilitate the use of research in policymaking. Various mechanisms have been established in IDRC-supported projects and programs to encourage these strategies including: (1) government policymakers as researchers or advisors to research teams; (2) making researcher relationships with policymakers a criterion for approving research support.

What is often left out of the literature is an understanding of whether policy influence should always be construed as a positive development outcome. Few studies examine issues related to research quality in terms of rigour (i.e. validity and reliability) or completeness and how research quality impacts on policy development. Not giving serious attention to the issue of research quality may in practice jeopardize positive intentions with negative consequences or outcomes simply because the research did not explore all the feasible and/or available policy recommendations.

In addition, there are issues related to what Diane Stone labels as “perceived influence” and what Ivan Krastev identifies as “faking influence”. What is perceived as being influential, how that perception is translated into evidence of influence, as well as researchers’ claim of policy influence are important issues that need addressing since many of these perceptions and claims suggest that policy influence is a positive development outcome.

Attention must also be given to new policy fields, such as those associated with information and communication technologies (ICTs) where the growth and diffusion of technologies and

their application to development problems is extremely rapid, and as a result of this diffusion, may have far-reaching impacts in many other sectors as well.

Finally, there are also new policy environments where preliminary evidence indicates that policy makers in, what are now independent states (e.g., Ukraine), are seeking knowledge, information and advice from researchers in order to develop national policies where none previously existed. The question here is how the policy processes in these “transition countries” where, in some cases, governance systems have undergone radical policy changes, work to either inhibit or facilitate the use of research.

This strategic evaluation could yield information surrounding these issues.

VI. The Study

In order to deal with the diversity of interests and needs as well as the complexities of the research-policy linkages, this strategic evaluation is being conducted using a range of methods and through the integration of findings from a number of different elements. The approach is one in which exploratory case study research is combined with deductive theory building, continually adjusted to accommodate one another (Burns, 1981). It is a hypothesis generating approach rather than a hypothesis testing approach given the limited range of work that has been carried out in this field. This results in a number of different elements that will be combined over the course of the project in collaboration with the users. Collaboration with the users will therefore extend beyond the strict confines of each study to engage users in the synthesis and hypothesis generation across elements around both the implications to programs and to the corporation as a whole. In addition, it is anticipated that partners of the Centre may be brought into the discussions in various ways. Two key mechanisms will be put in place to support this involvement. First, a small advisory group will work with the Unit throughout the study and will advise on design, research and use issues. Second, consultations with regional offices and the establishment of regional activities with their support will ensure input from regionally-based staff. While the study is clearly focused on learning for the Centre, the implementation of research, and any subsequent policy influence, is carried out by our partners, not by the Centre itself. It would therefore be advantageous to integrate the perspectives and views of partners in this study. This will be achieved both through interview processes in the study, and through partner engagement in regional and Ottawa-based consultations on findings.

Eleven primary outputs of this study have been proposed to date. Other products may be added based on the preliminary findings. The products are broken into several categories below. Aside from these elements, it should be noted that the studies are being conducted as far as possible with the engagement of Centre staff, notably in the design and analysis stages, but where possible also in the data collection itself. As these products become available they will be posted to this site.

Background

Six studies are included:

1. **Literature Review.** This is a review of the main bodies of work that address the issue of research influence on policy. It is assisting us in the definition of key questions and, on an ongoing basis, will inform the questions used as well as the methodologies for data collection and analysis. The review is completed and is available at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation/litreview_e.html (S Neilson, December 2001)
2. **PCR Review.** Project Completion Reports are completed by Program Officers on IDRC projects with a Centre contribution of over \$100,000. These provide insights into the results and management of the projects. Recent PCRs are being combed for information related to policy influence identified by Program Officers. It will assist in the development of typologies of influence for IDRC work. This study is complete and a summary version is available from the Evaluation Unit. (K Edwards, August 2001)
3. **Program Review.** In order to develop a clear picture of the priority given to policy influence, a review is being conducted of the programming documents for all Program Initiatives, Secretariats and Special Projects to identify the nature of policy-related objectives in each case. This will be completed in September 2002.
4. **Evaluations Review.** The Evaluation Unit maintains an inventory of evaluations conducted throughout the Centre. A review of the evaluations submitted to the Unit between January 2001 and January 2002 was commissioned in order to identify evaluations that had intent to assess/examine policy influence, and the type of influence that was claimed to have occurred. This will assist in the development of typologies of influence for IDRC work. This study is complete and is available from the Evaluation Unit. (A Adamo, April 2002)
5. **Project Objectives Review.** The objectives of projects and research support projects approved during the period January 2000 – July 2001 are being reviewed to identify the prevalence of reference to policy influence in project objectives. These will be sorted by programming area (Information & Communication Technologies for Development, Social and Economic Equity, Environment and Natural Resource Management), by Program Initiative, and by degree of policy influence intended. This will be completed in September 2002.
6. **Framework Paper.** Evert Lindquist was engaged by the Centre to provide a backgrounder on frameworks for examining policy influence. This document, which complements the literature review, was based both on his knowledge of the field as well as a series of consultations with Centre staff. This document is complete and is available from the Evaluation Unit (E Lindquist, September 2001)

