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International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Evaluation at IDRC

January 2017



Evaluation at IDRC

This document describes IDRC's approach to evaluation. It is used by staff to explain our priorities to our grantees, funding partners, the Canadian public and to those interested in evaluating research for development.

This document is divided into three sections. It starts with the purposes and principles that guide evaluation at IDRC. The second section describes IDRC's decentralized evaluation system. The third section sets out evaluation priorities for IDRC's current *Strategic Plan 2015-2020* period. Finally, there are annexes for our funding partners and grantees on what they can expect when working with IDRC on evaluation.¹ Throughout, we link to resources that provide further detail, including tools, approaches, and guidelines for evaluating research for development.

Section 1: Purposes and Principles of Evaluation

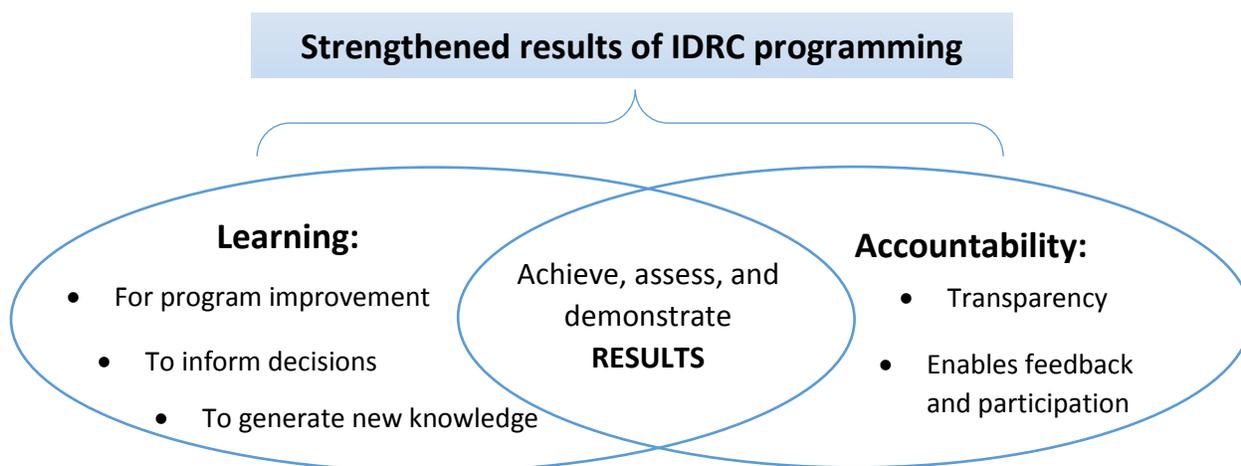
Purposes of evaluation at IDRC

Evaluation helps us realize our goals. It is a strategic intervention that supports and furthers IDRC's mission to fund research in developing countries to promote growth, reduce poverty, and drive large-scale positive change. IDRC conducts evaluations to strengthen the processes and results of the research we support, and to increase our understanding of the contribution of research to development.

Evaluation at IDRC contributes to both learning and accountability (see Figure 1):

1. *Learning*: Evaluation supports our organization to be results-oriented, reflective, and questioning; to articulate values; and to use evidence to test assumptions and make decisions. More broadly, evaluation generates knowledge about research and development.
2. *Accountability*: Transparent and publicly accessible evaluation demonstrates to the Canadian public and our funding partners how their investments contribute to positive change. IDRC's commitment to high-quality evaluation ensures the best available evidence is available for decision making. We works with our grantees toward common goals; evaluations are part of our commitment to document and assess our joint efforts. Evaluations provide opportunities for feedback about the quality and relevance of the Centre's work from diverse perspectives, including stakeholders in developing countries.

¹ This document specifically focuses on evaluation of IDRC programming and strategy. This is distinct from the evaluative research IDRC funds as part of its programming (e.g. impact evaluations of government policies).

Figure 1: Purposes of evaluation at IDRC

Guiding principles for evaluation at IDRC

The practice of evaluation at IDRC is guided by four principles: utility; quality; collaboration and shared benefit; and knowledge sharing and transparency.

Utility

The decision to evaluate should be strategic, not routine. IDRC is selective in determining when and what issues, projects, and programs are evaluated. The choice of what to evaluate is based on need (i.e., on the risk, learning-potential, priority, phase, and size of the investment). Each evaluation is designed to meet the needs of its [intended users](#), including IDRC management, funding partners, program staff, and/or grantees. Evaluations should produce actionable findings to help us test theories of change, learn from successes and failures, and improve strategy. Users' participation in evaluation processes helps ensure relevance and ownership of the evaluation findings.

