

Executive Summary

Capacity Development for Research: Strategic Evaluation

Rebuilding Prestige in Research: *Organizational Case Study of Makerere University*

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Background

IDRC's Evaluation Unit (EU) is conducting a multi-phase strategic evaluation to investigate the Centre's contributions to the development of capacities of those with whom the Centre works. The evaluation aims to provide IDRC's own staff and managers with an intellectual framework and a useful common language to help harness the concept of capacity development and document the experiences and results the Centre has accumulated in this domain. Specifically, it focuses on the processes and results of IDRC support for the development of capacities of its southern partners: what capacities have been enhanced? Whose? How? How effectively?

Phase 4 of the strategic evaluation focuses on the elaboration of six organizational case studies intended to help the Centre better understand how it can best plan for, implement, and evaluate support for its partners' capacity development.

Research for Development Context

This case study reports on IDRC's collaboration, since 1996, with Makerere University (MU) in Kampala, Uganda.

Established as Makerere Technical School in 1922, Makerere University is the oldest institution of higher education in Uganda. During its history, the University has experienced multiple changes – from its 'golden age' in the late 1960s, through the political turmoil of the 1970s and 80s, to a phase of recovery and change beginning in the 1990s and continuing today. While still



*Makerere University
clock tower*

considered a public university, Makerere has, since 1992, developed into a 'hybrid' institution with public and private funding. Makerere is regarded as Uganda's most prestigious university and as the country's main centre for academic research, yet is

increasingly facing competition for students from newly established, often private universities in Uganda.

The environment for ‘research for development’ in Uganda is still young and emerging. Despite considerable rhetorical support for research, individuals and teams at Makerere face a difficult environment, with concrete obstacles including large classes and increased teaching/marking loads, poor salaries, lack of research funding, and a lack of required infrastructure. At the same time, they are facing an increasing pressure to conduct research and publish.

Still, a number of recent changes occurring at Makerere and in Uganda—including the government’s growing realization of the potential leadership role of academic research in solving development problems, and the University’s commitment to relevant and applied research—give reason to hope that the situation will improve.

For the analysis of institutional characteristics of Makerere as a university, the concept of ‘*loose coupling*’ can be helpful: it describes a situation in which system elements (e.g. parts of an organization) are responsive to each other, but at the same time retain evidence of separateness. At universities—including at Makerere—research tends to be among the loosely coupled functions of the organization.

However, for a university to have research capacity also implies a number of core (organizational) abilities. Certain key ‘enabling conditions’ must be in place in order to allow researchers to apply their

abilities (e.g. appropriate infrastructure, an institutional research mandate). These ‘enabling conditions’ are more likely to flow from ‘*tightly coupled*’ relationships within the institution—i.e., those where support and services trickle down (in a more linear and hierarchal fashion) from the institution to its component parts (e.g. researchers), and where organizational-level decisions have an immediate, direct impact on other levels. This distinction between ‘organizational functioning’ (flowing from ‘tightly coupled’ relationships), and ‘people abilities’ (flowing from ‘loosely coupled’ relationships) suggests different approaches to strengthening research capacity. An effective strategy for bolstering an institution’s ‘enabling conditions,’ may be quite different from an effective strategy to strengthen its ‘people abilities’. The case study suggests IDRC’s focus is almost exclusively on ‘people abilities’ and loosely-coupled relationships, and that this has been complementary to other donors’ emphasis on helping develop ‘enabling conditions.’

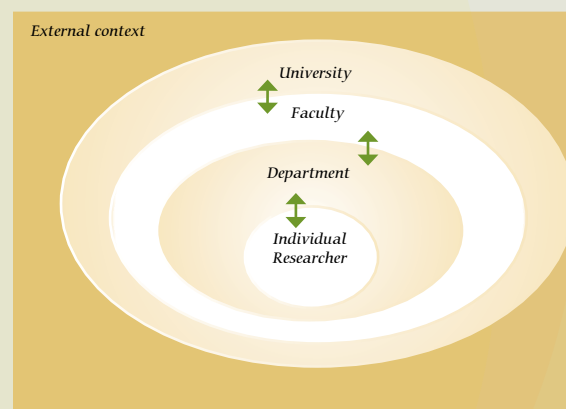


Figure 1. University as Tightly Coupled System

External context

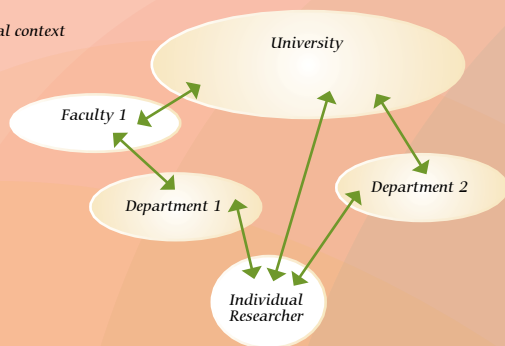


Figure 2. University as Loosely Coupled System

Expectations and capacity development strategies

The relationship between MU and IDRC has been and is constituted through a collage of different relationships between individual researchers or teams at Makerere and a variety of IDRC staff. Up until now, the collaboration between IDRC and Makerere has not been formalized in an explicit or implicit agreement between the two institutions that would state overall intentions of their relationships. This individualized relationship building is made possible and is fostered by the loosely coupled nature of Makerere's research function.