The Study itself will be comprised of a number of sub elements to capture information and ideas in response to the three main questions outlined above. As the project is the main unit of operation for the Centre, the project becomes central as a unit of study in this corporate evaluation. A case study approach will provide us with the opportunity

to review the work in a number of diverse projects. The details of each study will be developed in design documents as the studies are initiated.

7. **Policy Influence and IDRC: A history of intent**

Accepted wisdom at the Centre is that in the early days (70s and 80s), the Centre and its staff were primarily preoccupied with good research; responsibility for use of that research rested elsewhere. This study will explore and document the evolution of thinking on the relevance of policy influence in the Centre's evolution through a document review (*inter alia*, Board minutes, Annual reports), interviews with senior staff (both past and present) and the Corporate Secretaries. The focus on the management decision processes is intended to complement the focus on program officers and project leaders that will inform the case studies. Anticipated completion: September 2002.

8. **Regional Case Studies.**

A number of studies in the area of research influence on policy have been conducted. Many of the studies to date have focussed on an understanding of the stages of the policy process and critical points of influence, by focussing on significant examples, or cases which are quite well known and prominent. While this approach can inform the overall discussion, most of the work supported by IDRC results in much more modest and incremental change. Therefore, the identification of the model case may not be the most appropriate approach to building a better understanding of the nature of policy influence that obtains from Centre support.

A series of cases in each of the regions in which the Centre is working are being carried out. Criteria for selection included: range, uniqueness, comparability, type of influence, type of organization doing the research, type of organization being influenced, duration of IDRC involvement with the partners, intentional vs. unintentional influence, IDRC programming type (PI, Secretariat, Corporate Project). Consultants were identified in each region to carry out the case studies. Preliminary criteria for selection of consultants included: i) experience with qualitative methods; ii) capacity for social/gender analysis; iii) participatory learning approaches to evaluation; iv) experience in the policy domain; v) ability to work across sectors; vi) strong knowledge of region of work; and vii) availability. These studies are staged: two cases were conducted in Feb/March 2002 as field tests. A "Terms of Reference" Workshop was held in April 2002 with all the consultants (hired to date), members of the Evaluation Unit, Carol Weiss and IDRC staff to discuss the terms of reference for the cases, and to develop a common understanding of the TORs. An interview guide was developed by the evaluation team and was tested during the two field tests. These questions were also discussed in detail as a group by the consultants and IDRC staff during the "Terms of Reference" Workshop. Based on the field-testing and these discussions, the questions were further refined.

Beginning in May 2002, 11 case studies were initiated in Latin America, Southeast Asia, West Africa, Eastern & Southern Africa, and one global case.

In each region, a regional level analysis is proposed. This would include participation by the consultant, some of the project leaders (possibly from the studies involved, or other related projects in the region), regional Program Officers, Regional Directors, 1 or 2 “experts” from the region, at least one member of the evaluation team. Consideration will be given to involving regional staff from other regions and to the integration of cases from other regions into discussions (e.g., bringing the Eastern & Southern Africa Regional Office cases to the West & Central Africa Regional Office and vice versa).

Upon completion of the case studies, and the development of a regional analysis, the Unit may undertake a preliminary global analysis. On the basis of these documents, the consultants will be reconvened with the evaluation team for further analysis of the findings.

