

Strengthening leadership — lessons from research leaders of today and tomorrow

Purpose of this brief

This brief summarizes key lessons for research for development (R4D) funders. It is based on findings from an evaluation of the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) [contributions to building emerging research for development leaders](#). We outline how alumni from the Global South defined effective R4D leaders and how funders such as IDRC can best support them. We then explore how IDRC embeds these concepts in program design.

Who this is for

This is for anyone undertaking or supporting R4D by awarding grants, working with research partners, hiring service providers for capacity or leadership strengthening, or operating as a leader in these spaces.

About the evaluation

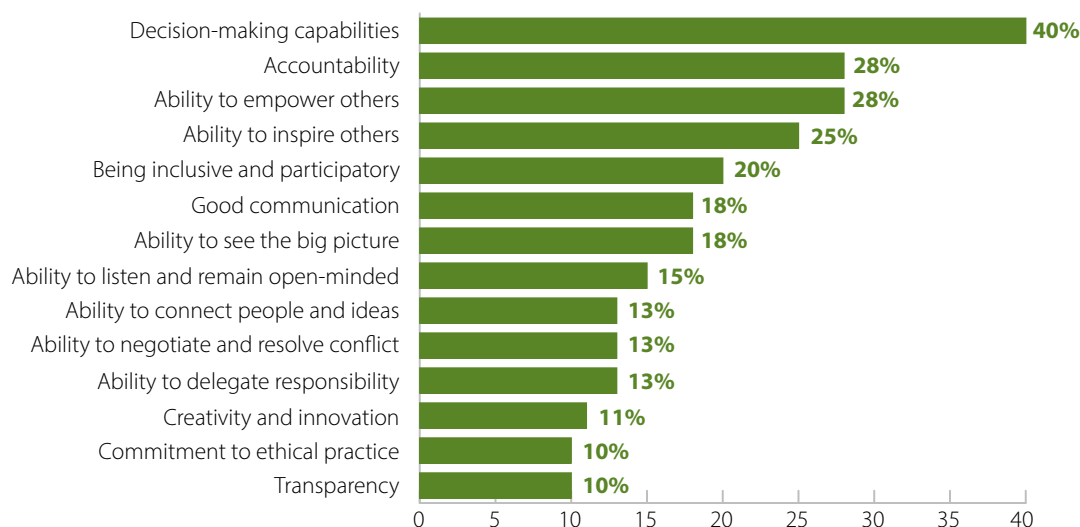
The evaluation assessed leadership strengthening in IDRC-funded award programs and research projects with the aim of understanding how best to support graduate students and early career researchers. The methodology included a survey of alumni of IDRC-supported experiences (responses from 934 individuals in 102 countries and 75 projects) as well as a qualitative review of example projects (from interviews and focus groups). As a result, the findings referenced in this brief represent the opinions of IDRC alumni, and as such highlight perspectives from the Global South

What is good R4D leadership?

Good leadership can be characterized in a wide range of ways, depending on culture, tradition and personal experience. In the evaluation of IDRC's [contributions to building emerging research for development leaders](#), alumni of IDRC-supported experiences in the Global South identified some of the key features they observe about good R4D leadership.

Those surveyed agreed that, first and foremost, a leader must have expertise in their field. They frequently selected decision-making capabilities (40 percent) and accountability (28 percent) as the top qualities that define effective R4D leadership. Interestingly, their definition of good leadership also **included less traditional characteristics**, such as the ability to empower others (28 percent), inspire others (25 percent) and be inclusive and participatory (20 percent).

Figure 1: Top qualities that define leaders



This is in line with findings from an IDRC background study called *Southern Perspectives on Leadership in Research for Development*,¹ which found that relationships and influence are important factors in characterizing leadership. Exploring those less traditional characteristics a bit further, here are three things that good R4D leaders do:

1. They take an inclusive, collaborative approach.

Evaluation participants emphasized the importance of using a collaborative, rather than individual, approach to leading teams, which involved sharing leadership responsibilities. Many highlighted the value of inclusive, collaborative leadership to effectively address complex, deeply rooted development issues. As the *Southern Perspectives on Leadership in Research for Development* study finds: “relationships and influence, not just individual skills and outputs, are essential dimensions of leadership.”

