PI External Reviews: Summary of Report Acacia II

Report to IDRC Board of Governors
October 2005
By: Dr. Simon Batchelor, Consultant, Gamos, Great Britain; Dr. Nancy Hafkin, Consultant, Knowledge Working, United States; Dr. Annie Chéneau-Loquay, Directrice de recherche, CNRS l`Institut d`études politiques de Bordeaux, France.

PI Aims

1 Acacia II has been working towards a vision for Africa where, "Africa is actively contributing to and benefiting from the global knowledge economy, and ICTs appear on the policy agenda of all African countries as a means to raise and improve living standards for all (including rural as well as urban dwellers, women, men, children, youth and the disabled populations)."

2 The specific objectives of the PI include the following:

2.1 To enhance understanding and knowledge of the innovative, transformative or dysfunctional effects of ICTs in poverty reduction and human development in Africa.

2.2 To improve African countries' capacities to formulate and implement national ICT policies that promote equitable access to ICTs and information for socioeconomic development.

2.3 To contribute to research in appropriate ICTs that support development and adoption of affordable and functionally relevant technical solutions for Africa.

2.4 To support research that increases African content on ICTs through software development for effective application of ICTs for development.

2.5 To learn from Acacia's community-based research and experimentation and to widely disseminate this knowledge.

3 Acacia II has worked towards this vision by undertaking action research in communities and circumstances of poverty in Africa and supporting applied research that fosters pro-poor ICT based policies and functionally relevant technical solutions within the African context.

Review Methodology

4 For this External Review of the Program Initiative (PI) Acacia II, field visits were made to a purposive sample of nine research projects (four in West Africa, three in East Africa and two in South Africa), PADs and other documentation supplied by IDRC were reviewed, and a broader sample of the outputs from the program were

considered. In addition to interviews with staff and direct stakeholders the team also sought the opinion of a number of ICT4D decision makers.

Review Findings

5 The review found that progress had been made towards achieving the objectives. The overall trend is seen to be very healthy, very much 22005 Program External Reviews Acacia II Summary
fulfilling the Acacia II prospectus, and putting IDRC in a good position for creating a prospectus for Acacia III.

6 The action and applied research of Acacia II has enhanced understanding of the complex and constantly changing dynamic interaction between ICTs and poverty reduction. By improving the capacity of individuals and institutions, and by undertaking applied research, Acacia II has improved Africa's ability to formulate and implement ICT policies and thereby to support the adoption of affordable and functionally relevant technical solutions. Regarding content development, the strategy adopted was to support software development that enables content development. Regarding dissemination of knowledge Acacia II has made many
significant contributions.

7 The Acacia II prospectus included the majority of recommendations of the external review of Acacia I. Perhaps the most notable strategy of Acacia II has been to concentrate more on the research mode and to wind down previous commitments (NAAC, SchoolNet and telecentres) in a sustainable way. Acacia II has moved away from Acacia I's concentration on NGOs as project implementers to engaging African social scientists and restoring the emphasis on research and linkage between research and national government policy.

8 Key to the Acacia II prospectus was a change in implementing strategy from one-off action research projects to encouraging networks of researchers that could undertake both action and applied research around a theme or node of interest. In particular the networks tend to have good connections to policy and decision makers, thus enabling windows of opportunity to be used for policy influence.

9 The review found that the first year or so of Acacia II should be considered a transition phase as projects funded during this time tended to continue to be one-off action research projects (often planned or discussed during Acacia I). After consolidation in the middle of the four-year program, it is clear that projects funded in the latter years strongly reflect the planned strategy of networks and applied research. These latter projects contribute more strongly to the Prospectus objectives.

Outputs `

10 A review of the outputs across the whole of Acacia II shows clearly the effort that has been put in to consolidate the learning from Acacia I and disseminate it appropriately. Regarding outputs type and quality we can say there is a reasonable range of outputs in both type and quality. A number of key publications have been produced. 32005 Program External Reviews Acacia II Summary

11 The quality of the outputs from the Acacia II Acacia Series Publications project is particularly high. Of special note is a good and useful review of the literature onICTs and poverty reduction by Catherine Nyaki because of its thorough coverage of what has become the key issue in ICT4D.

12 We note the widespread dissemination of some key Acacia products such as the Acacia maps – in particular the 'Out of Africa' map which did much to spread awareness of the ICT4D

challenges facing the continent- distributed widely, in a timely fashion that was much appreciated by many.