Quality

Evaluation should meet high quality standards. Quality includes the utility of evaluation, the use of rigorous methods, and safeguarding ethical standards. Evaluation is not value-neutral, and specific attention needs to be paid to including diverse perspectives and addressing inequalities in the evaluation process.

IDRC has helped create [frameworks and tools](#) to improve the quality of our evaluations.

Collaboration and shared benefit

Evaluation should be designed to meet collective needs and be an asset for those being evaluated. IDRC will negotiate the purpose, design and governance of evaluation with

funding partners to avoid duplication, and to ensure utility for all parties.² Moreover, the Centre recognizes that evaluation can impose burdens on grantee organizations, so their participation should be of benefit to them. IDRC looks for opportunities to build in grantees' perspectives, information needs, and uses into evaluation designs.³

Knowledge sharing and transparency

Learning about the findings, practice, and theory of evaluation should be documented and shared. Knowledge sharing helps build evaluation capacity both within IDRC and among our grantees, and ensures evaluation remains relevant to the issues and priorities for development and development research.

Evaluations should be publicly accessible. Evaluations commissioned by IDRC staff and by our grantees as part of their IDRC grant are available through the Centre's public [digital library](#).⁴

Section 2: IDRC's evaluation system

IDRC has developed a strategic and decentralized system of evaluations at the organizational, program, and project levels.

Levels and types of evaluation at IDRC

At the **organizational level**:

- *Evaluations of strategic objectives* help IDRC gauge how well it is delivering on its Strategic Plan. This complements monitoring and internal assessment of progress against indicators for the Centre's strategic objectives.
- *Targeted impact evaluations* provide evidence of the contribution of IDRC-supported research to longer-term effects on peoples' lives or the environment. These evaluations are targeted in that they assess the impact of IDRC investment on a specific issue over a number of years and projects.

At the **program level**:

- *Program evaluations* are conducted for all or parts of program portfolios that are primarily IDRC-funded. These evaluations are typically summative and conducted by

² See Annex 1 for an overview of how IDRC approaches evaluation in funding partnerships.

³ See Annex 2 for an overview of how IDRC approaches evaluation with our grantees.

⁴ Public access is restricted when the evaluation is of unacceptable [quality](#) and/or the likelihood that the content of the report would cause harm, particularly to grantees or communities, outweighs the benefits of its disclosure. Critical findings are not a reason to restrict access to an evaluation.

external experts. They are designed for accountability, learning, and input into future programming directions.

- *Evaluation in partnerships* focuses on programming that is supported by multiple partners. As described in Annex 1, we design evaluations to meet the accountability and learning needs of each funder involved. Large partnerships generally have independent evaluations built into the program design. In most cases, IDRC manages these evaluations. If our partner manages the evaluation, IDRC expects to be consulted in evaluation planning.
- *Strategic learning studies* are tailored to IDRC program or grantee learning needs. They can focus on a cluster of projects, organization(s), issues, or program strategies. These evaluations may be formative or summative, and conducted internally or externally. Learning studies about cross-cutting issues can cover multiple programs.

At the **project level**:

- *Project evaluations* are normally commissioned by program officers or grantees. Not all projects are evaluated, and this decision is made strategically based on need (i.e., on the project risk, learning-potential, priority, phase, and/or size of the investment).
- *Project completion reports* are program officers' assessments of projects that capture results achieved and significant learning. They complement the technical reports provided by project grantees.

Roles and responsibilities

Within IDRC's decentralized evaluation system, responsibility for planning, commissioning, conducting, and using evaluation is shared.

- The *Board of Governors* holds IDRC accountable for all programs and partnerships they approve in Program Area Implementation Plans. The Board receives significant program and partnership evaluations, with corresponding management responses.
- *Senior management* promotes a culture of learning, creating incentives for evaluation and learning from success and failure. They allot resources for evaluation and incorporate evaluation findings into their decision-making. Management writes responses to program and partnership evaluations.
- *Program staff and grantees* engage in and support high-quality, use-oriented evaluations. When appropriate, they seek opportunities to build their evaluation capacities and develop or adapt evaluation methods relevant to their programming.
- *The Policy and Evaluation Division* supports IDRC staff and management in their evaluation roles by providing technical guidance and capacity building. It leads adjustments to the evaluation system and the development of innovative evaluation

approaches to keep pace with IDRC programming and priorities. The Division monitors [evaluation quality](#) across the Centre. It manages organizational-level evaluations, as well as program-level evaluations in cases where independence from program managers is deemed essential.

Evaluation planning

IDRC starts planning for evaluation during program design. This includes clearly defining expected results, strategies that will help achieve them, the timeframe in which they are expected, and the milestones that will demonstrate progress. Evaluation plans both use and feed into other program management functions like monitoring, reporting and research synthesis.