At their core, relationships between IDRC and researchers at Makerere are based on an (at least assumed) common interest in different development problems as addressed through one of IDRC's programs and a related funding initiative. The objectives and foci of the respective IDRC programs/initiatives tend to be broadly defined, thus allowing considerable space for developing locally relevant research projects.

For most researchers at Makerere the key intention for entering a relationship with IDRC in the first place is the possibility to access funding for research. The wish to engage in research was based on a variety of underlying reasons, ranging from the hope to contribute to knowledge generation relevant to solving development problems to simply enjoying undertaking research.

IDRC officers and researchers at Makerere also stated that enhancing research capacities of researchers and/or their teams was an important underlying intention of research projects. In many cases however, these intentions remained implicit and were neither captured in project documents nor made explicit in discussions between IDRC and individual researchers. This may limit not only IDRC's ability to share and/or showcase positive effects of its work, but also opportunities for IDRC and its partners to systematically build on achieved results, and to monitor and reflect upon research capacity changes over time.

As the relationship between IDRC and Makerere is constituted by a set of individual relationships, so is IDRC's capacity building work. The Centre does not 'do' capacity building of Makerere University, but of individual researchers and teams, 'one person/team at a time'.

Which specific capacity building interventions are adopted, therefore, is determined by the particular circumstances of the relationships between IDRC and individual researchers. IDRC activities are guided by the underlying principle

that it should provide whatever feasible assistance the respective partner may require to do better research. Most of the interviewed IDRC officers regard capacity building as IDRC's core way of operating and see the process of working with their partners at Makerere on research projects as *being* capacity building, not a *means* for capacity building.

There is no fixed procedure or set of activities that IDRC uses to support the capacity building of different partners. Instead, officers select the types of support they deem to be relevant and feasible in the respective situation. IDRC supports individual researchers not only as persons working on an individual project

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but as colleagues with the potential to contribute to knowledge generation and discussion on the respective research problem. Researchers are addressed and supported primarily in their capacity as contributors to *thematic* areas rather than in their role within the

university. In this, IDRC's approach differs from and complements that of most other donor organizations supporting research at Makerere. The specific added value that IDRC brings to its relationships with partners/researchers is its specialized expertise and advice which can lead to capacity development at all stages of project design and implementation.

For example, IDRC has engaged with its partners at Makerere by:

- assisting in the improvement of project concept papers and proposals;
- offering information, training and advice on methodology, and challenging researchers to explore alternate approaches to conducting research;
- supporting and encouraging the dissemination, sharing and publication of research findings;
- providing catalytic funding to build networks or working groups;
- providing researchers with information on international conferences and workshops, and in some cases funding their attendance;
- encouraging researchers to reflect on research findings, and to seek opportunities beyond the current project.

In all of these activities, IDRC played the roles of "enabler," "connector" and "thematic advisor" for its research partners. Three IDRC program areas have been involved in this work: Social and Economic Policy; Information and Communications Technology for Development; and Environmental and Natural Resource Management.

Major findings

Project technical reports and other documents provide only limited information on what research capacity building results have been achieved through the IDRC/ Makerere collaboration. Interviews with researchers, students, and IDRC staff provide richer data pointing to a variety of positive effects on the research capacities of individuals and teams. The report details positive changes that include new and expanded knowledge and insights into research problems and methodologies (including trans-disciplinary work and community involvement), increased exposure to and participation in professional networks, strengthened personal CVs and thus increased opportunities for promotion,

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and enhanced experiences in team and project management.

A considerable part of the capacity changes described by principal researchers has occurred as 'meta results' of the respective research projects, i.e. as effects resulting from the overall process of collaborating with IDRC on a project, and/or the mere fact that individuals had the opportunity to gain new experiences, contacts, and ideas by means of working on a research project.

To a very limited degree, IDRC-supported projects have also had positive effects at the level of individual university departments and thus beyond the level of individuals, e.g. by providing selected equipment relevant for research. None of these effects at the department level were part of the stated project objectives, nor have they been captured in project documents or otherwise been made explicit.

The considerable degree of 'silent' and un-captured capacity development results (at individual and larger organizational levels) suggests that IDRC may miss out on opportunities for tracking the successes of its research capacity building work, and for utilizing past achievements as the basis for planning and monitoring further capacity development work.

The case study report illustrates that IDRC's work with researchers at Makerere corresponds with the IDRC criteria for good practices contributing to capacity development. Some key elements characterizing IDRC's approach include:

- **Relationships** – One of the most helpful aspects of the Centre's support is the personal exchanges it creates between researchers and IDRC officers. These officers are knowledgeable and passionate about the respective area of research, and are connected within regional and international networks.