13 The Review notes that in some cases there has been a long time lag between project completion and output dissemination. The review encourages the Acacia team to find ways to shorten the cycle. In particular it notes the need for a project "interim" report and for a review of the links made to project outputs on the website – both of which are under consideration and the review team is merely drawing attention to the importance of these actions.

14 We note that neither these projects nor others in Acacia II have generated any articles in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Publishing in journals is important to the career development of African researchers, and may be important for the long-term credibility of Acacia research. However, we note that scientific journal papers are not necessarily influential on policy makers, and while they have a role to play, a wide range of outputs is required to fulfill the Acacia objectives. (see paragraphs 18-23)

Outcomes and Reach

15 A review of the outcomes and reach of the program again draws on the difference between projects funded early in the life of Acacia II and those being funded now. The latter projects are clearly network-based and have a much wider reach in terms of policy and decision-making (and geography).

16 Acacia II has worked with a wide variety of stakeholders. It has engaged with academic institutions and individuals that have been key to much of its research. But it has also suitably engaged with government, civil society, private enterprise and the public.

17 Acacia I was undertaken in four countries. Acacia II has implemented a more regional strategy. By involving researchers from approximately 14 countries in networks of mutual interest, the program is able to have a good reach throughout Africa. The regional approach is very good and should be taken through to Acacia III, as should the emphasis on networks of people and researchers. 42005 Program External Reviews Acacia II Summary

Policy Influence

18 As an example of the positive policy influence of Acacia II, RIA! has already been quoted in OECD documents as an example of African research for African policy making. According to the OECD DAC Journal:- "For instance, the report "Fair Access to Internet Report" (Gillwald et al., 2004), has tentatively revealed two aspects of policy environment that seem to be very important lessons for decision makers. In a comparison of policy environment and access to ICTs, it noted that the lack of a policy environment in Algeria has led to the development of relatively small scale private sector initiatives that have lowered the cost of access to ICTs - and that the forthcoming tightening of the policy environment may well reduce access. It also identified that Uganda, which has had a seemingly positive enabling environment for ICTs (compared to many of its neighbours), had not resulted in significantly better access and lower costs. The lesson here is not that the policy environment has not had its intended impact, since the research is only tentative and needs confirmation. Rather, the lesson to be learned is from the response of the regulator - when the results of the paper were seen, the regulator immediately asked the question of experts about what more could be done to improve the enabling environment, heard the answers and took action within months of the study being published.

19 It is very clear that Acacia and IDRC have been invaluable in several countries in the development of one of the most liberal and forward thinking policy environments for ICT4D in Africa. While it appears that Uganda is the most successful of Acacia's policy work, there is evidence of substantial success as well in Mozambique, Senegal, and Kenya.

20 In Uganda, the involvement of Acacia I and II has been of tremendous importance to Ugandan policy makers. This was clearly voiced in stakeholder interviews, in project documents and by external observers. These included:
"Prior to IDRC-commissioned research MTN had a service fee of 18,000 USh/-. Research showed how unaffordable this was. It went soon to 10,000/-; and now it is free."
"IDRC did the groundwork that led to the establishment of ICT policies in Uganda. They helped in identifying gaps in infrastructure: Acacia studies pointed out the need for the establishment of basic information infrastructure as a necessary prerequisite to any further development. IDRC/ Acacia field experiences were very useful in identifying government policy paths, stakeholder needs, constraints. IDRC provided the research needed to move forward. IDRC contributed directly to the national ICT policy Task Force." 52005 Program External Reviews Acacia II Summary

21 Acacia's efforts at building ICT awareness also stimulated private sector ICT development by building capacities that led a number of ICT pioneers to undertake entrepreneurial ventures. Acacia also shaped individuals who became ICT champions and moved their country's ICT agenda forward. They helped bring a huge growth in the Uganda community exposed to ICT4D, World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and other information society issues. The influence of Acacia has not been limited to ICT policy alone. Through the Curriculum Net project Acacia contributed heavily to the development of ICT policy for education

22 It is difficult to separate the policy achievements in Uganda by Acacia phases, because they have been a continuous effort and have spanned both. Acacia has been working on ICT policy in that country since 1999, in all aspects of its development The Cabinet of Ministers adopted the country's ICT policy in 2003.

23 Using a participatory approach, Acacia Senegal has come to exercise substantial influence, both directly and indirectly, on public policy. The Acacia projects have had an influence on the development of a new vision and approach to ICT policy in the countries where it operates, notably in an integrated and organized vision. The establishment of a telecommunications regulatory agency (ART) in Senegal is one illustration of this. Acacia also stimulated ART to work towards social equity in the democratization of access to ICTs. As well as this direct influence, secondary or indirect influence on policy in Senegal includes:
   • Reinforcing the capacities of policy decision makers and other actors influencing policy directly or indirectly at the local or national level.
   • Providing a viable information base, based on real experiences in the use of ICTs, to create the conditions for partnerships.
   • Encouraging a climate of exchange and learning opportunities.