IDRC's senior management and Board of Governors keep track of evaluation plans to ensure the Centre has adequate evaluation processes to support accountability and learning. With respect to coverage and frequency of evaluations, IDRC practice is in keeping with the Canadian Treasury Board's [Policy on Results](#) that states that, in general, programming is independently evaluated once every five years.

Commissioning evaluation

Those who commission evaluations across IDRC's decentralized evaluation system are responsible for setting up and managing a high-quality evaluation process. While they generally rely on the expertise of evaluators to design methodology, commissioners set the overall parameters for an evaluation, including timeline, budget and overall approach. They define what is to be evaluated, who will be involved, the questions, and what evidence is most relevant. IDRC has supported the development an interactive "[Program Managers' Guide to Evaluation](#)" that IDRC staff and grantees can use for managing an evaluation that is conducted by external or internal evaluators. The guide is publically available.

The guide supports decision making throughout the process of an evaluation, from planning its purpose and scope, designing it, conducting it,

Figure 2:

STEPS IN THE COMMISSIONING PROCESS

1. Decide how decisions about the evaluation will be made
2. Scope the evaluation
3. Develop the Terms of Reference (ToR)
4. Engage the evaluation team
5. Manage development of the evaluation methodology
6. Manage development of the evaluation work plan including logistics
7. Manage implementation of the evaluation
8. Guide production of quality report(s)
9. Disseminate reports and support use of evaluation

reporting findings and supporting use of its findings (see Figure 2).

Conducting Evaluation

Evaluating research for development involves several unique features when compared to evaluating other international development interventions. It is also different from evaluating other kinds of research. In order to deal with these features, IDRC has helped create several [frameworks and tools](#) for assessing the outcomes of research for development, a few of which are highlighted below. We do not use any specific framework or tool in a systematic or routine way. These are often further adapted by IDRC programs and our grantees in their evaluation work.

Research for development has long, non-linear results chains. Typically, there are many intermediary links in a causal chain between conducting applied research and achieving development outcomes of improved well-being of a specific population and the environment. To evaluate the results of research for development programming, we must accept that change pathways are often non-linear, context is crucial, and complexity is the norm.

- Suggested resource: [Outcome Mapping](#) is an approach to planning, monitoring and evaluation that puts people at the centre of development, defines outcomes as changes in behavior, and helps measure contribution to complex change processes.

Research for development outcomes are different from development intervention outcomes. Research for development outcomes can include, for example, [increased capacity](#) of the individuals, organizations, and networks doing the research and using the resulting knowledge. Outcome evaluations might focus on the influence of research on technological development, innovation, or policy and practice changes.

- Suggested resource: [Knowledge to policy. Making the most of development research](#) shows how research can contribute to better governance in several ways: by encouraging open inquiry and debate, by empowering people with the knowledge to hold governments accountable, and by enlarging the array of policy options and solutions available to the policy process.

Evaluating research for development is different from evaluating academic research. Typically, academic research evaluation is done through deliberative means (such as peer review) and analytics (such as bibliometrics). IDRC has developed a holistic approach that acknowledges scientific merit as a necessary but insufficient condition for judging research quality, and the role of multiple stakeholders and potential users in determining the effectiveness of research (in terms of its relevance, use and impact).

- Suggested resource: [Research Quality Plus \(or RQ+\) Assessment Framework](#) includes scientific rigor as well as research legitimacy, importance, and positioning for use as

dimensions of research quality. It also takes into consideration key influences (enabling or constraining factors) either within the research endeavor or in the external environment, and includes customizable assessment rubrics that make use of both qualitative and quantitative measures.

Using evaluation

There are several ways IDRC uses the process and findings of evaluation. Evaluation processes can, for instance, help clarify results and theories of change, strengthen synergies across a portfolio, and reinforce cultures of evidence-based decision-making. Evaluation findings are used to make summative judgments, support formative improvements, support accountability, generate knowledge, or adapt a model to emergent conditions. Our use-oriented approach to evaluation means we start by clarifying the [intended uses](#) of an evaluation for each user. Being specific and transparent about what is expected of an evaluation allows for more explicit and focused planning, more effective process, and more appropriate approaches. It also ensures that evaluation users are prepared to take up findings.

Examples of intended uses:

- *Learning and improvement:* formative evaluations often focus on course-correction and tend to be more open-ended, gathering data about strengths and weaknesses to inform the program.
- *Capturing ongoing insights:* developmental evaluations provide right time feedback to guide adaptation of the program in emergent and complex environments.
- *Informing future programs:* summative evaluations are usually conducted towards the end of a program to judge the overall effectiveness or worth, and to draw lessons for other ongoing and next generation programming.
- *Transparency and stewardship:* IDRC uses evaluation to publically communicate our progress and achievement – which includes success and failure.

