

A Contemplative Recess: IDRC's Annual Learning Forum (ALF)

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Working in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world in their search to build healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous societies, IDRC's mission is "empowerment through knowledge".

IDRC supports researchers, knowledge activists, and innovators around the globe in order to promote interaction and foster a spirit of cooperation and mutual learning within and among social groups, nations, and societies. To do this, IDRC must ensure its own staff is knowledgeable and innovative, continuously learning and improving.

An exciting new event was added to IDRC's calendar in 2005 -- the Annual Learning Forum (ALF). The ALF alternates each year between a one-day all-staff event and a series of smaller program-based team meetings. The program specific events are organized either face-to-face or virtually. The ALF occurs in both Ottawa headquarters and in the regional offices.

The ALF isn't just another meeting; it is an innovative, energizing, even festive workshop. It brings together program and corporate staff. It is a chance for colleagues to set aside their everyday routines and assumptions, and to spend time discussing and reflecting on how they can work more effectively and efficiently.

Path: Reflection

IDRC monitors carefully and evaluates its projects and its programs. It seeks to draw lessons from these efforts and to find new ways for the research that it supports to promote human development.

The ALF evolved out of a desire to make use of the rich data being gathered by one of IDRC's newest systems for assessing the projects it supports. This bold scheme – called the "rolling project completion report" (rPCR) – emphasizes that colleagues can learn from one another by holding a purposeful interview. A sequence of 3 oral interviews about a project retrieves factual information and generates new knowledge among the participants. (For more detail on rPCR, see the highlight 6 entitled "Deepening A Culture of Reflection: IDRC's Rolling Project Completion Report Process".)

The ALF uses material gathered from the rPCR process as well as other evaluation data. It adopts the same approach to learning: conversation and reflection are designed to draw out new knowledge. Its purpose is to share this knowledge between colleagues, between regions, and between program areas to improve the performance of the organization. It is the embodiment of IDRC's mission "empowerment through knowledge", demonstrating that what IDRC promotes with its partners, it also engages in.

The core activity of the all-staff forum is guided small-group discussions. The intellectual framework for these table-talks is set by readings, knowledgeable colleagues, and by expert presentations. Seeking to generate lateral thinking, the forum employs participatory group facilitation techniques and encourages a relaxed and engaging atmosphere. The program zeroes in on key topics that are of broad interest. A focused agenda helps ensure the discussions will be meaningful and productive. At the inaugural ALF, held in 2005, the topics were "The Public Policy Influence of Networks" and "Network Sustainability".

Unlike many meetings, the ALF is not a time for planning or decision-making. Instead it is an opportunity for colleagues to reflect as a community in order to generate, deepen, and share their learning.

Destination: Learning

Even though the forum is grounded in real data and in documented information, a core objective of the meeting is to elicit undocumented *tacit* knowledge. The assumption is that both the organization as a whole and its individual staff members have absorbed lessons of which they may not yet be aware. The function of the forum, in other words, is to find out what is already known but has yet to be shared.

This process of promising discovery occurs within individuals, when colleagues compare experiences, question one another, explore varying contexts, search for patterns, analyze differences, debate concepts, and so forth.

The knowledge exchanged need not take the form of abstract ideas or grand theories. On the contrary, practical nuggets – insights, ideas, tips, personal contacts, references to books and articles, anecdotes – are what make the forum so valuable for colleagues at IDRC. The central concern is: In the support of development research, what works, and what doesn't?

This learning process goes beyond merely reporting and sharing information. In addition to asking, "What have we accomplished?" the forum asks "Why?" and "How?" Colleagues analyze their experiences in order to make better informed, more nuanced, decisions later on. IDRC works in a global context where there are seldom easy answers, and the forum challenges staff to do better, to be innovative, to take risks – all in order to improve the Centre's performance.

Atmosphere: Electric

The forum makes it easier for staff to let their minds soar by replacing the everyday office environment with an atmosphere that is easygoing, even festive. The process encourages staff to dig deeply into a topic rather to graze it superficially.

Interactive ICTs are used to facilitate sharing, long-windedness is discouraged, and there are few formal presentations. In 2005, the meeting area was decorated, gourmet coffee was served, and the lunch hour featured world music and other trimmings designed to brighten the atmosphere.

The easy tone was also encouraged at the inaugural ALF by the Marketplace, a showcase of tools, resources, and wisdom regarding networks provided by support and service groups within the organization. The informal venue was a chance for colleagues to go “knowledge shopping” as well as to share ideas and discuss projects. As well, a community web log, or “blog”, accessible from stations at the forum, provided the opportunity for real-time evaluation of the meeting as it was still underway.

Follow-up: Toward an Inquisitive Culture

The detailed substance of the forum is documented and recorded, in print and in electronic media, for the immediate benefit of colleagues in the regions and for the longer-term purpose of continuing learning. Staff also has an opportunity to reflect on the ALF process itself and offer input on how to improve its relevance, learning, and sharing potential.

A broader goal, however, is to foster a deeper “culture of learning” within IDRC. The organization wants its staff to expand their thinking, to question their assumptions, to push themselves beyond the status quo – all in the service of finding better ways to do their work. It wants to instill an inquisitive and evaluative culture where imagination, rumination, creativity, and debate are hallmarks of the work environment.

The Annual Learning Forum (ALF) helps entrench the idea that a contemplative recess – one that includes a little light fun – is a routine item on IDRC’s corporate calendar.