2. They build partnerships and networks that reach beyond the academic community.

Networks and personal connections are key enablers for strengthening leadership abilities. In the survey, almost 95 percent of alumni

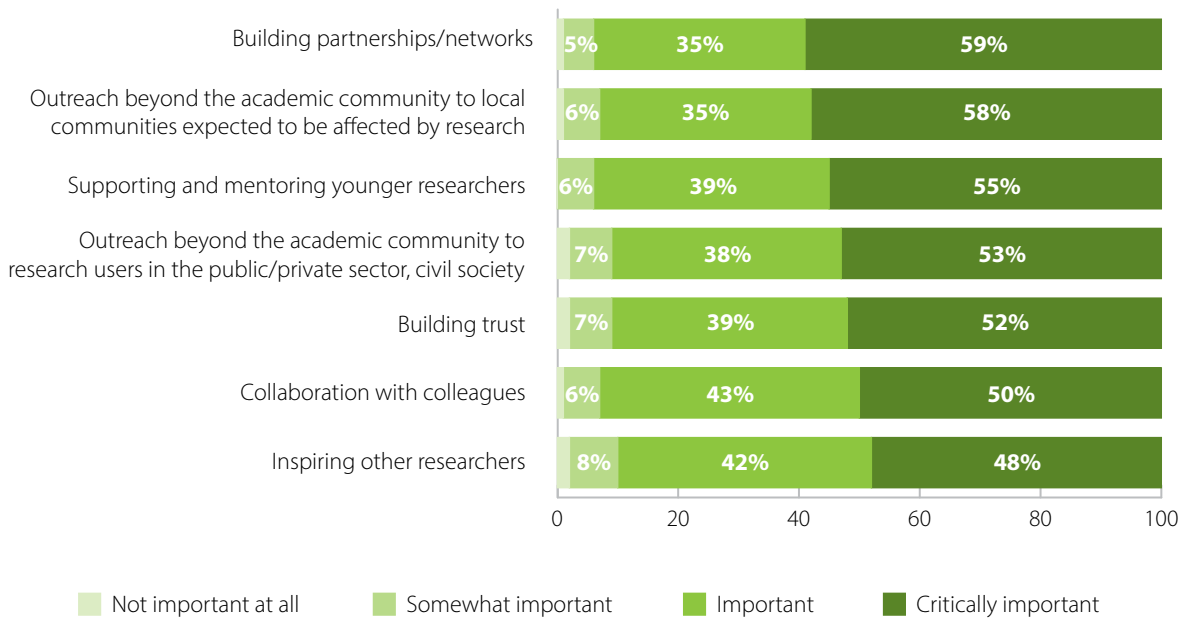
respondents said that building partnerships/networks is important or critical to leadership. Alumni in focus groups stressed that the connections they made during their IDRC-supported experience helped them in professional and personal growth. Respondents prioritized outreach beyond the academic community to local communities, with 58 percent saying this was critically important. The evaluation also showed the importance of engaging with research users during their IDRC-supported opportunity, which led to positive effects in research and leadership skills, as well as policy awareness.

3. They support and mentor young researchers.

Mentorship can foster a supportive network in the face of challenging issues, and respondents prioritized supporting and mentoring young researchers as a feature of good R4D leadership. Similarly, alumni shared that they felt deeply connected to those who mentored them during their IDRC-supported opportunity, and many remained in contact with peers and mentors beyond the duration of their program.

¹ Fieldhouse, Emma (2017). [Southern Perspectives on Research Leadership: Towards an Evaluation Framework](#).

Figure 2: Capacities for becoming an R4D leader



What can R4D funders do?

Given how alumni in the Global South understand the strengths of good R4D leaders, funders can take away four key lessons:

Lesson 1 — Offer tailored capacity strengthening that goes beyond technical training.

Supporting R4D goes beyond providing funding for projects, and it is often the training and professional development opportunities that researchers value most. Along with developing technical skills, emerging leaders can strengthen their capacity to build relationships and take a collaborative approach to leadership.

In the evaluation, capacity strengthening tended to address both scientific research capacity and a range of related professional capacities (e.g. communication, evaluation, on-the-job training) that complemented the objectives of the research project. While half of alumni respondents acquired technical skills that helped them hone their expertise, a quarter acquired soft skills that improved their leadership abilities. IDRC's respect, trust

and commitment to relationships with researchers facilitates a space for learning and project evolution. This encourages exploration and support for ideas that emerge from experiences in the field.

Lesson 2 — Support and strengthen networking and engagement opportunities.

