

**Strategic Evaluation of IDRC's Contributions to Capacity-
Building
Design Document – Review of Centre Approaches and
Contributions to Capacity-Building
("Module 2" of the Strategic Evaluation)
IDRC Evaluation Unit¹
February 2005**

1. Introduction

- 1.1. IDRC's Evaluation Unit is conducting a strategic evaluation to investigate the Centre's contributions to the development of capacities of those with whom the Centre works. This strategic evaluation focuses on the processes and results of IDRC support for the development of capacities² of its southern partners – what capacities have been enhanced, whose, how, and how effectively.
- 1.2. As one component of the strategic evaluation, the Evaluation Unit will support an analysis of a sample of projects, to identify some of IDRC's contributions to the development of capacities of southern partners (as RSP 102838).

2. Purpose and objectives of this module

General objective: to examine Centre contributions to the development of capacities of southern partners, in selected cases – whose capacities and what capacities have been enhanced, through what approaches, and how effectively.

Specific objectives:

- 2.1. To identify some Centre approaches and contributions to building capacities, through analysis of a sample of projects and partners, including examination of the perspectives and experiences of Centre partners, using a systems/complexity approach;

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² The international development community tends to use the term "capacity development" rather than "capacity-building". The latter is often seen to mean that capacities are assumed to be absent, or that the process is one of moving from one level of capacity to the next, whereas "capacity development" acknowledges existing capacities, and the political dynamics of change. In this document, both terms are used somewhat interchangeably as "capacity-building" is the term most frequently used in Centre parlance.

- 2.2. To articulate and report on the extent to which, how and in what contexts IDRC support has facilitated capacity development, particularly in the CSPF 2000-2005 period;
- 2.3. To assist Centre senior managers, in monitoring and supporting indigenous capacity-building, as part of the Centre's Corporate Assessment Framework (CAF); and Centre staff and managers, in designing, supporting and monitoring projects and activities intended to develop capacities. This includes being better able to articulate and report on the extent to which and how IDRC interventions facilitate capacity development;
- 2.4. To help verify and inform the Centre's corporate knowledge about the scope, characteristics and effectiveness of its support to capacity-building;
- 2.5. To identify issues for possible further investigation and evaluation.

3. Questions to guide the analysis

- 3.1. What is the **scope and nature of IDRC's support** for capacity-building; and what **results** in terms of capacity-building can be observed in selected examples of IDRC-supported work, and **what contributed** to these results? How are these results manifested throughout the various systems that are relevant to IDRC's work in these cases?
- 3.2. More specifically, **whose capacities** and **what capacities** has IDRC **sought** to enhance, at what level(s), and **which have been enhanced**? At what degree of complexity are these capacities? Analytical categories for "whose" capacities and "what capacities" can be drawn from but not limited to those found during the background work for the strategic evaluation. Possible categories for the former identified to date include individuals, organizations (research, non-government, government, other), communities, groups (e.g. farmers), institutions, networks, and sector, "societal" or systems capacities. Possible categories for the latter will include capacities specified in the CAF and others identified through the background work.)³

³ Types of capacities **identified by the CAF** include capacities (i) to identify and conceptualise research problems, (ii) to design, implement and evaluate research projects, (iii) to establish priorities for action, (iv) technical, administrative, evaluative and management capacities (especially through training), (v) supporting processes for devolution, and participating in sustainability of program, (vi) building relationships and linkages with other organizations...to achieve own goals; (vii) to communicate and disseminate research results...to promote evidence-based change. Types of capacities **identified by Bernard** (2004a) in an analysis of 40 IDRC-supported projects echo these to some extent, although include abilities (including types of knowledge, skills and resources needed) to (i) use/apply research outcomes in policy and/or practice; and (ii) mobilize research-related policy and program at a systems level. Other possible

- 3.3. What **approaches** (time, resources, strategies, modalities, mechanisms, etc.) have been used?⁴ How **relevant, appropriate and effective** have these been? (or, what have been the results of these?)
- 3.4. What **other factors** affected results? (Types of other factors can include, but are not limited to: the policy environment within the Centre; the IDRC program objectives; other initiatives in place, including those of the organization, and other donors; other factors and incentives within or affecting the recipient organization and the project leader and research team; the wider research environment, sector, topic etc. in the setting/country/region; other systemic factors; etc.)
- 3.5. What are the **perspectives of southern partners** in terms of their needs and their experiences in the context of IDRC support? What **changes** have they observed or experienced, and what do these changes mean for them?