Capacity Building and Gender Mainstreaming

24 It is noteworthy that Acacia II has an emphasis on adding value to projects by sustained mentoring of Africans, thereby developing capacity. This long-term input to people has yielded good returns as many of those mentored are now in positions of authority and are

taking pro-poor decisions (e.g., V. Massingue in Mozambique and F. Tusubira in Uganda among many others)

25 The review team conducted a gender analysis of Acacia II projects. It found that the two new gender-specific projects (Regentic and Grace.Net) in Phase II were exciting and innovative and with the potential of being 62005 Program External Reviews Acacia II Summary

gender transformative, but that Phase II was doing less well than Phase I in considering gender issues in all projects. The review calls for gender to be given a higher active priority in the next prospectus.

26 Among the strengths of the program were:
- Its flexible approach and the fact that it can adapt to changing conditions without losing sight of the prospectus objectives.
- Proposal development by dialogue with the partner.
- The high quality of the team members.
- The team's presence on the ground in Africa.
- The team's collegiate working style

27 It seems that the way of working in South Africa, i.e. the project officer being housed within the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA), is a viable way of working.

28 The review team notes that of all the international agencies IDRC is one of the most respected. While international agencies should be collaborative rather than competitive, the reality of the development world is that agencies can sometimes neglect to communicate and collaborate. Acacia in particular, and IDRC in general, are considered by most agency personnel interviewed as collaborators rather than competitors.

Issues for Consideration

29 There may be a need for an improved information system Acacia appears to lack a comprehensive and functional project information management system. Timely, complete and accessible project information should be a regular and basic core function of any program, let alone one that is dedicated to information for development and whose historical origins are in the premier IDRC Information Sciences program. At the minimum, a database is needed with a definitive list of projects, their status, outputs, available progress reports and PCRs. We note that the information management problems discussed above are not unique to Acacia, but rather relate to ICT4D as a whole and perhaps all of IDRC as well.

30 There seems to be a need for some form of interim report that can be used to both redirect projects (where necessary) and derive lessons learned, it does not explicitly confirm that a reflective report will be undertaken before project closure. We suggest that a "mid term" report would be useful.
Such an approach would also be an appropriate check to project extensions. There has a been a slight tendency for Acacia to grant 72005 Program External Reviews Acacia II Summary
extension to projects without a suitable analysis of whether the project is on track and is likely to achieve what it is intended to achieve.

31 Mechanisms that can speed up the publication of research are needed. Reporting research results and learning is a slow process, but one could hope for a more rapid dissemination of learning from Acacia II projects. In addition to greater rapidity, a dissemination strategy that would produce a more systematic process of dissemination of results would

be more desirable than the current system that seems to be heavily event-focused- e.g. concentrating on events such as the Johannesburg conference and WSIS I and II.

32 We recommend mirroring all outputs on the IDRC website for ease of access to global researchers.

33 Interviews suggest that language is a slight constraint within the PI. Officers have felt in the past that proposals written in French are scrutinized less than those written in English, and that there is less team discussion of them. There is also an awareness that exchange between West African programs and others could be enhanced. We note that the team leader is aware of this language issue and is taking steps to address the concerns – some of the team are improving their French, and some are improving their English

34 The challenge of gender should be revisited and revitalised.

35 Acacia should consider how it can more effectively learn from other PIs. There seemed to be relatively little learning across the continents (i.e. by Acacia from other ICT4D program Initiatives). A clear exception to this was the input of Onno Purbo from Indonesia who has inspired many people within Acacia II, and in particular can be thought of as a key stimulation for the First Mile First Inch (FMFI) project. Such South-South exchanges are valuable, and could become an increasing resource strategy for Acacia III.

36 Perhaps a wider choice of technologies, with more attention to community radio and mixed technologies, would have been more appropriate and workable. From these technologies, one could advance to others. It is noted that the whole ICT4D program area made a conscious choice not to work on issues related to community radio and to focus on interactive or 'new' ICTs.

37 The initiative may have concentrated too heavily on Internet. Africa has experienced a dramatic uptake of mobile telephony during the lifetime of Acacia II, which caught most observers by surprise. While Acacia II has responded to this, it could have perhaps responded more strongly.