Building individual skills is critical but, on its own, is not enough. According to the evaluation, alumni's professional development was most significantly supported by the networking opportunities they encountered and by an overall increase in awareness of the implications and relevance of their research for policy and practice. Respondents emphasized the importance of outreach beyond the academic community to local communities. It also emerged that opportunities to engage with research users during the IDRC-supported experience significantly increased the number of alumni acquiring technical and leadership skills, and contributed to higher skills acquisition in terms of strategic thinking, effective communication and motivating others. Opportunities to engage with research users also had a positive effect on research skills, as well as enhancing alumni's resumes and their ability to obtain work in their field.

Lesson 3 — Foster mentorship opportunities.

An important strategy for strengthening individual researchers' leadership skills is mentorship by more experienced researchers; the evaluation found that this can serve to build strong relationships. Sharing knowledge and mentoring is also viewed as a feature of good R4D leadership, and many alumni reported feeling deeply connected to, and inspired by, their own mentors from their IDRC-supported experience. Many stayed in touch with peers and mentors beyond the IDRC program, which resulted in the creation of a supportive network in the face of challenging issues.

Lesson 4 — Be explicit and intentional about gender equality and inclusion.

This is important with respect to who benefits from leadership-building opportunities as well as what leadership skills are strengthened. Capacity-strengthening efforts can help ensure that R4D leaders have the skills they need to address gender equality and inclusion in their own work. Consideration of who is supported, and how to engage underrepresented groups in leadership strengthening, is also part of fostering inclusive, collaborative relationships. This requires an understanding of who is traditionally participating in the field being supported, what groups are underrepresented and the challenges marginalized groups may face.

How can program design support R4D leadership?

What does strengthening leadership look like in practice?

The evaluation looks at various ways that funders can support good R4D leadership, with implications for both program and individual project design. These leadership-strengthening approaches can either be embedded in research projects and programs or focus more on standalone awards and fellowship opportunities:

- **Embedded projects** — Research projects that typically have research as a primary objective and also include a clear intention and associated activity or strategy to strengthen the capacities of emerging research leaders within or alongside the research activity.
- **Awards projects** — Individual awards projects whose primary or sole purpose is to offer fellowships, scholarships or training opportunities to individual graduate students and/or early career researchers, whether as part of a degree or as a separate program of capacity strengthening.

Funders can support R4D leadership, as identified from a Global South perspective, via practical opportunities, including individual awards programs or embedded approaches in research grants. Table 1 summarizes approaches that are commonly used by IDRC.

Taking it forward

Beyond providing funding, donors can play an important role in strengthening R4D leaders who reflect the leadership characteristics that researchers in the Global South value. To help facilitate an ongoing dialogue about what effective R4D leadership looks like, funders can integrate approaches aimed at both strengthening individual researchers and fostering collaboration and inclusion. Funders should review the approaches in Table 1 at the design stage, as well as throughout the project life cycle, to facilitate ongoing learning about how to foster and strengthen R4D leadership.

Table 1: Strategies for supporting emerging research leaders

Type of support	Description
Training and workshops	Providing tailored professional-development training that targets prioritized needs in research and complementary skills
Ongoing mentorship	Explicitly engaging experienced researcher(s) in a mentorship role to provide guidance and accompany early-career researchers and/or graduate students
Networking	Supporting participation in existing networks, encouraging connections with other actors through collaboration and providing support to attend conferences and events
Collaborative research	Providing opportunities to work collaboratively with colleagues from across different regions, disciplines, sectors and types of knowledge users
Curriculum development	Developing or enhancing curriculum for a graduate degree, program or course materials as a component of a research project
Small grants	Using all or part of a research project budget to offer small grants for early- to mid-career researchers so they can build experience leading teams in relatively small research projects, or for individual capacity building related to the research
Engaging emerging research leader(s) as a project (co-)lead	Engaging early- to mid-career researchers as a principal investigator or project co-lead with the intention of building their capacities through on-the-job experience
Support for publishing and knowledge sharing	Supporting the publication of research as part of an award, and encouraging researchers to engage potential research users with accessible and targeted knowledge
Exchange placements/residencies at international universities	Facilitating knowledge exchange through exchange placements

This brief was prepared by Shannon Sutton (independent consultant), with inputs from Amy Etherington and Hayley Price-Kelly (IDRC). The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of IDRC or its Board of Governors. The brief is based on findings of the following evaluation:

- Kallick, Judith; Nemeth, Nora; Martel, Mirka. (2019) IDRC's contributions to building emerging research for development leaders.

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