4. Conceptual/analytical framework and methodological design

- 4.1. In developing this activity, the Evaluation Unit considered a number of methodological approaches. One issue is coverage – how to balance obtaining findings from across the Centre’s activities on the Centre’s contributions to capacity development and the effectiveness of various approaches, with examining selected experiences in sufficient depth to provide meaningful information. Another was appropriateness of methodological approaches to the topic. A third were the human and financial resources available for the evaluation, as well as the timing of other evaluation work being supported by the Unit which involves contact and collection of data from Centre partners and staff. The conceptual and methodological design has been informed as well by a consideration of the literature, of other agencies’ work, and the background studies to this evaluation (see Design Document – Overview of Strategic Evaluation for a discussion of these).

types can be found in other corporate documentation, and are emerging through the background work.

⁴ Various categorizations of IDRC’s approaches include the following: training, “learning by doing”, networking, Canadian collaboration, strengthening and creating institutions, linking partners, collaboration, interactions between program staff and partners, etc. (IDRC 2003, Gillespie 2004, Bernard 2004a). Bernard (2004a, b) provides as one categorization (a) formal (e.g. graduate degrees); (b) nonformal (e.g. structured mentoring, facilitated study visits, seminars, workshops on project-specific issues); and (c) informal (unstructured mentoring, internet links, document distribution, program officer comments). Bernard indicates, though, that some mechanisms including institutional strengthening, small grants, networking, short-term training and study visits, and consultant/advisors fall within more than one of these categories.

4.2. Many authors (Lusthaus et al. 1999; Morgan 1998, 1999, 2003; ECDPM 2003; UNDP 1998; Boesen 2004), in writing about capacity development, have underlined the **systemic** and **complex** nature of capacity development. As a result, this analysis will be informed by the developing fields of systems approaches to evaluation, and evaluation in complexity. The module begins from the premise that capacity development is a *complex* phenomenon, and develops an evaluation approach accordingly.⁵ This seeks to do the following, for example:

- Identify the relevant systems in place, and changes within and among these (looking for the interconnections among systems)
- Map relationships and how these unfold;
- Incorporate different perspectives and points of view on the same phenomena;
- Look for dynamics rather than static “results”.

While the entry point to the module is projects, for the most part, the units of analysis will be those which are relevant to the particular case: individuals, organizations and/or parts thereof, communities, sectors, networks, etc., with an understanding of the complex systems in which these are embedded.

4.3. This evaluation will also draw on the concept of “theories of change” found in the evaluation literature, although it will not adhere to a “theories of change” evaluation model. “Theories of change” are articulations of the underlying assumptions about a program’s “logic” – why it has selected the particular activities and approaches that it has, and what processes of change are believed required to reach the desired ends (Weiss 2001; Pawson 2003; Gillespie 2004; etc.). Theories of change can be expressed as linear or systemic / complex relationships (Davies 2002). While the strategic evaluation will not attempt to assess the theories of change that are uncovered, an exploration of these theories can help shed light on why the Centre uses the approaches to capacity-building that it does, and how these compare to others’ theories; and help articulate the Centre’s role in overall capacity development.

4.4. The overall design of this module will be qualitative, using both deductive approaches (i.e., analyzing data according to a pre-established framework and categories) and inductive (i.e., allowing patterns, themes and categories to emerge in the data). Qualitative evaluation is important where cases are diverse and outcomes likely to be varied, processes and contexts are varied and need to be documented; quality of interventions or processes needs to be assessed; and the subject matter requires in-depth

⁵ See Design Document – Overview of Strategic Evaluation for a discussion of the systemic nature of capacity development. The evaluation approach proposed draws on a workshop on evaluation in complexity led by Michael Quinn Patton in conjunction with the CES-NCC Conference in November 2004, as well as other writing on systems and complexity theory and evaluation in complex systems.

examination (Patton 2003). To enhance rigour, sources and methods will be triangulated.

- 4.5. Identifying capacity “results” is a complex undertaking. If capacity development is defined in **learning outcome** terms, then results can be observed in terms of **changes in awareness, information, knowledge, understanding, confidence, attitudes, motivation, behaviours, policies and practices**; and **how these changes are enabling the learner(s) to better manage** themselves and their environment (Bernard 2004a, p. 27). Bernard (2004a, b) suggests questions that can be asked of participants in order to identify them. Bernard adds that an evaluation of capacity development needs to determine whether it is sufficient to identify *abilities* to do something (i.e. to have learned something new) or whether it is necessary to observe the actual *doing* of it (i.e. changed actions or behaviours); and whether statements of learning or observations of learning in action are necessary. The evaluation will seek evidence of the latter, while collecting information on both.
- 4.6. From a systems perspective, identifying enhanced capacities becomes even less amenable to a “snapshot” approach; dynamic processes are at play. Bernard and others write about organizational processes that could be observed. For example, collective or organizational learning entails creating shared sets of values, explanatory maps and agreed norms of practice, which often requires support to processes of understanding and “unlearning” established norms and patterns, and to group processes of formulating new ones (Bernard 2004b).
- 4.7. The notion of “capacity development” increasingly permeates the language and programming of many donor and development agencies. It is certainly part of the international development discourse; to what extent is it reflected in how southern organizations and individuals see themselves, their needs or aims, and their work? How does this affect the effectiveness of capacity development efforts? The strategic evaluation therefore seeks to understand the perspectives of selected partner organizations regarding their objectives, work, and the resulting changes they experience.
- 4.8. It is proposed that the analysis of partners’ perspectives build from the principles of “goal-free” evaluation design. As defined by Scriven (1972, cited in Patton 2002), “goal-free” evaluation seeks to identify actual effects of an intervention, including unintended effects, rather than focusing on the expectations of those who designed the intervention. According to Patton (2002), the intent of goal-free evaluation is to find out the extent to which participants’ needs were met, as opposed to a focus on the extent to which stated project or program goals are being achieved. This is facilitated through open-ended interviews, field observations (descriptions