It is important that the cases present detailed stories of the policy influence process. This study will not create a checklist or single set of lessons on policy influence. It is argued here that these lists are much too broad to be useful in more than a very general sense to the future work of the Centre. Rather, the focus will be on the development of rich case studies that explore not only the IDRC work undertaken but also the changing context in which the work was carried out and the processes that were used. It is the interplay between the project and these other factors which provides a menu of experience which can be used both by Program Officers for planning future work and by the corporation at the strategic level in considering the relationships, strategies and types of research required to influence public policy. It may be that in some of the regional workshops or at workshops in Ottawa, Program Initiatives identify lessons for their teams, or checks they wish to apply to projects intended to influence policy.

This approach puts more responsibility on the user of the findings to delve into the products of the study and their analysis in some depth; it also puts more responsibility on the implementation team to ensure appropriate dissemination of the various products.

Time frame

- i. case initiation in one or two regions Feb/March 2002
- ii. meeting with all consultants with IDRC, April 2002
- iii. Carry out cases May-Sept, 2002: first group; Sept-Dec, 2002: second group (planning)
- iv. Write up individual cases July-Dec, 2002
- v. Regional analysis, Nov 2002 – March 2003
- vi. A regional analysis is planned; we anticipate that this analysis will be managed in the regional office with participation of: Program Officers, consultant, recipients, Evaluation Unit, and if applicable, regional

experts. A draft document will be prepared in advance which will be a reflection on the issues that emerge from the cases. It will not attempt to draw up checklists for policy influence; rather it will focus on deepening understanding of the conditions and factors in the cases under study; the focus will be on programmatic issues and learning

9. Countries in Transition

Most of the work that has been done on the influence of research on public policy makes assumptions about the nature of governance systems: that they are more or less democratic and open to influence from a range of sources. As indicated in the literature review this is seen as one key area into which the Centre could make a significant contribution: what do you do when you are working with systems which are less democratic or that are in transition from one governance regime to another. The Centre has a number of experiences of this kind and these will be explored to define a study at this level.

10. Corporate Synthesis/Global analysis

Being a discussion of the implications of these studies for the work of IDRC at the program and corporate levels. This will build on the cases and will be developed in several stages, first at the regional level, through a series of workshops engaging the consultant, a selection of POs and recipients, with at least one member of the evaluation team, and, potentially regional experts. At the corporate level, these syntheses will be further considered from the point of view of issues for consideration by IDRC in the future. This study will inform the goals of the Corporate Strategic Program Framework and will, through exploration of a range of experiences, permit a focus on the overall objective as outlined in the quote at the beginning of this document.

An exploration and analysis of the data focussed on corporate issues is planned. Based on the studies as well as the regional analyses, a document will be prepared by the evaluation team that will serve as the basis for a workshop for deepening the analysis. Workshops with IDRC managers, program staff and selected recipients are planned for Winter 2003.

The focus in this activity is in responding to the needs of the second user of the evaluation, Centre management. While the case studies will in themselves provide a valuable set of information at the project and program levels, they will not necessarily provide corporate level information unless we undertake a deliberate effort in that regard. This analysis and set of workshops is intended to create that focus.

11. Methodology Review

One of the issues raised in Centre consultations was a need to a guide on how to evaluate/assess policy influence (potential and actual) of research. This

will be addressed in a limited way in this study through a thorough review of the methodology used in the evaluation. This paper will build on initial methodological explorations, indicate sources and will be informed by consultations with experts in the field, and the literature.

- i. Identification of documentary process for use during the study
- ii. Documentation
- iii. Write up

Issues in Implementation

As noted above, a second stage of this study could revolve around issues in policy implementation. This aspect of the study will not be addressed before Winter 2003. Policy influence is quite distinct from issues in implementation; if and when policy influence does occur, it is less clear what happens after this point and how this influence of policy affects development outcomes. Once cases of policy influence have been identified and studied, a sub-set may emerge in which implementation could be a main focus. Products and processes are not yet clearly identified. The issue to be considered is how policy influence affects development outcomes in the implementation of policy modifications or changes, or the introduction of new policy.

VII. Linkages with related studies

A number of related studies are ongoing and contact has been made with some of these. Given the focus and priority on use of this study within the Centre and by its partners, no efforts have been made to develop this as a collaborative study. However, information exchange and sharing is a priority. Discussions are underway in that regard with the Department for International Development, UK (DfID, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/>), the Global Development Network (GDN, <http://www.gdnet.org/>), the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI, <http://www.odi.org.uk/>). Other exchange opportunities will be explored and used. We will explore the potential for presenting the work as results emerge in other fora.

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