

In Conversation: Rohinton Medhora

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Director of the Social and Economic Equity program area is the latest in a series of positions that Rohinton Medhora has held during in his eight-and-a-half years with IDRC. Prior to this posting, he was Senior Program Specialist for Economics, and Team Leader of the Trade, Employment, and Competitiveness program initiative. A former economics faculty member at the University of Toronto, Dr Medhora has worked on a wide range of topics including economic integration, monetary union, financial liberalization, central and commercial banking, trade, exchange rates, privatization, and structural adjustment. His research has covered countries from Latin America to West Africa. Dr Medhora's other experience includes work for the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank's Economic Development Institute.

What does IDRC mean by social and economic equity?

Social and economic equity or SEE comprises the range of programming which focuses on the social sciences and, I would say, the supra local level by which I mean sectoral, national, regional, and international policies. That is one way to look at it. Another way is to say that social and economic equity is about institutional approaches to development. Not the bricks and mortar kinds of institutions, but the institutions that comprise society, how they interact, and how they make society a better or worse place to live in over time.

Why is it a focus of IDRC programming?

IDRC has always had a very strong social science component. The continued emphasis is probably a reflection of the fact that national and international policies really do matter. Much of the research IDRC supports is aimed at linking the household level, or community levels, with policies made at the "macro" level. What is required for this strategy to succeed is the existence of capacity to undertake policy relevant research, and the right political climate to use this research in generating appropriate debates and, ultimately, sound policies.

Can you give an example?

Sure. Take the Latin American Trade Network (LATN), a project funded by our Trade, Employment, and Competitiveness program initiative. The network was created to give a voice to Latin American perspectives on trade issues. While people talk about a Latin American trade perspective, too often it has been Latin American specialists writing in Washington, for instance. The trade network is bringing forth many more local perspectives on a variety of trade issues. For example, there is a tradition in many developing countries of subsidizing certain industries. They do this to create an "upmarket sector," to create good jobs, to generate incomes and employment, and so forth. Given the expansion of global trade agreements through the Uruguay Round and now

through the World Trade Organization (WTO) process, this traditional development-oriented perspective then has to fit within a subsidy regime that is internationally compatible and jives with the trade agreements that developing countries have signed. LATN researchers have examined the whole issue of subsidization and the WTO, and have produced a couple of papers that address this issue.

Where does gender fit into your program area?

Gender is a theme that cuts across all of IDRC's programming. It has been fairly intensively mainstreamed in SEE. In our Peace, Conflict and Development (PCD — formerly Peacebuilding and Reconstruction PBR) program initiative, for example, gender is front and centre. Too often, women bear the brunt of war and reconstruction. Trade-offs have to be made between policies that directly improve the situation of women and children, and those that assist in demilitarizing a country — perhaps buying off men with guns who are being demobilized.

Another of our program initiatives, called the Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic and Adjustment Policies or MIMAP, is doing some very interesting work on whether non-conventional, gender-specific indicators — like violence against women — paint a different picture of the development process in South Asia than do traditional indicators such as nutrition, health, and income. The answer that we see emerging is "yes they do," but it is a very complex "yes."

In the LATN and MIMAP examples there seems to be an emphasis on linking field-level research to policy-making. Why?

Development is often focused on technical fixes. The fact that it is about people is again reasserting itself, even in the rhetoric of the large multilateral organizations. But we know you cannot simply study people in their day-to-day activities without understanding the environment and the context in which they operate. Policies shape that context and, as I said earlier, they do matter! Making the link between people's daily activities and their ability to alter bigger processes is something that lots of organizations want to do, but very few have a demonstrated record of doing it well. We do. Besides the MIMAP example I mentioned, the African Economic Research Consortium is another project that has had impacts far beyond the immediate relevance of the published outputs. Linking the macro to the micro is something that IDRC has done well and something we want to do more of.

Do you see new opportunities for linking field level research and the policy level?

All the time. We are in the process of finalizing an agreement with the Canadian International Development Agency to work with them on a facility for growth and poverty reduction. This will link countries' debt relief packages to their poverty policies. While the whole business of writing poverty reduction strategies is a bit of the "flavour of the month," it is nevertheless a real issue. How do you get countries to design policies that are timely, feasible, and produced through a process of consultation that is internally credible?

Through its Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment project, the PCD program initiative is developing a methodology — you might say a process — that seeks to introduce rigorous and systematic analysis of the peace and conflict impacts of development interventions in particularly precarious political contexts.

On the trade side of our work, there is lots of room for new opportunities because the trade agenda is expanding into things we did not think of as trade issues. Technology flows, financial flows,

competition policy — there is a range of issues on which developing countries need to get their act together or get left behind. Our job is to help them not get left behind.

Is there any research you would like to see pursued in the future?

To be honest, there is nothing that I want done that we are not doing. We have a very comprehensive program — to the point that we risk spreading ourselves too thin. Some of the things we are exploring, but for which we do not yet have the resources for a full-fledged program, include our current work on governance, equity, and health. Linking health outcomes to sound policy environments is a huge issue. Yes, people's health has suffered because health budgets have been cut. But money is only half the story: the other half is that the remaining health budgets have not been spent wisely. That is a governance issue. Bringing health and policy-making together and linking them to poverty outcomes — understanding that poverty is as much a poverty of health as a poverty of income — is, I think, a fascinating area. We are already doing excellent work in this area in Tanzania through the Tanzanian Essential Health Interventions Project.

Although not linked to SEE, some of the work being explored on knowledge systems could be an important future research wave. As I understand it, knowledge can be created, borrowed, bought, stolen, and adapted. Ultimately, however you acquire it or invent it, it has to be put to good use. Why is it that some countries have a rocket program and others at the same income level do not? Why is it that countries like the former Soviet Union, which are great at nuclear science and engineering, fall flat when it comes to linking some of that know-how to improving people's conditions? The answers will likely provide some excellent insights on how to better link knowledge to development.