of activities, actions and processes, conversations, interactions, etc.); and involves asking open questions such as “what if any changes did you see during your involvement with the IDRC-supported project?” “what made a difference for you?” etc. A methodological option would be externally-facilitated self-assessments.

- 4.9. The above considerations suggest the need for in-depth studies of a relatively small number of projects and partners, to investigate some of the issues and factors identified.

5. Sampling

- 5.1 The sample size depends on resources available as well as on methodological considerations. Based on these, the module will initially entail a review of approximately 50 projects, with subsequent, more in-depth examination of a smaller sample of projects and partners.
- 5.2 The sampling frame will initially be projects of all types approved since April 1 2000 to date, and all organizations supported by IDRC. (This could be extended to previous periods, including the 1996-2000 period, and prior, depending on the specific assessment questions and criteria for sample selection.)⁶
- 5.3 For the selection of the sample, a number of options for selecting projects have been considered, with identification of **purposeful sampling** as the most appropriate approach of those considered. Purposeful sampling will allow for information-rich cases to be selected, which will generate insights into key issues and into effectiveness of interventions, rather than generalization to a population (Patton 2002). Purposeful sampling would entail talking to staff, as well as considering projects identified through the background work, to determine which projects to examine, based on criteria identified.
- 5.4 Possible criteria for selection of the sample, which arise from discussions with IDRC managers and staff, include:
- The opportunity to analyse certain issues – e.g. the role and effects of IDRC support within the broader system(s); in particular **the relationship between individual and organizational support** and

⁶ The population of projects approved as of Sept. 30, 2004 is 1683 (= 562 Research Projects + 1083 RSPs + 37 Awards Projects + 1 Secretariat). This includes 860 completed projects (= 119 Research Projects, 736 RSPs, 5 Awards Projects). A longer time period would expand the number of projects in the population accordingly. The total number of Research Projects supported by the Centre since 1970 is approximately 7000, with support provided by these to approximately 3000 different institutions.

capacity development – where are IDRC’s emphases, what are the implications of these, what are the results, where does IDRC look for connections between the systems, where and how is IDRC making the links, with what effects;

- The opportunity to analyse certain **approaches (e.g. training, mentoring by IDRC staff and/or advisors, networking) and/or contexts** – in order to understand our approach(es) and how these contribute to building capacities, particularly in complex contexts;
- The opportunity to examine projects thought to be “**unsuccessful**” examples of capacity-building as well as those considered “**successful**” examples (looking at these over time and in context);
- The opportunity to analyse support to different types of organizations -- e.g. universities, NGOs, other; or organizations which have received sustained support, and organizations which are “new” to IDRC; or “high-“, “medium-“ and “low-risk” organizations.

5.5 Details of the methodology and specific criteria for sample selection will be identified in consultation with the consultants carrying out the evaluation, who will be selected in large part for their expertise in evaluation and in the field of capacity development.

6. Data sources

a. For projects:

- Files
- Key project documents (PAD including appraisal, reports, correspondence, evaluations, PCRs); and program prospectus
- In-depth interviews (face-to-face or telephone) with PO(s)
- In-depth interviews (face-to-face or telephone) with project leaders
- Travel as required

b. For partners’ perspectives:

- Files where applicable
- Selected reports/documents (proposal, technical reports, project outputs)
- In-depth (face-to-face) interviews with partners
- Field-based observations and interaction (requiring travel, or site-based consultants)

7. Implementation

7.1 This activity entails three planned components: up to two of data collection and analysis, and one of synthesis and dissemination of materials produced during the evaluation.

7.2 Of the two data collection and analysis components envisioned:

7.2.1 One will refine and conduct an analysis of a sample of projects;

7.2.2 One will examine selected partners' perspectives, and/or assist in developing a framework for monitoring capacity development.

8. Outputs and Dissemination

8.1 The outputs will include:

- A report on each component of the activity;
- Materials and processes for engagement with staff on the design and findings of the evaluation.

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