Section 3: Evaluation priorities for 2015–2020

IDRC has committed to evaluating the implementation of its [Strategic Plan 2015-2020](#), which emphasizes “the Centre’s success ... will rely on IDRC’s continued ability to learn and adapt.” This section outlines three priorities to continue to improve IDRC’s evaluation practice.

Priority 1: Support more effective learning through the use of monitoring data, internal assessment, and targeted evaluation

- Strengthen results-oriented planning
- Improve monitoring systems for better aggregation and synthesis
- Engage in annual learning events, using monitoring data to support self-assessment that feeds strategic decision-making
- Conduct or commission evaluations that target specific program learning needs

Priority 2: Continue to develop an even more flexible approach to program evaluation, maintaining quality and coverage

- Engage in high-quality evaluations to support funding partnerships
- Develop comprehensive program evaluation plans with attention to appropriate coverage and frequency
- Prepare Annual Evaluation Plans to help senior management and the Board of Governors ensure that the Centre has adequate evaluation processes to support accountability and learning

Priority 3: Support the implementation of the Strategic Plan 2015-2020 with evaluations of the strategic objectives

- Deliver strategic performance reporting to Board of Governors
- Conduct evaluations of core themes in IDRC's *Strategic Plan 2015-2020* that build common understanding across the Centre and with our grantees, assess collective results, provide input for future directions, and share the Centre's knowledge

ANNEX 1: Evaluation in Funding Partnerships

IDRC supports several programs with other funders. Conducting evaluation in various types of partnerships requires flexibility and transparency.

We recognize each organization has a different culture and expectations when it comes to evaluation. As IDRC develops new funding partnerships, we set out clear and detailed plans for managing the program or project's evaluation. In order to develop these plans, we get to know our partners' approaches to evaluation. We seek to understand what they expect from evaluation, how our partner uses evaluation results, and if they have requirements around evaluation questions, scope or methodology.

There are several practises IDRC brings to evaluation in funding partnerships.

We build in results-oriented thinking from the outset. Preliminary results frameworks are developed at the beginning of a funding partnership along with an agreement on an appropriate level of flexibility to evolve over time. It is typical for a more concrete understanding of intended results to emerge in the early months after project grants are approved. With this increased understanding, the Centre refines results and develops a more detailed monitoring and evaluation framework in consultation with our funding partners.

We earmark resources for evaluation.

We design evaluations to meet the accountability and learning needs of each partner involved. We coordinate in order to avoid duplicative evaluations. Evidence from evaluations helps us revisit theories of change, test assumptions, and improve implementation strategies.

We clarify roles and timelines. We use established program governance mechanisms to approve evaluation plans, and we agree on roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authorities. Where necessary, we establish separate decision-making or advisory groups to involve in evaluations. These can include members of our partners' evaluation divisions. We jointly develop terms of reference that document our agreements and guide the implementation of the evaluation. Timelines consider funding partners' reporting requirements and decision-making processes.

ANNEX 2: Implications for Grantees

This annex draws out implications of Evaluation at IDRC for our grantees. Grantees may be involved in evaluations that IDRC commissions, and grantees may commission evaluations themselves using IDRC funds.

When IDRC commissions evaluations of programs, partnerships or strategic objectives, grantees may be asked to provide input during design or in data gathering. IDRC-commissioned evaluations are made public, so grantees will have access to the findings of those evaluations.

As part of IDRC's utilization-focused approach to evaluation, the decision to evaluate projects is strategic, not routine. While all projects are expected to define and monitor their results, not all individual projects are formally externally evaluated. If either IDRC or the grantee decides it is useful to evaluate a project, they can build it into their plans and [budgets](#). Project-level evaluations may be commissioned by IDRC alone, jointly with grantees, or by grantees alone.

When grantees commission evaluations, they discuss the scope of the evaluation with their program officer. When grantees are the primary user of the evaluation, studies may focus on a project, or go beyond, to a broader organizational strategy or performance area. IDRC expects these evaluations to meet high quality and ethical standards. As part of IDRC's commitment to share learning, the grantee-commissioned evaluations that IDRC funds are made public, subject to our normal considerations for transparency.

IDRC programs sometimes provide additional support to grantees for monitoring and evaluation as a way to strengthen a focus on results, adaptive management, and organizational development. IDRC programs have also invited grantees to work with them to improve evaluation tools and approaches for new sectors or results of research for development.