- **Flexibility** – IDRC officers understand that in most cases project plans have to be adjusted during implementation to meet the changing realities of the field. IDRC does not force a project to stick to plans that no longer make sense.
- **Persistence** – The relationship between IDRC officers and individual researchers does not automatically finish once a research project is over but continues over time.
- **Strategic Intelligence** – IDRC conducts extensive background research into the issues it addresses before inviting project proposals. Therefore, topic areas it suggests tend to be relevant to key development issues at regional and national levels.
- **Building on existing capacities** – IDRC tends to work with highly qualified individuals at Makerere who have proven capacities in carrying out research. The collaboration builds on the existing thematic and methodological knowledge, skills, and experience. Another important characteristic of IDRC's work is that the Centre insists on using and thus building on the University's existing administrative structures and processes for financial management and auditing.

- **Locally driven agenda** – IDRC officers are open to and respectful of the ideas of the researchers they support. They do not enforce a specific approach or methodology, but leave the 'how' of a project up to the respective research teams.

However, the report also identified several problematic areas, and challenged IDRC to re-examine its approach in relation to the following aspects of its support for researchers:

- **Capturing results:** The collage nature of the IDRC-Makerere relationship(s) limits the Centre's ability to capture the nature and results of its overall support to Makerere University in a comprehensive way. It makes it difficult for IDRC to gain a comprehensive overview of what its work with Makerere has entailed over time; what results/effects at individual, and organizational levels it has contributed to; and what opportunities for future support may have arisen from (currently 'hidden') cumulative effects, or from untapped opportunities for cross-fertilization among researchers and teams at the university. The fragmentation of IDRC's support has also contributed to a limited visibility of the Centre's support to Makerere beyond the individuals who have directly worked with IDRC.

- **Partner selection:** For IDRC, the fact of having limited research funds available and thus having to select among possible grant recipients raises a number of practical and ethical issues. Selecting individuals based on *personal knowledge* of them and their work increases the likelihood of having a good understanding of their interests and their engagement in the research questions addressed. It also invites criticism, as it tends to exclude those who may not have the luck to be personally known to IDRC. Selecting grant recipients based on *competitive processes* may be more appealing in this respect, but eliminates the benefits arising from establishing longer-term relationships. IDRC is currently using both approaches for identifying grant recipients. Rather than choosing between them, the key task for the Centre may be to effectively manage stakeholder expectations and communicate clearly, how and why it uses which approach.
- **Discussion and reflection on the concept of 'research capacity building':** Various stakeholders support the strengthening of research capacities at Makerere and/or in Uganda. While currently there is some exchange among different donor agencies, this is mostly limited to 'who is doing what' questions. There appears to be very little, if any, discussion and reflection about the underlying conceptualizations

of research capacity and research capacity building that guide different approaches. This can limit opportunities for creating and capturing complementary effects, and for identifying potential yet currently untapped synergies between different approaches taken by different donors.

Looking ahead

One key challenge for this case study was the realization that it had set out to explore something that did not formally exist – namely a defined institutional relationship between IDRC and Makerere University. That such a relationship existed and that it could be described in terms of a coherent 'story' was one of the implicit assumptions underlying the concept of 'organizational case study'. This also meant that stating the absence of such a relationship might run the risk of being automatically understood as describing a fault or weakness of IDRC's relationship with Makerere.

This case study however strongly suggests that this is not the case. While it points out some areas for improvement, the study builds a case for the view that IDRC's current approach to working with Makerere makes sense given the Centre's institutional strengths, structure and resources, as well as the specific context of the university it works with. At the same time, the Centre is comparatively less well positioned to engage in institutional development of the university on a large scale. Reflections about potential areas

for improvement of the IDRC/Makerere relationship focus on the question: How might the Centre be able to maximize the effects of its current (capacity building) work not only at the level of individual researchers and teams, but also at larger organizational levels? Suggestions include:

- Making currently implicit intentions and results of research capacity building more explicit;
- Supporting and encouraging regular exchange among individuals and teams at Makerere;
- Encouraging researchers to explore linkages with existing (research) priorities and agendas of Makerere and/or specific departments; and,
- Exploring opportunities for more in depth exchange with other donors supporting Makerere to investigate potentials for synergies arising from complementary approaches to building research capacity.

Methodology

Charles Lusthaus and Anette Wenderoth (Principal Investigators), and Miranda Cobb (Research Assistant), all from Universal Management Group, carried out the case study. IDRC approved a detailed methodology, developed by the study team.

The study included a sample of 22 IDRC supported projects at Makerere, all of which had commenced between 1996 and 2006. Main methods of data collection were document and file review, interviews, and site visits to Kampala and IDRC's Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa in Nairobi. Validity of data was ensured through data triangulation (using convergence of multiple data sources).

One limitation in the study process was that available project documents and files provided information on only a small part of the actual capacity development objectives and results of the IDRC/Makerere collaboration. The study therefore had to rely largely on information gathered in interviews. Another limitation was that five of the fifteen principal researchers involved in the reviewed projects were unavailable for consultations. A limitation for the study report was the absence of an implicitly or explicitly formalized institutional relationship between IDRC and Makerere. This made it difficult to compile and share a coherent and evolving 'story' of the IDRC/Makerere collaboration as had originally been intended.